

Tertiary Staff's Perceptions of the Cruciality of Department Head Characteristics in Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine staff's perceptions of the cruciality of department head characteristics at private tertiary institutions in Malaysia. The Perceived Department Head Characteristics Questionnaire was administered online to collect data that was subsequently analysed using SPSS 26.0. Results showed that tertiary staff perceived several leadership characteristics as highly crucial for department heads. Mann-Whitney U test for perceived characteristics across gender revealed no statistically significant differences for all the items, except for fairness. Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed no significant age differences for all perceived characteristics, except for even temperament. The same test showed no significant differences for all items in terms of qualifications. One-sample Wilcoxon test revealed that the median of all perceived characteristics was significantly greater than the hypothesized value of 3.5. Lastly, among others, 91 to 96 percent of tertiary staff perceived characteristics such as fairness, honesty, active listening, empathy, compassion, innovativeness, interpersonal communication, organisational skills and charisma as highly crucial/crucial.

Keywords: 1. department head characteristics 2. private tertiary institutions in Malaysia

Introduction

Effective department heads display distinct characteristics that are perceived as crucial to their position. Trocchia and Andrus (2003) found that integrity and honesty are the two most crucial characteristics for department heads, reflecting the cruciality of faithfulness, pledge-keeping and capability to materialize words with deeds. Schwella (2021) postulated that integrity leadership grounded on mutual trust can favourably influence personal credibility, interpersonal relationships and institutional legitimacy. Consistently associated with ethics and morality in leadership, integrity serves as a valuable function and instrument over and above its fundamental moral-ethical value. Founded on trust, it guides leaders to treat others as others want to be treated, under take the most appropriate thing even when nobody else is around, treat others with respect and effectuate trust in, of, and for leadership.

According to VIA Institute on Character (2023), honesty enables individuals to speak truthfully by presenting themselves in an authentic manner, while assuming responsibility for their emotions and behaviours. Honesty equips individuals with integrity, enabling them to display who they profess they really are across all aspects of their life. It provides individuals with the strength and tenacity to accurately reflect their inner thoughts, undertakings and intents both publicly and privately. Additionally, it always links them to self-concordance that allows their goals to accurately represent their tacit interests and values.

Besides integrity and honesty, Trocchia and Andrus (2003) found that fairness is regarded as the third most important characteristic for effective department heads. VIA Institute on Character (2023) reiterated that fairness encourages individuals to treat others justly without allowing any personal feelings influence their perceptions of others, while intending to give everyone equal opportunity. Additionally, fairness equips individuals with the cognitive judgment capacity to reason and evaluate.

They are able to apply logic and fundamental principles to assess moral-ethical rights and responsibilities as well as to demonstrate empathy and compassion.

Review of Research Literature

A review of research literature was conducted to provide a theoretical background as well as to reduce the research gap on leadership characteristics in Malaysia, where very limited research is available on crucial leadership characteristics at private higher education. Lowder (2007) who conducted a meta-analysis on leadership excellence to develop a construct for positive leadership found that effective leaders tended to reflect certain characteristics. First, they tended to demonstrate self-awareness, using knowledge as a tool for stimulating self-awareness within the organisation, leading to positive outcomes. Second, they tended to display an understanding of shared meaning based on virtue ethics. Third, they tended to exhibit virtuous attributes and behaviours, including high motivation, staunch mental attitudes and equal treatment. They also tended to display favourable perceptions of the organisation, positive self-esteem and crucial core values. Lastly, they tended to focus on continual self-assessment and focused self-renewal in terms of personal, interpersonal, managerial, organisational and societal effectiveness that reinforce positive attributes and behaviours within the organisation.

Several studies indicated that effective leaders tended to have positive personality and professional characteristics. Spendlove (2007) who examined competencies of university leaders found that educational leaders tended to regard academic credibility and university experience as crucial for effective leadership in higher education. Additionally, they also tended to regard interpersonal communication and negotiation skills as crucial. Schafer (2010) who examined the traits and habits of police supervisors found that effective supervisors tended to demonstrate high integrity, work ethic and personnel concern. Fisher (2011) found that effective project managers tended to highly value staff by rewarding them for job accomplishment and reinforcing high-achieving behaviours that boost both team and individual self-esteem and drive outcomes. Hoffman et al. (2011) found that effective leaders have characteristics such as charisma, creativity, self-confidence and interpersonal skills.

Mitchell (2015) found that effective leaders tended to demonstrate 29 characteristics. First, they tended to focus on sound principles/strategies, grassroots values, organisational size/ resources, collaboration and focus. They also tended to possess campaigning abilities, funding/fundraising prowess, global scope and qualified staff, while showing appreciation to peer organisations, grassroots approaches, diversified strategies, commitment and professionalism. Perks and May (2015) found that effective leaders tended to identify needs and devise action plans to achieve intended outcomes. Besides articulating problems and addressing major concerns and issues, they also have a vision for the future and take steps to materialise the vision. Other than encouraging teamwork and delegating tasks to qualified staff, they also focus on nurturing more leaders rather than followers, while striving to emphasise group achievements rather than personal gains. Additionally, Parr, Lanza and Bernthal (2016) found that effective leaders tended to demonstrate three prominent personality profiles with different leadership competencies. Firstly, power players seemed to perform well on every performance factor and appeal to a broad audience; they were most likely to be open to novel ideas and were sociable. Like power players, protocol followers tended to be conscientious and emotionally stable, but they were only moderately good in managing others and interpersonal relationships; they were unable to formulate future changes for the organisation and drive them. Lastly, creative communicators lacked the diligence to formulate strategies and implement new ideas although they were also open to new notions and were very sociable.

Guzmána et al. (2020) who examined the characteristics for Industry 4.0 leadership found that effective leaders tended to have three crucial characteristics. First, they tended to possess the cognitive skills to effectively communicate and distribute information effectively in a constantly evolving digital environment. They actively engage in learning to adapt to new digital settings and employ innovative technologies to promote learning and innovation. They also employ critical thinking to assess the implementation of new technologies within their organisations. Secondly, they exhibit positive interpersonal leadership skills to establish consensus among their staff, fostering a collaborative and participative environment that encourages the exploration of new ideas. They utilize persuasion to cultivate a learning and innovation-oriented atmosphere, motivating their staff to embrace an open and digital mindset. Lastly, they practise strategic leadership by emphasizing a mission that promotes innovative and lifelong learning, encouraging experimentation and fostering a culture of collaboration, participation and networking. They also employ system evaluation and solution appraisal to analyse acquired technologies and evaluate both internal and external communication platforms to identify areas for improvement and potential solutions. Cakir and Adiguzel (2020) conducted a study on the connections between leadership effectiveness, knowledge-sharing behavior, and job/firm performance. They discovered that knowledge sharing plays a significant role as an intermittent factor between leader

effectiveness and job performance. This implies that leaders who engage in knowledge sharing have a notable influence on performance and strategy, which, in turn, encourages employees to share information at the desired and healthy level. In another study by Maia, Doa, and Phan (2022) that explored the impact of various leadership personality traits on business innovation, it was found that leaders' core self-evaluation, risk propensity and achievement need have a significant influence on business innovation. Additionally, the acquisition, interpretation and distribution of knowledge were identified as significant mediators between leadership traits and business innovation. Notably, the need for achievement influences knowledge acquisition. Overall, leaders who tended to value success and efficiency often encourage staff's lifelong learning that leads to increased knowledge and capabilities. Lastly, Alanazi (2022) who examined effective digital leaders' characteristics found that they tended to act as turnaround leaders, strategic managers and visionaries. As turnaround leaders, they ensure that changes are rapidly implemented to address such issues as performance decline or downward trend in market share. Besides being responsible and innovative, they also possess the ability to influence others, inspire a shared vision, initiate and formulate strategies. As strategic managers, they possess the analytical ability, foresight and decisiveness to formulate strategies with clear-cut objectives, make specific plans to achieve management objectives, align activities to support the objectives and allocate resources within budgetary constraints to achieve objectives. They are able to synergise, consolidate, improvise and reach corporate objectives by keeping pace with rising expectations. Besides giving full attention to details, they also practise critical thinking, define mechanisms for input, formulate the objectives of the strategic planning process and develop a plan for implementation. Lastly, as visionaries, they are good at delegation, building consensus, establishing measurable objectives, creating and enforcing timelines, prioritising, building confidence and managing by objectives. They align their vision with the organisational mission, purpose and values through such interpersonal skills as conflict resolution, flexibility, empathy and teamwork.

Significance of the study and research questions

The research literature on department head characteristics provides a conceptual framework of why and how particular personal and psychosocial characteristics are related to leadership processes and outcomes. It sheds light on particular functions that suggest a corresponding array of leader characteristics necessary for effective organisational management. To advance the field of educational leadership, research on department head characteristics will provide multivariate information on the relative contribution of various attributes in the effective management of tertiary institutions in Malaysia. Additionally, identification of crucial leadership characteristics serves as a strategy to assist department heads in their daily tasks. It can also help facilitate the selection and preparation of department heads, suggesting appropriate goals for the department, while reducing the turnover rate and stress that often occur in leadership positions. Search committees at tertiary institutions can incorporate a list of crucial leadership characteristics into their selection procedures since identifying and enhancing such characteristics is a crucial issue for policymakers, leaders themselves and higher education staff. This study also underscores the need for a more proactive approach to identifying department head characteristics to increase leadership effectiveness at colleges and universities in Malaysia. In order to determine these characteristics, three research questions were formulated for this study:

- Were there any significant differences in staff's perceptions of department head characteristics in relation to gender, age and qualifications?
- Were there any significant differences in staff's perceptions of department head characteristics based on a hypothesized value of 3.5?
- What were the descriptive statistics for staff's perceptions of department head characteristics?

Methodology

Instrument

The Perceived Department Head Characteristics Questionnaire designed by Trocchia and Andrus (2003) was used to collect data. It was first administered to 43 marketing department heads and 247 full-time marketing faculty members from 167 institutions of higher learning. Factor analysis of the data yielded three factors concerning perceived characteristics of department heads. The most important factor/principle ($M = 6.75$) included fairness, honesty and integrity. Its variance, eigenvalues, Cronbach's alpha were 15.1%, 2.26 and 0.69, respectively. The second most crucial factor/understanding ($M = 5.83$) included empathy, compassion and listening skills. Its variance, eigenvalues, Cronbach's alpha were 19.5%, 2.93 and 0.77, respectively. Lastly, the least crucial factor/vigour ($M = 4.81$) included energy,

humour and innovativeness. Its variance, eigenvalues, Cronbach's alpha were 14.2%, 2.14 and 0.65, respectively (Trochia & Andrus, 2003).

Data collection and data analysis

Data collection was done by administering the Perceived Department Head Characteristics Questionnaire online. Deans, coordinators and registrars of nine colleges in Sabah and Sarawak were contacted via email, but only three colleges (with a total of 36 staff) agreed to participate in the study. Another 20 staff from an Australian-based university in Sarawak were invited directly and personally to complete the questionnaire via email. All the 56 administrative and teaching staff who completed the questionnaire, came from communities with vastly different cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, but are fluent in both English and Malay. According to the central limit theorem, the sample size was adequate to give reliable and valid information for the study. Table 1 presents the demographic information of staff pertaining to age, gender and qualifications.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of subjects

Gender	Frequency %
Male	46.42
Female	53.57
Age	Frequency
25-35	25.00
36-45	28.57
46-55	32.14
56-60	14.29
Qualifications	Frequency
Diploma	7.14
Bachelors	39.29
Masters	28.57
PhD	25.00

After data collection, a spread sheet was generated and SPSS 26.0 was used for data analysis. First, Mann-Whitney U, a non-parametric test, was conducted on self-esteem to determine if there were any significant gender differences, while Kurskal-Wallis H, another non-parametric test, was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences with regards to age and qualifications. Second, the Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted to determine the level of significance of each characteristic using a hypothesized value of 3.5. Third, percentages of agreement were calculated to get a general impression of perceived characteristics of department heads.

Findings

Results showed that tertiary staff perceived leadership characteristics as highly crucial for department heads. See Table 2, as follows:

Table 2: Means of perceived characteristics based on gender, age and qualifications

Gender	Perceived characteristics
Male	64.31
Female	62.37
Age	Mean
25-35	59.07
36-45	64.81
46-55	64.56
56-60	64.63
Qualifications	Mean
Diploma	66.75
Bachelors	61.50
Masters	65.06
PhD	63.00

Mean values: High = 56-70; Average = 49-69; Low = Below 48

The Mann-Whitney U test for the perceived characteristics across gender revealed no statistically significant differences for all the items, except for fairness, whereby male staff obtained a significantly higher mean than female staff (see Table 3).

Table 3: Mann-Whitney U test for the items across gender

Item	p-value
Honesty	0.078
Fairness	0.005*
Active listening skills	0.330
Open-mindedness	0.186
Interpersonal communication	0.273
Decisiveness	0.095
Event emperament	0.836
Organisational skills	0.112
Energy	0.494
Empathy	0.835
Compassion	0.540
Innovativeness	0.228
Charisma	0.104
Humour	0.808
Overall	0.413

* $p = 0.005$

The Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed no significant age differences for all the characteristics, except for even temperament (see Table 4).

Table 4: Kruskal-Wallis H test for the items across different age groups

Items	p-value
Honesty	0.872
Fairness	0.940
Active listening	0.068
Open-mindedness	0.592
Interpersonal communication	0.982
Decisiveness	0.332
Even temperament	0.020*
Organisational skills	0.058
Energy	0.577
Empathy	0.070
Compassion	0.092
Innovativeness	0.610
Charisma	0.753
Humour	0.238
Overall	0.129

* $p > 0.05$

The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed no significant differences for all the items in terms of qualifications, where all the p -values were more than 0.05 significant level (see Table 5).

Table 5: Kruskal-Wallis H test for the items across different qualifications

Items	p-value
Honesty	0.450
Fairness	0.478
Active listening	0.591
Open-mindedness	0.228
Interpersonal communication	0.366
Decisiveness	0.209
Eventemperament	0.764
Organisational skills	0.361
Energy	0.664
Empathy	0.181
Compassion	0.239
Innovativeness	0.295
Charisma	0.910
Humour	0.937
Overall	0.592

The one-sample Wilcoxon test revealed that the median of each characteristic was significantly greater than the hypothesized value (see Table 6).

Table 6: One-sample Wilcoxon test with the hypothesized value of 3.5

Items	p-value (2-tailed)	Conclusion
Honesty	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Fairness	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Active listening	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Open-mindedness	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Interpersonal communication	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Decisiveness	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Eventemperament	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Organisation skills	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Energy	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Empathy	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Compassion	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Innovativeness	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Charisma	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value
Humour	$p < 0.001^*$	Statistical significantly larger than the hypothesized value

* $p < 0.001$

To gain a general view on staff's perceptions of the cruciality of leadership characteristics, percentages on "very crucial" and "crucial" were collapsed, for example, the overall percentage for honesty was $26.8 + 69.6 = 96.4$. Results showed that 91 to 96 percent of tertiary staff perceived honesty, active listening, effective interpersonal communication, organisational skills, empathy, compassion, innovativeness and charisma as highly crucial/crucial. Humour was considered the least crucial characteristic for department heads (see Table 7).

Table 7: Percentages of agreement on staff’s perceptions of the cruciality of department head characteristics

Degree of cruciality	1	2	3	4	5
Honesty	0.0%	1.8%	1.8%	26.8%	69.6%
Fairness	0.0%	0.0%	3.6%	21.4%	75.0%
Active listening	0.0%	0.0%	5.4%	26.8%	67.9%
Open-mindedness	0.0%	0.0%	10.7%	14.3%	75.0%
Interpersonal communication	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	26.8%	66.1%
Decisiveness	1.8%	1.8%	8.9%	30.4%	57.1%
Eventemperament	0.0%	0.0%	16.1%	33.9%	50.0%
Organisational skills	0.0%	0.0%	8.9%	23.2%	67.9%
Energy	0.0%	3.6%	7.1%	30.4%	58.9%
Empathy	0.0%	0.0%	5.4%	28.6%	66.1%
Compassion	0.0%	0.0%	5.4%	26.8%	67.9%
Innovativeness	0.0%	1.8%	3.6%	35.7%	58.9%
Charisma	0.0%	0.0%	8.9%	30.4%	60.7%
Humour	0.0%	3.6%	26.8%	33.9%	35.7%

5 = Very crucial; 4 = Crucial; 3 = Uncertain; 2 = Not crucial; 1 = Not crucial at all

Discussion and Final Thoughts

Findings implied that tertiary staff tended to perceive leadership characteristics as highly crucial for department heads. No significant gender or age differences were found except for fairness and even temperament, respectively. No significant differences were found in terms of qualifications. Overall, most tertiary staff perceived fairness, honesty, active listening, empathy, compassion, innovativeness, interpersonal communication, organisational skills and charisma as highly crucial/crucial. These findings confirm the findings of previous studies; for example, Trocchia and Andrus (2003) found that fairness, honesty and integrity were perceived as the most crucial characteristics of department heads, followed by empathy, compassion and listening skills. They added that personal characteristics viewed as crucial for department heads to thrive in a dynamic workplace marked by constant global and digital changes are open-mindedness and active listening skills. Further, Guzmána et al. (2020) described Industry 4.0 leaders as being innovative, while Hoffman et al. (2011) listed charisma as one of the characteristics that effective leaders possess. Additionally, Jogulu (2010) found that transactional characteristics tended to be strongly aligned with the ratings of Malaysian managers who displayed high preference for organisation and structure. Mills et al. (2014) found that school administrators generally tended to perceive certain leadership attributes as more crucial, including open communication, creative problem solving, on-campus-collegiality, organisational skills and respect for others. Mohammadreza et al. (2015) found that top influencers scored significantly higher on empathy, sociability and activity compared with bottom influencers, thus appearing to exhibit the personality characteristics that promote positive interactions in effective leadership. Lastly, Cabuenas, Singco and Español (2021) found that a majority of university leaders tended to exhibit effective interpersonal skills to maintain amicable relationships with office personnel. As suggested, among others findings, it can be inferred that interpersonal communication, active listening, compassion and empathy are highly crucial characteristics of department heads. Effective interpersonal communication is critical for departments heads as it enables them to convey ideas and plans, while simultaneously inculcating a deeper sense of community and direction. The way they say something can be almost as important as what they say since engaged employees can easily discern their level of authenticity. When department heads demonstrate that they have heard and evaluated what others have communicated, their team is more likely to listen and follow. Moreover, active listening is a fundamental counterpart to good communication, allowing department heads to integrate the valuable ideas of their team. It allows them to gain a better understanding about what someone else is communicating. Beyond hearing people’s words, they pay attention to cues such as tonality, body language and the situational context of the conversation (The Bailey Group, 2023).

In addition, organisations with a strong culture of empathy and compassion are better able to attract, hire and retain top talent. Equipped with empathy and compassion, department heads can emotionally discern what other people feel and view things from others' perspectives. They encourage them to investigate circumstances from other people's views, while being cognizant of their thoughts, feelings and attitudes toward a particular scenario. It helps them create an open and psychologically safe environment that encourages all staff to express their authentic self without fear of judgment. Empathetic and compassionate department heads can sense staff's concerns and strive to create a more empowering environment for them to speak their minds, thus allowing them to gain insight into new opportunities. An empathetic and compassionate work environment is also more innovative because it encourages staff to bring new ideas to the surface without fear of criticism or punishment (The Bailey Group, 2023). As a final word, this study is limited because it only involved a small sample recruited from two out of 13 states in Malaysia. Generalizability of findings could be improved by getting a larger sample from several states reflecting greater cultural diversity and socioeconomic backgrounds. Lastly, more leadership attributes should be considered to provide a better conceptual framework for future research.

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