

“Servant Leadership” Vs “Leadership Competency” – towards “Sejahtera” University Working Environment

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Abstract

This research was conducted to examine whether servant leadership and leadership competency have a significant relationship with the working environment, involving respondents from public university leaders in Malaysia. In addition, this study aims to find the answer either leadership style or leadership competency is more substantial in influencing the working environment which subsequently impacts the success of a university. The results of this study prove that servant leadership and leadership competency have a significant relationship with the working environment with $p < 0.01$. However, the regression results show only servant leadership has a significant influence or contribution towards the working environment with a t-value higher than 1.96. This research suggests that university leaders can consider the servant leadership style in governing their universities. Through literature review and discussion, leaders by now should have more favourable opinions and perceptions towards servant leadership and no longer perceive it as a leadership style for a weak leader. The motivation of conducting this research is due to prevalent leadership issues recently happened at universities leading to unpleasant working environment. It is hoped that the results and discussion of this study can contribute in the form of references to university leaders on the importance of leadership style based on humanity and empathy to obtain a favourable university working environment, aligned with the goals of the National Education Philosophy (NEP) and sustainable development agenda (SD16 – peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Keywords: Contingency Theory of Leadership, Leadership Competency, Servant Leadership, Servant Leadership Theory, Working Environment

Introduction

Malaysia's economic development is depending on its educated citizens. To produce knowledgeable citizens depends heavily on education quality, especially in the higher education sector (Fadzil et al., 2022). Although this has been recognised for a long time, issues related to poor or ineffective leadership remain hotly debated, and universities in Malaysian are no exception. The ineffective leadership has resulted in the absence of the “kesejahteraan” (well-being) element in the workplace (Shetty et al., 2022) and this is contradicting what has been advocated in the sustainable development agenda (2030 Agenda – SD16) that emphasises improving the well-being of everyone through peace and justice. One of the increasingly acute situations that occur in most universities in Malaysia is the unpleasant working environment caused by excessive and unreasonable workloads (Fadzil et al., 2022) which happened due to the universities lacking leaders with empathy (Abd Hamid & Alam, 2022). In addition, the leaders are criticised for being leaders without legit characteristics as leaders (Salleh, 2022). Quite recently, a round table discussion was held at one of the leading universities in Malaysia with the aim of discussing the long-overdue problems related to university leaders. The roundtable discussion also highlighted the characteristics that should be possessed by someone known as a leader. One of the characteristics mentioned is, a leader must have the characteristic of a "servant" and not just competency (Salleh, 2022). Further to the roundtable discussion, the researchers were encouraged to conduct this research.

Literature Review

Many opined that an organisation's success is highly dependent on the employees (Raoush, 2022). Therefore, the employees' well-being (“kesejahteraan”) is very important to ensure employees are always happy and healthy to resume their responsibilities. However, there has been numerous inauspicious news related to employees' well-being recently which is caused by unfavourable working environments and bad leaders, and this is no exception in the university settings (Salleh, 2022). Many university leaders have been criticised for being lacking in integrity, being self-centred, heartless, and managerially incompetent despite having high qualifications (Fadzil et al., 2022). Hence, this research was conducted to find the answers to the factors that might have significant relationships with the working environment. Additionally, this research also aims to examine whether humane value like empathy is more important than competency level in attaining a “sejahtera” working environment that is well-aligned with the sustainable development agenda (SD16 - peace, justice, and strong institutions).

This research adopted servant leadership as one of its independent variables since servant leadership is professed by many to be a leadership style that should be adopted by every leader, especially university leaders (Khattak et al., 2019). Servant leadership is a leadership style that always puts the interests of others first. Servant leaders empower and appreciate employees' efforts and sacrifices hence improving the working environment (Nazir et al., 2022). Unfortunately, servant leadership has been often rejected by most leaders due to them incorrectly perceiving the meaning of it. Many misconstrued servant leadership is only meant for weak leaders and that is why they are addressed as “servants” (Majid & Mahsen, 2022). Nevertheless, the term “servant” in servant leadership is to remind every individual, including the leaders, regardless of who they are, they remained a servant who is responsible for looking after the well-being of their employees. They are servants who are accountable to lead their employees to the success of their organisations (Majid & Mahsen, 2022). Although

many scholars have discussed topics related to servant leadership, the misconception proved that there is still room for this topic to be further discussed and studied. Moreover, researchers Hai and Van (2021), supported by Raoush (2022) have also manifested that the study of servant leadership is still required especially in the context of the higher education industry.

Leadership competency is defined as the leader's ability to lead his employees and his organisation (Khadka et al., 2014). Competency is often measured or seen through a person's qualifications and achievements. Nevertheless, there are criticisms stating that simply having qualifications and achievements does not guarantee that a person can lead effectively (Shetty et al., 2022). Previous research by Shalleh et al (2022) has also proved that successful and sustainable organisations are not due to having highly qualified leaders alone, but because the leaders possess personal qualities like integrity, honesty, humility, and being very respectful towards everyone. There have been news highlights that how highly educated leaders can also be more inclined to always be in the front row, feeling superior and without care for others, hence being less empathetic towards their employees. There have been reports that these merely highly qualified leaders, the kind of highly qualified leaders sans humanity and integrity, love taking credit at the expense of others' sacrifices and efforts which ultimately leads to unhealthy work environments (Modise, 2023). Despite these criticisms, there are some who think that qualifications remain a pivotal element in organisations' success because qualifications and knowledge will put the leaders in the capacity to think and solve the organisations' problems. Being able to solve organisations' problems will indirectly help the organisation to obtain a "sejahtera" working environment (Sumantri et al., 2022). Following the inconsistency, this research was conducted in order to find an answer to one of the research objectives.

"Sejahtera" means peace, serenity, and protection from disaster (i.e., hardship, disturbance etc.). According to Wan Ya'cob (2022), there is no precise term that can translate the word "sejahtera" into a single English word. "Sejahtera" itself is one of the important elements in the life of every person to maintain harmony and amiable relationship among each other. Additionally, with the presence of "kesejahteraan" at work, employees will be more effective in performing their daily responsibilities, hence contributing to the success of the organisations (Nordin et al., 2022). Therefore, it is very important for university leaders to ensure there is an element of "sejahtera" exists within the university working environment. Unfortunately, as reported by some previous researchers (i.e., Shetty et al., 2022), there are many issues related to university leadership (i.e., no empathy, self-centred, no integrity etc.) that has led to this unamicable working environment which subsequently led to poor university performance. Examining the reported issues has prompted the researchers to pursue this research focusing on leadership and the working environment.

Underpinning Theory and Proposed Research Framework

The underpinning theories used to underpin the proposed research framework of this study are the Contingency Theory of Leadership by Fiedler (1964) and the Servant Leadership Theory by (Greenleaf, 1970). The former theory states that for someone to be an effective leader, they must not just be adaptive to any situation but always be ready to face the challenges ahead. This theory is to support H2 because, leadership competency refers to leaders' capability in managing their organisation through their expertise, skills, and knowledge (Fiedler, 1964). Thus, capable, and knowledgeable leaders are normally not afraid to face difficulties. They realise that enough knowledge will enable them to encounter any

type of challenges and finally achieve a peaceful working environment. The latter theory is to support H1 and H3 because, servant leadership refers to leaders who prioritise their employees' first over their own interests which made them trustworthy, humble, accountable, and ethical, hence leading to the attainment of prosperous organisational culture and pleasant working environment. Moreover, since servant leadership advocates striving to serve others rather than accrue power or take control, this has made servant leadership as a more prominent element in inculcating a "sejahtera" working environment than the other elements (Greenleaf, 1970).

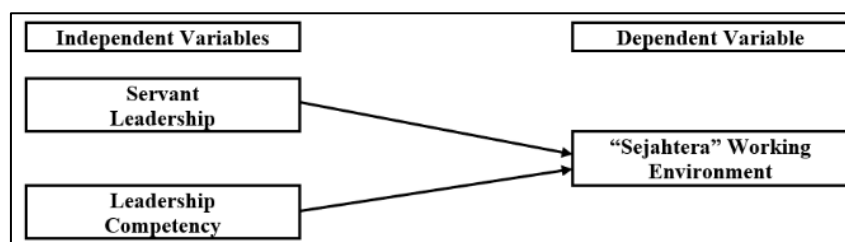


Figure 1: Proposed Research Framework

Based on the underpinning theories and discussion from previous studies, the proposed hypotheses for this research are:

H1: There is a significant relationship between servant leadership and "sejahtera" university working environment.

H2: There is a significant relationship between leadership competency and "sejahtera" university working environment.

H3: Servant leadership is the most significant influencer to "sejahtera" university working environment.

Methodology

This research is non-experimental quantitative research involving correlational and causal-comparative. The population involved are university leaders from 20 public universities in Malaysia. A total of 2921 university leaders (i.e., Vice Chancellor, Dean, Deputy Dean, Head of Department, and Program Leader) have been identified from each university website. Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling size table as the indicator, only 341 respondents were required to continue with data analysis. This research uses a simple random sampling technique because it is simple and it opens the opportunity for everyone in the population to have an equivalent opportunity of being chosen as the sample. In addition, this technique allows the results to be generalised (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013).

The researchers used the Google form where a total of 433 respondents voluntarily responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire for this research was adapted from previous studies. Questions to measure servant leadership, leadership competency, and working environment were adapted from Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011); Khadka et al (2014); Abdul et al (2016) respectively. As an assurance that the collected data will be used solely for research purposes, all data will be treated as private and confidential, as well as to ensure freedom of expression from respondents, a confidentiality clause has been included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was made available in English to the respondents. Both data screening and inferential analysis were conducted utilising the SPSS version 26.

Results and Discussion

Data Screening and Cleaning

Before proceeding to the data analysis, the researchers carried out data cleaning procedures namely, boxplot and Cook’s Distance Analysis to identify if there are outliers that could warp the findings of the result. Figure 2.0 represents the boxplot graph with potential outliers (cases 7, 126, 246, and 253). The researchers have decided to discard only case 126 first because it is considered an extreme outlier. However, to confirm other outliers are not extreme outliers, Cook’s Distance procedure was carried out. Figure 3.0 is the Cook’s Distance Scatter Plot and it shows case 7 can be considered a multivariate outlier and has substantial potential to misrepresent the research results, hence deleted.

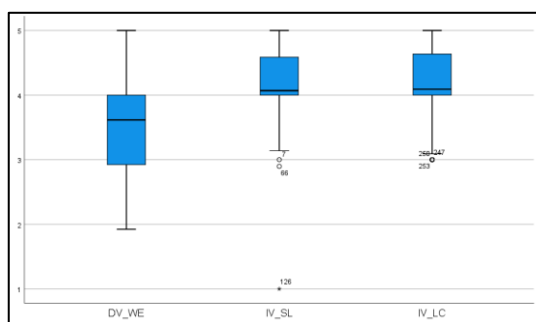


Figure 2.0: Boxplot

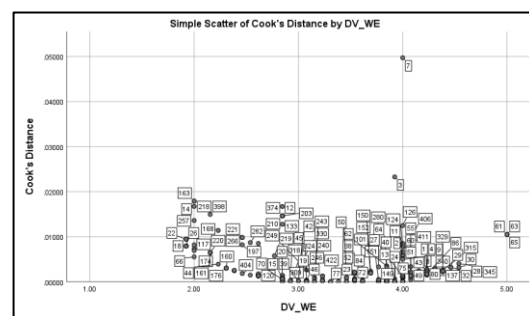


Figure 3.0: Cook’s Distance Graph

A normality test has also been conducted to ensure that the data used for the next analysis, especially to run the correlational analysis is normal. Table 1.0 summarises the skewness and kurtosis results for this research. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the normality issue does not exist because both the skewness and kurtosis results for all variables are within the accepted range ($-2 \leq x \leq 2$) (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 1.0
Skewness and Kurtosis for Variables of Study

	Overall Mean	Overall SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Servant Leadership	4.1895	0.44614	-0.118	-0.623
Leadership Competency	4.2462	0.47065	-0.069	-0.300
Working Environment	3.4312	0.67927	-0.583	-0.519

Measurement Model Analysis

Next, the reliability analysis has been conducted to check the internal consistency of the measuring instrument. Reliability analysis is crucial to ensure all data that are going to be analysed to fulfil the objectives of this research are reliable and error-free, thus contributing to the accuracy of the results (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Table 2.0 is a summary of Cronbach's alpha reliability test results. All variables are concluded as complying with the rule because each variable shows a value of no less than 0.70 (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013).

Table 2.0

Reliability Results - Cronbach's alpha

	Cronbach's Alpha
Leadership Competency	0.936
Servant Leadership	0.953
Working Environment	0.947

Structural Model Analysis

The first procedure that needs to be done during the structural model analysis is the multicollinearity analysis to check on a good regression model. Multicollinearity issues must not exist in a good regression model. A regression model is considered as good if the Tolerance result is not less than 0.30 and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is less than 4.0 (Hair et al., 2017). Table 3.0 shows the Tolerance and VIF results of this research, and it can be concluded that the regression model of this research is free from multicollinearity issues and is going to be a good one.

Table 3.0

Multicollinearity

	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
Working Environment (Constant)		
Servant Leadership	0.525	1.905
Leadership Competency	0.525	1.905

To achieve the objective of this study and to confirm H1, H2, and H3, a correlation analysis was conducted. Table 4.0 summarises the results of the correlation analysis.

Table 4.0

Correlations

		Working Environment	Servant Leadership	Leadership Competency
Working Environment	Pearson Correlation, r	1.000	0.466**	0.256**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000
	N	431	431	431

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results show that servant leadership and leadership competency have a significant relationship with the working environment with $p < 0.01$. This simultaneously supports both H1 and H2. Nevertheless, based on the Pearson Correlation (r) results, servant leadership ($r = 0.466$) show a stronger relationship with the working environment than leadership competency ($r = 0.256$), thus H3 is supported.

H1 is supported plausibly because servant leadership is referring to leaders who always put others before themselves and perform their responsibilities mainly because of God. Therefore, they always remember that they are responsible for leading and moving hand-in-hand with their employees for the sake of the organisations' successes and everyone's well-being (Nordin et al., 2022). Servant leaders are also leaders that always know their roots

where they are the servant to their God thus, they must not behave arrogantly, abuse or misuse their power, lack integrity, being selfish but always act bravely to stand for their employees' rights even though the decision might jeopardise their own position. The courage to stand up for what is right is reasonable because, servant leaders realise that as a servant to God, everything they own is just a loan but not their absolute possession. Therefore, as a servant, they must take care of the "Amanah" (their employees and their position) that have been entrusted to them and do it for the sake of their God and not just to earn recognition, high salary, title, or fame.

H2 is also supported and this finding is aligned with earlier findings by (Sumantri et al., 2022). H2 is supported believably because, a person's knowledge, ability and proficiency in their work are important to enable them to carry out their responsibilities as the leader of the organisation. Everyone is aware that, in the end, the leader is the ultimate person who is responsible for making the final decision and as well as responsible for finding the best way to solve the problems faced by the organisation. Therefore, to enable someone to make the sound and best decision for their organisation, they need to have sufficient competency, expertise, and knowledge to enable them to distinguish between what is best and what is not good for their organisation. This is because, ultimately, leaders are the person who are answerable and accountable for everything that happened in and to their organisations.

Nevertheless, the analysis is then further to regression analysis basically to delve deep the reason of why servant leadership is found more influential towards working environment than leadership competency. Based on the analysis results presented in Table 5.0, the β -value for servant leadership is 0.552 whereas the β -value for leadership competency is -0.125. A positive β -value means that for every 1-unit increase in the predictor variable, the outcome variable will increase by the beta coefficient value, vice versa. Therefore, for this research, for every 1-unit increase of servant leadership, the working environment will increase by 0.552 (direct relationship). Meanwhile, for every 1-unit increase of leadership competency, the working environment will decrease by 0.125 (inverse relationship). The regression results indirectly support and rationalise why servant leadership has a stronger and substantial relationship with the working environment. When leaders are kind, empathetic, truthful, and always "walk his talk" or keep to his words and promises, the employees will certainly in favour of their leaders' behaviours. According to Modise (2023), this positive reciprocate behaviour will create a more harmonise and peaceful working environment which eventually towards the attainment of "sejahtera" working environment. However, when the leaders only possess knowledge but missing of pure heart and empathy, they are more likely to become self-centred, arrogant, and forget their true responsibility as leaders, which ultimately contribute to uncomfortable and toxic working environment.

Table 5.0
Regression Analysis

	Beta	T Value	P-Value
Working Environment (Constant)		2.316	0.021
Servant Leadership	0.552	9.398	0.000
Leadership Competency	-0.125	-2.123	0.034

This research has also undergone the Coefficient of Determination (R^2) procedure which is basically to statistically examine how close the data are to the fitted regression line. The R^2 for this research is reported to be 0.225 (per Table 6.0) and according to Cohen (1988), it is

considered as moderate. In other words, this research R^2 value indicates that the independent variables (servant leadership and leadership competency) are moderately or not explaining much in the variation of the dependent variable (working environment), despite the significant relationship. As suggested by Cohen (1988), there will be a need to add more independent variables into the model that will somehow relate to the dependent variable.

Table 6.0
Coefficient of Determination

Variables	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Working Environment	0.225	0.222

Conclusion

This study certainly has its limitations. Among the limitations of this study is that the respondents involved are only university leaders. Therefore, future studies can consider the opinions of respondents other than university leaders like academicians, operations staff etc. Besides that, the study also should not be limited to the higher education context only to allow the generalisation of the results to other industries. In addition, this study is a quantitative cross-sectional. Future researchers may consider a qualitative study involving employees as the respondents to find out in depth the elements that they feel are important to obtain a "sejahtera" working environment. Moreover, research to gauge employees' perception of leadership characteristics is also encouraged to find out the main characteristics expected by the employees to attain a sense of belonging in the organisations where they work.

Although this study has its limitations, the results of this study also have their contributions. Firstly, the proposed research framework for this study can be used as a basis for future researchers to continue the same study by adding other elements as independent variables. Future researchers can further this research due to the moderate coefficient of determination results ($R^2 = 0.225$). Most importantly, this research has proven that the characteristics of "servant" leadership (empathy, integrity, honesty, and responsibility) are more important than just competency in creating a "sejahtera" and promising working environment as well as guaranteeing the excellence in the performance of the employees and the organisation.

It is hoped that the results of this research can be used as a basis of reference for university leaders in Malaysia about the importance of a leadership style that is based on humanity and empathy to obtain a favourable university working environment. This is important to help Malaysia achieve the goal of the National Education Philosophy ("NEP") which strives for the formation of holistic and integrated people, to produce balanced individuals who are not just intellectually but spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief and devotion to God (Modise, 2023). In addition, the results of this study also help Malaysia achieve its sustainable development agenda (SD16 – peace, justice, and strong institutions) which strives for the improvement of everyone's well-being including employees at work through leadership based on justice, integrity, and humanity.

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