IMPACT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS' ROLES ON WORK CULTURE IN A MALAYSIAN PRIVATE COLLEGE – CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Academic departments are key units in any higher education institutions. Efficiency of the management and operation reflects the leadership of the respective head of department. The heads of department own experience and the perception from lecturers revealed that the three essentials for instructional leaders i.e. resource provider, communicator and authority figures. The important elements of work culture were examined. The joint effect of these roles and cultural elements had impacted work culture in the area of relationship with lectures and students and exhibiting positive behaviour. Challenges faced by the heads of department were highlighted.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, most principals of private colleges are school leaders with multiple roles. They are responsible in the finance, administration, marketing, operation and academic matters. It is a common practice in private colleges to have heads of department to assist these principals in the academic matters. Heads of Department are responsible for the smooth running of their respective departments.

Roach (1976) observed that the roles and responsibilities of Heads of Department gradually shift from a purely subject-matter specialist to a planner and developer of department programs. However, their responsibilities as an instructional catalyst, resource allocator, arbitrator/human relations expert, and a partner in shaping the institutional goals and mission still remain unchanged (Roach, 1976). The capabilities of a Head of Department as an instructional leader are crucial in determining the academic success of the department. Wolansky (1978) noted that mostly a Head of Department is appointed for his /her academic achievement and intellectual standing rather than proven managerial ability. After many years, is this still the phenomenon at private higher education institutions in Malaysia? Are the roles that the Head of Department play as an instructional leader in a private college still unchanged as mentioned by Roach (1976)?

Culture differs in each learning institution. Past studies suggested that healthy and sound school cultures correlate strongly with the increase in student achievement, motivation, teacher productivity and satisfaction: Fyans and Maehr (1990) supported the notion that students are more motivated to learn in schools with a strong culture and Cheng (1993) found that a strong school culture had better motivated teachers. What is better, a positive and healthy culture that promotes learning for both the students and the staff members or a negative one that is steeped in conflict and is resistant to change? What type of work

culture exists in this college and what are the roles of a Head of Department in changing the work culture for the better? Cultural changes alter many forms of relationship. Hence, understanding the existing work culture is crucial before any changes can be introduced so that Heads of Department can be better equipped to shape the values, beliefs and attitudes that promote a healthy work environment.

2.0 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to explore:
- the roles exhibited by the Head of Department as an instructional leader
- important elements of work culture that exist in this college
- the impact of the Head of Department roles on the work culture
- the challenges faced by the Head of Department as the instructional leader in promoting a healthy work culture.

3.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURES
3.1 The Contemporary Roles and Responsibilities of a Head of Department

In Malaysia, education in private sector has become an industry. Students have become similar to products for trading in a market. The running of colleges and universities has become businesses. Principals are now being charged with more roles such as a change agents, financial planners, marketers and entrepreneurs.

Heads of Department are appointed to assist the principal and have multiple responsibilities in the learning organization. Strategic planning, assessments of students, staff development, resource allocations, and cost benefit analysis forecasting are part of their administrative roles. Past research by Wolansky (1978) made particular note of the fact that: "For the most part, the departmental executive officer is appointed principally by virtue of his/her academic achievement and intellectual standing rather than proven managerial ability" (p. 55). However, this role is becoming more complex because of rapid social and economic changes.

There is a need to re-examine the criteria for screening and selecting a Head of Department who would best serve the contemporary needs of a department. Roach (1976) indicated that"...80% of administrative decisions are made at the department level" (p. 15). He also observed that the roles and responsibilities of a Head of Department gradually shift from a purely subject-matter specialist to a planner and developer of department programs. He also noted that the head of department still remains as an instructional catalyst, resource allocator, arbitrator/human relations expert, and a partner in shaping the institutional goals and mission (p. 15).

In the present days, Head of Department is expected to exercise academic leadership, coordinate teaching and administrative matters, act as a point of liaison between the department and the top management, promote the interests of the department, support the development of staff and take overall managerial responsibility for the department. Therefore, some of criteria required by higher education institutions for screening and selecting a Head of Department that may be as important as academic achievement are:

program development, public relations, administrative style, communication skills, leadership, and professional involvement.

3.2 Roles of Instructional Leaders

The concept of instructional leadership that emerged in the early 1980s had changed the way how a school principal managed his or her school. In the 1980s, instruction leadership focused on the abilities of the principal to manage the school's operation i.e. principal centered. However, due to globalization in the 1990s, the focus of instructional leadership had shifted to a decentralized approach where school-based management or distributed leadership, creative leadership or facilitative leadership became topical (Lashway, 2002). Instructional leadership became a current issue these due to an increasing importance placed on academic standards, quality and accountability (Christie, 2000).

Instructional leadership is related to leadership in educational institutions with the aim to achieve quality learning for their students. Sergiovanni (1987) as cited in Blasé and Blasé (1998) suggested that instructional leaders have a responsibility to build a learning community. Flath (1989) found that instructional leadership activities could be grouped in the following four categories: goal emphasis, coordination and organization, power and discretionary decision making, and improvement of the instructional program and human relations. Furthermore, Krug (1992), Parker and Day (1997) highlighted that there are five general functions of instructional leadership: defining and communicating a clear mission, goals and objectives; supervising teaching; monitoring student progress; promoting instructional climate; and managing curriculum. Glickman (2004) described instructional leadership as working directly with teachers for group improvement, professional development, curriculum improvement and action research implementation.

Hanny (1987) perceived an instructional leader as someone with knowledge about curriculum development, teacher and instructional effectiveness, clinical supervision, staff development and teacher evaluation. Fullan (1991) agreed and expanded these roles to the management aspect. Throughout the literature, there were recurring themes on instructional leadership roles. Whitaker (1997) suggested four general roles for instructional leadership; a resource provider, an instructional resource, a communicator and visible presence. Achua and Lussier (2007) summarised the roles of leaders into three categories based on the ten roles of leadership which Henry Minitzberg identified. Interpersonal roles included the figurehead role, leader role and liaison role. Information roles comprised the monitor role, disseminator role and spokesperson role. Lastly, decisional roles consisted being an entrepreneur, a disturbance handler, a resource allocator and a negotiator.

In the field of educational management, almost all areas such as policy and practice, training, decision making and leadership had been inspected thoroughly. However, there were limited literatures addressing the issue of culture in relation to leadership. Although there were ample literatures on educational leadership, most of these findings are based on a Western cultural context. As a consequence, modern discussions of leadership that emphasize non Western cultural context are limited (Hallinger, 1995). Similarly, Western theories of leadership in education are transferred across cultures with little concern for their cultural validity (Hallinger, 1995).

Leadership affects the culture of a learning organization by facilitating a climate that either supports or hinders changes (Knutson, 2001). Leaders who are interested in changing the culture should understand the existing culture. Cultural changes by definition alter many forms of relationship. Many approaches had been suggested by researchers in introducing cultural change. Senge (1990) suggested that a school community sets a board vision. He emphasized that this vision changes as culture changes. Fullan (1992) recommended that setting vision for a healthy culture is a collaborative activity among the school community. Stolp and Smith (1994) suggested the approach of team building.

Unlike leadership in other types of organization, leaders in learning organization are expected to serve as designers, teachers and stewards (Senge, 1990). As a designer, a leader generates ideas or visions, structures these ideas or visions and creates an efficient learning process for others to assimilate these ideas. As a teacher, a leader fosters an atmosphere in which everyone knows that development is taking place. As a steward, a leader ensures that these ideas or visions are progressing at the right direction. Before any cultural change takes place, understanding the existing culture is important for leaders to better equip themselves in shaping the new values, beliefs and attitudes that promote a healthy learning environment. At present, there are many culture assessment tools in the form of questionnaires (Hord, 1997; Phillips & Wagner, 2002). It was noted that most cultural assessment tools were developed in the US and it may not be suitable to assess the cultural behavior in learning organization in non Western countries. Quantitative approaches of measuring culture suffered some weaknesses. Among them are that they failed to take account the pervasiveness of culture and the unconscious nature of the basic assumptions. They failed to identify the ambivalent nature of behavior. This might be due to people who wrote or answered questions that did not clearly indicate their basic assumptions.

A qualitative approach provides an understanding of the more complex processes of organizational culture i.e. an understanding of the meaning of the findings on the phenomena studied. Richly described data obtained from a collection that provided a deeper understanding of the work culture i.e. gave explanation about the culture of an organization that occurred over time. Interviews, observations and content analyses were the common data collection methods. Schein (1985) suggested that organizational culture be analysed in three components: the artifacts and creations, values and assumptions. Sathe (1985) highlighted that the analysis of culture can be done by identifying the shared feelings, values and doings among groups of people. The qualitative approach provides an explanation of the basic assumptions, behavior which are not easily be measured by the use of questionnaires. The result from the questionnaires, which are quantified, will help provide some preliminary information on the work culture.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative approach as a data collection method, which involved the participants of two Heads of Department (Mr. Williams and Ms. Alicia) who had serve the Department for more than 10 years and two senior lecturers of different schools (Mr. Ali and Ms. Malar). Pseudo names were used to protect the identity of the participants. The

selection of the participants was purposive as they were to provide in depth information on the work culture and the roles of the Head of Department as an instructional leader.

A semi-structured interview was used for this study as it allowed more variation than traditional structured interviewing and reflects the importance of cooperation between the researcher and participants. The interview protocol was designed according to the general research questions. Interviews were conducted during the free time of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Conversations at the interviews were recorded for the purpose of the data analysis at the later stage.

5.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
5.1 Roles Exhibited by the Head of Department as an Instructional Leader

There are two roles that are perceived to be important by the lecturers. The Head of Department described that they have to play three different roles in this college.

5.1.1 A Resource Provider

Mr. Williams and Ms. Alicia (both were Heads of Department) agreed that they were the resource provider to the lecturers either in relation to instructions or general issues. Mr. Williams related one of his experiences on this role:

> 'Whenever we asked a lecturer to pick up one new subject to teach, we have to provide some information and resources about this new subject. Based on this information, the lecturer will decide to take up this subject or not. We also provide further assistance such as getting the recommended reference materials for this subject to help this lecturer.'

Ms. Alicia also related her experience on providing information which was non-academic:

> 'One of the lecturers came to my office and related her health problem. She was worried that she can't afford to pay for her medical bills and wonder if her health problem was included in the employee's insurance package. I obtained the relevant information for her and managed to solve her problem.'

Both lecturers agreed their Head of Department had been helpful and provided relevant information related to the instructional issues to his or her subordinates. However, they were not dependent on their Head of Department as the only information provider. Mr. Ali highlighted the following point:

> 'We are aware that our Head of Department had many things to attend to. We will try our best to source the information on our own first. For non instructional matters, we will refer to the Human Resource Department personnel.'

5.1.2 A Communicator

From the interview sessions with the Head of Department and lecturers, the role of a communicator exhibited by the Head of Department was perceived to be crucial. Mr.

Williams pointed out the importance of communicating the expectation from the top management to the lecturers.

> '…the lecturers should be informed on the new key performance index (KPI) set by the top management as this new KPI has direct affect on their performance evaluation, annual salary increment and year end bonus. '

Mr. Ali (the lecturer) agreed that Head of Department was an important representative at the top management meetings as they were able to present the lecturer's requests and problems. He stressed the following point:

> '…without them to be our representative, our needs and problems were not made known. It is difficult for us to perform well when our needs and problems not attended to.'

5.1.3 Authority's Figures

The Head of Department pointed out that they represented the lecturers when dealing with the public. Ms Alicia commented the following:

> 'There were occasions where a student's parents came into my office, wanting to know their child's study progress, I have to represent the lecturing team on this situation. After gathering all the information from the lecturers involved, I gave a report to the student's parents. If they insisted to meet the lecturers involved then I will have to call them.'

Mr. Williams related the following events:

> 'There was a case where students lodged a police report claiming that one of the lecturers had used harsh words in class. We had to carry out our investigation before we took action on this case. It might look like a small issue here but there were all sorts of students that we are dealing with. We have to act fairly and protect the image of the college.'

From the findings, the roles exhibited by the Head of Department fitted the suggestion by Whitaker (1997) i.e. resource provider, an instructional resource, a communicator and visible presence.

5.2 Important Elements of the Work Culture

Through the interviews with the Head of Departments and teachers, three main components are evident.

5.2.1 The Atmosphere

The college's atmosphere was kept alive by the people who were in it. The attitude of the people affects the work environment. Mr. Williams (Head of Departments) had the following to comment:

'the attitudes of the people or lecturers who work in the building make them feel appreciated. The staff's greeting in the early morning or light conversation on today's tasks will automatically turn on the momentum.'

On the lecturer's side, Ms. Malar (the lecturer) noted that lecturers maintained a lively working environment in college. She illustrated the following as one example:

' the rush to get the lecture notes photocopied at the last minutes normally breaks the morning tension. Lecturers waiting to get the lecture notes photocopied often cracked jokes on yesterday's TV shows or football match results to lighten up the morning. There will be laugher and loud conversation near the photocopy machine. Suddenly, there is a high level of energy from that corner to start up the day.'

The Head of Department and lecturers agreed that the atmosphere also comes from various factors: how the people work together i.e. collaborating or adapting to new ideas and to changes, the availability of resources such as text books and A4 papers; respecting each other and having opportunities to build teamwork. Ms Alicia suggested that ....' work culture involved the whole staff and it is the life of this college.'

5.2.2 The Traditions

The traditions within the college also contributed to the work culture. Ms. Alicia commented that it is a norm to celebrate any form of achievement by lecturers or students. She related this with one event:

'Traditions are important here. There is a need to pay attention to these meaningful events. For example, one of our students obtained a world silver medal for one of the papers from his professional examination and the lecturer and the student involved received a token of appreciation from the management and the lecturing team organized a luncheon to celebrate this event.'

Mr Ali stated that the lecturing team had its own set of tradition that had a positive impact on the work culture in this college. He commented on:

'Among the lecturers, we share our ideas to improve our performance. Furthermore, we worked together and support each one in possible ways.'

Ms. Malar brought out two meaningful annual events that had a strong impact on the work culture. She had the following to note:

'Most of the lecturers here look forward to have a good annual trip and annual dinner. For many years, the lecturers had enjoyed company's sponsored overseas trips. We 'renew' ourselves or the bond with of family members and some of us took this trip for team building purposes. The annual dinner is to remind us of our hard work during the year.'

Teamwork and spirit of sharing were part of the traditions of work culture which aimed to improve the staff morale and promote the health working environment.

5.2.3 Perceptions

Perceptions influence conversations about the work culture. Both the Head of Department and lecturers agreed that how they express their views on work culture will reflect their experience working in this college. A minor change in the college can lead to discussions about the culture. To illustrate this point, Mr. Williams noted on the response of some of the lecturers on the new ruling that required lecturers to thumb in and out.

> '… This is the new ruling by the Human Resource Department. Though there are disagreements among some lecturers, somehow after reasoning out, they complied to this ruling. It is interesting to see how the work culture changes as a result of your recommendation or reasoning.'

Mr. Ali and Ms. Malar emphasized the importance of projecting a good image to students of this college. Mr. Ali stressed on the following point:

> 'As a private college, our image is the one of the selling points. We are being watched all the time either in classrooms or outside the classrooms. Every single move we make or view that we express, reflects on our work culture. Just imagine the impact on our image if one lecturer gives a negative view about the college to an outsider… It will tarnish the college's image and work culture. '

Ms. Malar perceived the importance of providing quality services to students. She had the following to highlight:

> 'Apart from teaching at the allocated time, we also devoted three hours of our free time per week for counseling sessions to help students with personal or academic problems.'

Both lecturers and the Head of Department also agreed that perceptions are whatever permissible to make an impact on the work culture.

5.3 Impact Head of Departments' Roles on Work Culture
5.3.1 Relationship with Lecturers and Students

Both Head of Department and lecturers pointed out that the relationship between lecturers and staff was important in positive work culture. Lecturers appreciated having the support of the Head of Department to assist with the discipline issues and to intervene with parents when situations become difficult.

Ms. Alicia (the Head of Department) mentioned the following:

> 'I perform better when there is support from my lecturers. I felt appreciated and committed to my job.'

Mr. Williams (the Head of Department) stressed on the following points:

> 'As a HOD, I am the middle person to connect students, lecturers and top management. Therefore, I need to cooperation from all parties so that I can be an effective HOD. I will try to promote a healthy relationship between the lecturers and students'

Both lecturers admitted that they performed better when working with the Head of Department, who can solve problems, promote teamwork and create a stable atmosphere through manageable processes and procedures.

5.3.2 Exhibit Positive Behavior

Both lecturers and Heads of Department agreed that consistently exhibit positive behavior on a daily basis makes a tremendous impact on work culture.
Ms Alicia (Head of Department) noted the following:

> 'Two ways to influence work culture are to maintain a professional attitude and role modeling behavior that can bring out the positive tone in the college.'

Mr. Williams (Head of Department) stressed on the following:

> 'You can influence the culture by what you choose to pay attention to. You have to build trust and be seen as keeping your word. Trust that they can be open to you and encourage conversations amongst us.'

The daily interactions that go beyond professional such as caring level of involvement make a difference on work culture. Mr. Ali (the lecturer) explained:

> 'My HOD took time to chat with us about our work matters, help us in staff development and having 'food fair' at a proper occasion, had a positive impact on us, the lecturers.'

5.4 Challenges Faced by Head of Department in fostering a Positive Work Culture

A Head of Department faces three main challenges in fostering a positive work culture in this college.

5.4.1 Workload

Time, priority of other issues in the college, skills of the team members must be factored into the success of a college. Developing a positive work culture is not a process that happens overnight. It takes times to create a foundation of shared beliefs. Strategic planning is needed for it to happen. However, being the Head of Department, there are many issues that arise each day which need care and attention. Mr. William (Head of Department) had the following to comment:

> 'With the increasing volume of administrative works, we found ourselves juggling with the many other issues that arise unexpectedly. We had to balance our focus on these issues. This balancing act is a challenge.'

Ms Alicia (Head of Department) highlighted the following:

> 'Job satisfaction comes from having time to devote to the more meaningful aspects of the job that have a positive impact on the culture of the college. Those extra efforts that we put in to make the college a better place to work is important, but sometimes not recognized.'

Both Heads of Department admitted that the nature of the job was stressful and required full commitment in order to have the positive outcomes on work culture.

5.4.2 Need for Training

Both of Heads of Department emphasized the need of training. The newly appointed person to this role needs the opportunity to network with the more experienced ones. Ms Alicia commented that:

> 'Most of us started our roles as HOD with little training. For some of us, we managed because we had a mentor to guide us. In other industry, this would not happen.'

Mr. Williams suggested the following:

> '… better approach is needed to appoint the Head of Department. We need support from the top management to equip us with the relevant skills. A newly appointed Head of Department can work with a more experienced one and the experienced one need to enhance their skills or knowledge by attending further training during their services as an HOD.'

The increased of volume of work combined with less trainings often means that the Head of Department is not given the opportunity to gain a sufficient breadth of experience needed to be effective. Mr. Williams had the following to complain:

> '… this is an imbalance. I want to grow too. There are high expectations for us to lead the department well but we received little support from the top management to make us effective.'

The Head of Departments acknowledged that there were training organized by the top management occasionally. However, it was not possible for all the Heads of Department to attend the training sessions together. Some Heads of Department had to forgo such training.

5.4.3 Cooperation from Lectures

Both of the Heads of Department voiced the concern on obtaining the full cooperation from lecturers. Ms. Alicia noted the following:

> 'Maintaining optimism and dealing with staff negativity during this downturn of the economy had been challenging for us. Changing a lecturer's negative mindset is a difficult process but very rewarding. These lecturers' participation influenced the lecturing team to cooperate to make the work environment better.'

Mr. Williams also admitted different lecturer's personalities made gave a tough time to persuade the team to cooperate with him. He added:

> 'Their personalities are quite interesting and my job is to make sure that all of us are on the same direction. I had tried to energize those senior lecturers. It was frustrating but I managed when they saw the direction I

wanted to take things to was genuine to make a better work environment. Bringing the new lecturer on right side while keeping the older staff happy, was a challenge but worth the effort.'

The Heads of Department agreed that the work culture had changed in this college and it has an important influence on the lecturers to change themselves to suit the new culture. They admitted part of their roles was to be the agent of change.

6.0 CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION AND NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The information gathered from this mini study reveals the important roles exhibited by the Head of Department in relation to work culture. The lecturers and Heads of Department agreed that some aspects of work culture are dependent on people's perceptions such as setting the atmosphere and the traditions. The research findings agreed with the culture description by Schein (1992) i.e. a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration.

The findings highlighted the importance influence of leadership to bring a change in work culture. Researchers like Fullan, Sergiovanni and Senge supported the idea of the importance of the role of school leaders in moving the school forward. Both lecturers and Heads of Department agreed that the certain roles were relevant to cultivate the positive work culture. Tracing back to past researches, Whitaker (1997) suggested four roles for an instructional leader to be effective i.e. resource provider, instructional resource, communicator and visible presence. The lecturers perceived that the Heads of Department to be important as resource provider and communicators whereas the Heads of Department perceived that they played one additional role i.e. as an authority figure.

The Heads of Department articulated many areas of work culture such as building the relationships with lecturers and students and modeling positive behavior into this college which aimed to instill a positive work culture.

The Heads of Department highlighted that it was not an easy to foster a positive work culture. There were challenges to be faced such as overwhelming workload, lack of training and cooperation from the lecturing team. The Heads of Department remarked that the top management gave less support to them to equip themselves with relevant skills to lead and manage their departments effectively. Despite of these challenges, the Heads of Department believed that they can make a difference in fostering the positive work culture in this college.

These research findings were based on the two heads of department in a Malaysian private higher education institution. This study is confined to leadership and a cultural boundary. Therefore, they should not be generalized to other public or private higher education institutions in Malaysia.

To have an in-depth understanding of how a work culture develops, an ethnographic research is recommended in future. This study requires the researcher to spend time in the

institution during data collection period to understand its cultural–sharing behaviors, beliefs and values.

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