Exploring the Relationship between Leadership Style and Employee Wellbeing: The Case of Dubai Government

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Abstract

Leadership is identified as a critical element for the success of an organization. The present study explores the relationship between leadership style and employee wellbeing in Dubai government organizations. The review shows that leaders use different leadership styles in order to achieve organizational goals. This research aims to shed light on how leadership style can impact on employee wellbeing.

This empirical study used a qualitative approach to collect data from the participants by using semi-structured interviews with ten senior leaders from Dubai government organizations. Drawing from major themes identified in literature, questions were designed to explore the relationship between leadership style and employee wellbeing in Dubai government organizations. Nvivo software was also used to analyze the data.

The results of this study indicate there is a significant relationship between leadership style and the wellbeing of employees. In addition, the results show that transformational leadership is one of the most effective styles, enhancing the quality of employee wellbeing in Dubai government organizations. The results provide support for the positive impact of this leadership style which implies that Dubai government organizations should train their managers to use transformational leadership style in order to enhance employee wellbeing.

The results of the research reveal that there is a future plan to focus on developing transformational leadership style in order to improve the wellbeing of employees. In the end, the study concludes with several recommendations, including the need to conduct more studies and research with other countries similar to the United Arab Emirates and government sector institutions in other countries, with the aim of generalizing the achieved results.

Keywords: Leadership styles, wellbeing, Dubai government, transformational leadership.

1. Introduction

With the rapid economic development that United Arab Emirates (UAE) has witnessed in the past three decades, leadership is becoming increasingly significant to the development and future of organizations (Kamali 2018). Leadership has also become a fundamental topic in most studies and theories over the past few years due to the influential role leaders play in achieving the organization's goals (Howard, 2005; Bass, 2008; Antonakis & Day 2017; Northouse, 2021).Many studies have identified various definitions of leadership (House et al. 1999, Bass 2008; Northouse, 2004; Northouse, 2021). Northhouse (2004) defined that leadership is a process in which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. Leadership is characteristically defined by the traits, abilities, and leaders' behaviours (Bass, 2008). According to Gill (2006), leadership is an essential factor that determines the success of implementing change in organisations. An organisation's long-term success is correlated strongly with its capability to build dynamic and effective leaders (Holt, 2011). Indeed, organisations cannot meet their goals without effective leadership (Bass, 1990 cited in Tirmizi, 2002). An effective leader is considered an essential element that an organization needs and possesses leadership skills that contribute to increasing employee productivity (House et al., 1999). It is also necessary for the leader to have the characteristics of a successful leader who uses different leadership styles with his subordinates. Studies (Berger et al., 2019; Walsh & Arnold, 2020; Salas-Vallina 2021) have confirmed that organizations may need to be informed of the impact of leadership style on employee wellbeing. Currently, most government organizations in the UAE focus on employee wellbeing, but there are not many details about the extent to which the leadership style used affects this wellbeing (Nielsen and Munir, 2009;Tafvelin et al. 2011; Nyberg et al. 2015). In the context of the UAE, and particularly in Dubai government organizations, this study addresses the following research question: "What is the impact of leadership style on employee wellbeing in the Dubai government organization?" This research aims to shed light on identifying the leadership styles of leaders and their impact on their employee's wellbeing. The underlying mechanisms and determinants of effective leadership style and its impact on employee wellbeing are critical to understand, as the existing literature tends to focus on leadership style practices, rather than the drivers.

2. Literature Review

Leadership is one of the most important topics in society, because of its significant role in the progress of organizations (Antonakis & Day 2017). Since the late 1940s, leadership research has moved towards an understanding of leadership style (Bass 2008). Leadership style is a variable that has received significant attention in the literature (Avolio and Bass 2004) and can be defined as patterns of emphases, indexed by the intensity of particular leadership behaviour, which a leader places on different leadership situations (Casimir, 2001;Andersen 2008). On the other hand, Hollander (1978) believes that leadership styles refer to the characteristics which are most typical across different situations. The common leadership styles that are found in the literature include charismatic, situational, autocratic, democratic, directive, coercive, affiliative, consultative and participative (Bryman, 1992; Jung & Avolio, 1999; Goleman, 2000; Coleman, 2005;Bass 2008). A leader who can show a mixture of leadership styles is more effective in achieving the goals of the organisation (Goleman, 2000). Leaders usually present different leadership styles in organizations (Oshagbemi & Ocholi, 2005). Furthermore, a number of studies (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001;Day & Halpin 2004) have recently argued that leadership involves a complex mix of cognitive, behavioural, and social skills that may develop at different rates and involve different learning experiences. According to Avolio and Bass (2004), the best leaders usually use a full range of leadership styles, transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles, as appropriate to the situation.

2.1 Leadership Styles

2.1.1. Transformational leadership style

The theory of transformational leadership has gained wide popularity amongst leadership reseachers during the past decade because of its different approach to inspiring employees as compared with other leadership styles (Shamir, House & Arthur; 1993; Gardner & Avolio, 1998).The concept of transformational leadership was first presented by Burns in 1978, who recommends that leaders and subordinates connect in a social exchange to attain a desired target. Burns argues that transformational leaders are people who elevate subordinates and themselves to a higher level of inspiration and morals (Bass 2008). This leadership style encourages subordinates to rise above their self-interest to attain organizational goals beyond stated expectations (Bass 1985). Also, transformational leaders are seen as inspirational and motivating employees to work with high performance and be able to overcome obstacles (Abasilim et al., 2019). According to Hernez-Broome and Hughes (2004), transformational leadership provides compelling visions of a better future and encourages trust over apparently unshakeable self-confidence and conviction. During the 1980s, the new or transformational approach became the main focus in many leadership studies (e.g., Burns 1978; Bass 1985; Bass 1995). For example, Bass (1995) claims that transformational leadership is one of the most popular approaches to leadership. In addition, Bass (1985) describe transformational leaders as those individuals who inspires their followers to achieve unprecedented results and build up their own leadership competencies. Transformational leadership style has five distinctive components: idealized attributes, idealized influence, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Avolio, 1997 ;Bass 2008).

2.1.2. Transactional leadership style

The theory of transactional leadership recommends that leaders make use of organisational frameworks to inform subordinates about what they have to do and what rewards they will get for following instructions (Bass 1995). The use of rewards in transactional leadership can be efficient, especially in routine conditions, and lead to high performance and follower's satisfaction (Bass, Avolio, & Goodheim, 1987). The transactional leader performs several tasks: they communicate objectives and expectations of performance, they connect objectives and accomplishments to rewards and observe the performance of followers according to their accomplished objectives, and they take corrective action when required (Smith et al. 2004). These types of leaders reward subordinates who follow instructions and warn people who do not follow instructions. According to Winkler (2010), transactional leadership is described by the contractual relationship that exists between the leader and employees, which mainly depends on their individual advantages. This indicates that subordinates are rewarded based on the accomplishment of their tasks to avoid punishment, make sure that the requirements of the leader are also achieved (Aarons, 2006). The transactional leadership style is also criticized for being more management-oriented than strategic in leadership (Hrgis et al., 2011). Transactional leadership consists of three elements: contingent reward, active management by exception, and passive management by exception (Avolio & Bass, 2004).

2.1.3. Laissez-faire leadership style

Laissez-faire leaders work with whatever structure is put in place without any criticisms or suggestions (Fiaz et al. 2017). In addition, aims and objectives are established only when it is compulsory and required. A laissez-faire leader avoids communication, avoids making decisions, and avoids getting involved when important issues

arise (Avolio & Bass 2004). A laissez-faire leader usually tries to maintain a low profile and not create waves of disturbance (Chaudhry & Javed, 2012). The laissez-faire leadership style is characterized by delays in actions and absence (Avolio & Bass 2004). When compared to transformational and transactional leadership styles, the laissez-faire leadership style is considered ineffective (Mathafena, 2007). This type of leader usually gives up on responsibility and lacks confidence in their ability as a leader (Fiaz et al. 2017). In addition, laissez-faire leaders avoid making decisions, hesitate in taking actions and are absent when needed in a critical situation (Eagly et al, 2003).

2.2 Employee wellbeing.

Wellbeing studies has progressively become a common topic in scholarly research journals (Cooper & Marshall, 1978; Danna & Griffin, 1999; Liu et al. 2010). There is a vast body of literature across different fields related to wellbeing in the workplace (De Simone 2014). In addition, there is also variation in the definition of wellbeing. In the past, wellbeing has been referred to the absence of disease, hence mostly referring to physical health. However, over time this term has gained a broader meaning which involves the physical, mental, emotional and social aspects (De Simone 2014). It is vital to recognize that as a concept wellbeing is seen as having both psychological and physical qualities (Liu et al., 2010). In UAE, there is a national strategy for wellbeing 2031 which aims to make the UAE a world leader in quality of life through a number of strategic objectives and different initiatives, highlighting the UAE government's attention on the wellbeing of citizens (World Health Organization 2021). The framework consists of three main levels; individuals, society and the country. The main purpose of the strategy is to enhance wellbeing by encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle. Dubai government organizations are currently working on different initiatives in order to support the National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031. Wellbeing at the workplace is a significant issue that should be considered because employees spend about one-third of their time at workplace, and they usually do not leave their job behind when they leave the workplace (Liu et al. 2010). Employees with poor wellbeing might be less productive, increase absenteeism, and reduced contribution to the organizations (Price, & Hooijberg, 1992; De Simone 2014).

2.3 The relationship between leadership style and employee wellbeing

Leaders play a focal role in organizations and their behavior and leadership styles have a substantial impact on wellbeing of their employees (e.g., Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber 2009). Leadership style has been considered as one of the most important factors that can enhance employee wellbeing and it is seen as the live wire for the achievement of organizational vision and goals (Nyberg et al. 2015; Inceoglu et al, 2018). A number of previous studies have examined how leadership style impacts on employee wellbeing (Nielsen and Munir, 2009;Tafvelin et al. 2011; Nyberg et al. 2015). For instance, (Tafvelin et al. 2011) conducted a longitudinal study of 2,700 social service employees of a Swedish municipality over a 12-month period. The study revealed that transformational leadership was significantly and positively related to employee wellbeing. Similar to the diverse definition of leadership, employee wellbeing has also been widely examined and produced various conceptualizations and measurements of wellbeing (Brunetto et al. 2012). According to Avolio et al. (2009), the wellbeing of employees and leadership styles are closely linked. Previous studies on wellbeing have broadly shown that leadership styles that are relational, charismatic and transformational consistently reveals better employee outcomes in terms of wellbeing (Cummings 2010). Explicitly, transformational leadership has been correlated with less depression, better general health and less stress (Nyberg et al. 2015;Kim & Cruz,2022).

3. Methodology

The study utilized qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews with participants from Dubai government organizations. Qualitative research is interested in meaning and in how people make sense of their lives and experiences (Miles & Huberman 1994). To apply qualitative methodology, the researcher visits the participants' sites, and settings to observe and record behaviour in situ (Myers 2010). This enables questions to be clarified for the interviewee and answers to be followed up as appropriate (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). Moreover, semi-structured interviews ensure that all questions are answered by participants, and that they will not receive any assistance from others during the interviews (Barriball and While, 1994; Gillham 2000; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow for greater breadth and depth of information to be sought, which may reveal the interviewee experience and give access to their ideas and thoughts (Klandermans & Staggenborg 2002; Sarantakos, 2005). According to Morse and Niehaus (2009), semi-structured interviews are usually used when the researcher has knowledge about the topic either from previous research or from the literature. The application of this approach to this study enables a deeper understanding how leadership style impacts on employee wellbeing, and helps to generate insights and answers to the questions related to leadership styles.

3.1 Participants, interview guide and procedures

Data were collected from interviews with ten participants, including Directors and Heads of Sections in five different Dubai government organizations. The participants were all Emirati, and their age ranged from 35 to 55 years old. There were 4 males and 6 females. The researcher ensured that the developed interview protocol addressed the research objectives. According to Myers (2010), an interview protocol lists questions or issues used in the study. Cassel and Symon (2004), argue that an interview protocol should be prepared by the researcher in order to lead the conversation during the interview. An interview should remain focused on the topic while permitting enough conversation to allow interviewees the chance to discuss relevant topics in depth (Calder, 2005). The interview protocol consisted of four themes and the research conducted face to face interview in participant's offices. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and all interviews were audiotaped for subsequent transcription, as well as to provide more rigour in the study by providing a full record of the interview (Myers 2010).

3.2. Data Analysis Procedure

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher and key themes were classified as suggested by the establish literature. The QSR NVivo 14 software was employed to code data collected during the study. Nvivo is a coding software that aids researchers in analyzing data and provided a good understanding of developing codes lists for the transcript (Weston et al. 2001). The framework of the coding reflected the structure of the interview questions. According to Miles & Huberman (1994), coding is the process of organizing data by connecting chunks and writing a word that represents a category in the margins.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section provides a detailed discussion of the main themes derived from the data analysis process. This study explored the relationship between leadership style and employee wellbeing in Dubai government organizations. The study included the participation of ten participants (6 females and 4 males) who are decision makers working in the public sector in UAE. The level of education of the participants was high: six of them held a master's degree, while four held a doctoral degree. Six of the participants were from the senior leadership category with the remainder from the middle leadership category. The main important ideas that emerged from the interviews are examined in detail in the following section:

4.1 Characteristics of a successful leader

This theme focuses on identifying the characteristics of a successful leader in Dubai government organizations, where the researcher asked the participants about the characteristics of a successful leader for them. Some characteristics of a successful leader that emerged in the interviews are:

1. *A successful leader is a person who inspires his employees to do the best.*
2. *A successful leader who motivates his employees, who really can lead.*
3. *A successful leader is a person who has the ability to take the initiative and make decision.*
4. *A great leader is a good listener, a good speaker and a decision maker.*
5. *A successful leader is someone who motivates and encourages his employees.*
6. *A successful leader is a good role model and has the ability to influence others.*
7. *A leader should be aware of the strength of his subordinates and identify the areas to be improved.*
8. *A successful leader is the one who understands his employees.*

Other participants mentioned that the Vice-President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum is a successful leader. Most participants agree that a successful leader must possess different leadership skills: effective communication, innovation, creativity, problem-solving, decision-making, and influencing others. The findings support the study conducted by Kamali (2018), in which he emphasized that successful leaders in organizations must have leadership skills that help them achieve the organization's goals. Another participant added that a leader should be able to identify the strength of his followers and be aware of the areas to be improved. Wajdi (2017) asserts that leaders usually have a vision of what can be achieved, and they can communicate it to their subordinates. Therefore, leadership is concerned with developing consistent and goal-oriented teams (Antonakis & Day 2017).

4.2 Defining leadership styles

Leadership style can be defined as patterns of emphases, indexed by the intensity of particular leadership behaviour, which a leader places on different leadership situations (Andersen 2008; Casimir, 2001). According to Anderson and Sun, (2017), leadership styles differ from one leader to another as each leader has their own style of influencing subordinates to achieve the goals of the organization. When the participants were asked to

answer the following question: "What is your definition of leadership style?", all participants demonstrated their knowledge of the different leadership styles that a leader may use with subordinates. They defined leadership styles as the different behaviours that a leader uses in dealing with subordinates. Some participants also pointed out that there are many different leadership styles, such as democratic, transformational, charismatic, transactional, and situational, as these styles are not fixed and may vary depend on situations. Also, the participants argued that there is no particular leadership style that works in every situation or organisation. This supports Avolio and Bass (2004), who argued that the best leaders usually use a full range of leadership styles, transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles, as appropriate to the situation. Furthemore , the majority of the participants metioned that a leader who can show a mixture of leadership styles is more effective in achieving the goals of the organization. The findings indicate that the participants knew how leadership styles are defined and are aware of the different leadership styles. The finding support the study of (Vermeeren et al., 2014;Antonakis & Day 2017) who argued that leadership styles are one of the key elements for successful organizations.

4.3 Defining employee wellbeing

There are a huge body of literature across different fields related to employee wellbeing at the workplace (De Simone 2014). Also, there is variation in the definition attributed to the term of wellbeing. When the participants were asked to answer the following question: "How do you define employee's wellbeing?" most of the participants referred to overall mental, emotional, physical and health of employees. Another participant argued that employee wellbeing is about being emotionally healthy, dealing with stress, handling stressful situations, and enjoying life at the same time. In addition, one participant added that employees who are emotionally healthy are able to cope with many challenges faced at workplace. Past research shows different variations in the definition of wellbeing (Danna & Griffin, 1999;Liu et al. 2010; De Simone 2014). For example, De Simone (2014) mentioned that wellbeing involves the physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects. Moreover, Liu et al. (2010) claimed that the concept of wellbeing is seen as having both psychological and physical qualities. Other participants mentioned different terms used for employee wellbeing such employee happiness, employee satisfaction and employee engagement. One of the participants declared that when an employee is in a state of wellbeing at workplace, they can be more creative, productive and better able to cope with stress. Also, one participant said that the employee wellbeing is the most valuable asset and must be a priority for Human Resources departments. This supports the findings of Guest (2017) who suggest that Human Resources Management should give priority to develop different practices and approaches to enhance employee wellbeing.

4.4 The relationship between leadership style and employee wellbeing

Various studies have investigated the relationship between leadership styles and employee's wellbeing (Nielsen and Munir, 2009;Tafvelin et al. 2011; Brunetto et al. 2012;Ausat et al., 2024). Leaders play a crucial role in organizations and their leadership styles have a significant impact on employee's wellbeing (Avolio et al. 2009). When the participants were asked to answer the following question: "How does leadership style impact on employee wellbeing?" the majority of the participants argued that it has a major impact on the wellbeing of the employees. For example, one of the participants mentioned that "when you spot employees who are actively engaged and work happily and more productively, you should know that they have a great leader who encourages employees and takes care of their wellbeing". Also, another participant said: "We need more transformational leadership in Dubai government organizations, a leader who has the ability to inspire and motivate others." According to a joint study conducted by Pierce and Newstrom (2011), working with a transformational leader is very enjoyable and full of passion and energy. It was confirmed by Bass (2008) that the transformational leadership style tends to be more effective compared to other leadership styles. Kamali (2018) added that there are many examples of transformational leaders, including Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of the Emirate of Dubai), Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela, as each of these leaders had the ability to motivate and inspire others. It is necessary to pay attention to the different leadership styles of leaders, as they have a major role in achieving an organization's goals (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1973; Casimir, 2001). There is some evidence that transformational leadership can have a significant impact on wellbeing (Tafvelin et al. 2011; Nyberg et al. 2015;Kim & Cruz,2022). Furthermore, another participant revealed about the national strategy for wellbeing 2031 which aims to make the UAE a world leader in quality of life. They highlighted the UAE government is paying attention to the wellbeing of citizens in order to enhance their wellbeing. Another participant added "Although, there are a number of initiatives related to wellbeing in Dubai government organizations, some employees are still unhappy if they are dealing with autocratic leader". Lastly, one participant stated that "I think we need to create a culture of wellbeing in every organization". Those leaders who are passionate about creating a happier and healthier environment at workplace can also help to improve employee wellbeing. The findings demonstrate consistent benefits of transformational leadership on wellbeing, a range of studies (Richardson and

Rothstein, 2008; Antonakis & Day 2017;Ausat et al., 2024) have examined whether these styles can be developed in leaders and the benefits that may result.

5. Conclusions

In spite of the robust global research interest in the role of leadership style in organizations, there is not enough research looking at how different leadership styles impact on employee wellbeing, especially within Dubai government organizations. The results confirm the importance of the leadership styles which had significant positive impact on employee wellbeing in Dubai government organizations. The study focuses on different themes that emerged during interviews with senior leaders in Dubai government organizations, including different leadership styles and various definitions of employee wellbeing, and the impact of leadership style on the wellbeing of employees. In addition, the study shows consistent benefits in terms of reduced stress and better wellbeing for leadership styles that are more relational such as transformational leadership. Yet, the findings demonstrate poorer outcomes for autocratic leadership. The results recommend that employees will benefit more with transformational leadership where employees feel more comfortable with their leaders.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research Implications

The study is a preliminary study into leadership style and the impact on employee wellbeing in Dubai government organizations. Given the scope of the study, it would be difficult to test the relationship between leadership style and employee wellbeing. Still, the initial results offer themselves for further research to provide a more detailed and fine-grained analysis, using, for instance, quantitative methods.

In terms of methodology, the sample responses were from Dubai government organizations only, and, therefore, generalizability is limiting. The study can be replicated using different samples, for example by using a sample of the other employees in the private sector, this would be an interesting area for future research. Understanding the relationship between leadership style and employee wellbeing in Dubai government organizations is critically important, particularly given that transformational leadership showed consistent benefits to employees in terms of wellbeing. However, this area has, so far, received relatively little research attention, particularly with regard to high context cultures, such as in the UAE. Also, a major recommendation that research should be extended beyond merely examining the leadership styles of leaders, and begin to focus on employee perceptions and how leadership styles impact on their wellbeing. Lastly, Human Resources managers should be aware of the type of leadership styles that positively impact on employee wellbeing. They should also adjust the strategies and organizational polices to come up with different initiatives and programs to enhance the employee wellbeing.

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