

Gender and Communication Issues in the Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract: Gender and communication is a hot topic discussed and research on this topic is a never-ending effort. This study will discuss issues of gender and communication in the Malaysian public universities. Among the major items focused in this study is the advancement of women in the workforce, the major barriers that prevent women from climbing up the corporate ladder, and the management of conflict and anger in order to build a conducive and therapeutic work setting. The appointment of two women vice chancellors in the Malaysian public universities shows that the glass ceiling can be broken and women can excel further in the Malaysian workforce. This phenomenon indicates that women are also important in the policy-making and decision-making process in public universities.

Key words: Gender and communication • Public universities • Emotional intelligence • Job advancement • and Effective leader.

INTRODUCTION

The thinking of woman as responsible for caring and domestic work is a fallacy and must be changed. The males are no more the only breadwinner of the family as more women are working. The status of women nowadays has changed. More women have received higher education and entered the work market. The reasons for this shift may be due to the expansion of workforce and the feminist movement which demands for human dignity and individual equality (Kikoski and Kikoski, 2006). However, there is no agreement that one leadership style is uniquely the best or most effective. There is evidence that those occupying leadership positions tend to share characteristics and preferences and restrict participation or put great pressure upon those who are dissimilar (Gage *et al.*, 2004).

Women in the United States, Europe, Scandinavia and most other industrialized countries have secured rights to equal treatment in employment by the 1970s (Crompton, 2007). However, there still exist inequalities in employment between men and women in different

occupations. Women still experience a difference in income and fail to rise through organizational and professional hierarchies.

Every government in the world today is more liberal pertaining to bring women get involve in various types of workforce. In the case of Malaysia, the Ministry of Women and Social Development is demanding that women are also given the opportunity to have equal share of work in every sector. In addition, two vice chancellors of the Malaysian public universities are women.

Studies on gender have started for decades. Until now, more theoretical debates take place concerning the roles of gender in the workplace. Despite the debate, today's research still concludes that occupational gender segregation continues to occur. This segregation excludes women and minorities from access to the networks that can provide them support for career advancement (Murrell, 2001). People always tend to equate success with masculine behavior despite the fact that women are equally effective. This happens because leadership is viewed as a male stereotype and masculine behavior is not seen as desirable in women

(Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). However, good communication is a value added to both leaders. Pearce (2003) stated that communication is the best experience for authentic connection.

Good communication is always one of the most difficult skills to master and probably a great source of friction and problems in any organization. Situation, time, cultures and customs, and gender styles affect and complicate communication. Tannen (1990) wrote that men and women have different, but equal styles of communication. She believes that the key element guiding female communication is intimacy (where individuals negotiate complex networks of friendships, minimize differences, try to reach consensus, and avoid the appearance of superiority, which would highlight differences), whereas the key element in male is independence (establishing status by telling others what to do, and taking orders is a marker of low status). Though all humans need intimacy and independence, women tend to focus on the first and men on the second. Therefore, this study will explore the issues of gender and communication in the public universities in Malaysia.

Gender and Communication: Gender and communication is a hot topic discussed everywhere on earth. In our work setting, we could hear people voicing about their dissatisfactions with family members, colleagues, or even spouse that can finally create a gender communication problem. Therefore, better understanding of the involved and then moving toward better communication is important to enhance relationship building in the workplace. A communication studies approach provides a unique vantage point for studying gender.

Gender refers to one's self-identity that is how much a person associates himself or herself with the masculine or feminine or both (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2002). Masculine characteristics include independence, strength, and decisiveness. Feminine characteristics considered the opposite which include dependency, weakness, and irrationality. The understanding of these characteristics is important because society uses gender as the basis for identity in determining roles at home, within organizations, and the workplace (Gage *et al.*, 2004). Gender continues to have a substantial impact on individual's personal and work lives (Powell and Graves, 2003). Gender differences in personal life roles are associated with differences in women's and men's career patterns and development opportunities. Thus, it is important to consider gender differences in the effect of personal life experiences on leader development.

Family and home are both important tasks that are inevitable to men and women. In addition, they tend to have different views of family. To men, the traditional family role is to provide financial security to the family. They tend to separate the family and work role and create a boundary between the two domains whereas women have to balance their responsibilities to work and family. Women's career decisions are based on a desire to blend their work and personal lives. To show their care to the family, women are more likely to work part-time, take voluntary leaves of absent, or retire early to care for family members (Judiesch and Lyness, 1999). Therefore these commitments made women less advancement in the managerial ranks and made them less competence.

In spite of this, women's greater responsibilities at home may compel them to improve their working skills that can enhance their effectiveness at work (Graves *et al.*, 2006). It is clear that women's family responsibilities can also provide opportunities and challenges that contribute to the development of their leadership talents. In describing gender differences, they concluded that females are sensitive to context, good at picking up information that is incidental, distractible, and have superior verbal skills.

Implication for Gender Differences in Public Universities: In order to have a conducive and therapeutic working environment, public universities have to implement programs that can improve working parents so that they can have higher opportunities in work advancement. A work-life balance program must be implemented as soon as possible without any objection from the Human Resource Department (HRD). This program would include flexible work arrangements, part-time work, paid leaves, unpaid leaves, day care facilities, elder-care referrals and so forth. In addition, HRD should come out with creative ideas to make every staff dedicated and excel both in work and family matters.

The welfare of every employee must be looked into seriously. Organization should also consider workplace norm, particularly regarding working hours (Hein, 2005). During this time of overloading work, many staffs are expected to work long hours. Graves *et al.* (2006) suggested that organizations must pay employees based on their hours worked not actual performance. This benefit does not exist in Malaysia as only the supporting staffs can claim their extra work done. In this context, the universities should set fair standards concerning the number of hours that individuals work.

In addition, development planning processes and leadership training programs must be reviewed from time to time. Development plan should allow sufficient time for the individual to obtain learning experiences outside of work setting. Trainings must also be given to all employees because they want to achieve their career path in order to meet their goals, not only to those who are recommended by the management. At the same time, health-related, family-oriented, volunteer-oriented, and other personal goals should be considered as work-related goals.

Employees prefer an organization culture that values the whole person and reduces gender differences in men's and women's personal life experiences and career patterns. The opportunities of promotion must be based on performance; not only good rapport between top management and employees. When more women staffs are elected to head faculties, centers, and units, there must be some dissatisfaction among men who are not selected. As a result, this situation can create conflict and anger among the staff.

In leadership, when women lead and communicate using consensus, this may seem unnatural to men. This is what really happens in the universities now. These differences may also be responsible for observations that some women in professional positions do not behave in ways appropriate to their positions. This captures the downside of the differences for women employed in predominantly male dominated work environments. Some women do not strive for status or one-upmanship.

Tannen (1990) further elaborated that since women are not struggling to be one-up; they often find themselves framed as one down. Perhaps, the worst of all for women is that they may be judged differently even when they communicate with the same style. In other words, talking in ways that are associated with women causes women to be judged negatively, but talking the same way does not have this effect on men. Therefore, it is not simply the ways of talking that has affected so much as the people's attitudes toward women and men.

Major Barriers of Women in Job Advancement: There are many factors that prevent women's upward movement. Among the major barriers mentioned by Karsten (2006) included lack of line experience, exclusion from informal networks, negative stereotypes about women, lack of accountability of top leaders for advancing women, lack of role models, lack of mentoring, and lack of awareness of organizational politics.

From the above barriers, the writer would like to touch about the mentoring aspect that is clearly observed by many in the universities, although many people do not bother much. But, it will explode one day, when the dissatisfaction could not be covered anymore. Normally, when the head of an organization is a woman, the writer found that she appoints many women staff to head the responsibility centers. This mentor who is normally a woman, will provide her protégé with career development, access to influential individuals in the Human Resource Department and top management, and coaching to ensure that her protégé succeeds. As a result, protégés have more job opportunities, more satisfied with their jobs and careers and greater intentions to remain in the organization (Higgins and Thomas, 2001). Thus, it will create crony and empire and try to influence others to support them.

In addition, men and women may avoid participating in a cross-gender mentoring relationship due to concerns that sexual relationship might exist and people might realize their relationship. However, most of the protégés succeed and move up the career ladder of the organization (Karsten, 2006). To rationalize this matter, a formal mentoring program is implemented so that there will be no bias among gender and select the best employee to train to be the best group of leaders in the future. Good mentors must push people to do things rather than protecting them.

Apart from mentoring, networking also exists in many organizations. Networking is practiced by individuals to develop and maintain relationship with top management for the purpose of mutual benefit in their work or career (Forret and Dougherty, 2001). It is also related to career outcomes of managers, such as promotions and salary progression. The few studies examining gender differences in networking behaviors show little difference between men and women. Forret and Dougherty found that men were more likely to engage in socializing behaviors than women. It might be because women's contacts in organization are low as they have less ability to provide influence and access of resources.

Glass ceiling is another invisible barrier to the advancement of women from obtaining top jobs regardless of qualifications or achievements. Women get stuck in dead ends; deny of the lateral movement that they need to climb the corporate ladder. In this context, men and women compare on several important perceptions to the glass ceiling such as hiring, promotion, mentoring and networking, notions of success, sexual

harassment, workplace accommodations, and the qualities of a manager (Grunic *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, organizations must not discriminate against women so that their practices are favorable to all groups. This action will of course break the glass ceiling to a certain extent in many organizations.

The Changing Workplace: In Malaysia, more women are entering the workforce, either minorities or immigrants. This shows that the marketplace is inherently multicultural. Thus, multiculturalism is a prime characteristic of significant markets for a wide range of organizations (Karsten, 2006). Although women are needed to participate in world economies, race and gender discrimination persist. This is another paradoxical aspect of the modern workplace. Economies and workplaces of this twenty-first century are complex and challenging. Therefore, the need for successful labor participation of women is critical. Managers face critical operational considerations and issues in the workforce. All organizations need competent leaders who understand that cultural differences can be viewed as assets if effectively managed in the global arena.

Those two public universities are fortunate to have women vice chancellors who have a sharp vision and are ambitious enough to make their universities the best university in Asia and perhaps in the ranking of top 100 universities of the world in the next five years. In addition, they have showed tremendous improvement in realizing their aspirations to meet the challenges that previous men vice chancellors have not done. Northouse (2007) stated that in order to be an effective leader, a person must adapt his or her style to the demands of different situations.

Singer (2001) suggested that women should require both higher dispositional qualities (personality traits, intelligence, and competence) and more favorable work conditions if they want to become an effective leader. Singer further explained that women's ratings were significantly higher than men's on attributions to competence, subordinate support, and organizational characteristics. In order to be considered as a world class university which produces best quality graduates, they must have professors with high academic excellence and knowledge workers, dedicated non-academic staffs, and best quality facilities so that these universities can compete locally and internationally. In particular, self-knowledge, reflection, and networking are critical for employees to thrive in this contemporary workplace (Gee 2003).

Recommendation: No leader can satisfy every staff of an organization. As a result, disagreements, debates, differing perspectives, clashing ideologies, and justice struggles are inevitable in a pluralistic and unequal society. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the organization to resolve these conflicts. It is commonly believe that men and women react differently when managing interpersonal conflict. Men are more competitive and less sensitive than women. In addition, men are more likely engage in competitive or avoidant conflict management behaviors whereas women more often rely on cooperative and engaging management behaviors.

The negative emotion if not address carefully can cause serious conflict, dilemma, or critical incident that can wound the leader. Emotions most often arise in response to some inner conflicts with one's inner values (Johnson *et al.*, 2005). It is the leadership responsibility to work through difficult conflicts and interpersonal dynamics. However, leaders must be able to handle their own emotions intelligently before they can effectively manage emotions in anyone else (Goleman *et al.*, 2002). Men who experience anger toward women will not work well with women, particularly those women who refuse to acknowledge men as authorities. Studies found that men are more aggressive than women (Payne, 2001). Male leaders typically use direct methods to discipline their subordinates and express the anger by yelling, stomping their feet, pounding their fists, and even swearing without much inhibition.

In addressing conflict, Pammer and Killian (2003) explained that the best practices include encouraging managers and employees to voice concerns early, integrating collaborative problem-solving approaches, encouraging direct negotiation among the parties in a dispute, and aligning conflict management practices with each other. These characteristics help promote a workplace climate in which disputes are constructively addressed and resolved.

CONCLUSION

Men and women must be valued equally for their unique contributions. They must be treated not as competitors, but rather as complementary to bring success to the workplace or organization. Therefore, communities, organizations, and workplaces must not prevent anyone with leadership potential to lead them.

The role of men as family leaders must be maintained and their contribution can help reduce women's workloads either in office or at home. But today, women's sphere of influence has expanded and is now employed at nearly the same rate as their male counterparts.

The improvement in the number of women in managerial and professional occupations and the continued increase of women in decision-making positions clearly shows that women can influence the policy-making and decision-making process of an organization. This healthy phenomenon must be seen as a contribution to the building of a modern and futuristic nation. This shows that women have the potential to be active in organizational change.

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