

## **Strategic Leadership Actions and Success of Leaders in Malaysian and American Universities**

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Malmuzzammil Yasin, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Lokman Mohd Tahir  
*Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia*  
*Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of this descriptive non-experimental study was to determine if significant relationships exist between the leaders' use of strategic leadership actions and their success as perceived by their followers, and mediated by environmental contexts, and demographics. The participants in this study were university professors from Malaysia and United States of America. The participants were chosen via a random stratified sampling. They were asked to response to 77 questions on the Strategic Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ). The data collected was analyzed through multiple regression and correlation techniques to ascertain the hypothesized relationships. The study found that successful leaders use a wider array of leadership strategies than less successful leaders. There was also a significant difference between the array of action sets used by successful Dean's in Malaysian and American Universities and the array of action sets used by less successful Dean's in Malaysian and American Universities. Therefore, these findings are supportive of Pisapia (2009) proposition that leaders often fail because they are trained in and rely upon a linearity of thinking mindset, which does not work in situations characterized by ambiguity and complexity that requires them to be flexible and change oriented.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Strategic leadership, successful leaders.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Leadership is an important subject of discussion and research in organizational studies. Max Depree (1999) statement that leadership is "the subject of much thought, discussion, writing, teaching, and learning" (p.11) exemplified this idea. Bolman and Deal (1997) in their famous book, "Reframing Organizations, Artistry Choice and Leadership," mentioned how leadership is universally offered as a panacea for almost any problem. Bennis and Nanus (1985) stressed that leadership is the pivotal force behind successful organizations and that to create vital and viable organizations, leadership is necessary to help organizations develop a new vision of what they can be, and mobilize organizations to change toward their new visions.

Scholars and researchers in different academic disciplines have been trying to give new ideas and interpretations to the term "leadership." Bass (1981) collected and analyzed "more than 4725 studies on leadership that Bass listed on 189 pages of references in his handbook" (Rost, 1993, p.4). Bennis and Nanus (1985) contended that "thousands of empirical investigations of leadership have been conducted in the last seventy-five years alone, but no clear and unequivocal understanding exists as to what distinguishes leaders from non leaders" (p. 4). Despite the efforts made to understand leadership, "the fact remains that little is actually known about the phenomenon we refer as *leadership*" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 22). In analyzing the development of leadership studies, Northouse (2001) pointed out that for the past 50 years, there have been as many as 65 "different classification systems" to explain the dimension of leadership.

Realizing the need for a renewal in leadership concepts, Pisapia (2009) has introduced Strategic Leadership as an alternative way to understanding and practice leadership. It is a generic approach, which tries to provide the elasticity, practicality and pragmatic approach to leadership as the ability (as well as wisdom) to make consequential decisions about ends (goals), ways (strategies) and means (actions) in complex and ambiguous environments. Pisapia (2009) bases the need for strategic leadership on the need to overcome the failure of leaders who practice from a modern perspective in an increasingly postmodern environment. Leaders in this environment, he believes, fail for a number of reasons: (a) they are trained in and rely upon a linear thinking mindset, which does not work in situations characterized by ambiguity and complexity; (b) they are unable to identify critical societal and institutional forces impacting their environment and thus do not connect their organizations to the major themes associated with success; (c) their concept of change is also linear and therefore they overuse quantifiable parameters in the change process and seek to rationally plan their way to success; (d) they do not see their organizations as dependent upon the actions and views of other organizations and individuals, therefore, they do not connect with significant forces on their critical paths of success; (e) they

do not connect the principle concepts of necessary organizational changes to the minds and spirit of their followers, therefore removing an important component of empowerment and self-management; and (f) they use a limited set of leadership actions to influence followers to join in a common cause and therefore are effective only when conditions match their one-dimensional set of leadership actions.

Pisapia (2009) believes that to successfully use these strategies, leaders must use a multifaceted set of action sets: managerial-transformational, and political-ethical. He hypothesizes that the combination of preconditions, strategies and actions enables leaders to be successful in many different contexts and under conditions of ambiguity, complexity and chaos. Pisapia (2009) also assumes that successful leaders use a wider array of strategic leader actions than less successful leaders; particularly in complex and chaotic environments. This assumption is tested through this research study.

Pisapia (2009) organizes his strategic leadership action sets around two key tensions (a) the tension between the need for stability and the need for change, and (b) tension between “what is right” and “what is possible”---between the need for leaders who can manage and managers who can lead. The leadership actions are designed to apply managerial, executive, political and ethical behaviors to satisfy the organizations need for control, continuity and change, therefore inducing followers to join in a common purpose. The model that Pisapia (2009) presents is a demarcation from most leadership theories which have treated management and leadership as separate entities performed by different people. For example, Kolb, Osland, and Rubin (2001), Rost (1993), and Zaleznik (1977) maintained that leaders and managers exhibited two distinct types of behavior. Pisapia, on the other hand perceives that leaders use both of these actions through a process of balancing the organization’s need between stability and change. He also perceives that the political and ethical actions of leaders are used to balance the leader’s use of managerial and transformational actions.

Pisapia’s Strategic Leadership theory, especially his proposal on the four leadership action sets, has a few advantages because (a) it is a generic model based on several literatures and research done by previous theorists and organizational experts, and as a result the model proposed by him is comprehensive and covers ideas, which although had been proposed by earlier scholars, were not thought of as an ensemble, and (b) his model has proposed a unique and rational way of practicing leadership by promoting a balance between the organization’s need for stability and change, and the ethical nature of the task and the political realities that exist; which is a rare thing to find in higher education literatures.

The model has been tested only in parts (see Pisapia, Reyes-Guerra & Coukos, 2004; Pisapia, Reyes-Guerra & Coukos, 2005; Pisapia, Reyes-Guerra, & Yasin 2006). This study proposes to test his assumption that the use of a multifaceted set of strategic leadership actions in complex and sometimes chaotic environments will lead to greater leader success than singular use of available actions. The theoretical framework used in this research is based on Pisapia (2009) idea of Strategic Leadership. There are four strategic leadership actions (1) managerial (2) transformational (3) ethical, and (4) political. There are two major tensions in the application of leader actions; the tension between managerial and transformational leadership actions and the tension between political and ethical leadership actions.

Along with the managerial-transformational actions, Pisapia also recognizes that human organizations also have needs for power and moral approaches. These needs are many times in tension and affect the application of managerial and transformational leaders’ actions. He perceives this as the reality of the organization. This is the same argument made by Bolman and Deal (2001), Hoy and Miskel (1997), and Sergiovanni (1996) that in any organization, including schools, colleges, and universities, horse-jockeying, exploitation, conflicts, competition, and organizational politics always exist, and leaders should acknowledge and deal with this reality instead of ignoring it.

In order to transform the organization and to survive, leaders “must also juggle the political realities required to sell their ideas, while following the values identified as important by the organization” (Pisapia, 2009). Pisapia (2009) grounds the managerial actions in the behavioral sciences and theorizes that these actions work best in a hierarchical environment which views followers as subordinates during the frame sustaining change. The transformational actions are grounded in cognitive and behavioral research and focuses on frame breaking change and development of a new normative order. He theorizes that transformational actions works best with “a relatively mature, responsible, committed, stable, and immensely thoughtful, and talented group of followers which I call collaborators” (Pisapia, 2009).

Political actions are grounded in the sociological understandings of organizations and followers are seen as competitors. The political approach is particularly suitable for an organization where “muddling through” is the norm rather than selecting and carrying out the best possible alternatives. The ethical frame “houses the

moral compass of leaders,” and followers are viewed as colleagues. Ethical actions are seen as a good antidote to a politicized environment. Ethical leaders “seek to create cultures that are people centered, supportive of ethical work and provide opportunities for others to take responsibility” (Pisapia, 2009).

The term “success” and “effectiveness” have often been used interchangeably to describe leaders’ outcomes and have traditionally been assumed to be equivalent. However, (Luthans, 1988) has clearly distinguished the differences between successful and effective leaders. Successful leaders according to him refers to “those who have been promoted relatively quickly,” while effective leaders as “those who have satisfied committed subordinates, and high performing work units” (p. 137). Effectiveness can be examined from three perspectives, individual effectiveness, group effectiveness, and organizational effectiveness (Gibson, Ivancevich, & Donnelly, 1991). According to Peter Drucker (1973), effectiveness is the founding of success, while efficiency is a minimum condition for survival after success has been achieved. Efficiency is concerned with doing things right while effectiveness is doing the right things. According to Kim and Yukl (1995), most of the research on leadership theory and behavior deals with the outcomes of leadership effectiveness rather than success (Kim & Yukl, 1995).

Pisapia’s concept of success used in this study is more comprehensive and cuts across the discussions of success that have been provided above, ranging from concern of success of individual, organizations, as well as internal and external stakeholders. It measures leader success through the variables of (a) successful provision of value to the organization (Collins, 2001, Selznick, 1957); (b) success in meeting the goals of the organization’s mission or vision (Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Collins, 2001; Collins & Porras, 1997; Kotter, 1996; and Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999); (c) bringing about change in the organization (Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1996; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999); (d) maintaining an orderly work environment (Heifetz, 1994; Burns 2004); (e) satisfying the needs of the organization’s internal stakeholders (Barnard, 1938; Burns, 1978; Bass & Avolio, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1996; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999); (e) satisfying the needs of the organization’s external stakeholders (Burns, 1978); and (f) empowering followers (Kotter 1996; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Senge, 1990). Leader success in this study is measured based on followers’ perception of their leaders.

The purpose of this study was to determine if successful University Deans in complex environments use a more multifaceted set of leaders’ actions than less successful Deans in similar environments. A sub purpose of this study was to develop a reliable and valid instrument to measure the leaders’ use of strategic leadership actions based on Pisapia (2009) strategic leadership idea. This study is guided by these research questions:

- 1) Can a reliable and valid instrument be developed to determine the relationship between the leaders’ use of strategic leadership action sets and their success?
- 2) Is there any significant relationship between the leaders’ use of transformational, managerial, political and ethical action sets and the leaders’ success?
- 3) Is there any significant difference between the array of action sets used by successful Deans in Malaysian Universities and the array of action sets used by successful Deans in American Universities?
- 4) Is there any significant difference between the arrays of action sets used by less successful Deans in Malaysian Universities and the array of action sets used by less successful Deans in American Universities?
- 5) Is there any significant difference between the array of action sets used by successful Deans in Malaysian and American Universities and the array of action sets used by less successful Deans in Malaysian and American Universities?

## **II. THE INSTRUMENT USED IN THE RESEARCH**

The instrument used in this research is called the Strategic Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ). In the first stage of the development of the SLQ instrument, Pisapia (2009) theory of strategic leadership was studied, discussed, and understood. Then the constructs were delineated into several behavioral statements called actions. A panel of experts was used to determine if these actions represent the four leadership factors. A final list of these items were built into a questionnaire and pilot tested for reliability before it was finalized and used

A pilot study of the SLQ instrument was conducted with 38 respondents to evaluate their leaders on a series of 5-Likert scales. The Alphas Cronbach values for the transformational, managerial, ethical, and political action sets were .9401, .9343, .9578, and .8900 respectively. The Cronbach Alpha for these 97 items was 0.9838. The Alpha for the success items was .9665. A psychometric approach as proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) was used to establish the construct validity of the instrument using the data from the research. First the reliabilities for each subscale (transformational, managerial, ethical and political actions) were established by simply summing the items within-scales and applying the Cronbach alpha. Then, the four sub scales were cross-

correlated. The results revealed that the reliabilities for each subscale were high. Alphas for the transformational, managerial, ethical, and political action sets were .9436, .9337, .9507, and .6893 respectively. The Alpha for the success items was .9642. Then, a bi-variate correlation analysis was conducted between the four subscales. The results show that in general, the inter-correlations between the subscales were high. Therefore, the construct validity of the SLQ was not supported.

The respondents in this research were selected among university professors from 23 colleges in two public universities in Malaysia, and eight colleges from a public university in South Florida. About 186 professors of these three institutions were sampled and administered the Strategic Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ). The overall percentage of return questionnaires by the professors was 67 percent (124 respondents).

### III. THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

For research question 1, the results revealed that the reliabilities for each subscale (transformational, managerial, political, and ethical) were high; therefore the instrument developed was statistically reliable. The Alpha Cronbach values for the transformational, managerial, ethical, and political action sets were .9436, .9337, .9507, and .6893 respectively. The alpha for the success items was .9642. Through the psychometric analysis, where a bi-variate correlation analysis was conducted between the four subscales, the results show that in general, the inter-correlations between the subscales were high. Thus, the construct validity of the SLQ was not supported.

In order to answer Research Question 2, the leaders' average score on transformational, managerial, ethical, and political actions were correlated with the leaders' average score on success. Table 1 lists all the correlation values and the effect sizes of the analysis.

*Table 1 Bivariate Analyses of the Four Leader Action Sets and Leader Success*

Action Set	Correlation (r)	r <sup>2</sup>	Effect Size
Transformational	0.744*	0.553	Medium
Managerial	0.664*	0.441	Medium
Ethical	0.642*	0.412	Medium
Political	0.647*	0.419	Medium

\* $p < .05$ ,  $n=22$

Table 1 reflects a significant correlation between leaders' use of transformational actions and the leaders' success. The Pearson correlation value was 0.744 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the effect size was 0.553 (medium effect size). There was also a significant relationship between leaders' use of managerial actions and the leaders' success. The Pearson correlation value was 0.664 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the effect size was .441 (medium effect size). There was also a significant relationship between leaders' use of ethical actions and the leaders' success. The Pearson correlation value was 0.642 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the effect size was .412 (medium effect size). There was also a significant relationship between leaders' use of political actions and the leaders' success. The Pearson correlation value was 0.647 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the effect size was .419 (medium effect size). In all four instances tested, the results indicate a substantial practical effect of the relationship between the four leader action sets and the leader's success ranking by professors.

In order to answer to Research Question 3, the Deans' level of success was computed for each Dean by pooling the responses of their followers to the success items. Two levels of success were created: (a) less successful Deans, and (b) successful Deans. These levels of success were created by grouping scores that fell above the mean as "successful Deans" and scores that fell below the mean as "less successful Deans". The study of the use of action sets was further analyzed by determining if successful university Deans used a wider array of action sets than less successful Deans. Array in this study meant the ability of the leader to use more than one set of actions. Pisapia (2009) has classified the "array of actions use by leaders" into three categories: (a) wide array, for those leaders who used four strategic leadership action sets, (b) narrow array for those leaders who use three or four action sets, and (c) constricted array for those leaders who use none or one action set. Based on this understanding, the array of action sets used by the Deans were categorized as wide, narrow or constricted depending on their average array scores computed through their followers' responses on their strategic leadership actions. Depending on these average scores, their array of actions was determined whether it is wide, narrow, or constricted as categorized above. Then, the average score Deans achieved in every action set was computed. Deans who received scores one standard deviation below the mean score on the action sets were considered as "not using the action set". Those who received scores one standard deviation above the mean were regarded as "using the action set". Those who received scores score between these two values were regarded as "somewhat

using” those particular actions. For the analysis, “somewhat used” and “used” were regarded as using the particular actions.

In order to answer the research question, a regression analysis was run to see the difference between the two groups in predicting the array set of actions used by the leaders. The results show that the successful American Deans tended to have lower (0.443 units lower) array scores than successful Malaysian Deans. The regression was a modest fit ( $R^2_{adj} = 0.187$ ), and the overall relationship was not significant ( $F_{1, 12} = 3.986$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Thus, there was no significant difference between the array of action sets used by successful Deans in Malaysian Universities, and the array of action sets used by successful Deans in American Universities.

In order to answer the research question 4, a regression analysis was run to see the difference between the two groups in predicting the array set of actions used by the leaders. The results show that the less successful American Deans tended to have lower (0.133 units lower) array scores than less successful Malaysian Deans. The regression was a poor fit ( $R^2_{adj} = 0$ ), and the overall relationship was not significant ( $F_{1, 6} = 0.748$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Thus, there was no significant difference between the array of action sets used by less successful Deans in Malaysian Universities, and the array of action sets used by less successful Deans in American Universities.

In order to answer the research question 5, a regression analysis was conducted to see the difference between the two groups in predicting the array set of actions use by the leaders. The results show that the successful Deans in Malaysian and American Universities have higher (0.485 units higher) array scores than the less successful Deans in Malaysian and American Universities. The regression was a moderate fit ( $R^2_{adj} = 0.210$ ), and the overall relationship was significant ( $F_{1, 20} = 6.570$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) with a medium effect size of 0.247. Thus, there was a significant difference between the array of action sets used by the successful Deans in Malaysian and American Universities, and the array of action sets used by less successful Deans in Malaysian and American Universities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At least, two conclusions can be drawn from this study which add to the leadership literature and support the practical application of strategic leadership by leaders in most organizations. Firstly, the statistical results confirmed that the SLQ is a reliable and content valid instrument for measuring the leaders’ use of Pisapia’s strategic leadership actions sets. The reliability scores of the subscales were high. The only problem is with the high inter-correlations between the subscales. Thus, the researcher was not able to establish the construct validity in this study. However, the researcher believes that the SLQ instrument could be improved further through factor analysis to eliminate the overlapped items from the questionnaire. Some respondents complained that the 77-item questionnaire is too long and took more time than they thought it would take to complete. Since each action set was measured by 15 items, they should be reviewed and it is recommended that 5 items from each action set that do not lower the high reliability or construct validity of the instrument be removed from the instrument.

Secondly, this study generally supports Pisapia (2009) assumption of strategic leadership that successful leaders are able to use a multifaceted set of leader actions. For example, the study found that successful leaders use a wider array of actions than less successful leaders. There was a significant difference between the array of action sets used by the successful Deans in Malaysian and American Universities, and the array of action sets used by less successful Deans in Malaysian and American Universities. It was clear that the array of leader actions is related to success. Therefore these findings are supportive of Pisapia’s proposition that leaders often fail because they are trained in and rely upon a linearity of thinking mindset, which does not work in situations characterized by ambiguity and complexity that requires them to be flexible and change oriented.

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