

UNDERSTANDING THE PRACTICE OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AMONG SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: EVIDENCE FROM MALAYSIA

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***ABSTRACT**---Ethical leadership is a type of value-based leadership that highly aids in balancing the principal's role as a manager and leader in schools. Studies have shown the impact of practicing ethical leadership towards building trust, positive workplace behaviour, increasing innovative workplace mindset and organisational performance. The emerging leadership style has found strong roots in the international platforms but not in the Malaysian local school leadership interest. 3 secondary school principals were selected for this study based on the ethical leadership level as perceived by their teachers from a previous study by the researcher. Previous study shows that principals have high to moderately high level of ethical leadership practice in schools. This case study caters findings on the understanding and practices of ethical leadership style among the principals as perceived by the principals themselves. The study also explored the seven dimensions of ethical leadership as being practiced among the principals. A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect relevant data. The interview was transcribed and thematically analysed. The principals sharing revealed that they lacked the understanding of ethical leadership style but practiced several dimensions of ethical leadership in their daily school administration tasks. The findings suggest that ethical leadership has ample room to be integrated into current school leadership practices and be made understood of its impact on improving teacher work performance.*

***Keywords**---Effective Leadership, Value-based Leadership, Ethical Leadership.*

I. Effective School Principal Leadership

The role of the school principal in the 4IR era differs from the past, where the focus on technology-based resources and human resource development needs equal attention for optimum organisational success. An effective principal will be skilful to balance the role of a leader and a manager for the best of school performance outcomes, positive leading people practices towards professionalism and notable administrative measures (Mansor and Baki,

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2007; Rizvi, 2008; Martin, 2019). Hamzah et al. (2010) reported the need to integrate technology leadership practices into current practices as an alternative to traditional practices that no longer can be purposeful in this century. Traditional leadership styles no longer work in current complex situations and dilemmas in the school context. In recent years, leaders from private and public sectors have started integrating value-based leadership practices for better role credibility (Copeland, 2014) and as role balancing initiatives. Nevertheless, being dependent on policy and higher authority demands, limits the idea of being innovative and self-manoeuvring ideas especially into the school leadership system. Therefore, ideas that uphold national education policies in line with instructional and leadership needs to be addressed when choosing best school principal leadership practices.

There are various factors to determine the best or rather effective school principal leadership. Li, Hallinger and Ko (2016), presented a very practical looking principal leadership model that integrates decision making, solving problems, being responsible in the situation or dilemma, being part of the problem-solving team, taking every problem in hand and handling it effectively as illustrated in Figure 1. The model supports good communication, reinforcing rules and guideline and good decision making as key approaches to effective leadership towards teacher professional development. The model is people orientated and requires highly knowledgeable leaders with a passion to lead. Effective leadership does not pertain to only being skilful in managing a school.



Figure 1: Model of Principal Leadership (Li, Hallinger and Ko, 2016)

II. Value-Based Leadership (VBL) in Schools

VBL helps establish a climate conducive to effective teaching-and-learning practices and building of trust as principals constantly face issues of dishonesty, unfairness, decision making and empowerment (Copeland, 2014). A value-based leader uses his or her values, beliefs or principles to plan, strategies, approach a given situation and make decisions. VBL focusses on the well-being of all its members (Van Niekerk & Botha, 2017). In 2007, the

founder of Centre for Ethical Leadership developed the EL 4-V Model as presented in Figure 2. The Ethical Leadership 4-V model represents Values, Vision, Voice, and Virtue comprehended the entire concept of ethical leadership. Together with ethical leadership, several other leadership styles e.g transformational leadership, authentic leadership, spiritual leadership (Copeland, 2014; Hendrikz and Engelbrecht, 2019) is also listed as value-based leadership style. Value-based leadership is finding its way into contemporary leadership practices for its core aim in integrating commonly practiced leadership styles that is underpinned by moral values and principles. This is also due to fact that in recent years, commonly practiced leadership styles have declined in the area of practicing moral values and VBL has the potential to overcome “deficiency in leadership” (Van Niekerk & Botha, 2017). To add on, there is a misunderstood fact that VBL will not be able to influence employees working habits and overall organisational success; as much as it could in just promoting good moral values (Copeland, 2014). Gurusamy and Thambu (2018) stated that a morally sensitive human being makes effective decision based on ethics and values at any critical situation. The multidimensional leadership features demonstrated by leaders practicing VBL, leads to long term successful organisation (Kar, 2014). The concept of VBL stands a high chance to be integrated to current school leadership practices along with many other government initiatives towards effective school leadership.

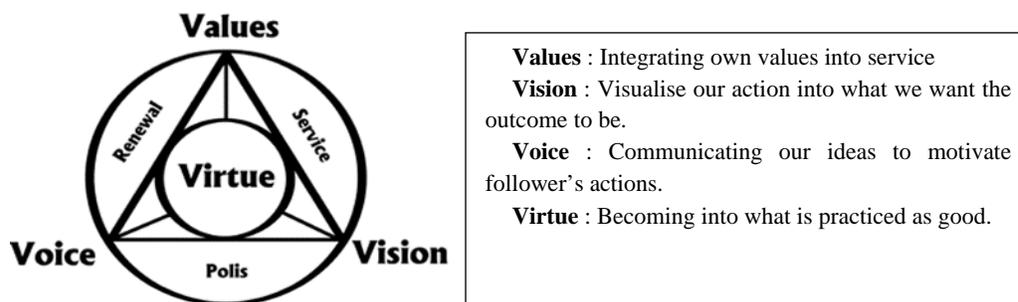


Figure 2: Four V model of Ethical Leadership (Centre for Ethical Leadership, 2007)

III. Ethical Leadership

Organisational disputes places everyone in doubts if a leader has played an effective role. The increase in organisational scandals, drop in work quality and performance; and seeking for best leadership practices is a never-ending episode of problems in the field of organisational administration or management. Haq (2011) recommends skilled leaders to integrate ethics and nurture values into solving organisational dilemmas. At this point, the discussion on ethical leadership as an alternative or and integration measure to current practices is significant.

Ethical leadership has found its way into influencing various organisational leadership, administration and management aspects. Brown, Trevino and Harrison (2005), have conceptualised ethical leadership model, presented the future direction of practicing ethical leadership and defined ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two- way communication, reinforcement and decision- making”. An ethical leader projects himself or herself as a morally inclined person in the process of dealing with people, making decisions and strengthening organisational goals, rule or policies. The role of an ethical leader was further made clear as a moral

leader and a moral manager. The ethical leader is capable of balancing the levels of management, and leading followers towards better attitude and behaviours. In other words, the role of an ethical leader is not bound to managing the office mindfully but also leading people with a heart. Ethical leaders can be observed as someone who is kind hearted, people focused, civic-minded, fair problem solver, speaks his mind, acts upon his/her words, trustworthy, shares responsibilities and guides others to be ethical (Brown and Treviño, 2006; Brown, et al., 2005; Kanungo and Mendonca, 1998). They reward and appreciate the ones genuinely produce results, guide the ones who are misled and do not tolerate the ones who violate ethics.

The influence of ethical leadership has been widely shared by many researchers but the knowledge lacks contribution to school leadership especially in Malaysia. Nevertheless, several models that shows the impact of ethical leadership on work behaviours and performance is gradually assimilating into current practices upon understanding that these models have worked in private organisations (non-school context).

According to Freeman and Stewart (2006) for the development of effective leadership, the first step is to understand the need and impact of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership has been identified significantly strong on employee work pattern (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012), building trust in leader (Bello, 2012; Engelbrecht et al., 2014; Yozgat, & Meşekiran, 2016; Yanik, 2018), improve work engagement (Lin, 2010; Engelbrecht et al., 2014), improve organisational commitment (Zhu, May, & Avolio, 2004; Poon, Rahid & Othman, 2006; Ilham, 2014; Yanik, 2018), ethical decision making (Arar, Haj, Abramovitz & Oplatka, 2016), job satisfaction (Yozgat, & Meşekiran, 2016; Yanik, 2018), individual innovative work behaviour (Yidong, & Xinxin, 2013), employee creativity (Mehmood, 2016), job involvement (Ghani & Jusoff, 2009), organisational performance (Khademfar, & Amiri, 2013) and quality job performance (Bello, 2012).

IV. Current Challenges

This study was motivated by the fact that there is a need to integrate a value-based leadership style into current leadership styles in practice and; to balance the role of a school principal as an effective leader and manager. The 21st century principals still face media critics and competency issues when balancing management and leading a school (Mansor, 2006) which also includes curriculum and co-curriculum management issues (Hamzah & Ayob, 2015) student affairs, financial, office administration, human resource, community relationships, school environment and school infrastructure responsibilities (Alias et al., 2010). This study believes that, a value-based leadership style could be a panacea to several issues involving school leaders and their teachers. Apart from this, principals facing issues regarding their integrity and accountability too is highly being reported. This current study aims at bringing forward ethical leadership which is a type of value-based leadership (Copeland, 2014; Hendrikz and Engelbrecht, 2019), into school management and administration as a mean to solve these issues mentioned above. Ethical leadership seems to be a newfound term in the field of leadership that needs to be addressed in the public sector especially in schools. Findings from previous studies in Malaysia, show that ethical leadership practices based on the seven EL dimensions (Kalshoven et al., 2011) is high to moderately high (Vikaraman, Mansor & Hamzah, 2018). Nevertheless, the empirical data lacked information on the understanding principals had about ethical leadership and its impact on holistic organizational success. To follow up on these findings, this current case study

aimed at exploring the understanding of ethical leadership among 3 principals and how the seven dimensions are being practiced in schools.

V. Research Question

What is the understanding of ethical leadership and how it is being practiced by 3 national secondary school principals in Malaysia?

VI. Methodology

This case study involves 3 secondary school principals. A semi structured interview protocol was developed and used to interview the 3 principals (informants) from 3 different types of national secondary schools. The five principals are from:

Principal 1 (P1): National Religious school – High performing, Fully Residential, Cluster School of Excellence

Principal 2 (P2): National type school – Low performing, academically ranked lowest in the district.

Principal 3 (P3): National type school - Average performance, High student intake and feeder school for vernacular school students.

The interview protocol had 6 questions that explored the understanding principals had about ethical leadership and how ethical leadership dimensions were practiced in their capacity in their school. The interview protocol investigates the understanding the principals had on practicing ethical leadership based on the seven dimensions (Kalshoven et al., 2011). The bilingual semi-structured protocol was emailed to 2 experts for validation purposes before the interview proper. After the experts reviewed the protocol, there were some suggestions on improving the terminologies in the protocol with very minor editing. Then, the interview protocol was pilot tested on 1 principal prior to this case study for feedback on understanding the content of the protocol, to ensure that the informants would share their experiences in depth and the interviewer will be able to derive ample relevant information from the interview to answer the research question. The interview protocol was peer reviewed and content reviewed by the respondents before the interview session. It was emailed to the informants before the actual interview took place. Therefore, the informants had ample time to think and prepare themselves for the interview. All 3 principals preferred to speak in Malay Language. The researcher translated the audio recording into English Language. The interview was audio recorded for transcribing and future reference. Upon the completion of the interview, the informants were given a letter of consent to be signed as approval to use the interview findings in this study. The data collected via the interview was transcribed, thematically analysed (based on the seven dimensions stated below) and cross case analysed. The seven dimensions adopted and adapted as the reference themes into this study, to be functional for a school context:

People orientation: emphasizes the relationship between the principal and teachers, two-way communication skills, building trust, showing care for teachers' welfare and making fair decisions.

Fairness: handling issues pertaining to teachers work responsibilities, decision making, mistakes or problems, misunderstandings and providing the space.

Power sharing: empower teachers to contribute in critical decision-making processes and freely seeks guidance from teachers, delegates challenging tasks equally and provides opportunity for all the teachers to plan their goals.

Concern for sustainability: highlights on principals having concern towards providing a healthy and friendly environment to work.

Ethical guidance: explain work ethics and code of conducts expected at the school.

Role clarification: clarifies the roles and performance expectations of each teacher, teacher's responsibilities and what is anticipated from working groups.

Integrity: which demands principals to hold on to their promises. Principals should be relied upon their actions and words; and trusted to do the things they have said.

VII. Findings and Discussion

The understanding of ethical leadership and how it is being practiced by 3 national secondary school principals in Malaysia.

From the interview, it was identified that all 3 principals practiced ethical leadership. Nevertheless, principal showed signs that they lacked the understanding of how ethical leadership influenced teachers work performance. Despite the practice of ethical leadership, it was found that principals still faced ethical challenges like being watched by others, fair distribution, following religious standards, being caring to all, differences in approaching senior and junior teachers; teacher appraisals and rewards. The principals were asked "what are the key traits or behaviour that an ethical leader should have in a school context".

Responses given include the following:

"A principal must be sincere, fair and tolerant. I follow the 360° Leadership Style. It is a leading style that considers the well-being of all stakeholders...students and teachers." (P1)

"What is the meaning of ethical leadership? (Researcher explains) ..."Being trustworthy, loyal and sincere at work." (P2)

"Ethics refers to values or our attitude and as a public servant we must practice positive working ethics. Key features of being an ethical leader are...." (P3)

There were statements saying being ethical helped in building trust and therefore made things easier at workplace to be implemented or discussed. This gave more support for teachers to work dedicatedly towards the school goals and individual performance. Being a good listener and understanding the teacher's problems were considered very important to build a good relationship with the teachers. Principals took every teacher as an individual and respected their views in any meetings or decision-making processes.

Integrity

In the school context, principals agreed to practicing integrity in terms of being spiritual, financial management and decision-making process. They confessed in following religious law, practicing religion and trust and fear in

GOD as practices of being integrity. They managed finance lawfully by following the SOP set by the Ministry of Education and by equally distributing funds where needed most in their school. When making decisions, the principals agreed on sticking to decisions made in meetings or with all the teachers. They kept to their words and were committed to the decision the made.

Responses given include the following:

“Integrity is very important. Careful with money. I listen and make good decisions. I have far goals and high moral standards.... I like to maintain it. My duty to fulfil what I say” (P1)

“Being trustworthy, loyal and sincere is important for me. Once trust is broken, people will get angry. If not with money, but our work. We must be sincere and not lie during our work. This I also tell my teachers to follow.” (P2)

“...leaders must be trustworthy, loyal.... responsible towards their work and what they say.” (P3)

Fairness

Principals are quite aware that they have to practice being fair to all teachers. Fairness is practiced by giving equal opportunity, in making decision and listening without being judgmental or discrimination. Every teacher was given equal opportunity to share their ideas, knowledge, talent, skill and space to achieve personal goals. A decision was made after the principal discussed with the teachers, whereby they had equal chance to share their opinions and disagreements. Principal listened to every idea, thought and suggestions carefully before making conclusions and not necessarily accepted everything said by the teachers.

Responses given include the following:

“I try to distribute work that they can do best...explain if they don’t understand or are reluctant to follow rules..this is important in long run. I’m responsible if they don’t know their work. I am lucky because I have vast experience and have gained enough knowledge to lead different group of teachers.” (P1)

“I treat teachers equally. Every teacher has good points. They are given opportunity to share their knowledge. I try to reward them for their work.” (P2)

“I have strong respect for teacher’s rights, handle issues without discrimination or bias towards a culture or race...handle with calmness and avoid being harsh to all.” (P3)

People Orientation

The principals found people orientation to be very important in their management and administrating practices in order to get teachers to follow their instructions or decisions without much problems. The principals practiced good listening habits, role modelling, collaborated decision making, trusting their teachers and occasionally having open discussions. They took heed in understanding teachers’ personal issues and paid a lot of attention to their needs. They practice what they have preached to develop trust in their capabilities to lead.

Responses given include the following:

“As a principal, you are alone, but you need the support of your subordinates. Because of the respect, teachers may avoid you, but we have to make friends. Being a role model to all – our attendance, teaching and how we behave. We are being watched and observed so we have to be careful. They assume we are perfect.” (P1)

“I role model myself. I show good values. I take care of how they feel, their welfare and advise them like a friend. I humble myself to their level. I don’t share their personal issues.” (P2)

“...able to work as a team, I have good communication habits – verbally and non-verbal, treat everyone with care because big school and many teachers, humble and initiative to add knowledge...we are being watched, our clothes, how we dress-up, talk and behave” (P3)

Power Sharing

Only one principal shared on sharing their commitments and power with their teachers especially with their assistant principals, department heads and subject panel heads. They also distributed work and responsibilities to their teachers when needed.

“I prefer teachers to share during meeting. Let everyone hear them talk and we make shared decisions.” “I practice 3600 Leadership style. From top to down, we give rights for everyone to share and take responsibility.” (P2)

Ethical Guidance

Guidance were more focused on lesson preparation and school programmes. There were lack of ethical guidance given to teachers. Nevertheless, teachers were well briefed of work ethics as quoted by the Ministry of Education e.g Kod Etika Kerja and Tonggak 12 as reference to ethical codes to follow in schools.

“I advise my teachers to be loyal and sincere...always speak the truth”. (P2)

“Principal must follow ethics to guide the teachers later on”. (P3)

Role Clarification

Clarifying the roles each teacher plays in an organisation is also a practice of being ethical. The principal shares what is expected of a teacher clearly. In this interview, two principals mentioned that they explain what they expect from their teachers and staffs during staff meetings and classroom observation.

“I prepare guidelines on procedures to work on somethings like desk files, work procedure manuals.” (P3)

Concern for Sustainability

Concern for sustainability at school focusses on providing a conducive and safe workplace for teachers and staffs to work. Apart from that, principals’ valuing the importance of caring for the environment is also considered an ethical practice this is also considered being ethical. Only one principal spoke on providing a comfortable place for his teachers.

“I try to provide comfortable and safe place to work.” (P1)

Table 1 shows the summary of ethical leadership practices by dimensions as reported by the principals. P1 practices 5 out of 7 dimensions, P2 practices 4 out of 7 dimensions and P3 practices 5 out of 7 dimensions of ethical leadership. There were 3 dimensions of ethical leadership which was identified as practised by all the principals (P1, P2 and P3) namely integrity, fairness and people orientation.

Table 1: Ethical Leadership Dimensions Practiced by Principals

Principals / Ethical Dimensions	P1	P2	P3
Integrity	√	√	√
Fairness	√	√	√
People Orientation	√	√	√
Power Sharing	√		
Ethical Guidance		√	√
Role Clarification			√
Concern for Sustainability	√		

VIII. Implications and Conclusion

It is evident that, there's ample room to deepen the knowledge and understanding of ethical leadership style among principals in Malaysia. The principals in this case study, shared some traces of their understanding towards what ethical leadership is; but lacked the knowledge of how ethical leadership influences teachers positive work patterns or holistic school success. Though previous studies shared vigorous findings that ethical leadership is being practiced highly among most principals, when interviewed the findings revealed that what was in practice still lacked understanding. Ethical leadership sounded like a newfound terminology in their principalship tenure. The findings from this study may be taken as a benchmark towards sharing effective practices in the future as well as working towards understanding the impact of ethical leadership. The understanding of ethical leadership practices will be meaningful in many ways to school principal if they understood the impact it had on employee work patterns, performance and behaviours. Traditional leadership practices can be alternated to ethical leadership. Ethical leadership may perfectly be integrated into other commonly practiced leadership styles. Ethical leadership as a branch of value-based leadership may perfectly be adapted into future leadership training modules. Although much attention has been paid to ethical leadership recently in the international arena, not much has been explored in the local context especially in schools. This study contributes in extending existing understanding in the area of ethical leadership development, the influence processes that enables organizations to develop ethical as well as effective leaders.

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