

An empirical study on staff's perceptions of transactional leadership behaviours among departmental heads at Malaysian tertiary institutions

Yuk Fong Chin

Twintech International University College of Technology, Penang, Malaysia

Fung Lan Yong

Twintech International University College of Technology, Penang, Malaysia

Ming Ha Lee

Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus, Sarawak, Malaysia

Corresponding Author: **Fung Lan Yong**

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine staff's perceptions of the cruciality of transactional leadership behaviours among department heads at private tertiary institutions. The study was limited to 56 administrative and teaching staff from three private colleges in Sabah and Sarawak as well as an Australian-based university in Sarawak. The Transactional Scale/Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was administered online to collect data that were subsequently analysed at 0.05 significant level using SPSS 26.0. The p-values of a Mann-Whitney U test indicated no significant gender differences in staff's perceptions of transactional leadership, except for "making changes when necessary" with male staff scoring higher than their female counterparts. Additionally, the p-values of a Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed no significant differences for all the transactional items in terms of age and qualifications. However, a one-sample Wilcoxon test revealed that the p-values for all the items were less than 0.05 significant level, where the median value for each of the items was significantly greater than the hypothesised value of 3.5.

Keywords: 1. Cruciality of transactional leadership, 2. department heads, 3. Malaysian private tertiary institutions

Introduction

Transactional leadership (Burns, 1978) has been widely practised in different organisations in Malaysia, including some private institutions of higher learning. Transactional leaders often seek to motivate staff by appealing to their self-interests. They encourage staff to attain expected levels of performance by helping them to accept task responsibilities, identify goals and develop confidence toward reaching desired performance levels. Transactional leaders are usually characterised by three characteristics. First, they use contingent rewards to motivate staff by providing them with material or psychological rewards contingent on the fulfillment of contractual obligations. They believe that contingent rewards will inspire a reasonable degree of involvement, loyalty, commitment and performance among staff. Second, transactional leaders practise active management-by-exception, demonstrating vigilance to ensure that staff fulfill predetermined standards. Lastly, they also practise passive management-by-exception, intervening only when noncompliance of standards or errors have occurred (Bass, 1985; Bass, 2000; Bass and Avolio, 1995).

Research shows that transactional leaders tend to exhibit several attributes that help enhance productivity, job satisfaction and sustainability. Bass (2000) reported that effective transactional leaders often accommodate their subordinates' by rewarding contingent incentives, honour and promises for those who are successful in fulfilling

the commitments of the leaders or the organisation. Elenkov (2002) who examined the impact of leadership style on organisational performance found that managers' transactional behaviours tended to positively influence organisational performance and innovation. Moreover, Hoogh, Hartog and Koopman (2005) found that transactional leadership was positively related to such personality characteristics as agreeableness and conscientiousness; it was also moderated by a dynamic working atmosphere.

Paracha et al. (2012) who examined the impact of transformational and transactional leadership on the performance of school employees found that that transactional leadership had a significantly greater impact on job performance. Further, Cheng, Chuah and Abdullah (2012) found that transactional leadership tended to positively influence managers' motivation, implying that it has practical implications on corporate management and company performance. Further, Sadeghi and Pihie (2012) found that department heads tended to practise active management-by-exception sometimes, focusing on standards by directly monitoring staff's behaviour and performance, while actively keeping track of all mistakes. When deviations from standards occurred, they would apply corrective action and negative feedback to rectify the situation. On the other hand, Aziz, Abdullah and Tajudin (2013) found a significant positive relationship between transactional leadership and organisational performance, implying that transactional leadership is a dominant style influencing an organisation's triple bottom line (profit, people and planet). Lastly, Ebrahim et al. (2022) found that transactional leadership had the highest correlation with work life quality, implying that it is effective for not only managing staff, but also enhancing their quality of life.

Transactional leaders adopt a managerial philosophy of reinforcement and exchanges; they manage staff by establishing specific goals, and subsequently, offer a reward for achieving them (Michigan State University, 2021). They would thrive in private higher education in Malaysia, where staff are expected to achieve a student enrolment quota every semester. Another area where a transactional mindset is beneficial is research, as many staff are striving to publish a specific number of studies in Scopus-indexed journals as a key performance indicator (KPI). Additionally, it is effective in situations where administrative or academic teams are facing serious time constraints to accomplish projects with limited financial resources, for example, trying to hold a one-day educational roadshow to attract potential students and other stakeholders.

Since transactional leadership is often synonymous with maintaining a status quo of actions and processes (Michigan State University, 2021), it is effective in the academe that is usually characterised by intrinsically motivated staff who rarely seek or need inspiration from their deans or department heads; hence, this leadership approach is frequently adopted by prominent tertiary institutions. Additionally, transactional leaders often focus on organisational performance and employee supervision to maximise productivity in the present (Michigan State University, 2021). They will flourish in higher education since they focus primarily on smoothening the flow of the day-to-day functioning of the institution. Lastly, in academia, transactional leaders need to know what motivates and inspires staff, parents, students and other stakeholders, for example, by underscoring the strategic thinking behind important account management or by modifying their recruitment approach in response to ever-changing market conditions.

Transactional leadership is often seen in organisations that intend to operate swiftly (Betz, 2021). To succeed as quickly as possible, many tertiary institutions implement standardised regulations and similar protocols at every departmental level. Transactional leadership is popular in mid-to large-sized tertiary institutions that are highly regulated. In higher education, where policies and standard procedures dominate, transactional leaders are able to effectively manage people from vastly different cultures with varied language backgrounds.

As aforementioned, transactional leaders often try to increase staff productivity by offering a reward at the end of a short-term goal (Martins, 2022). Therefore, they prevail in the academe that usually operates from a system of rewards to motivate staff by appealing to their self-interest or encouraging them to excel in their work to receive perks or incentives. They use extrinsic motivation and contingent rewards (rewards that are dependent on desirable behaviour or achievement) to motivate staff with tangibles that initially appeal to them, such as a pay raise, annual bonus or certificate of recognition; for instance, a burgeoning tertiary institution often uses

transactional leadership to convince staff to do something challenging beyond their regular workload, for instance, to publish a certain amount of empirical research to attain a personal reward, in this case, KPI points for an academic award or promotion.

Statement of the problem

The body of literature reveals a lack of empirical research on transactional leadership behaviours at tertiary institutions in Malaysia. The purpose of this study was to examine staff's perceptions of the cruciality of transactional leadership behaviours among department heads at private higher institutions of learning in Sabah and Sarawak. Findings of this study would contribute to the corpus of knowledge in terms of leadership at tertiary institutions in Malaysia where leadership research has primarily focused on the corporate sector rather than the academe. This study would make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge concerning the practical implications of transactional leadership, especially in terms of departmental management that often influences staff performance, academic outcomes and profit margins.

A study on staff's perceptions of the cruciality of transactional leadership among department heads at private higher educational institutions would generate deeper understanding of its main components within the Malaysian context. Findings of this study would encourage department heads to identify leadership behaviours that could transform them in ways that would result in higher work efficacy, greater job pride and better retention amongst staff, in synchrony with the 2030 United Nations' agenda for sustainable development goals. With its vision to become a prominent higher education exporter, Malaysia has the urgent need to create a pool of dynamic and innovative academic leaders. This study would yield useful information on department heads' leadership styles that could be aligned with institutional accountability and transparency to create a milieu that is conducive to teaching, learning and research. Literature has shown that transactional leadership tends to have a positive impact on staff's attitudes, motivation and commitment, but it is still inadequate in relation to private higher education in the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study aimed to close the gap in the literature by contributing new information on the cruciality of transactional leadership among department heads, a component that might indirectly affect the profitability, social responsibility and environmental sustainability of tertiary institutions.

Research questions

Three research questions were formulated to guide the research:

- What were the descriptive statistics of transactional leadership perceptions in relation to gender, age and qualifications?
- What were the significant transactional leadership perceptions based on the hypothetical value of 3.5?
- What were the percentages of agreement in transactional leadership perceptions of department heads?

Review Of Literature

Arham, Boucher and Muenjohn (2012) examined the leadership styles of one sales manager and eight company owners/founders to investigate emerging themes or explanations. Findings revealed that many leaders tended to exhibit transactional leadership (active management-by-exception), often closely monitoring their organisation's activities, while keeping a close relationship with employees. They would interfere and show staff what they have done wrong by demonstrating the most appropriate way to handle a difficult situation. They also practise passive management-by-exception, intervening only when procedures are ignored. Further, Nasir et al. (2014) who examined the relationship between leadership styles and organisational performance among 156 academic leaders found that transactional leadership and organisational performance were significantly related, implying that transactional leadership, when distributed appropriately among different administrative levels, has a positive impact on the promotion of quality education in tertiary institutions.

Mohamad and Yahya (2016) who examined the impact of transactional leadership on subordinates' trust among 300 employees at local authorities found that transactional leadership was significantly related to employees'

trust, implying that employees have faith in leaders who practise contingent reward and active management by exception. On the other hand, Hashim et al. (2018) who examined the relationships among leadership behaviour, entrepreneurial orientation and organisational performance among 384 owners/managers found that entrepreneurial orientation tended to act as a partial mediator in the relationship between leadership behaviour and organisational performance. Additionally, transactional leadership tended to have a significant relationship with entrepreneurial orientation and organisational performance, implying that it can positively increase individual outcomes that result in higher organisational productivity.

Khairul, Mohd Arof, and Ismail (2019) who examined 87 government servants' perceptions of leadership styles in government organisations associated with asset management, project management and engineering found that government employees tended to perceive transactional leadership as the most frequently practised leadership style. Additionally, Che Cob and Zainal Abidin (2020) who examined the relationship between the leadership styles and talent management ability among 267 public university leaders found that transactional leadership was significantly related to talent management ability, implying that leaders and subordinates seem to have an interdependent relationship, with the former striving to meet the latter's needs (safety, belonging and recognition) in return for compliance and commitment.

Rajagani and Mansor (2020) examined the relationships among leadership styles, organisational culture and succession planning among 261 educational officers. Findings revealed a significant positive relationship between transactional leadership and succession planning. Further, Zulkhairi, Mohd Syharuddin and Yaacob (2021) who examined the influence of leadership style on employees' job satisfaction among 144 postal employees found that transactional leadership tended to significantly influence job satisfaction, implying that leaders need to use precise directions and tangible rewards to boost employee productivity. Lastly, Salim et al. (2022) who examined the factors affecting transactional leadership in relation to knowledge, attitudes and practices among 107 engineering staff found that staff's knowledge tended to significantly influence the practice of transactional leadership, contributing to 46 percent of its variance.

Instrument

The Transactional Scale/Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) designed by Bass and Avolio (1995) was used to collect data; it contains short questions using the Likert scale, ranging from very crucial / crucial / uncertain / not crucial / not crucial at all. Bass and Avolio (1995) found that the reliability of the MLQ, for each leadership factor, ranged from 0.74 to 0.91.

According to Galinha et al. (2017), the transactional dimension of the MLQ had an internal consistency value of $\alpha = 0.70$ based on a sample of 64 teachers. Its first category, contingent reward or reinforcement, had an internal consistency value of $\alpha = 0.42$, while its second category, active management by exception, had an internal consistency value of $\alpha = 0.81$. Additionally, Bagheri and Sohrabi (2015) examined the psychometric properties of Persian version of the MLQ by obtaining the opinions of 10 experienced faculty members, besides administering it to 210 faculty members. Results showed that the MLQ transactional subscale had a reliability coefficient of 0.90, while its construct validity varied between 0.62 and 0.91 based on a confirmatory factor analysis.

Sample

The sample consisted of 56 administrative and teaching staff from three private colleges in Sabah and Sarawak as well as an Australian-based university in Sarawak. Deans, coordinators and registrars of nine colleges were contacted via email, but only three colleges ($n = 36$) agreed to participate in the study. Another 20 staff from the university were invited to complete the questionnaire email. According to the central limit theorem, the sample size was sufficient to provide reliable and valid information that applies to independent, identically distributed variables.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was done by administering the questionnaire online. A spreadsheet was automatically generated and SPSS 26.0 was used to analyse data at 0.05 significant level to address the research questions. Specifically,

Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine whether significant differences existed in staff’s perceptions of the transactional behaviours among departments heads by way of gender, while Kruskal-Wallis H test was run to determine whether significant differences existed in staff’s perceptions of the transactional behaviours among departments heads by way of age and qualifications. A one-sample Wilcoxon test was run to determine if any of the transactional leadership items had significant cruciality based on the hypothesised value of 3.5.

Findings

Table 1 presents the demographic information of staff pertaining to age, gender and qualifications. Male staff comprised 46 percent, while female staff 54 percent. were female. About 25 percent were 25 to 53 years old, 29 percent were 36 to 45 years old, 32 percent were 46 to 55 years old and 14 percent were 56 to 60 years old. About seven percent had a diploma, 39 percent had bachelors, 29 percent had masters and 25 percent had a doctorate. Results showed that the mean score of transactional leadership behaviours was 36.8 (high) for male staff and 34.7 (average) for female staff.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of transactional style according to independent variables

Gender	Frequency percentage	Mean
Male	46.42%	36.77
Female	53.57%	34.70
Age	Frequency percentage	Mean
25-35	25.00%	34.64
36-45	28.57%	36.25
46-55	32.14%	35.56
56-60	14.29%	36.50
Qualifications	Frequency percentage	Mean
Diploma	7.14%	35.50
Bachelors	39.29%	35.05
Masters	28.57%	36.31
PhD	25.00%	35.93

For mean value: High = 36 – 40; Average = 32 – 35; Low = 31 and less

Gender differences

Results showed that the *p*-values of the Mann-Whitney U test for each of the items was greater than 0.05, except for the item “making changes when necessary”. This indicated non-significant gender differences in staff’s perceptions of the cruciality of transactional leadership, except for “making changes when necessary” with male staff scoring significantly higher than their female counterparts (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mann-Whitney U test for transactional leadership items across gender

Items	<i>p</i>-value
Provides assistance in exchange for staff’s efforts	0.873
Does not wait for things go to wrong before taking action	0.109
Makes changes when necessary	< 0.001*
Takes action before problems become serious	0.086
Clarifies staff’s expectations related to performance goals	0.117
Expresses satisfaction when staff fulfil performance goals	0.121
Gives full attention in dealing with mistakes/complaints/failure	0.063
Does not wait until problems get serious	0.112

*Significant at 0.05 level

Non-significant differences in age and qualifications

Results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test indicated no significant differences for all the items in terms of age and qualifications, with *p*-values greater than 0.05 (see Tables 3 & 4).

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis H test for transactional leadership items across age

Items	<i>p</i> -value
Provides assistance in exchange for staff's efforts	0.342
Does not wait for things go to wrong before taking action	0.606
Makes changes when necessary	0.578
Takes action before problems become serious	0.268
Clarifies staff's expectations related to performance goals	0.725
Expresses satisfaction when staff fulfil performance goals	0.795
Gives full attention in dealing with mistakes/complaints/failure	0.494
Does not wait until problems get serious	0.427

Table 4: Kruskal-Wallis H test for the items across qualifications

Items	<i>p</i> -value
Provides assistance in exchange for staff's efforts	0.985
Does not wait for things go to wrong before taking action	0.849
Makes changes when necessary	0.683
Takes action before problems become serious	0.517
Clarifies staff's expectations related to performance goals	0.331
Expresses satisfaction when staff fulfil performance goals	0.667
Gives full attention in dealing with mistakes/complaints/failure	0.681
Does not wait until problems get serious	0.569

One-sample Wilcoxon test: Significant differences

Results of the one-sample Wilcoxon test revealed that the *p*-values for all of the items were less than 0.05, indicating that the median value for each of the items was significantly different from the hypothesised value of 3.5. In short, all the median values were significantly greater than 3.5, reflecting that staff tended to choose the higher score for all of the transactional leadership items (see Table 5).

Table 5: One-sample Wilcoxon test with the hypothesised value of 3.5

Item	<i>p</i> -value	Conclusion
Provides assistance in exchange for staff's efforts	< 0.001*	Significantly larger than the hypothesised value
Does not wait for things go to wrong before taking action	< 0.001*	Significantly larger than the hypothesised value
Makes changes when necessary	< 0.001*	Significantly larger than the hypothesised value
Takes action before problems become serious	< 0.001*	Significantly larger than the hypothesised value
Clarifies staff's expectations related to performance goals	< 0.001*	Significantly larger than the hypothesised value
Expresses satisfaction when staff fulfil performance goals	< 0.001*	Significantly larger than the hypothesised value
Gives full attention in dealing with mistakes/complaints/failure	< 0.001*	Significantly larger than the hypothesised value
Does not wait until problems get serious	< 0.001*	Significantly larger than the hypothesised value

*Significant at 0.05 level

Percentages

Percentages of agreement (very crucial/crucial) were collapsed to gain a general view of staff’s perceptions of the degree of cruciality of transactional leadership behaviours among department heads. About 91 percent of staff perceived that it was very crucial/crucial for department heads to make changes when necessary, clarify staff’s expectations related to performance goals and express satisfaction when staff fulfil performance goals. Lastly, 96 percent perceived that it was very crucial/crucial for department heads not to wait for problems to become serious (see Table 6).

Table 6: Percentages of agreement on the cruciality of transactional leadership behaviours

Degree of cruciality	1	2	3	4	5
Provides assistance in exchange for staff’s efforts	0.0%	3.6%	14.3%	41.1%	41.1%
Does not wait for things go to wrong before taking action	1.8%	0.0%	10.7%	37.5%	50.0%
Makes changes when necessary	0.0%	1.8%	7.1%	33.9%	57.1%
Takes action before problems become serious	0.0%	1.8%	1.8%	32.1%	64.3%
Clarifies staff’s expectations related to performance goals	0.0%	0.0%	8.9%	33.9%	57.1%
Expresses satisfaction when staff fulfil performance goals	0.0%	0.0%	8.9%	35.7%	55.4%
Give full attention in dealing with mistakes, complaints or failure	0.0%	1.8%	8.9%	30.4%	58.9%
Does not wait until problems get serious	0.0%	0.0%	3.6%	26.8%	69.6%

5 = Very crucial; 4 = Crucial; 3 = Uncertain; 2 = Not crucial; 1 = Not crucial at all

Discussion And Recommendations

No significant differences

Findings revealed no significant differences existed in staff’s perceptions of the cruciality of transactional leadership behaviours among department heads in relation to gender, age, and qualifications, which was supported by previous research. Sirin, Aydin and Bilir (2018) who examined the transformational-transactional leadership and organisational cynicism among physical education and sport teachers found no significant differences in teachers’ perceptions of transactional leadership in terms of age, professional seniority and department. Similarly, Igram, Garstka and Harris (2018) found no significant gender differences in respondents’ perceptions of transactional leadership. Lastly, Pattinama (2021) found no significant differences in employees’ perceptions of transactional leadership based on gender, education level, type of education, work department and length of work.

Results indicated that staff tended to perceive the cruciality of transactional leadership of department heads as rather high. All of the items yielded median values, indicating that staff tended to choose the higher score for all of the transactional leadership items. Further, staff perceived five of the transactional items as crucial/highly crucial for department heads, with a majority indicating that department heads should make changes when necessary, clarify staff’s expectations related to performance goals, express satisfaction when staff fulfil performance goals and tackle problems before they become serious.

Transactional leadership is more common in societies with high power distance (for example, Malaysia) that encourage leaders to focus on administration, teamwork, overall organisational performance and productivity (Bass, 1985, Den Hartog, 2004; Nawaz, Hussain & Sohail, 2020). Since they manage staff with strict rules, regulations, procedures and defined modes of business or transactions, subordinates have little say in the decision-making process. In Malaysia, where a strict hierarchy is found, both managers and employees are more likely to follow directives, rules and policies set by the higher management. Transactional leadership is neither good nor bad; it depends on the objectives and purposes of a particular organisation in a particular society. However, it is dominant in many private tertiary institutions in Malaysia that still rely on established

standards and yardsticks in terms of learning outcomes, effective governance, accountability and quality assurance.

Recommendations

According to Roner (2018), leaders can use transactional style to maintain simplicity and clarity in their organisation's management practices, while appealing to staff's emotional needs. First, educational leaders who practice this particular style should invite staff to participate in goal setting; it enhances goal commitment leading to an increase with staff input. Before launching new performance objectives, they should have a meeting with staff to discuss what they are expected to achieve, while encouraging them to share ideas. Second, educational leaders should add purpose to their orders. Besides providing a process document or assignment list to give staff a clear understanding of their expectations, they should also deliver their instructions with detailed information about why the assigned work is crucial. They should remind staff of the greater purpose of their work to keep them engaged, for example, by reminding them that their contributions play a pivotal role in raising their institution's international ranking. Lastly, educational leaders should personalise staff rewards. Besides offering bonuses, promotions and other types of standard incentives, they should also offer several options for staff to choose from; for example, they may ask high achieving staff to share their wish-list of rewards (token of recognition, certificate of appreciation, professional development plan, team-bonding activity) and try to accommodate it. Finally, generalisability of findings was limited because only a small sample ($n = 56$) and questionnaire were used to collect data. Future research should use larger, randomised samples to increase the probability of obtaining more reliable data. Data from other Malaysian states should be gathered in order to have a more representative sample. Further, the use of an online questionnaire might result in biased responses since it was difficult to totally control internal validity threats. Follow-up interviews should be conducted to get more details that could further support the findings.

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