Understanding and measuring leadership effectiveness in a South East Asian context

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Rather than relying on a somewhat intuitive approach to selecting predictor measures, such as psychometric tests, to tap into performance measures, research has shown that the conceptual matching of predictors and criteria for a specific construct has resulted in higher validity estimates (Warr, 1999). Bartram (2005) took this notion one step further by arguing that a ‘criterion centric’ approach, focusing from the outset on the criterion rather than predictor(s), provides a more meaningful measure of the important aspect of workplace behaviours. In a criterion centric approach, the pairing of the predictor with relevant measurement of the criterion results in more accurate prediction of job performance, by allowing researchers and practitioners to specify and then measure which aspect of a criterion is best measured by certain predictors.

Given the importance of understanding the criterion domain to increase the precision of appropriate measures, the present study focused on leadership effectiveness criteria of in a SE Asian organisation. The research investigates leadership effectiveness criterion in a SE Asian context where the economy is growing rapidly and where local leaders exercise their acquired Western leadership skills in the local context but in practice may be culturally unacceptable (Chan, 2004). Leadership studies, such as the GLOBE project, have identified global leadership traits, based on the assumption that culture varies between countries with leadership and management implications (Javidan et al, 2006). Therefore, we hope that the present study will also contribute to the leadership literature more generally, as empirical studies of leadership located in SE Asia which are still comparatively sparse compared to the body of evidence from the Western world (Taormina & Selvarajah, 2005).

The research questions

The present research investigated the criterion of organisational leadership effectiveness in Malaysia being part of SE Asia guided by the following research questions:

- What are the leadership effectiveness criterion/criteria?
- How do the criteria map onto to the extant leadership literature?

Methodology

The study proceeded in three stages as described in Figure 1. The research setting was a semi-government institution in which the organisational agendas involved have national level impact with over 2500 employees.

1. The first stage elicited concrete examples of effective and ineffective leadership behaviours using CIT interviews with a representative sample of 26 employees (peers, subordinates and supervisor of leaders) on their experiences with senior officers’ demonstration of effective/ineffective leadership behaviours.

2. The second stage produced relevant themes based on the indicators collected from the CIT. As the organisation had an in-house model of leadership, card sort tasks with three different groups were conducted; European (n = 8), Asia Pacific (n = 7) and Malaysian (n = 4) were asked to classify cards into clusters on the basis of their relatedness and label the themes accordingly.

3. During the third stage, a mixed background of participants took part in a focus group to finalise the criterion of leadership effectiveness behaviours.
Findings

1. Interviews
After conducting a rigorous process of data cleaning by the researchers and independent individuals of the initial 672 behavioural indicators extracted, a final total of 180 indicators were used to determine the criterion.

2. Card sort task
This procedure produced a total of 17 main and 50 sub-themes, in which the themes of leadership effectiveness included dimensions that were task oriented, people oriented and thinking abilities.

The card sort activities showed that despite having similar clusters of criterion relating to leadership effectiveness, the Asian and Malaysian group put more emphasis on people oriented themes in comparison to the European group.

3. Focus group
The leadership effectiveness criterion of the organisation as identified during this research is shown in Figure 2.

The various aspects can be divided into a) thinking ability i.e. analysis & strategy; b) people oriented themes, i.e. supportiveness and interactions with others; c) task oriented themes i.e. execution and resilience & composure; and d) motivation.

This model aligned conceptually with the in-house model in overview.

It is acknowledged that this study was limited to one organisation in Malaysia. However, the qualitative process from the initial identification of behaviours, through to the subsequent clustering and comparative process in the methodology and data analysis procedure of the research, have provided insights of the criterion of leadership effectiveness in a SE Asia context.

A subtle cultural differentiation that was observed during the card sort task was the respective emphasis on people-related themes by the Eastern background groups, which was judged more important by Asian participants. This relates to the GLOBE research which found that Southern Asian leadership scored overall high on ‘team oriented’ i.e. team builders, collaborative and diplomatic (Gupta et al., 2002). This finding is important for researchers and practitioners to note, as such subtle differences can have implications for related interpretation of psychometric results.

Despite having different groups involved, the broad criterion identified consisted of leaders’ attributes that were related to carrying out the job/role, interaction with people, thinking abilities and motivation. These are similar to the components of Bartram (2005) Great Eight model that comprise of personality, motivation and ability constructs.

Likewise, the findings were also comparable to the Saville Consulting Wave model of work performance that consist of four clusters which include; thought, influence, adaptability and delivery (Maclver et al., 2006). Evidently, the components of leadership effectiveness found in this study are comparable with other research done in the West, even if the emphasis differs.
In conclusion, in our view this study makes two original contributions, on a practical and theoretical level:

1. The method applied here showed how a local model can be validated and mapped against other models. This is important, as anecdotal evidence suggests that many competency models are implemented without prior validation.

2. From the local data collated here, there was indication that, in line with prior research, person-related qualities are seen as more important than task-related qualities.

Moving forward, this research will inform a subsequent quantitative study to ascertain which leadership aspects are associated with measures of ability, personality and competence and motivation respectively.

References


