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Leadership in Higher Education: An Examination of Styles, Assertiveness, and Creative Problem-Solving

Mary Grace O. Gumpal[1], Joseph Mirvin A. Dadap[2]
[1]*Isabela State University, Phillipines*
[2]*De La Salle Medical and Health Sciences Institute, Phillipines*
marygrace.o.gumpal@isu.edu.ph

Abstract: This research investigates the complexities of leadership within the higher education sector, focusing on leadership styles, assertiveness levels, and creativity in problem-solving among university leaders. The primary objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the experiences and behaviors of these leaders, shedding light on their effectiveness in managing the complexities inherent in educational institutions. The study employs a mixed-method research design, utilizing the Consensual Qualitative Research-Modified (CQR-M) approach to offer a nuanced understanding of the experiences and behaviors of top-ranking officials. The participating institutions, Isabela State University and Dela Salle Dasmarinas in Cavite City, provide a diverse context for the exploration of leadership dynamics. The quantitative findings reveal that a substantial 83.3% of the participants exhibit a free-rein leadership style, signifying a preference for autonomy in decision-making. Additionally, a majority of the university leaders emerge as non-assertive and intellectual conformists, shedding light on prevalent communication patterns and cognitive approaches within the leadership cadre. Qualitative analysis yields five major themes that encapsulate both the characteristics and challenges faced by university leaders. These themes provide a comprehensive narrative, addressing the nuances of their experiences and shedding light on the multifaceted nature of leadership within complex educational institutions. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by not only quantifying prevalent leadership styles and traits but also by providing a rich qualitative exploration of the contextual factors influencing university leadership. The insights garnered from this research hold significance for academic institutions aiming to enhance leadership effectiveness, offering practical implications for leadership development programs and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities faced by educational leaders in managing the evolving landscape of higher education.

Keywords: *Leadership style, university leaders, general traits, assertiveness, consensual qualitative research-modified*

Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of higher education, effective leadership within academic institutions plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of educational endeavors. This research journal article delves into the multifaceted realm of leadership styles, assertiveness levels, and creativity in problem-solving exhibited by university leaders.

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As the higher education sector undergoes constant evolution, the need for adept and adaptable leadership becomes increasingly apparent. The exploration of various leadership styles is crucial in understanding how university officials navigate the intricate web of challenges and opportunities inherent in their roles. By examining assertiveness levels, this research aims to uncover the assertive communication patterns that characterize effective leadership, contributing to the broader discourse on leadership effectiveness in academia.

Furthermore, the investigation into the creativity exhibited by university leaders in problem-solving endeavors to unearth the innovative approaches employed in addressing the unique challenges faced by educational institutions. This facet of the study seeks to provide insights into the role of creative thinking in fostering adaptability and resilience in the face of the ever-changing educational landscape.

The study not only endeavors to contribute to the academic understanding of leadership within the higher education context but also holds practical implications for institutional development. By elucidating the experiences and behaviors of university leaders, this research seeks to provide valuable insights that can inform leadership training programs and foster a culture of effective leadership within academic institutions.

Literature Review

Leadership is a multifaceted process through which individuals motivate and guide their groups, often involving influence and collaboration between leaders and followers to attain organizational objectives, particularly through transformative change. Dubrin (1995) defines leadership as the capacity to instill confidence and garner support among those essential to achieving organizational goals. In educational institutions, which are critical to national development, effective administration involves managerial processes such as planning, organization, monitoring, control, and evaluation. Hence, it is imperative for these institutions to be led by competent, ethical, and diligent leaders who can influence human resources, maintain an optimistic outlook toward future changes, and emphasize staff development and learning, thereby enhancing the quality of academic activities (Sanyal, 2000, as cited by Mozaffari, 2016).

Effective leadership hinges on a set of inherent traits possessed by leaders. Despite years of research, scholars continue to seek a comprehensive understanding of the defining characteristics of effective leadership (C. Dulewicz, Young & Dulewicz, 2005, as cited by Mothilal, 2010). Each leader exhibits unique skills and a distinct style of leading, making it essential to comprehend these individual leadership styles and their efficacy in managing people. Leadership style encompasses the approach and manner in which direction is provided, plans are executed, and individuals are motivated. From the perspective of employees, it includes the spectrum of both overt and subtle actions undertaken by their leaders (Newstrom & Davis, 1993).

Dulewicz and Higgs (2005), as cited by Mothilal (2010), posit that effective leadership is a fusion of personality traits, cognitive attributes, and behavioral factors. They further elaborate that effective leadership can be conceptualized as a combination of: (1) Personal characteristics enabling effective leadership; (2) A repertoire of essential skills and behaviors; (3) Context-dependent leadership styles; and (4) Alignment of leadership behaviors with personal style.

The trait leadership theory, articulated by Stogdill, contends that individuals possess inherent qualities that either predispose them for leadership roles or can be cultivated to excel in such roles (Leadership Central, 2016). These qualities include intelligence, responsibility, creativity, and other

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values contributing to effective leadership. Additionally, assertiveness, dependability, persistence, and adaptability are identified as overarching traits characterizing effective leaders.

Scholars have also identified general personality traits commonly found in effective leaders. Dubrin (1995) enumerates these traits as self-confidence, honesty, integrity, credibility, dominance, extroversion, assertiveness, emotional stability, enthusiasm, a sense of humor, warmth, creativity, a high tolerance for frustration, self-awareness, and self-objectivity. While past studies have explored personality traits and leadership styles using the Big Five factors (OCEAN)—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—and found significant relationships with leadership styles, recent studies have highlighted the importance of assertiveness and creativity in leadership effectiveness (Bosiok, 2013; Judge et al., 2020).

Assertiveness

Research on assertiveness in leadership gained prominence during the 1990s. Assertiveness is a personality trait influencing leaders' approach to performance goals and tasks. It involves expressing one's beliefs, feelings, and opinions while respecting others' rights. Assertive behavior manifests in various forms and is highly valued in leaders.

The relationship between assertiveness and leadership remains complex. Santora (2007) points out key questions, such as how assertive leaders are perceived and whether assertiveness impacts social and instrumental outcomes associated with leadership. Ames et al. (2009) emphasize that individual differences in assertiveness significantly affect perceptions of leaders. Conflicts and differing views within organizations often lead to confrontational assertive behavior, reflecting the diversity of personalities among leaders.

Assertiveness can be instrumental in achieving successful leadership and advancing group goals. However, Santora (2007) argues that leaders with extremely low or high assertiveness levels may face challenges. Extremely low assertiveness may hinder task completion and be perceived as a weakness, whereas overly high assertiveness may negatively impact relationships. Thus, moderate assertiveness is suggested to be effective for both social and instrumental outcomes. Ames et al. (2007) propose that leaders must understand the positive and negative consequences of assertiveness and adapt their assertiveness levels flexibly and effectively.

Recent studies, such as those by Grant and Gino (2018), further explore the nuanced role of assertiveness in leadership, suggesting that situational factors and cultural contexts significantly influence the effectiveness of assertive behaviors.

Creativity

Creativity is among the most highly sought-after traits in leaders today. Creative leaders introduce new ideas, innovations, or transform existing concepts. They encourage innovative thinking within their organizations and bring unique approaches to interactions with team members and colleagues. This emphasis on creativity is especially crucial in educational institutions, which are crucibles for future leaders.

Creative leaders, as described by Kreitner and Kinicki (cited by Dubrin, 1995), often "march to the beat of different drummers." They challenge the status quo, continuously seek improvement, and provide unique perspectives on problem-solving. Given the importance of creativity in leadership, there is a pressing need for further research in this area, as highlighted by Bosiok (2013).

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Recent studies by Anderson, Potočnik, and Zhou (2014) emphasize the role of creative leadership in fostering organizational innovation and adaptability. These studies indicate that creative leaders not only enhance organizational performance but also contribute to a more engaged and motivated workforce.

Leadership Style

Leadership style refers to the approach adopted by a leader in different situations, with significant implications for various organizational aspects, including employee motivation, performance, productivity, and communication.

Leadership styles play a pivotal role in effective school administration, with different styles being appropriate in diverse organizational cultures. For this research, university officials from De La Salle University – Dasmarinas, a private institution and Isabela State University, a government run institution were chosen as a focus, given their critical positions and the need for accountability. These officials not only manage large institutions but also serve as instructional leaders responsible for developing effective teaching teams, as highlighted by Wallace (2013), as cited in Krasnoff (2015).

Recent studies, such as those by Wang, Waldman, and Zhang (2014), further investigate the interplay between different leadership styles and organizational outcomes in educational settings, providing valuable insights into effective leadership practices in HEIs.

The dearth of research on leadership in an academic setting, particularly in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with multiple campuses, makes this study particularly critical. By examining leadership styles, assertiveness levels, and creativity in problem-solving, this research seeks to illuminate the experiences and behaviors of university officials and their effectiveness in managing these complex educational institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study employed a mixed-method research design to achieve its objectives. Mixed-method research design integrates philosophical assumptions that guide data collection and analysis, combining both qualitative and quantitative data within a single study or series of studies.

For the qualitative data derived from short narrative responses to questions, the research utilized a Consensual Qualitative Research-Modified (CQR-M) approach, which was developed by Spangler, Liu, & Hill (2012). CQR-M was deemed suitable for this purpose, given its capacity to provide a thorough and in-depth examination of individual experiences, ensuring consistency in data collection across participants. The core elements of CQR-M involve the use of open-ended questions in semi-structured data collection techniques, typically in interviews.

Participants

The study involved six prominent University officials from De La Salle University-Dasmariñas and Isabela State University. Specifically, the participants included the ISU president, vice president/vice chancellor for Academic and Related Affairs, vice president/vice chancellor for Finance and Administrative Services, and vice chancellor for mission, external affairs, and advancement.

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Materials

To gather the necessary data, the researchers designed a set of guided questions for face-to-face interviews. Additionally, leadership self-assessment tools for assertiveness, leadership style, and creativity in problem-solving were incorporated. These tools were adapted from Andrew J. DuBrin's book entitled "Leadership Research Findings, Practice, and Skills" (2016). The assessment instruments included:

Leadership Style: An 18-item test in which participants rated items as "Mostly Yes" or "Mostly No," revealing their leadership styles as Authoritarian, Participative, or Free-rein.

Assertive Scale: A 30-item test requiring participants to rate items as "Mostly True" or "Mostly False," providing insights into the level of assertiveness, categorizing individuals as non-assertive, assertive, or aggressive.

Creative Personality Test: A 20-item test with "Mostly True" or "Mostly False" ratings, used to identify the level of creativity exhibited by a leader.

Interview/Guide Questions: The researchers formulated a set of semi-structured interview questions tailored for the respondents from De La Salle University-Dasmariñas and Isabela State University.

Procedure

The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews and surveys with the university officials from De La Salle University-Dasmariñas and Isabela State University. However, due to the officials' demanding schedules, shorter and semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews, with the officials' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for in-depth analysis. Survey questionnaires were collected and processed for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized in analyzing qualitative data while, measures of central tendency, including mean scores, frequency, and percentage of responses, were computed for the quantitative data

RESULTS

The self-assessment on leadership styles, assertiveness and creativity reveals that most of the participants tend to be participative or democratic leaders, non-assertive, and creative. Below are the tables that show the results.

Table 1. Leadership style, level of assertiveness, and creativity in problem-solving of the participants.

General Traits					
Leadership Style	%	Assertiveness	%	Creativity in Problem Solving	%
Participative	83.33	Assertive	16.67	Creative	33.33
Free Rein	16.67	Non-assertive	83.33	Intellectual Conformist	66.67

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Table 2. Individual Leadership Style, Assertiveness, and Creativity on Problem Solving of the Participants

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Free-Rein	Participative	Participative	Participative	Participative	Participative
Non-assertive	Non-Assertive	Assertive	Non-Assertive	Non-Assertive	Non-Assertive
Creative	Intellectual Conformist	Creative	Intellectual Conformist	Intellectual Conformist	Intellectual Conformist

Leadership Styles

The study revealed that the participants predominantly employ participative and free-rein leadership styles. Participative leadership, also known as democratic leadership, values input from team members and peers while still vesting the ultimate decision-making authority with the leader (Johnson, N.D.). On the other hand, free-rein leadership is characterized by minimal direct supervision, allowing subordinates to function autonomously and demonstrate their capabilities. These findings suggest that most university leaders do not adhere to traditionalist leadership norms but rather acknowledge the rights, capabilities, and contributions of their team members. They actively seek and incorporate the inputs of other employees before making final decisions.

Assertiveness

The study indicated that a significant majority of the participants (83.3%) exhibited non-assertive behavior. This could be attributed to the fact that participants occupy high-level management positions where they may not directly issue orders to subordinates. Their non-assertiveness might also be due to their democratic leadership style, as assertiveness may manifest in a more empathic manner. Furthermore, the participants displayed characteristics of intellectual conformism, often aligning their thinking with the majority and adhering to established rules and protocols when resolving issues.

Qualitative Phase
The short interviews conducted with the university leaders revealed five major themes, shedding light on their experiences and perceptions as leaders:

Table 3. Superordinate and subordinate themes on leadership experiences

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Sample Response
Q1. How will you define leadership?		
Leading towards a Goal	Leading people	…leading people towards a goal
	Influencing people	…inspiring or binding people
	Motivating people	…service, motivation, solution
Q2. What is the most challenging experience you have as a university leader?		
Organizational Discipline	Rules	…. handling people
		…giving sanctions
	Protocols	…implementing rules that I personally don't believe in
Q3. How do you face your everyday challenges?		
Stewardship	Positivity	…with a smile
		…through prayers

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Q4. Can you name at least 1 or 2 of your main goals for the university and solution?"		
Aiming for the Stars	Highest Standards	…to become internationally recognized university …give the best quality education
Q5. How would you describe yourself as a leader?		
Ethical Leadership	Virtues of a Good Leader	…very ideal, every inch a Lasallian leader …humane but firm …a prayerful who recognizes the sovereignty of God

Theme 1: Leading towards a goal: The university leaders generally perceive leadership as a means of guiding, influencing, and motivating individuals toward achieving common goals. Leadership, in their view, is the path to goal attainment. They defined leadership when asked for a brief definition as:

".. leading people towards a goal" for Leader 1 while for Leader 2 it is *" inspiring and binding people"* and for leader 3 *" it is service, motivation and solution"*.

The Harvard Business Review (2023) reported on the evolving capabilities required for effective leadership. Findings revealed that majority of senior leaders believed that leading strategically and leading through uncertainties and changes are qualities that are increasingly vital as organizations navigate complex global challenges and shifting workforce expectations ((Harvard Business Publishing, 2023). Being said, leaders are always facing challenges and expectations from their people and how they deal with those challenges is another important aspect of their leadership style.

Few participants admitted that the most challenging experienced they have were handling people, giving sanctions and imposing rules that are contradictory with their personal stand. These leads to the next theme organizational discipline.

Theme 2: Organizational Discipline: Leaders highlighted the challenges associated with making ethical decisions. Organizational discipline was considered essential, emphasizing adherence to company protocols and fair rule enforcement. The study highlighted the leaders' difficulties in imposing sanctions and rules, confirming the majority's non-assertive tendencies as revealed in the quantitative result of this study. Organizational discipline was seen as vital in achieving an honest, fair, and efficient work environment.

Theme 3: Values of stewardship: The university leaders exhibited strong personal values in their daily challenges, radiating positivity and religiosity that can influence their subordinates positively.

Theme 4: Aiming for the Stars: All participants shared a common goal-setting principle: "It is better to aim high and miss than to aim low and hit." Their ambitions included achieving international recognition for their universities, reflecting their determination to raise the institutions' global stature.

Theme 5: Ethical Leadership: Ethical leadership, guided by respect for ethical beliefs, values, and the dignity and rights of others, was evident among the leaders. Concepts such as trust, honesty, consideration, charisma, and fairness were closely associated with their leadership styles.

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The generated themes highlight both the characteristics and challenges faced by the university leaders. The themes of achieving a goal, values of stewardship, and ethical leadership align with their personality traits of non-assertiveness and conformity. In contrast, the themes of organizational discipline and aiming for the stars illuminate some of the key challenges these leaders encounter, further emphasizing their democratic and free-rein leadership styles.

CONCLUSION

The higher education sector in developing countries like the Philippines plays a pivotal role in socioeconomic well-being. As the new millennium progresses, educational leaders face continuous challenges in strategic planning, institutional reforms, and resource management (Bright, 2006). Therefore, there is a growing demand for creative and assertive leaders to address these challenges effectively.

The responsibilities placed upon university officials are undeniably demanding and require significant attention. Virtues and ethical leadership are vital traits for leaders in any educational institution. This study's results provide a valuable foundation for further research on leadership in higher education institutions.

It is hoped that the insights gleaned from this study will pave the way for more in-depth exploration of leadership in the context of higher education institutions, ultimately contributing to their continued growth and success.

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