

WOMEN LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES IN DRIVING ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dominant competencies required for women managers at top-level management. It undertook a qualitative investigation by employing an interview technique with 17 women managers from top-level management. The selection of the participants was based on the position, expertise and experience as well as their role, being directly involved in decision making processes. The social constructionist interview technique was selected encompassing open-ended questions. The team was granted permission from Frost & Sullivan for the use of open-ended questions. Based on data analysis, communication is the most sought competency followed by coaching and mentoring and technical knowledge. Teamwork and interpersonal skills are among the required competencies. Setting the right strategy is also critical as it enables organizations to reach strategic and competitive objectives.

Keywords: Women leaders; top-level management; competencies; organizational performance; qualitative.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership effectiveness is determined by the characteristics of leader, situation and followers; whether in general or in public sector leadership practices [12] or in public sector leadership practices [11]. Leaders are required to have amplified their ability in recognizing assumptions, evaluating arguments and drawing clear and valid conclusions [5]. These are crucial key competencies that a leader needs to be equipped.

In [1] defined competencies as characteristics demonstrated by an individual to achieve a desired performance goal within an organization such as knowledge, skills, aspects of self-image, social motive, feeling and acting. Competencies have become standard vernacular for discussing the necessary components of successful performance. Managerial competence is crucial for the survival of the organizations [10].

Women leaders have gained some economic significance and are increasingly recognized as an important source of manpower. Women in Malaysia have come a long way since independence in 1957. The age-old attitude that women's place is in the home and they are not to be seen or heard in the work place are certainly being replaced. They are seen and heard in work environments. In Malaysia, working women have been successful to the extent that they represent about 35% of the labor force but how have women fared as top-level managers? Are they entrusted with key managerial functions that determine the health of their organizations or are they are merely making numbers in management? As the role of women in the labor force grew in importance, studies on women competencies at the top-level management have gained prominence.

Despite an almost equal percentage of men and women in the labor force, but the number of women advancing to senior management role is still relatively small and moves at a slow rate [3]. A wide gender gap at the top management level is a persistent reality around the globe as revealed by most surveys and this is not a new phenomenon. In [6] survey has established a positive correlation on the presence of women in top management to a higher financial performance and better governance. In June 2011, the Malaysian government introduced a policy to increase the participation of women at the decision-making level in the corporate sector to 30% from the current 7.6% within the five-year time frame. The government had

done its part by raising the number of women in the higher echelons of the civil service to 33%, but more measures were needed to address gender diversity in the region.

Driven by the desire that women's leadership is important to further the current societal transformation at the workplace. It is also the opening act toward a more equal and balanced society. Corporate mobilization towards increasing the number of women leaders is imperative because without it we are failing to diversify our corporate structure. Whether it is the public or private sector, organizations that are led by inclusive leadership teams make better decisions that deliver better results.

Research had shown that our organizations do not represent an accurate picture of leadership because we have been neglecting prominent segments of the corporate makeup. Women leaders bring a unique perspective to today's progressively evolving workplace environment. The qualities that are desirable for leadership in the 21st century include the ability to connect, collaborate, empathize and communicate-these qualities tend to be "female" in nature.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study has set several research objectives as follows:

1. To examine the level of competencies among women leaders towards organizational performance.
2. To identify the dominant competencies among women leaders towards organizational performance.

1.2. Significance of the Research

The findings for this research should provide some advice of the current situation on leadership competencies in Malaysia. The expected outcomes of this research will:

1. Provide better understanding to the management on the desired competencies among women leaders in Malaysia.
2. Provide understanding to women leaders pertaining to the competencies that would prepare effective women in the top management for the future.

2. METHODOLOGY

In line with the nature of the study, whereby the research aims to identify the competencies sought in women managers at the top-level management, a qualitative approach is deemed appropriate. In [4] pointed that exploratory research is a suitable approach for interpretive study. Such method requires an interpretative comprehension via interaction with the subjects. In-depth interviews were employed and that acted as the primary data collection. Interviews provide better and more insightful explanation to the focus of the study.

Interviews are useful for obtaining the background of a participant's experiences, while interviews are more suitable to understand how people think and feel [2].

Social constructionist interview technique was selected for the approach where open-ended questions were asked including (1) What are the competencies sought in a women at the top-level management, (2) What has been the impact of these gaps and (3) Are they delivering these expectations? The team was granted permission from Frost & Sullivan for the use of open-ended questions.

2.1. Choice of Subjects

In relation to this study, and as the opinion of the people who has specialized knowledge related to the competencies required for women managers at the top-level management was very much sought. In [8] said that people whose knowledge is highly specialized are categorized as 'specialists'. In [9] posit that their expertise, availability for interview, agreeableness to cooperate and ability to share information were among the criteria for subject selection.

This qualitative approach interviewed a total of 9 women Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and 7 non-CEOs with a grand total of 16 subjects. They hold positions such as Director and Deputy Director General from both private and public organizations. This is illustrated in Table 1 and Table 2 as follows.

Table 1. Job designation of the subjects (CEOs) and types of industry involved

No.	Job designation of the subjects	Types of industry	Number
1.	Chief Executive Officer	Services	5
2.	Chief Executive Officer	Property	2
3.	Chief Executive Officer	Telecommunication	1
4.	Chief Executive Officer	Finance and Investment	1
	Total number		9

Table 2. Job designation of the subjects (Non-CEOs) and types of industry involved

No.	Job designation of the subjects	Types of industry	Number
1.	Director, General Manager, Vice-President Group HR,	Services	3
2.	Head Corporate Planning and Business Improvement	Agriculture	1
3.	Deputy Director General	Forestry	1
4.	General Manager Research and Development	Logistics	1
5.	Advisor Human Capital Management	Telecommunication	1
	Total number		7

Table 3 demonstrates the percentage of the organization by sector as follows.

Table 3. Percentage of organization profile by sector

No.	Sector	Types of industry	Percentage
1.	Private sector	Services	50
2.	Public sector	Property	50

Each group, made up of either a total of 2 or 3 members were assigned to conduct an interview session with the participant from the respective organization. Before the interview took place, calls were made requesting for a convenient date and time of appointment. Several follow-up calls took place and there were cases of a shift or changed in the appointment set or scheduled earlier. Some preferred email to be sent to them with an explanation pertaining to the purpose of the study, as well as the questions to be asked before the encounter took place as scheduled. Although the interview focused on these concerned items, consistent examination of the issue was essential to gain further comprehension of the experts' view.

Interview took place from October 2016 till February 2017 and each interview lasted about one hour, although some took about 15 to 20 minutes longer.

The interviews took place at the subjects' premises, although one or two agreed to be interviewed at their preferred venue. As mentioned by [7], posing different types of questions is the key to obtaining meaningful data. During the interview, the researcher made an audio recording of the dialogue between the researcher and the experts. Subject impressions were recorded in a diary immediately after each interview.

The purpose was to determine the respondent's interpretation pertaining to the important competencies required by women managers at the top-level management. Also, immediately, after each interview was over, the researcher transcribed all the interviews verbatim to capture the true meaning of the phenomenon. For the data analysis process, the data was coded into themes.

2.2. Data Analysis

Content analysis technique was used to code and decipher the data such to making sense of it. The recorded transcription was listened twice while verbatim transcriptions were done. At this point, we conceptualize the themes of data interpretation. We validated the coding process by discussing the categories developed with team members who have good background in qualitative type of studies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the content analysis conducted, the study found important competencies workplace competencies in driving organizational performance. The overall ranking in leadership competencies as (1) communication, (2) coaching and mentoring, (3) technical knowledge, (4) teamwork, (5) interpersonal skills and (6) strategy.

Generally, the subjects of the study emphasized the required and important competencies that drives organizational performance as follows:

3.1. As Said By the Subject: Communication

- ‘...ability to communicate from the technical team to the non-technical team, so that everybody move in the right direction...’ (Subject No. 2).
- ‘...give constructive feedback, choice of words you use. Initiate a culture, allow people to speak up. As a leader, set a culture for people to speak out in a pleasant manner.....’ (Subject No. 4)
- ‘... consistent communication to your staff, which is like the sister in you, the mother in you...’ (Subject No. 6)
- ‘...communication skill among the young ones ... takut nak cakap – especially English speaking ability’ (Subject No. 5).

3.2. As Said By the Subject: Coaching and Mentoring

- ‘...ability to communicate from the technical team to the non-technical team, so that everybody move in the right direction...’ (Subject No. 2).

3.3. As Said By the Subject: Technical Knowledge

- ‘...ability to communicate from the technical team to the non-technical team, so that everybody move in the right direction...’ (Subject No. 2).

3.4. As Said By the Subject: Teamwork

- ‘... teamwork style. Tap into their talent. Start with a goal you want to achieve. Get them to volunteer. Sometimes we picked numbers in a team. Teamwork ... learning from each other, time management, fast decision-making’(Subject No. 3).
- ‘...through teamwork. Supervision ... Jangan lepas tangan. Don’t just let go. Not command and control situation, but given them trust ...’(Subject No. 6).

Fig. 1 shows the findings pertaining to competencies as said by CEOs versus Deputies.

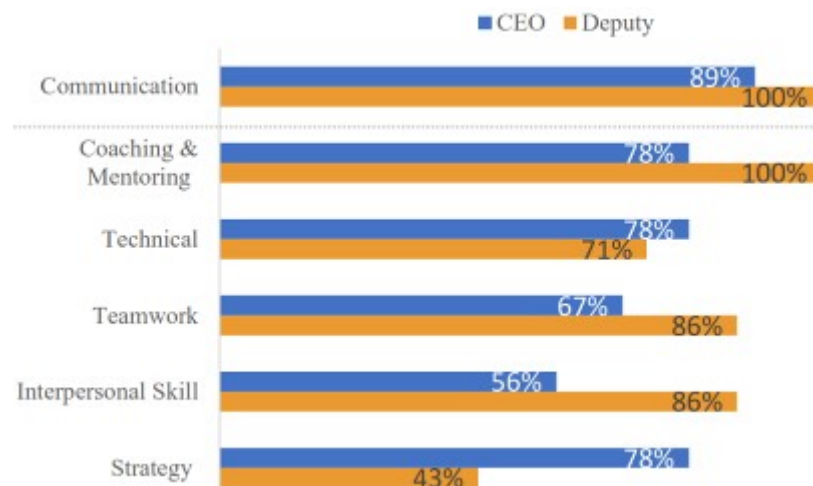


Fig.1. Findings pertaining to competencies as said by CEOs versus Deputies

4. CONCLUSION

The research has contributed in enhancing the understanding of the required competencies among women managers at the top-level management. The team discovered the importance of those competencies that must be possessed by any women leaders at the top-level management.

Although not every female leader appears to excel in all of them, but in the aggregate, it makes a compelling case for female leadership – especially as research has shown that the presence of female executives on corporate boards correlates to organizational performance.

In [6], companies with the highest gender diversity, exhibit a much higher return on equity (10%), a higher operating result (48%) and a stronger stock price growth (70%).

The research concluded that communication, coaching and mentoring as well as technical knowledge are among the three top competencies said by the subjects. Women leaders play a very important role in the decision making and their contribution cannot be ignored.

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