BLOOMING LEADERS AMONG EQUALS: A CASE OF LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION PLANNING IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION[1]

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Abstract

Why certain organizations still look for outside talents albeit the consensus on the importance of leadership development and succession planning? This may happen when significant stakeholders believe that change is more important than continuity; and transformation could only happen with presence of outside talents. We revisit this issue by identifying ways to nurture internal talents to be change navigators while sustaining continuity. In acknowledging the scarcity of leadership talents, we conduct an in-depth study that combine descriptive quantitative analysis and in depth qualitative technique to understand the needed competencies and development programs to nurture vice-chancellors in public higher education in Malaysia. The findings suggest that competencies needed are as comprehensive as those prepared for C-suite due to the current turbulence in higher education. Hence, the programs for nurturing such talents also require an integrative dynamism from critical stakeholders.

Keywords: leadership, succession planning, higher education, leadership development program, Malaysia

1.0 Introduction

A phase of changing leadership, defined as *succession planning* is not unusual in any organizations. The idea that the right people must be at the right place and at the right time to do the right things so as to produce the right results for the whole eco-system has been discussed for decades. Nonetheless, there are still eclipses and unclear trajectory on the right elements, processes and assessment, while most of these earlier works concentrate on corporations and largely western centric (Cascio, 2011; Conger and Fulmer, 2003; Rothwell, 2010, Sweeney, 2013). Studies that venture into specific contexts would enhance the generalizability and understanding of theories and practices of succession planning.

Aside from issues of leadership transition, measures in current studies have shown that up to 40 percent of an organization's overall performance can be attributed to the strength and

performance of leadership. It is in contrast with about 12 percent in similar studies a decade ago (Schroder, 2004). While the profile sets of leaders are extensive, the numbers of leaders from certain regions (including Malaysia) are limited. Just at a time when the importance of leaders is greater than ever, we have an enormous gap in leadership capability and leadership pipeline strategies in many parts the world. Malaysian higher education landscape is a microcosm of this phenomenon.

This paper is based on our empirical work which is still open for further review and discussion. Our study explores the issues of competencies within the vice chancellors leadership pipeline and the triadic engagement and synchronization of three significant entities in Malaysian public higher education system, namely universities, the Academy of Leadership for Higher Education Institutions (AKEPT) and the Ministry of Education. The main objective is to develop a pragmatic leadership succession plan model for top management of public universities. Within this scope, we aim to identify: 1) a leadership talent specification standard that is based on a set of established competencies. This specification standard should be applied during the process of talent pool, talent development and talent retention of leaders at public higher education, as well as 2) identify a comprehensive leadership succession planning programs that constitutes the process of pooling/acquiring, developing and retaining the talents.

2.0 Literature Review

From 1967 to 1997, thirteen nations proudly *sustained* within the league of *high* growth nations. What the World Bank (Commission of Growth & Development, IBRD, 2008) defined as *"high"* is above 7 percent (of gross domestic products), whereas *"sustained"* is above 25 years. Malaysia *poised* as one of these nations, synchronously leaped along Botswana, Brazil, China, Indonesia, Hong Kong (China), South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Malta, Oman, Taiwan, and Thailand. At the heart of Malaysian higher education during the past thirty illuminating years, Malaysia has evoked the rise and struggle of five public higher learning institutions (*University of Malaya, University Technology of Malaysia, Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Technologi MARA*) in growing the institutions and nurturing talents to develop critical industries, to prepare leaders for the public sector and to create entrepreneurship for the country. Among the keys of this successful navigation of *talent creation* at that point in time was the significant leadership at these higher education institutions. Nonetheless, the decades of 2000s looms a critical

concern. Malaysia is *slumped* within the middle income nations. Its higher education institutions are challenged with economic turbulence, globalization, fast technological innovations, deregulation, socio-cultural shifts as well as competition from other nations' higher education sectors that have a similar intention, which is to be a regional knowledge hub. Its higher education system is expected to accelerate the transformation by preparing workforce for modern jobs (World Bank, 2000).

This scenario has upped the ante on Malaysian higher education while the country grapples to quantum leap again as a sustaining high growth nation. There are concerns on whether leaders of Malaysian higher education institutions today and the future repeat their predecessors' contribution and the success for the nation, if not exceeding them. Not much literature openly discusses the required leadership competencies to transcend the whole institutions into better heights of growth and adaptations to new challenges in the context of Malaysia. These are vital inquiries, yet compelling and still obscure. Anchor to any entity's sustainable victory is its ability to transition to new leadership, predominantly defined as *succession planning* (Rothwell, 2012). Failures and mistakes in leadership transitions may generate a chasm and hiatus in higher education institutions' accomplishment and processes of renewal.

Charan, Drotter, and Noel (2001) define succession as "perpetuating the enterprise by filling the pipeline with high-performing people to assure that every leadership level has an abundance of these performers to draw from both now and in the future." To put it simply, succession planning is a preparation an organization has to carry out to replace one leader with another. It involves systems with specific rules and procedures which match the needs, nature and culture of specific context (Friedman, 1986). Hence, executive development and placement practices may not come in a one-size fit all models condition.

Understanding what skills future leader needs as well as how they can learn them would ensure the right skills at the top and everywhere else in the organisation. Therefore, the emphasis is on identifying linchpin positions and making time for in-depth talent management. Developing leadership pipeline is labour-intensive, but regularly identifying high potential managers and increasing their leadership skills through challenging assignments, team support, training, and mentoring would keep a full pipeline for those linchpin positions (Conger et.al, 2003). In addition, it is crucial that the process is transparent. Managers should be well-informed of where they stand on the corporate ladder and what needs to done to advance. Farashah et al. (2011) in their study on the effect of succession

planning on employee career attitudes found a significant correlation between succession planning extensiveness and career success and employees' satisfaction of the promotion process. Table 1 illuminates best practices of succession planning.

Table 1: Best Practices of Succession Planning

Succession planning process component	Best practices	Source
Process and change management	- Top management participation and support - Setting specific goals - Measuring real progress against goals regularly and defining correction plan - Designing SP based on internal needs assessment and external benchmarking - Centralized structure and formal approach - Having full–time responsible person for SP - Detailed SP planning including work breakdown and schedule - Evaluation of personal development of successors - Budgeting of SP - Considering motivations and rewards for successors - Considering motivations and rewards for mentors - Linking SP to business strategy - Establishing formal procedure and open communication - Support and develop candidates according to their career interests and exploited in real positions	Ley (2002); Conger and Fulmer (2003); Rothwell (2010); Karaevli and Hall (2003); Diamond (2006); Ibarra (2005); Waymon (2005), Jarrel et al. (2007); Greer and Virick (2008); Wolfred (2008); Farashah et al. (2011)
Selection of successor	- Extend SP to all organizational levels - Identification of critical positions and prioritizing them in SP - Periodical evaluation of employees - Establishing performance appraisal system	Christie (2005); Diamond (2006); Burns-Martin (2002); Byham et al. (2002); Larson (2005); Diamond (2006)
Development of successor	- Establishing a system for employees' competency gap analysis - Establishing a system to discover employee potentials vs. current performance - Developing career and personal development plans - Establishing system of identification of future job competencies - Linking SP to training plan - Linking SP to persona interests and careers - Extensive use of on the job training - Career Workshop	Greer and Virick (2008); Patton and Pratt (2002); Ingraham and Getha-Taylor (2004); Grove (2007); Saungweme and Naicker (2009)

Source: Farashah et al. (2011)

3.0   Methodology

We applied a mixed methodology approach of quantitative survey to identify competencies deemed critical for Vice Chancellors. Primary data for this research were collected using a self-administered questionnaire designed to serve the purpose of the research objective. The survey was carried out in approximately a week. The targeted respondents were deans and deputy deans from public higher education institutions. In addition, we employed focus groups and interviews to identify specific processes and programs to develop the leadership pipeline system. Via these qualitative methods, we aim to discover comments and messages about the existing policies and expectations on future ones concerning the research objectives and the phenomenon of interest, namely succession planning and talent management for leaders of public higher education institutions.

The questionnaire in this study was developed based on the results of seven in-depth interviews conducted and four focus group sessions aimed at assessing and validating (1) the measurement of leadership competencies, (2) roles of AKEPT and (3) suggested training programs provided by AKEPT. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Through the survey, we assess the five dimensions of leadership competencies: bases (five items); key qualities (14 items); key skills (17 items); people skills (nine items), and leadership style (four items). In addition, there were 19 statements that require respondents to state their opinions pertaining to the roles of AKEPT and 27 statements pertaining to the suggested training programs provided by AKEPT. The statements were believed by the researchers to capture the essential aspects of succession planning. Furthermore, in this study a rating scale was adopted, anchored by (1) least important and (10) most important.

4.0 Findings- Discussion and Implications

Analysis of the various variables was done by assigning a rating scale based on the degree of importance among the respondents with respect to the items and the statements posed to them. Exhibit 1 shows the overall ranking of the leadership competencies. The five most critical items are integrity, ethical, decision-making, networking, and visionary. These findings coincide with leadership perspectives invoked by transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1993), servant leadership (Banutu-Gomez, 2004, Covey, 2006) and the trait theory (Northouse, 2007).

Exhibit 1: Leadership Competencies-: Leadership Competencies- Overall Ranking

Item	N = 44	Most important	Rating average	Overall Ranking
Integrity	42	37	9.71	1
Ethical	42	34	9.60	2
Decision making	41	31	9.59	3
Networking	41	34	9.58	4
Visionary	41	31	9.54	5
Visioning	41	28	9.51	6
Intrapersonal	41	33	9.50	7
Interpersonal	41	35	9.50	8
Honesty	41	31	9.49	9
Decisiveness	40	28	9.48	10
Charisma	41	27	9.46	11
Supportive	39	21	9.46	12
Passion	41	26	9.44	13
Courage	41	26	9.39	14
Leading change	41	26	9.39	15
Respectful	41	26	9.37	16
Planning	41	24	9.32	17
Wisdom	41	26	9.29	18
Virtue	40	23	9.25	19
Adaptability	40	22	9.25	20
Fairness	41	27	9.22	21
Performance	41	20	9.20	22
Global mindset	41	20	9.20	23
Empowerment	41	20	9.17	24
Humility	41	23	9.15	25
Resourceful	41	21	9.15	26
Understanding stakeholder's context	41	16	9.15	27
Participative (deep dive)	39	17	9.15	28
Negotiation	41	23	9.12	29
Emotional Intelligence	41	25	9.10	30
Driving for results	41	18	9.10	31
Expertise	42	23	9.05	32
Innovation	41	18	9.05	33
Successes	42	18	9.02	34
Budgeting	41	18	9.02	35
Taking charge	41	15	9.00	36
Visibility	41	25	8.98	37
Culture builder	40	25	8.95	38
Informational	41	24	8.90	39
Authority	42	19	8.86	40
Human resource management skills	41	16	8.80	41
Tolerance for ambiguity	41	16	8.78	42
Inclusiveness	41	24	8.78	43
Accessibility	41	23	8.73	44
Mentoring	41	23	8.73	45
Academic	41	15	8.68	46
Entrepreneurship	40	12	8.53	47
Autocratic	41	4	6.44	48

Source: from survey

In closing the gaps, there should be an array of sub-programs that AKEPT could implement, supporting its previous and current training programs. In the pursuit of developing top-level academic leaders, most of current vice-chancellors being interviewed suggested that AKEPT incorporates all the four important criteria as attributes (personal characteristics, credentials, development process, and business mindedness), with measureable learning taxonomies, and categorization at different levels of leadership pool. It needs to incorporate in its testing and measurement, important distinct areas such as fraud detection, balance sheet, account, crisis and risk management.

Banking on the stakeholders' reflections and opinions, we propagate that this comprehensive program must have principles. The first principle concerns the readiness of Ministry of Higher Education to ensure talents who would rise to helm any of the public universities would undergo a particular series of compulsory leadership programs as a reflection of enhanced abilities, skills and knowledge gained prior to taking the critical position. Essences of equilibrium and balance are a necessity for leaders and therefore, we proposed that development programs embedded in this succession planning combine physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual elements. Each of the consecutive programs, attended and participated by all talents in the pools should be '*niched*', for their self-development, while simultaneously aligned to national and institutional agenda. These sets of niche programs must also have specific learning goals and objectives; thus development of competencies be measured after the programs ended, and synchronized cooperatively by AKEPT, the Ministry, the university and mentors or coaches of the talents. In other words, we propose an integrated assessment. Undoubtedly, this is a daunting task and time-consuming. Hence, we foresee that an automation and intelligent system is a necessity. Once competencies development of each talent is recorded, it would stand as a living document and evidence during the process of Vice Chancellors' selection.

As an integrative effort and assessment, universities should collaborate with AKEPT in providing the list of talent pools to undergo the succession planning program. At this juncture, only immediate supervisors (example: incumbent VCs or DVCs) would know which talents do have the potentials. They are the best to help devise plans to help individuals develop themselves and close competencies gaps.

Subsequently, individual talents at universities are best trained in a central succession planning program so that camaraderie and cohesiveness could be achieved within the eco-system. Challenges within the global higher education environment need to be encountered in a team effort. Increasingly, leadership teams from various universities, irrespective of

institutional nature and pursuance, need to consistently cooperate as the higher education sector becomes complex, challenging and dynamic. More importantly, there is a need to have a culture that embraces a common sense of purpose and aspirations. This would annihilate any growing minute sense of cult, and hence projects an authentic appreciation among all neighboring public universities, putting national success ahead of individual universities or own recognitions.

One way to critically select talents from within the universities is by implementing Individual Development Plan (IDP) at the university level. Based on this IDP, a talent could be measured based on potentials and performance and later be plotted in a Talent Grid. At any event of time, these are the talents whom should be chosen for the central succession planning programs. Each level of assessments should rationally move the talents higher along the trajectory of the *talent grid*. In addition, from the *Talent Grid*, universities could also generate a Talent Inventory, in which decision makers could select readily talents within short notice for particular, suitable positions. Different human capital measurement strategies could be developed to record depth and development of talents' potentials. The moment AKEPT receives the *Talent Grid* (or lists of talents) from universities, a central talent pool could be created and managed consistently. Reviews and measures must be done on an ongoing and interim basis in order to ensure all development gaps of talents are closed.

In terms of this, we propose a pyramid system with a continuum between three to five years, and continuous self-assessment based on the purpose-driven Leadership Model (Maidique, 2011). Each cohort of talent pool may be started with a large number of talents. At the entry level, a pool of 500 talents across various universities could be considered. The type of programs may fundamentally focus on operational or governance. After self-assessment, the talent pool would be loomed into just 150 talents. The assessment is based on specific programs and evaluation of the Purpose-driven assessment model. At this second level, more challenging assignments could be given with proper guidance by a cadre of mentors and coaches. At the final end, what the nation needs are VCs who reflect "servant leaders" who prioritize their institutions and society, rather than themselves. This is the 'platinum' level, in which less than 50 talents with characters of *builders* and *transcenders* are ready to lead universities. Average performers or those identified as unable to align between self and institutional priorities could be strained out and pulled back from the succession planning system. The proposed Succession Planning Program also takes into consideration the concept of *Leadership Pipeline* (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011). In lieu of this, high performers, namely *builders* and *transcenders* should be nurtured as early as they are acquired

into the Malaysian higher education system. At the entry level of talent management, universities with the immediate supervisors (Deans) must be able to distinguish and track potentials of young lecturers with PhDs to be highlighted and brought into AKEPT's attention. This is also the stage where mentors and their surroundings absorb young talents with behavioral and value-based transitions. It is the phase where mentors train the young talents to manage and balance time for themselves and allocate time to value managerial work and supporting others while succeed in their academic and research endeavors. An existing Vice Chancellor stressed during the in-depth interview: *"VCs have to be from those who have gone through the mills...we cannot afford to take people who have never become a dean or have not earned a solid academic, research and management leadership to run a university"*.

As the leadership pipeline passage enters the next stage, the young talents should be provided responsibilities to manage others via leading programs and departments. As talents divest themselves from individual academic and research leadership, they should be able to learn valuing managerial work, and not just tolerating it. They must be taught to view that making time for others via planning, organizing, coaching others and maintaining systematic work is a necessary task and mission-critical to their success. They should be imbibed with competencies to manage functional/operational aspects of a faculty. In fact, this is also a passage where potential *builders and transcenders* learn to generate long term perspectives and strategies to ensure sustainability of their faculties/ schools. As they attain academic and research leadership, they should also learn to mentor new young talents who join their faculties via a leadership style that focuses on instruction-performance-feedback/follow-up cycle. It is at this stage, that more concentration of training provided by AKEPT, universities and the ministry be increased. Potential *builders and transcenders* should also be given responsibilities to lead through their roles of Deputy Vice Chancellors. Sophisticated skills must be ingrained into their work values as they manage groups and other 'equals'. This includes enhanced abilities to 1) strategize, 2) to develop others 3) to multi-task between portfolios and networks within and across institutions 4) to assess core capabilities and improve them when required. When fully bloomed into Vice Chancellors, successors must develop propensity to shift from strategic or operational to visionary or global. In the long run, they need to also realize that some of the direct reports aspire to hold their position. Letting-go some of the strategic processes to these potentials with trust and empowerment as well as mentoring them for the sake of the institutions and the whole eco-system are prime importance.

5.0   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper is our genuine observations and are still open for further review and discussion. Throughout this paper, we apply the contextual approach in that succession planning program for Malaysian Higher Education requires an effective match with its eco-system, which combine both top-down succession planning program and a bottom-up career planning agenda. We stress on a triadic engagement and synchronization of three significant entities: universities, the leadership academy and the ministry in order to magnetize potential talents individually and galvanize development initiatives for the benefit of national, institutional and talent development.

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