



Leadership Style Among Women Leaders in Sabah

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Abstract

Every woman has the quality to become a great leader with their leadership style. However, women's representation as a leader in organizations is still low, especially in Southeast Asian countries. Hence, the focus of this paper is to explore the leadership styles among women leaders in government agencies and private organizations in Sabah. This paper applied the quantitative research method with a gender perspective, which was participated by 282 respondents in the survey. The results showed five leadership styles: democratic, autocratic, laissez-faire, transactional and transformational. Among those leadership styles, women in Sabah practised democratic, transactional, transformational and laissez-faire styles in leading their subordinates and organization. Meanwhile, autocratic is less applied by woman leaders in Sabah.

Keywords: *Women leaders, leadership styles, government agencies, private organizations, quantitative method.*

1. Introduction

As a contributor to the country's development and progress during the technological era (Eger, Miller and Scarles, 2018), women play a great role in the Malaysian economy. Thus, it is appropriate for the government to set a priority to women's development either in improving knowledge or skills, especially in the field of leadership. Merican and Ghani (2016) mention that the Malaysian government gives priority to increasing the number of women in decision-making positions. Based on the Malaysia Demographics Profile in 2019, there are about 49% of women in the total population. From that figure, *Jabatan Pembangunan Wanita* (Women Development Department) in Malaysia agreed to set a target of 30% women as decision-makers in organizations regardless of public or private organizations. Ironically, the target has been there since 1989 but we have not yet achieved it. This proved that the task is never been easy as setting the target. There is a lot of effort and sacrifice that needs to be injected in by various players, agencies, and parties to ensure its achievement. This national agenda- investing in women is smart economics as stated by Revenga and Shetty (2012) and Perianes (2018) needs to be highlighted as urgent and important.

The main aim of this research is to ensure the development and empowerment of women by mainstreaming the interests of women to achieve their full potential in national planning and development. Moreover, previous studies suggest that different genders have different leadership styles and this impacts the ability of women to hold top positions (Chaluvadi, 2015). Hence, by identifying the leadership styles of women in Sabah, this paper would be able to capture and understand some of the essential elements of each leadership style. With this information, it is hoped that government agencies like the Ministry of Women, Family and Development will benefit and enhance their future development programs.

2. Literature review

Women's involvement in management or leadership is a global issue. In Malaysia particularly, the government is improving women's knowledge and skills through educational programs (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia; 2019). Based on the records in 2018, there were 61.92% of female students recorded at public and private higher education in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). The data shows there is increasing women participation in the labour force as in Table 2.1 below.



Table 2.1: Women's Participation in the Labour Force

Year	Men	Women
2017	80.2%	54.3%
2019	80.4%	55.2%

(Data from: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019)

However, the Department of Statistics Malaysia recorded only 24.7% of women involved in legislative, senior official and managerial positions. Meanwhile, there is 44.3% of women in professional and technical positions. In private organizations, a survey by Hirschmann (2020), which was conducted in 2015 found that less than 14% of all board members were women. This status quo is being maintained as reported by Ku Ismail, Amran, Aripin, Abd Manaf and Abdullah (2017). Additionally, they found that not much improvement has been done to increase women's representation on boards in Malaysian companies. Interesting findings reported by Wartzman (2013), companies with at least one-woman director were 20% less likely to be insolvent. Meaning, that companies with more women representation on boards of directors will have better financial performance and a good track record. This finding is supported by Abdullah, Ku Ismail and Nachum (2016) and Ku Ismail et al. (2017) studies. In 2018, Hays Asia Salary Guide reported that in 2017, women held 35% of management roles in Malaysia. This figure increased to 38% in 2018. While, the Institute of Corporate Directors Malaysia states that women's representation on the board of directors of public-listed companies in Bursa Malaysia has slightly increased but slowly, as in Table 2.2 below.

Table 2.2: Women's Representation as Board of Directors in Public-Listed Companies in Bursa Malaysia.

Year	Women's Representation as BOD
2018	15.6%
2019	16.6%

(Data from: *The Star*, 2019)

Both reports by Hays Asia Salary Guide and the Institute of Corporate Directors Malaysia indicated there is a slow increase in women's participation in management. Thus, it is the best time to determine and understand women's leadership styles.

Types of Leadership Styles

Previous scholars have identified several potential leadership styles, which might be applied by women leaders in Sabah. Among the leadership styles are autocratic (De Cremer, 2006 and Khan, Khan, Qureshi, Ismail, Rauf, Latif and Tahir, 2015; democratic (Jones, Jones, Winchester and Grint, 2016; Allafchi, 2017; Al Khajeh, 2018); laissez-faire (Tarsik, Kassim and Nasharudin, 2014; Al-Malki and Juan, 2018); transformational (Baskarada, Watson and Cromarty, 2017; Baker, 2023) and transactional (Xenikou, 2017; Cherry, 2022).

Autocratic Leadership

This leadership style is also known as authoritative leadership. The leader will have complete control of the tasks. She will set the goals, determine the processes and oversee all steps it takes to reach those goals either with little or no input from the subordinates (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang and Farh, 2004). According to De Cremer (2006), an autocratic leader is a person, who makes decisions on her own without considering the opinion, views or input of her subordinates or followers. Normally, the person is strict and keeps close monitoring of subordinates. Additionally, among the attributes of autocratic leadership are leader would rely on threats and punishment to influence subordinates, does not trust subordinates, does not allow for subordinate input and has limited time in which to make a decision (Khan et al., 2015).

Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership is also known as participative leadership. This style of leadership allows leaders and subordinates to work together to make decisions. The leader is willing to hear advice, suggest subordinates and recognise subordinates' expertise. The person is also able to utilise the capacity of each member as effectively as possible at the right time and condition (Jones et al., 2016). Subordinates are provided the chance to freely participate, generate ideas and exchanges as well as make discussions before decisions are finally made by the leader (Cherry, 2020). Meanwhile, the democratic manager keeps her subordinates informed about everything that affects their work and shares decision-making and problem-solving responsibilities (Khan et al., 2015).

Laissez-Faire Leadership

According to Al-Malki and Juan (2018), the laissez-faire leadership style is also known as delegative leadership as the leader delegates the task to the subordinates with little guidance. In certain situations, the leader will provide little or no direction, instead giving total freedom to carry out the tasks. That means, the subordinates will have all authority and power to determine goals, make directions and resolve problems (Khan et al., 2015). Additionally, the leader also does



not provide regular feedback, thanks their subordinates, does not understand her responsibilities and hopes the subordinates will cover for them (Khan et al., 2015).

Transformational Leadership

Baker (2023) states that this leadership style empowers subordinates to accomplish positive change through big vision, inspiration, and a call to action. The leader could connect emotionally with her subordinates and inspire them to achieve something greater in the future. Moreover, the leader can effectively communicate a positive vision of the future, motivate, and encourage the subordinates to keep pushing forward. In the end, collective action leads to innovation, massive transformation, and the betterment of everyone (Baskarada et al., 2017; Baker, 2023).

Transactional Leadership

This leadership utilises a reward and punishment system to motivate and direct subordinates. Transactional leadership is also known as managerial leadership, which emphasizes the importance of structure, organization, supervision, performance, and outcomes (Xenikou, 2017). This style of leadership is normally used in business, when employees successfully achieve the target; they will be rewarded. On the other hand, if they fail, they will be punished or reprimanded (Cherry, 2022).

Although there are five leadership styles, this study will be looking into the most practised leadership styles by women leaders in Sabah.

3. Research Methodology

This current study involved 282 respondents, aged between 30 and 59, located throughout Sabah. Respondents held positions as decision-makers in their organization, at the management level. Due to restrictions on the movement control order (MCO)- COVID-19 by the government, the data collection has to be conducted online. The researchers built an online survey utilizing Google Forms, enabling to broader participation and ease of access. The survey link was disseminated to various entities, including central and state government ministries, departments, government agencies, as well as corporate bodies and government-linked companies throughout Sabah. In identifying the women's leadership styles in Sabah, this study applied a quantitative approach with a gender perspective. There are three sections in the survey: demographics, intrinsic personalities and open-ended questions regarding other intrinsic factors and practices. The purposeful sampling method was employed, which involved the deliberate selection of female employees who met the predetermined criteria.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

The results of this study show that women in Sabah have various leadership characteristics and characters.

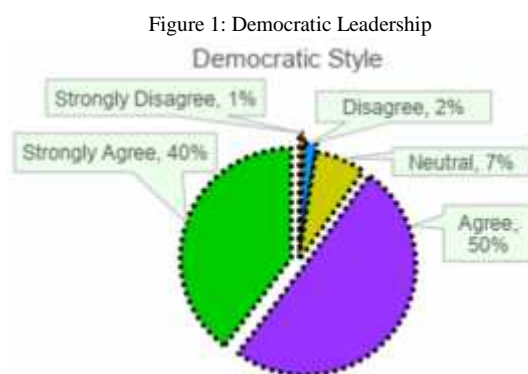


Figure 1 shows the respondent's feedback that they usually make decisions collectively or together with involvement among members of management, supervisors, and subordinates. Collective decision-making received a vote of 90% which is of high quality and this factor can increase the cooperation and commitment of leaders with subordinates to work as a team for the purpose of increasing staff motivation and loyalty to the organization. This shows that women as a leader are also quite open and listen to the opinions of others at the management level, as well as being able to work as a team - democratic leadership. This democratic leadership style is also known as a leader who encourages all his employees to get involved in their organization. The opportunity is given to every member of the organization to give an opinion or view before a decision is made.

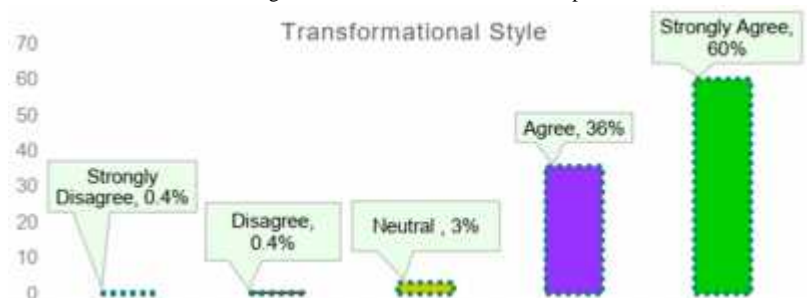


Figure 2: Autocratic Leadership



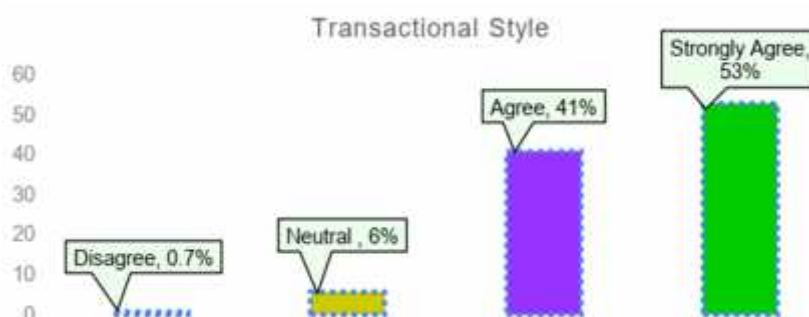
As depicted in Figure 2, the average respondent does not agree with the veto attitude by making their decisions without considering the views of others. Most of the respondents answered on a scale of strongly disagree and disagree and only a number were neutral (24%), agree (20%) and strongly agree (9%). Autocratic leadership, also known as authoritarian leadership, is a leadership style characterized by individual control over all decisions and little if any input from group members. Autocratic leaders usually make choices based on their ideas and judgments and rarely receive advice from followers. Autocratic leadership involves absolute, authoritarian control over the team.

Figure 3: Transformational Leadership



The characteristics of women's leadership in Sabah can also be seen in Figure 3 above when more than 90% of respondents stated that they always give opportunities to their staff to participate in decision-making. Thoughtful suggestions from staff for an issue are also considered to help them make sound decisions that indirectly achieve organizational goals through consensus and good relationships with subordinates. In carrying out this function, the leader tries to activate the people she leads, both in the participation in making decisions and in implementing them. Participation does not mean being free to do whatever you want, but it is done in a controlled and directed manner in the form of cooperation without interfering or taking other people's main tasks. The leader should remain in the function as a leader and not an executor. Most of the time, the leader will encourage, guide and motivate the subordinates to ensure the achievement of goals or outcomes.

Figure 4: Transactional Leadership

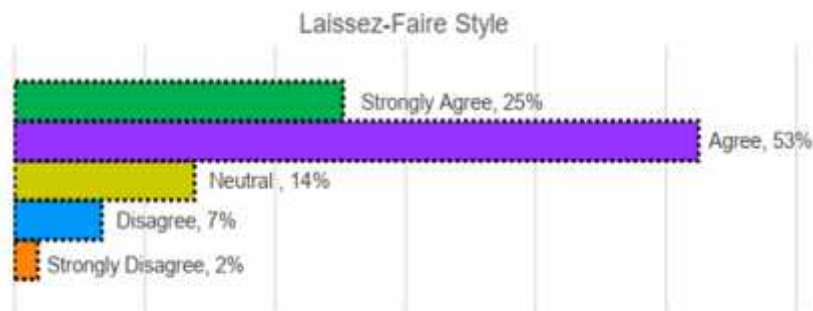


Apart from that, they also practice the attitude of delegation by assigning tasks to supervisors or subordinate staff. The purpose of this distribution is to ensure that all tasks can be carried out as best as possible. It can be seen from Figure 4, most of the respondents' answers are on the agree (41%) and strongly agree (53%) scale. This leadership style gives trust to the 'frontline manager' to deal with work processes or conflicts at the grassroots level so that the organisation's goals are achieved without problems. The person who receives the mandate is trusted by the leader and is the leader's



assistant who has the same principles, perceptions, and aspirations. The transactional function basically means trust, which is trusting subordinates to carry out a task and achieve objectives. If the subordinates successfully achieve the objective, the leader will reward them for the achievement of desired outcomes. Meanwhile, if the subordinates fail to achieve the objective, then they will be punished or penalized.

Figure 5: Laissez-Faire Leadership



Around 78% of the respondents (as in Figure 5) stated that they give freedom to their staff to do the assigned tasks so that the organization's objectives can be achieved. Therefore, the monitoring that is done is very minimal because of the high trust and confidence of the subordinates. This freedom allows the subordinates to work comfortably and be able to use all available knowledge and skills effectively. At the same time highlight their talents through creative and innovative thinking to achieve organizational goals in various ways. The term "laissez-faire" comes from the French language meaning "to let do". In this leadership style, the main goal is to create a team that can work independently, without needing any guidance or interference from the leader or employer.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The success of an organisation depends on the leadership style of a leader in operating and achieving the organization's goals. This study has identified five leadership styles: democratic, autocratic, transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire as in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Leadership style practised by women leaders in Sabah



Findings from the survey, indicate that most women leaders in Sabah applied transformational, transactional, democratic, and laissez-faire styles in leading their organization. The less applied style is autocratic. As a leader, the person could have more than one leadership style. The democratic leadership style matches the woman's nature-sensitive, intuitive, caring, accommodating and cooperative (Mulawarman, Komariyah and Suryaningsi, 2021). Additionally, women by nature like to accept suggestions, and criticism, give freedom and prioritise teamwork, which suits the characters for transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles. Basically, a leader will apply a different leadership style in different situations (Mulawarman et al., 2021). Depending on the purpose, intensity and urgency of a particular matter; the leader will identify the most suitable style to be applied. Thus, a leader would never apply the same style to a different situation. Usually, the democratic style will be applied when the leaders view their role as coordinators of various elements and components in the organization. The transactional style will be utilized when the leader monitors the subordinates' performance and enforces the organizational rules, standards, and culture. Rewards and punishment will be given appropriately according to their performance. However, the leader could apply the transformational style when she wants to motivate, inspire, persuade, nurture a good relationship, cultivate new skills and encourage the subordinates to achieve the target or beyond. Meanwhile, the laissez-faire style could be utilized when the subordinates are experts at what they do, a leader has a great deal of trust and confidence in the subordinates



and both parties have a mutual understanding of what they need to achieve (Cherry, 2022). Additionally, this style is suitable to encourage creativity and unique output from the subordinates.

Women leaders tend to be more likely to apply a democratic and transformational style (Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci and Burke, 2017). However, this study found that women leaders in Sabah not only practised democratic and transformational but also transactional styles. It is believed that the practice of leadership style among women leaders has an influence on the organizational culture as well as the local culture in Sabah. Continuous gender study on women's leadership perspective is needed to ensure the relevant parties are able to address the women's barriers to becoming great leaders; to identify the skills and programs needed in preparing women to become future leaders, explore new opportunities for women leaders and add to the existing literature on women leadership. There are several limitations and recommendations for future studies. As this study was conducted on a quantitative method; hence, future research could be on qualitative or mixed methods. By conducting interviews and performing some observations, more relevant data could be collected and interesting findings could emerge from the exercise. Another potential research is to study the young women leaders' leadership styles. This would help the government to plan and strategize for women's development in the future.

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