

Does Leadership Development Matters? A Qualitative Inquiry of Students' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research is about student leadership development. The aims of this study is to reveal in-depth students' understanding of leadership development and their views on the perceived impact. This study used a qualitative approach, with Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as data collection technique. Participants are 12 leaders of student organizations who were selected by purposive sampling. The FGD discussed five sub-themes, i.e., the importance of leadership, the importance of leadership development programs, leadership attributes, the evaluation of student leadership development programs and the future model of leadership development. This study found that participants regarded leadership skills as very important, both during university and as a provision to take part in work or society at large. Leadership development programs on campus are considered as an important means of obtaining the necessary leadership skills. Furthermore, participants assessed the importance of a continuing development program, which uses a variety of methods and contents, and is always evaluated for its effectiveness. In the future, student leadership development models need to consider the suitability of content with the dynamics of changing student needs.

Keywords: Leadership, Leadership Skills, Leadership Development, Student Leadership Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been recognized as one of the keys to success for organizations, regardless of the type of organization [1]. At university, student leadership competencies are very important to be developed. Many leadership development programs have been carried out by campuses around the world [2]. However, not much has been revealed the effectiveness of such programs [3]. Similarly, research on the impact of student leadership development is also mixed [4].

Leadership skills are formed through training and learning programs from the first year until they graduate. These programs are primarily aimed at improving student leadership capabilities. However, as stated by [2] many leadership development programs are intended to achieve other strategic goals (e.g., increasing retention rates) but include implicit leadership skills development. In this way, leadership development becomes unfocused and has been carried out on an ad hoc basis. Apart from this fact, there are at least three important issues in the leadership development. First, it is not clear what learning outcomes are measured in the programs. Second, the evaluation phase of the program is often overlooked.

Third, it is not yet clear the impact of the leadership development programs carried out so far.

2. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to reveal in-depth students' understanding of the student leadership development program and their views on the perceived impact. The research objectives are:

- 1) To find out student assessments of student leadership development programs, and
- 2) To determine the expected and felt impact of the programs.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Leadership

Leadership skills have been regarded as an important factor in organizations and societies. Leadership is also a very important factor in providing the direction of development and policy formulation and implementation [5]. According to [6], leadership is an individual characteristic of how they act and influence others. [7] said that leadership emphasizes

relational aspects that focus on process, collaboration, ethical relationships and social responsibility. [1] defines leadership as "a process of motivating and facilitating people to work collaboratively to accomplish shared objectives." A number of other definitions mention leadership as the art of directing and pushing someone towards the achievement of objectives or a process consisting of individual activities, interactions and actions that affect systems inside and outside the organization [8].

The assumption that most definitions have is that leadership is an influencing process, that is, when an individual exerts deliberate influence on others to organize activities and relationships in a group or organization. Leadership can also be understood as a process of influence based on clear values and beliefs that lead to a vision [9]. According to [10], there are three dimensions in leadership: (1) leadership is the process of influencing the structure and managing a process in the organization, (2) leadership related to organizational values and commitment of its members to these values, and (3) a clear vision is an essential feature of any form of effective leadership.

From the different definitions in the literature, there is a number of agreement about the important elements in the definition of leadership [1]. First, leadership involves processes and outcomes (e.g., member commitment) that contribute to the development and achievement of organizational goals. This leadership element describes its functional perspective, namely leadership functions to realize organizational goals [11]. Second, organizational leadership is identified through the application of influence on organizational life [11]. This means that leadership only occurs as a response or anticipation of organizational activities that are not routine; i.e., situations that pose actual or potential obstacles to the achievement of organizational goals [11].

The discussion on leadership theory continues to develop according to environmental dynamics. The current leadership theory is the result of evolution from the leadership theories in the past. Past research describes leadership theory as focusing on human resources. More specifically, leadership theories focused on two topics, namely leadership development methods and a leader's emotional resonance with his subordinates [12].

Over time, leadership theory has developed into a more complex discussion with a wider range of topics. Currently, the topics discussed in leadership theory do not only revolve around human resources as its main focus. The discussion of leadership theory elaborates the relationship between human resources and social capital in which people perform different activities. Emphasis on social capital means building network relationships among individuals that enhance

cooperation and exchange of resources in creating organizational value [13].

3.2. Leadership Development

Leadership development is defined as an effort to increase leadership knowledge, skills and abilities which in turn has a positive impact on selected individuals or team members so that their leadership abilities are more developed and improved [14]. [15] argue that leadership development involves acquiring one's skills through a didactic learning process and from experiences. In other words, leadership development is considered as an important and effective factor in a process that makes changes for the better by expanding the capacity to carry out leadership roles effectively ([8]; [16]).

[17] argued that leadership development needs to be applied as early as possible to help individuals learn specific knowledge and skills related to leadership. The addition of leadership capacity in individuals is an important indicator of success in academics and has an effect on academic scores, career, work environment and the ability to adapt and survive in difficult conditions.

Leadership is a topic that is always present in every student development program in higher education. The expectation is clear, that is, with the implementation of leadership programs, future leaders who can bring change directly to society will emerge. However, the impact of implementing this leadership program has had mixed results. A number of studies have concluded that leadership programs help develop student leadership. Other studies have been able to inform the causal relationship between leadership programs and student development outcomes.

For example, [18] has identify socio-cultural conversations with peers, faculty mentoring, and participation in community services as the main influences complemented by findings related to the importance of leadership effectiveness as a medium-term outcome. Furthermore, [18] argues that the provision of leadership programs has a positive correlation with the improvement of students' abilities in tertiary institutions. Using a quasi-experimental design pretest-posttest, [19] concluded that leadership development had a positive impact on leadership capacities and well-being of university students.

A number of other researchers found different results, that the leadership program had no significant impact on university students. [20] argues that student leadership learning may not have as significant an impact as most educators believe. One explanation for this is the lack of clarity regarding the leadership skills material needed by students [20].

According to [21], student leadership development programs can take the form of volunteer activities that allow participants to participate (eg, leadership workshops open to all students) or mandatory programs that require someone to participate. Leadership development can be applied to formal leadership programs in class and outside class activities such as activities in organizations, training and workshops. An individual may decide to participate in the training or be required to participate so that it can influence the motivation of prospective leadership development program participants.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is used because this approach is very "rich" so that it is able to provide an understanding of very complex phenomena such as leadership [22]. Leadership is highly influenced by context and, in this regard, qualitative research has made an important contribution to leadership studies through the study of the importance of contextual factors for leaders [22] [23].

The data collection method in this study is a focus group discussion (FGD), which bring together a group of individuals in a supportive environment. FGD is frequently used as a qualitative approach to uncover an in-depth understanding of social issues [24] and allows participants to discuss freely with each other without worrying about their opinions [25]. Furthermore, as a type of interview, FGD could reveal important issues from real experiences of participants and the interviewer could actively follow up on the subject's answers, clarify and expand questions [26]. [27] stated that one of the strengths of focus groups is the variety of perspectives and experiences that participants expressed during the interactive discussion.

According to a review conducted by [28], most researchers suggest the number of participants in FGD ranges from 4-12 people. Adopting this view, the numbers of participants recruited for this current study were 12 student organization leaders in Bandung, Indonesia.

This study uses the Template Analysis [29] which produces a list of codes or templates that represent the themes identified from the textual data. The template analysis is "a style of thematic analysis that balances a relatively high degree of structure in the process of analyzing textual data with the flexibility to adapt it to the needs of a particular study" [29]. According to [30], Template Analysis combines a deductive and inductive approach to qualitative analysis, in the sense that codes are predefined and then modified when data is collected and analyzed.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are five themes in the FGD, i.e., the importance of leadership, the importance of leadership development, leadership attributes, evaluation of leadership development, and the expected model of student leadership development.

5.1. The Importance of Leadership

As suggested by [6], leadership is an individual characteristic of how they act and influence others. Participants revealed that leadership is not only about giving orders or instructing others, but also understanding the circumstances of the followers. They further said that leadership is as self-control to be a good role model before leading others. In this regard, personal orientation in leadership becomes the main factor because of its impact on the organization.

As stated by another participant, the main orientation of a leader is to provide benefits to others, because it is believed that the best human beings are the most beneficial for others. Another important meaning of leadership is helping someone to be able to play a role or provide benefits in community life. This is in line with [7] who argued that leadership emphasizes relational aspects that focus on collaboration, ethical relationships, and social responsibility. [31] also emphasized that for many young students, leadership becomes a means to express themselves cognitively, psychologically, ethically, and physically, as leadership is a social process for working with others.

Leadership can also be seen from a functional perspective, that leadership functions to realize organizational goals [11]. One participant said that "the leader is an influencer." The influence of a leader is needed to create change in the organization for the better. Leaders must have the influence to make their members shared the same vision and goals. This is in line with [1] opinion which defines leadership as "a process of motivating and facilitating people to work collaboratively to accomplish shared objectives."

One participant said that students actually have an important role as agents of change. Leadership is also a very important factor in providing direction for the development of the organization and policies that will be implemented [5].

5.2. The Importance of Leadership Development

Leadership skills are acquired, among other things, through leadership development and training programs. Participants have various views about the importance of leadership development. The benefits

of leadership development can be grouped into three categories, namely knowledge, attitudes and behavior.

The participants argue that through leadership development, students can learn to be an effective leader, both at the individual and organizational levels. They argue that leadership development programs can also develop certain attitudes. In terms of behavioral dimension, participants expressed a number of benefits that can be obtained by participating in leadership development.

5.2.1. Knowledge

In this category, there are participants who argue that through leadership development programs, knowledge about the positive things of organizational culture can be obtained. In turn, this organizational culture can be transmitted to the next generation so that "the impact and benefits can be felt." Other participants argued that through leadership development programs, students can learn to be an effective leader, both at the individual and organizational levels.

Leadership development programs are an important alternative to gain knowledge about leadership and how to implement or practice leadership in a variety of different contexts. In addition, a participant said that besides being able to provide provisions for being a student, the knowledge and skills acquired can also be used as a basis for "organizing or socializing in the real world."

5.2.2. Attitudes

Participants argue that leadership development programs can also build certain attitudes. For example, creating a positive attitude to always uphold the truth. Leadership development programs can also build a supportive attitude, both to those who are currently leaders, peers, and to maximize the potential of those who are being led. Another aspect of attitude mentioned by the participants was the "character" or "spirit" of leadership. Participants also mentioned that leadership training can form or sharpen "sensitivity" to the problems faced and train a positive attitude to solve problems as well as find alternative solutions with an open mind.

5.2.3. Behavior

In the behavioral aspect, participants expressed a number of benefits that can be obtained by participating in leadership development programs. Management and leadership training programs at the basic level, such as "basic leadership training," acquire skills to manage oneself. From programs at

the advanced level, skills can be obtained for managing events, managing mid-level organizations or even more complex organizations.

Another benefit is the potential to produce new leaders. There were even participants who mentioned the importance of the leader's ability to "create new leaders who are better than themselves." Leadership training programs play an important role in equipping students with the ability to design various programs and activities required by the organizations they lead.

Other participants also expressed the importance of leadership development to equip students with practical skills. The skills mentioned include, "how to lead from above, how to appreciate our friends who struggle to support us from below, how to give good direction, how to influence, how to make them comfortable in the organization." These skills are not only needed when they become students but also provide a strong foundation to play a role in their organization and in the workplace when they graduate. This result in line with the study of [32] that students believe they benefit from peer leadership experiences across a range of key outcomes areas, most prominently creative problem solving, appreciation of diversity, and a sense of belonging and contributing to the university community.

Apart from data extraction from the FGD results, the grouping of the three themes above (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, and behavior) is also in line with the notions of a number of scholars regarding the main elements that make up leadership. [32], for example, said that although there are many definitions of leadership, there is general consensus on the three main elements that make up an effective leadership structure, namely being (attitudes), knowing (knowledge), and doing (skills).

5.3. Leadership Attributes

Participants expressed interesting views about leadership attributes. Based on the views expressed by the FGD participants regarding the attributes of the leader, it can be concluded that the leader must be communicative, assertive, open-minded, patient, have integrity, and have the courage to make decisions.

5.4. The Evaluation of Leadership Development

This theme is divided into three categories: the process, the duration of implementation and the contents, trainers and facilities.

5.4.1. The Process

The participants expressed several opinions regarding the evaluation of the process in the leadership development program they have participated in. For example, there is no innovation in terms of methods or ways of delivering material that are considered less varied and do not follow the current dynamics of leadership theory development. In addition, the number of participants who took part in the leadership development program was so large that the delivery method was considered ineffective by the participants.

FGD participants argued that leadership development programs should not only be given to new students, which are campus-owned centralized programs, but must also be carried out continuously and spread throughout student organizations and their administrators. In addition, the focus of the evaluation of the majority of participants was the absence of involvement and collaboration between student organizations and campus management in designing the concept of a leadership development program. In this regard, [31] said that at the organizational level, the university exerts influence through policies, procedures, communication channels and rules and regulations. In turn, compliance with regulations can have an impact on the inflexibility and neutrality of the trainers/instructors and student leadership style.

5.4.2. Duration

There were a number of things raised by the participants when discussing the evaluation of the leadership development regarding the duration or the timing of implementation. The participants suggested that the duration should be adjusted to the topics and training materials. Also, an inappropriate implementation timing and schedule is one of the participant concerns. They argue that each development program should be given time according to student needs.

5.4.3. Contents/Trainers/Facilities

The participants thought that the campus should be able to provide leadership training that focused on the applications. According to participants, the training should not only focus on theoretical matters, but required practice according to student needs. At universities, students are not only educated as prospective workers but accompanied by training on how students can take part in society, have an impact on society and work for the broader public interest.

The participants said that the contents of the leadership development program can be tailored to the needs of each academic department, which refers to certain expertise. In addition, it is important to consider the application of the training results or

transfer of training. Dissemination of information and inaccurate branding regarding leadership development programs also became the attention of the participants as it greatly influenced participant participation.

5.5. The Future Model of Leadership Development

The first focus on this theme is the process and methods of implementing leadership development programs. The participants thought that continuity was needed in the leadership development program. This means that a follow-up program from activities that have been implemented previously is needed.

It can be concluded that the participants expect the implementation of development programs that does not only focus on providing trainings, but offer assistance/mentoring, monitoring and evaluation following the program. This is, for example, in line with [15] suggestion that mentoring can improve student leadership development.

FGD participants who are leaders of student organizations aspire that the university can provide space for them to be able to actively participate in every program planning. Hence, each program given can suit the needs of students and be in line with the student organizations' program. In turn, program overlap between the university and the student organizations can be minimized. It is as [9] said that treating students as colleagues allows organizations to develop leadership identity while preparing students for leadership as professionals.

The second focus on this theme is the expected duration of the leadership development program. Based on the results of the FGDs, the participants expected that the program would be carried out continuously.

Based on the participants' statements regarding the expected duration of the leadership development program, the organizers, especially campus management, should be able to identify the program needs that are appropriate for each batch of students. In addition, development programs need to be organized at a number of levels, from basic to advanced development programs.

The third focus on this theme is the expected content of the leadership development program. The majority of the participants expect an innovative and applicable development program.

Based on several statements made by the FGD participants, it can be concluded that in the future,

development program content needs to be adapted to the needs of the current generation and the dynamics of internal and external change. [34] Believes that one of the challenges for university leaders is to train students to be able to live in an environment with different values, major technological changes, and complex cultural and social changes.

6. CONCLUSION

The participants' perceptions and views on leadership and leadership development were varied. However, it can be concluded that the participants considered that leadership skills were very important, both during university and as a provision to take part in work or society at large. Leadership skills enable them to have a positive impact and benefit on organizations and society.

Leadership development programs on campus are considered as an important means of obtaining the necessary leadership skills. Furthermore, participants assessed the importance of a continuing development program, which uses a variety of methods and contents, and is always evaluated for its effectiveness. In the future, student leadership development models need to consider the suitability of content with the dynamics of changing student needs.

The significance of the current study is that the findings provided broader insights into student leadership development from the perspective of the actors. The results confirmed several overarching themes of leadership development. Additionally, the use of qualitative approach through FGDs is proven to be able to reveal important issues of leadership development that come from real experiences of the participants. As such, program developers can use these findings to create more effective leadership development programs.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitation of this study should be noted. First, the study was focused on students who serve as leaders of student organizations. Regular students may have different perspectives about leadership development. Second, this study only included students from polytechnic or university of applied science. Involving additional participants from other institutions or universities would be worthwhile in order to establish validity and generalizability of the present findings. Finally, this study explores five a-priori themes of leadership development. Investigation on students' perspectives in other institutions may result in more or less themes of leadership development.

The results of the FGD need to be explored further in in-depth interviews with different participants. Hence, a more complete picture of students' views on leadership development will be obtained. In turn, it can provide sufficient information for the creation of a leadership development model. In addition, despite the rich findings provided by qualitative approach of the current study, future studies are encouraged to adopt a mixed method. [35] argues that by using quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study, mixed-methods research in leadership studies can address the weaknesses of both methodologies. We believe that the knowledge gained from this method is important for constructing a more comprehensive model of leadership development.

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