

**Christopher T. Selvarajah/Patrick Duignan/
Chandraseagran Suppiah/Terry Lane/Chris Nuttman**

In Search of the ASEAN Leader: An Exploratory Study of the Dimensions that Relate to Excellence in Leadership

Abstract

- This paper reports on a part of a major research which attempts to study perceptions of excellence in leadership within both private and public sector organisations in ASEAN countries.
- In this paper we have identified ninety four statements of a multi-dimensional nature covering personal qualities, managerial behaviour, organisational demands and environmental influences as a measure of excellence in leadership as perceived by Asian managers.

Key Results

- Honesty has been ranked as top priority, followed by strategic vision for the organisation and recognition for good work as factors determining the importance of excellence in leadership in Asian organisations.

Authors

Dr. Christopher T. Selvarajah, Professor of International Business, Department of Management Systems, Massey University, New Zealand.

Dr. Patrick Duignan, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of New England, Australia.

Chandraseagran Suppiah, Head of Department, Department of Educational Psychology, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei.

Dr. Terry Lane, Associate Professor, Department of Educational Foundation, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei.

Dr. Chris Nuttman, Dean, Faculty of Management and Administrative Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei.

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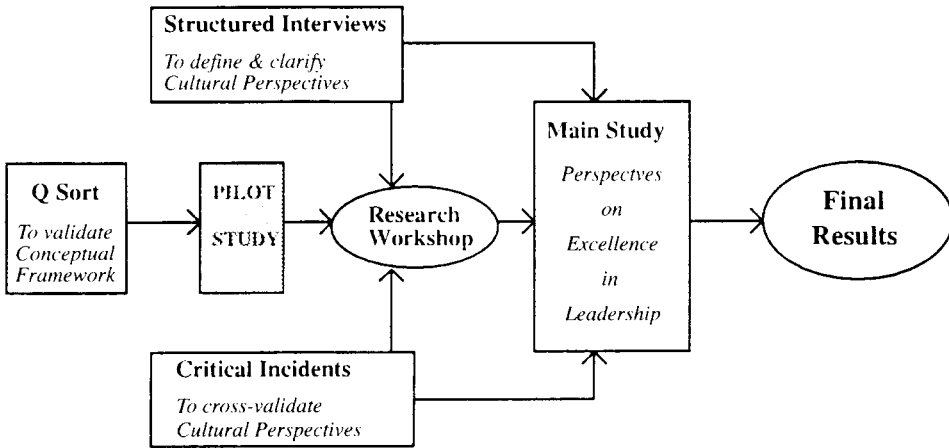
Introduction

This article is the first in a series that is written on leadership as perceived by managers in the ASEAN perspectives on excellence in leadership (APEL) research project. The APEL research project was initiated in 1991 and funded by University of Brunei Darussalam. Associate researchers in each ASEAN country assisted the research team to reduce respondent's anxieties or concerns and to help in the cultural interpretation of findings. The research associates are seen as important intermediaries in such cross-cultural studies and in the refining of the research instruments (see Appendix). Members of the research team visited the various ASEAN countries and with the assistance of the research associates conducted interviews, gathered critical incident studies from managers and developed a questionnaire-based research instrument. In total 105 days were spent in the 5 ASEAN countries by members of the research team (not including Brunei Darussalam). A 3-day APEL Workshop was held in Brunei Darussalam, where the researchers, associated and about 30 managers from the private and public sectors in Brunei Darussalam participated. The purpose of the workshop was two-fold; to bring together the associates and the researchers to discuss issues and concerns of the research and to develop a closer working relationship between associates and researchers and secondly to seek the views of practising managers in a workshop setting. Over 350 managers participated in the APEL research from all 6 ASEAN countries (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand).

This research is part of a major study which attempts to study perceptions of excellence in leadership within both private and public sector organisations in ASEAN countries. One of the problem in this type of research is the complication in understanding the cultural variance contributing to leadership excellence in the countries of ASEAN. To overcome this deficiency the findings of the research will be interpreted using a number of cultural measure instruments, including interviews. Figure 1 illustrates the overall Methodological Framework of the APEL research.

A major purpose of the APEL research is to generate a cross-cultural, composite leadership profile of managers in both the private and public sectors in ASEAN. The research expects to highlight similarities and differences in leadership characteristics and to identify cultural factors that influence excellence in leadership in the countries of ASEAN. This paper does not, however, cover the ASEAN countries alone, though the purpose of APEL is. This paper reports the findings of an exploratory study conducted at the AIM and VOTECH, where the sample population were student-managers from countries of ASIA, including ASEAN. Table 1 shows the nationality composition of the respondents.

Figure 1. Methodological Framework



Concept of excellence in leadership

Southeast Asia is characterised by immense economic growth, social confidence and cultural resurgence. All sectors, whether public or private, require talented professional managers – skilled, culturally-oriented, quality-conscious and customer-driven. This is seen as a prerequisite for maintaining the socio-economic momentum, competitive-edge for sustaining the economic prosperity of the region. This dynamism has created a new awareness of management practices of the East. Academics and businessmen alike are trying to understand Eastern managers and their value systems. Writers such as, Hari Bedi (1990) and William Ochi have popularised Asian management to both the East and the West.

On excellence in management, writers such as Peters and Waterman (1983) and Kantor (1985) influenced management thinking and practices. This signalled a change from or added to the study of Organisational effectiveness, the concept of 'excellence' in management. 'Excellent' or 'successful' organisations build their mission statements and Organisational values around the recognition or the value of their people. They believe that the most important resource within an organisation is the workforce and that the performance of the organisation rests on the skills, knowledge, attitudes and other characteristics of the workforce.

Peters and Waterman's work has been subjected to a number of criticisms (Carroll 1983, Guest 1992). Carroll states that the authors fail to explain:

- why favourable cultures occur in some companies and not in others.

- why some companies may lose their positive attitudes.
- why management effectiveness has not been included as a measure of corporate performance.
- why excellent has been narrowly defined.
- why they have chosen a purely rational model for explaining corporate performance.

However, from this research point of view, Peters and Waterman's work contributes to the understanding of the process of excellence and do not create a 'numerative determinism' (Carroll 1983, p. 88) as found in a purely rational model. Such a model does not form the basis for determining excellence in leadership in this study.

Armstrong (1991) stresses that management roles have changed and that managers have greater responsibility, autonomy, encouraged to be more entrepreneurial and rewards commensurate with performance (p. 25). Organisations are becoming acutely aware of the shortcomings of their managers and are seeking ways of measuring skills required in management positions. One of the earliest was Fine's Function Job Analysis (Fine 1974). This technique, initially developed in the 1930s, attempted to describe positions, especially non-managerial and technical jobs, in terms of elements and dimensions.

McCormick (1972) popularised the Position Analysis Questionnaire (PAQ) first developed in the 1960's. It is a structured questionnaire that measures the elements that characterise human behaviour in jobs. Elements are measured on scales of extent of use, importance to the job, amount of time and possibility of occurrence. The main disadvantage of PAQ is that it measures on limited information on job content and there is no identification on what is important in measuring Organisational performance.

Recently the United States Office of Personnel Management (1985) developed the Management Excellence Inventory (MEI). The MEI was designed to measure the skills of effective managers and consisted of competencies that are required by managers to be effective in their jobs. The data for the MEI instrument was gathered through governmentwide surveys, job and role surveys, critical incident interviews and job analysis panels; and the findings were validated by rigorous field studies, testing, empirical research and demonstrated consistency with emerging theories of management (Flanders 1983, 1985). The MEI competency-based model of job performance distinguishes the competencies necessary to achieve management excellence. The model elements are organised along three dimensions:

- managerial functions,
- effectiveness characteristics of managers, and
- management levels.

Researchers and writers alike have evaded the precise definition of excellence but have gone on to prescribe instruments for measuring excellence. One can however conclude that the dimensions of excellence are governed by factors such as; the object to be measured, object of measure and the environment of the object. It is within these parameters that "excellence" is measured. If this rationalisation can be accepted, we can say that the search for the definition of excellence stops here. Excellence is object specific and attempts at universalising the concept will be unproductive.

There are many unanswered questions about the dimensions of excellence and its relationship to leadership. The traditional literature on leadership has focused on factors such as effectiveness, productivity and efficiency. This view has not changed drastically but has a new focus with the concept of excellence as a wider perspective. The notion of excellence is loosely defined and is a general theme that avoids quantification of precise measures and allows researchers room to explore in indepth the dynamics and relativities that contribute to the elusive meaning of excellence.

Excellence in this research accepts the above restrictions and the concept of excellence in leadership is seen as a combination of factors desirable for good leadership within a contextual framework. In this research the contextual framework is taken to be cultural.

Leadership may be "defined as a process of social interaction between the leader and his or her subordinates, in which the leader seeks to influence his or her subordinates to achieve the objectives of the organisation" (Petzall et al. 1991, p. 143). It is evident then that there is a close relationship between leadership and power. The ability of the leader to influence subordinates depends very much on the power relationship between the two and the situation in which the relationship takes place.

John Kotter has for the last decade articulated his views on power and influence of managers and leaders (1985) and in his recent book, *The Leadership Factor* (1988) distinguished leaders from managers. He purports that managers are different to leaders in that managers administer large bureaucracies and ensure stability while leaders are change agents. The leader is seen as one who can respond to change positively and one who actively creates change – the transformational leader (Bass and Avolio 1990, p. 21).

More and more researchers are looking at the 'soft' and 'hard' skills of power in relation to achieving excellence in leadership. Hard skills are those that are formalised and are expected of leaders and subordinates in a given situation. Rost (1991, p. 3) says that leadership research emphasis to-date has been on peripheral elements which "allows leadership practitioners to seize something tangible in their quest to define and practice leadership and to believe in the effectiveness of the prescribed behaviour". Soft skills may not be formalised and to an outsider they may not be obvious. Most organisations have formalised

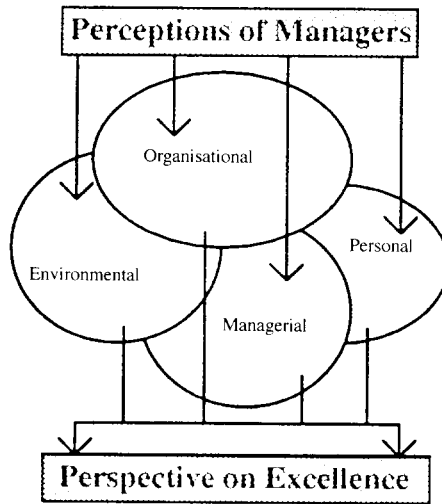
power and authority structures and managers are fast to recognise that this alone does not bring excellence to their leadership. There are other factors or values that contribute to achieving this excellence. This may depend on factors such as, the environment and culture. As Rost (1991, p. 4) sums up, too much emphasis has gone to the “periphery and content syndrome” and too little to the process of leadership.

The main reason for the fascination which the subject of leadership exerts over the minds of researchers and managers alike is the assumption that it is a key variable in organisational productivity, organisational performance and employee satisfaction (Petzall et al. 1991, p. 144). Stogdill (1974) and Bass (1981) reported that there have been about 5,000 empirical studies on leadership and many researchers are of the opinion that we still know nothing on the subject. To refute this claim, House and Baetz (1979), following a large scale survey on leadership studies, concluded that the accumulated research evidence is sufficient to make several valid generalisations, and to point the way towards the construction of a comprehensive leadership theory.

House and Baetz (p. 348) also suggest that leadership can significantly influence organisational effectiveness and individual satisfaction, but may not always produce positive outcomes for organisations or individuals. They further add that it is far more important to specify the conditions under which leadership take place and to be aware that leadership is always a two-way process; where the behaviour of leaders is influenced by interactions with and expectations of their followers. The concept of excellence in leadership goes further than this to include values that may impinge on this relationship such as, influences of the environment and organisational demands. In this study, we have identified ninety four statements of a multi-dimensional nature covering personal qualities, managerial behaviour, organisational demands and environmental influences as a measure of excellence in leadership as perceived by managers. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework for the study of excellence in leadership.

Research Method

In preparing for the APEL research, a pilot study was conducted at the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) and at the Vocational Technical Institute (VOC-TECH), a Southeast Asian Management Education Organisation (SEAMEO) institute located in Brunei Darussalam. The AIM is one of the premier management institute in Asia that trains managers and VOC-TECH conducts training in management education for senior educationalist from

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework for the Study of Excellence in Leadership

Southeast Asian countries. The main purpose for conducting this pilot survey at AIM and VOC-TECH was to study the variability of perceptions among managers in countries of Asia represented in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) courses at AIM and at a two month management education course at VOC-TECH. The combined data from the two target samples is illustrated in Table 1: Demographic details. The pilot study had a wider focus in that the sample population, who were 'student-managers', used Q-Sort technique to allocate ninety four 'excellence in leadership' statements under four main categories of: Personal Qualities, Managerial Behaviours, Organisational Demands, and Environmental Influences. The four categories were developed after intensive study of the literature on leadership and management excellence. Fifty per cent support from respondents was taken as the cut-off point in determining whether a statement was placed in a particular category. The discussion in this paper which analyses the Pilot Study will be under the four categories.

The Pilot Study was conducted using Q-Sort procedures (Kerlinger 1973, pp. 582–600). Ninety-four statements about different characteristics of leadership were printed on small cards, one statement per card. Subjects were asked to read the cards, and then to sort them into different piles categorised:

- 1 On the *Importance* of each statement to Excellence in Leadership;
- 2 On whether the statements were characteristics of any one of; *Personal Qualities, Managerial Behaviours, Organisational Demands or Environmental Influences*, and then,
- 3 What *Priority* is given to each statement in each group.

Table 1. Demographic Details of Respondents in the Pilot Study

Age	%	Sex	%	Religion	%	Nationality	%	Industry	%
Under 35	52	Male	85	Buddhism	11	Bruneian	1	Private	57
35-40	25	Female	15	Cristianity	40	Chinese	3	Public	43
41-45	13			Hinduism	16	Indian	31		
46-50	5			Islam	28	Indochinese	8		
Over 50	4			Others	5	Malaysian	3		
						Filippino	32		
						Thai	3		
						Others	7		

Size of Organisation	%	Seniority	%	Ethnicity	%
Under 50	17	Supervisor	21	Chinese	5
51- 100	13	Middle Manager	45	Indian	29
101- 500	21	Senior Manager	33	Malaysian/Indonesian	19
501-1001	5			Filippino	29
Over 1000	43			Thai	3
				Others	4

Value Statements

The ‘collection of ninety-four’ statements were put together by the four APEL researchers with the help of research associates in various ASEAN countries after an in-depth study of the literature on leadership and management excellence: Works of people such as, H Bedi (1990), Peters and Watermen (1983), Rost (1991), Burns (1978, 1984), Hollander (1978), Hunt and Larson (1979), Pascale and Athos (1981), Prigogine (1984), Kantor (1985), Mukhi (1989), Bennis and Nanus (1985), Bennis (1983, 1989a, 1989b), Srivastava (1983) were consulted in developing of the statements.

The Findings

In this paper we will discuss the importance given to the statements by the respondents in sorting the statements to categories of; Personal Qualities, Managerial Behaviours, Organisational Demands and Environmental Influences, and the priority ranking given by the respondents to items in each category.

A nine-point-scale instrument, similar to Likert scale was used in the measure of the importance given to each statement. The respondents placed the

statements in a position marked on the scale. One indicating low importance and nine indicating high importance. This was to duplicate the kind of rating for an item which a questionnaire will normally provide.

Importance of Statements

The Managers ranked the 10 most important statements that they perceived contributed to excellence in leadership (see Table 2: Importance Ranking of Excellence in Leadership Statements). Statistical mean was used in ranking the importance of the statements.

Table 2. Importance Ranking of Excellence in Leadership Statements

Mean Ranking

8.0	be honest
8.0	have a strategic vision for the organisation
7.9	give recognition for good work
7.9	have confidence in dealing with people
7.9	motivate employees
7.8	continue to learn how to improve performance
7.7	organise work time efficiently
7.6	develop strategies to gain a comparative edge in the industry
7.6	create a sense of purpose and enthusiasm in the workplace
7.6	listen when employees want to say something

It is interesting to note that not all the ten statements of excellence in leadership ranked by the respondents appear in the four categories of the perspectives on excellence in leadership measures (Tables 3 to 6). Out of the ten excellence in leadership statements, only six statements are found in the perspectives on excellence in leadership categories. It appears that what respondents perceive as important statements in the personal, managerial, organisational and environmental categories of perspectives on excellence in leadership may not be seen as important excellence in leadership statements.

The research also shows that of the ten least important statements of excellence in leadership ranked, return favours (5.1), behave in accordance with his or her beliefs (5.1) and follow the heart – not the head – in compassionate matters (4.5) were judged as being important in the Personal Quality category and be formal when dealing with employees at work (4.6) was seen as important in the Managerial Behaviour category.

The research indicates that the respondents seem to generally perceive honesty as the most important statement in the measure of excellence in leadership. This also was ranked as the most important personal quality of the leader (Table 3). Strategic vision, a responsibility of top management (Viljoen 1991, p. 73) is ranked second most important statement in the measurement of excellence in leadership and fourth as the most important organisational quality (Table 5). It is interesting that this has not appeared in ranking of importance in managerial behaviour (Table 4). This may reflect the general shift in making the whole organisation “involved” in long term goals of organisations than leaving this function to top management totally.

Motivating employees, improving performance, creating a sense of purpose and enthusiasm in the work place and listening to employees are also found in both the importance ranking of excellence in leadership statements and in the managerial behaviour category of the perspectives on excellence in leadership. This indicates that the respondents see a greater number of criteria from managerial behaviour as a greater contributor to excellence in leadership than personal qualities of the manager, organisational demands or environmental influences. This may not be due to managerial behaviour being of greater importance than the other three categories, but the number of value measures attributed to managerial behaviour may be more.

Perspectives on Excellence in Leadership

Most studies in Leadership have placed some sort of a framework to explain the ‘dimensions’ of leadership influences and as Rost says in his book, “*Leadership for the twenty-first Century* is a critique of the efforts of leadership scholars and practitioners in the twentieth century to understand leadership based on the values and cultural norms of the industrial paradigm” (1991, p. xiv). This is a convenient method of studying the multitude of variables that can influence leadership in any setting. These measures are not fixed and it is preferable not to prescribe one or a narrow collection of variables as measures of excellence in leadership (Rost 1991, p. 18, Bennis and Nanus 1985, p. 6, Manz and Sims 1989, Sergiovanni 1990). This study shows that managers perceive statements as belonging to more than one category. In some cases the support for two or more categories is relatively strong. To illustrate this effect the Conceptual Framework for the Study of Excellence in Leadership was developed and is illustrated in Figure 2.

This approach avoids the pitfall of studying dimensions of excellence in leadership according to specific prescriptive categories. Respondents may view

Figure 3a. Being Honest

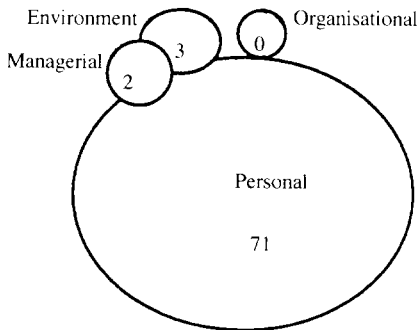
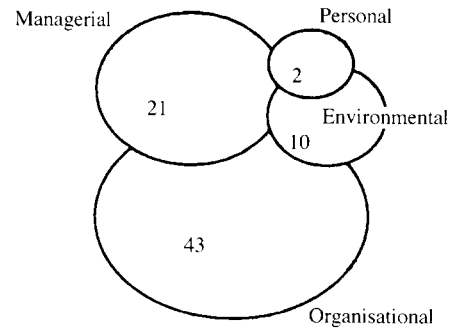


Figure 3b. Having a Strategic Vision for the Organisation



the same statement contributing to excellence in leadership as coming from more than one category. Figure 3a, being honest and Figure 3b, having a strategic vision for the organisation illustrates this point.

In the following discussions the rankings within each category has been culled previously using the fifty percent support from the respondents as the cut-off point in determining a statement was placed in a particular category.

Personal Qualities: Personal qualities refers to the personal values, skills, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of the manager irrespective of profession or organisation. These are the deep-rooted, personal factors that determines a

Table 3. Personal Qualities

Mean Ranking

8.0	be honest
7.5	speak clearly and concisely
7.4	deal calmly in tense situations
7.4	be an initiator – not a follower
7.4	be consistent in dealing with people
7.3	accept responsibility for mistakes
7.3	respect the self-esteem of others
7.2	be dependable and trustworthy
7.2	be practical
6.7	write clearly and concisely
6.7	listen to the advice of others
6.6	have a sense of humour
6.3	accept that others will make mistakes
6.3	treat most people as if they were trustworthy and honest
5.9	be informal when with employees outside work
5.7	follow what is morally right – not what is right for self or organisation
5.1	behave in accordance with his or her religious beliefs
5.1	returns favours
4.5	follow the heart – not the head – in compassionate matters
4.1	work long hours, even at home

person's approach to life in general, not just to managing. Table 3 illustrates twenty such qualities as perceived by the respondents to be important in determining excellence in leadership.

In determining the ranking of importance within the category criteria such as honesty, speaking clearly and concisely, dealing calmly in intense situations, being an initiator – not a follower and being consistent in dealing with people seem to stand out in relative importance.

Managerial Behaviour: Managerial behaviour refers to the values, attitudes, actions, and styles of managers that are specific to the performance of the management task. Table 4 illustrates twenty seven managerial behaviour qualities as perceived by the respondents to be important in determining excellence in leadership.

Among the twenty seven important managerial behaviours the respondents have indicated motivating employees, giving recognition for good work, listening to employees, creating a sense of enthusiasm in the work place, being consistent in making decisions, being logical in solving problems, being objective when dealing with work conflicts, being strict in judging the competence of

Table 4. Managerial Behaviour

Mean Ranking

7.9	motivate employees
7.9	give recognition for good work
7.6	listen when employees want to say something
7.6	create a sense of purpose and enthusiasm in the workplace
7.5	be consistent in making decisions
7.5	be logical in solving problems
7.4	be objective when dealing with work conflicts
7.4	be strict in judging the competence of employees
7.4	listen to and understand the problems of others
7.3	use initiative and take risks
7.2	support decisions made jointly by others
7.1	delegate
7.1	consider suggestions made by employees
7.1	trust those to whom work is delegated
6.8	make decisions earlier rather than later
6.6	try different approaches to management
6.5	persuade other to do things
6.5	make work decisions quickly
6.5	focus on the task-in-hand
6.4	select work wisely to avoid overload
6.4	share power
6.3	allow subordinates authority and autonomy
6.3	keep up-to-date on management literature
5.8	think about the specific details of any particular problem
5.7	make decisions without depending too much on others
5.4	tell subordinates what to do and how to do it
4.6	be formal when dealing with employees at work

employees and listening to and understanding the problems of others as being of greater importance in the measurement of excellence in leadership.

Organisational Demands: Organisational demands relate to the way a manager reacts or responds to organisational goals, roles, rules, structures, demands, pressures, and rewards. The intent is to discover if excellent leaders are 'organisational men' towing the organisational line and pushing corporate language and culture on all who work there. Do excellent leaders sell their souls to the organisation or do they put on other values above those of the organisation's? Respondents have selected only five criteria, under the strict guidelines of the research methodology and these are in Table 5.

Table 5. Organisational Demand

Mean Ranking	
8.0	have a strategic vision for the organisation
7.5	focus on maximising productivity
7.0	give priority to long-term goals
6.6	adaptability
6.3	sell the professional image or corporate image to the public

The one criteria that stand out as being of greater important among the selected measures within the organisational demand category is having a strategic vision for the organisation.

Environmental Influences: Environmental influences are factors outside the organisation that have influences on the operation and success of the organisation. These influences may have an effect on the organisation in such areas as, employee relations, management and resource utilisation. The external pressures may come in the form of political, socio-cultural, economic and legal changes. Continuous monitoring of the environment is an important task of top managers and organisational changes need to reflect the demands of the environment. The respondents have selected six criteria that satisfies the research conditions and are found in Table 6.

Table 6. Environmental Influences

Mean Ranking	
7.2	be socially and environmentally responsible
6.6	look for and use the positive aspects of other cultures
6.3	identify social trends which may have an impact on work
6.3	have a multi-cultural orientation and approach
6.2	be responsive to political realities in the environment
6.0	foster an international perspective in the organisation

It is interesting to note that the respondents in keeping with the growing awareness of environmental issues and responsibilities have indicated, being socially and environmentally responsible as being very important environmental influence measure on excellence in leadership.

Summary

Researchers and writers in organisational theories suggest that there is no universal definition for excellence and this is also our conclusion. Excellence in the crudest sense can mean the “best”. This is a relative term and one that is difficult to universalise. In this research we have looked at the dimensions that may relate to excellence in leadership as perceived by ASEAN managers.

The collection of statements (ninety four statements on the excellence in leadership) formed the basis of the dimensions that the managers sorted into the four categories. In the first instant the ninety four statements were selected by the researchers and the research associates from one hundred and fifty six statements collected after exhaustive study of the literature. The managers, placing personal judgement on the value and importance of the ninety four statements placed them in the four categories of: Personal Qualities, Managerial Behaviours, Organisational Demand, and Environmental Influences. Fifty per cent support from respondents was taken as the cut-off point in determining whether a statement was placed in a particular category.

In determining the importance of the excellence in leadership statements, the managers ranked honesty as top priority, followed by strategic vision for the organisation and then only recognition for good work. This perception may well differ if the population responding were supervisors instead of managers. Strategic vision, for instance, is of importance to top level managers than to junior managers. Of the ten excellence in leadership statements in Table 2, having strategic vision for the organisation, developing strategies to gain a competitive edge in industry, and creating a sense of purpose and enthusiasm in the workplace are more for higher level management.

The research also indicates that it would be wrong to slot dimensions of excellence into neat categories and label them. In this research the respondents have viewed the same dimension contributing to excellence as coming from more than one category. The study also suggests that though managers may be able to rank categories, the importance given to statements within the categories are equally important.

The research suggests that the number of statements valued by the respondents within each category is not a measure of importance of that category. The

importance of this is that researchers should not attempt to “equalise” number of criteria in measuring instruments. Certain measurements may need greater number of criteria to cover the area of study and others a lesser number. In this instance the respondents have identified Managerial Behaviour and Personal Qualities to have a greater number of statements determining the importance of excellence in leadership than Organisational Demands or Environmental Influences.

A research of this nature has many limitations. In the first instance we are dealing with cross-cultural study. The second problem is that we are dealing with measures of subjective nature and any attempt to measure and quantify is open to many interpretations and criticisms. The concept of excellence is still being pursued and searched and this in itself is a setback to any study that attempts to measure excellence in leadership.

Appendix. APEL Research Network

The Research Team

Christopher T. Selvarajah (Team Leader)
 Patrick Duignan
 Chris Nuttman
 Chandraseagran Suppiah
Research Consultants
 Terry Lane

ASEAN Research Associates

Alejandro J. Ferreria (Philippines)
 Mutiara S. Panggabean (Indonesia)
 Stanley Petzall (Singapore)
 Rafael A. Rodriguez (Philippines)
 Frederic W. Swierezek (Thailand)
 Mohd. Fauzi Hj. Yaakub (Malaysia)

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