

## Leadership Soft Skills, Perceived Trustworthiness and Structural Empowerment: A Correlation

Siti Asiah Md Shahid<sup>1</sup>, \*Shariff Harun<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Circular Economy of Logistics & Operations RIG, Faculty of Business and Management,

Universiti Teknologi MARA Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

sitiasiah109@gmail.com, \*shariffharun@uitm.edu.my

Corresponding Author: Shariff Harun

**Abstract:** To generate trust inside organizations, administrators with soft skills must build relationships and alliances with their staff, as well as create work conditions that empower employees to carry out their responsibilities. Administrators must essentially boost perceptions of trustworthiness. To solve this shortcoming, educational administrators must be informed and cautious about the notions of soft skills, dependability, and structural empowerment. This article investigates the relationship between each component of leadership soft skills, structural empowerment, and perceived trustworthiness. The mediating function of structural empowerment in the link between leadership soft skills and the perceived trustworthiness of the Head of Faculty was also investigated. This study collects its quantitative data using a survey questionnaire. The survey included 225 respondents who worked as administrative professionals in clerical and office assistant positions at three major campuses of Malaysian public higher education institutions in Malaysia's northern state. The study found that perceived trustworthiness and structural empowerment were substantially connected to all eight components of leadership soft skills. However, structural empowerment did not act as a bridge between leadership soft skills and perceived trustworthiness.

**Keywords:** *Leadership Soft Skills, Perceived Trustworthiness, Structural Empowerment, University Administrators, Malaysian Higher Education Institutions*

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### 1. Introduction

The business of operating and managing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the twenty-first century is getting more complex (Harun & Ahmad, 2022). Thus, HEI leaders must get the trust of their employees because it helps to build a strong team spirit, build support in achieving the organization's mission, and open higher-level goals and opportunities. According to Caldwell and Ndalamba (2017), successful leaders must foster greatness in organizations by cultivating relationships and proving their suitability as leaders, fostering genuine concern for others, embracing integrity, imparting knowledge, and easing the integration of such attributes. Therefore, in today's rapidly changing society, HEI administrators need to have the ability to practice their leadership styles in an environment that is characterized by unparalleled complexity and trust. Leaders must cultivate the confidence of their employees by being accessible and providing constructive feedback, as trust is vital for fostering employees' loyalty, contentment, and performance (Md. Shahid *et al.*, 2018). In light of this, the research focused on the three aspects of trustworthiness that people most often cite as reasons to put their faith in a person: their competence, their generosity, and their honesty (Colquitt *et al.*, 2007; Gefen, 2002) As the focus of the study.

Subsequently, as HEIs continue to undergo dynamic and revolutionary changes, educational institutions' leaders must have good interpersonal skills (Aldulaimi, 2018). This is because governance structure influences the performance of the organization (Chang *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, organizations depend on the calibre of their leaders since they help to motivate employees to perform well at work, recruit and keep top performers who are the source of future competitive advantage and motivate them to contribute to the organization (Naile & Selesho, 2014). Achieving these goals requires good leadership and the leader's ability to collaborate, connect, and work together with people at all levels. A humble leadership style benefits businesses by fostering a humble culture and increasing the well-being of employees (Afshan *et al.*, 2021). Thus, having a directive element with leadership soft skills is critical for an organization's morale and success. Concerning this, the eight components of leadership soft skills for administrators such as collaboration and teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development and coaching, personal effectiveness, personal mastery, planning and organizing, and presentation skills (Sadq, 2019) will also be the focus of the study.

In addition to the above, the effects of workplace empowerment were also reported as the enabling factor that allows employees to carry out their work in meaningful ways. Leaders who can inspire their followers profoundly may do so through either cultural or personal methods of empowerment (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). According to Kanter (1977), through empowerment, leaders can organize people, inspire and create opportunities for others. Hence, successful organizations need leaders who can formulate genuine ideas for the future, motivate them to provide guidance and support, and cultivate and sustain fulfilling connections with their employees, thereby fostering a sense of worth for the organization they aspire to lead (Longenecker, 2010). Thus, the six components of structural empowerment such as opportunity, information, support, resources, formal power, and informal power (Kanter, 2001) will also be analyzed as part of the variable of this study.

## 2. Literature Review

Chiaburu and Lim (2008) highlighted that trustworthiness is a sign of a secure atmosphere that can lead to great possibilities, which can positively encourage employees to trust their managers and reciprocate accordingly. Otherwise, any distinct trust beliefs between the superior and members of the organization might adversely impact their acceptance, tolerance, and relationship terms and quality (Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022). Hence, leaders should strengthen trusting connections by showing trustworthy behaviors as it can augment their beliefs of integrity. Employees are expected to take part in organizational development if they perceive that taking part in visible and non-visible work-related values, such as working environment, workplace values, and the cost-to-benefit ratio, is advantageous (Radi Afsouran *et al.*, 2022). Alternatively, positive trust beliefs can also be built by being approachable and capable of offering constructive feedback, which in turn will increase employees' loyalty and job satisfaction (Chiaburu & Lim, 2008). Insufficient trust in leaders and job dissatisfaction among employees are likely to result in their departure from the organization, therefore diminishing the overall efficacy of the operation (Md. Shahid *et al.*, 2020).

Historically, the so-called "hard skills" were the focus of managers and leaders in the past. Which, technical abilities are crucial skills and were the main priority of the organization in ensuring the organization functions smoothly. The situation has however changed in today's environment where leaders nowadays must have essential soft skills (AbuJbara & Woley, 2018). Thus, soft skills are now becoming the main components in a high-performance workplace and the new focus for future leaders. An investigation undertaken by the National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN, 2008) has further emphasized the significance of soft skills. The study suggests that the selection criteria for Head of Faculty should encompass strong leadership abilities (both academic and scholarly) as well as effective management skills (including decision-making, communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills). The Head of Faculty must have proficient soft skills to excel as a leader and manager, capable of effectively guiding and overseeing individuals for the improvement of Higher Education Institutions. Especially in adapting to the current changes happening in the workplace, which have shifted from a service-oriented to a customer-oriented business approach that requires the Head of Faculty to be involved in face-to-face communication with internal and external stakeholders.

Additionally, Young-Ritchie *et al.* (2009) proposed that perceived emotional intelligence leadership (part of leadership soft skills) behavior also needs to be in practice as it has a significant impact on structural empowerment and affective commitment (outcomes of perceived trustworthiness). This signifies the importance of leaders in creating a quality workplace for their employees as a means of achieving important organizational outcomes. Kanter (2001) emphasized that an organization that provides supportive and encouraging workplace environments such as providing employees access to information, support, and resources to accomplish work, as well as providing ongoing opportunities for employees' development will foster a climate of trust as well as an increased level of organizational commitment, feelings of autonomy and self-efficacy, which ensued employees to be more productive and effective in meeting organizational goals. Organisations that do not empower employees are likely to create mistrust which will in turn hinder people from working together, causing serious implications for organisational performance.

This study aims to accomplish the following objectives to address the aforementioned problem:

- To investigate the correlation between individual dimensions of leadership soft skills and structural empowerment.
- To investigate the correlation between each element of leadership soft skills and the perception of trustworthiness.
- To investigate the mediating function of structural empowerment in the correlation between leadership soft skills and perceived trustworthiness.

### 3. Methodology

The survey questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data for this study. According to Zikmund *et al.* (2010), a survey research method is a suitable tool for collecting, gathering, and compiling primary data as it allows the study to directly examine the characteristics of a large population. Using Cochran's (1977) correction formula, the sample size for this study is 225 respondents from a total population of 543. The respondents were comprised of administrative personnel within the clerical and office assistant positions at three main campuses of Malaysian public higher education institutions located in the northern state.

The stratified probability sampling method was utilized in this study as it allows the researcher to obtain a more efficient sample compared to if it were taken using simple random sampling (Zikmund *et al.*, 2010). This method enables the selection of subsamples from the defined group or subgroups within distinct strata that have similar specific characteristics. Moreover, the approach was used to guarantee that the sample would provide a correct representation of the population according to the specific criterion or criteria used for stratification. This research sampling strategy is efficient in providing more information within a certain sample size (Zikmund *et al.*, 2020). The survey questionnaire was distributed in both English and Bahasa Malaysia to guarantee an unambiguous understanding of the statement by the respondents.

The survey questionnaire contained 124 questions and is divided into four sections A, B, C, and D. Section A consisted of 80 items developed to measure the eight components of leadership soft skills derived from Crosbie's (2005) model of leadership soft skills, which are collaboration or teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development or coaching, personal effectiveness or personal mastery, planning and organizing, and presentation skills. The instrument had undergone a strict validation process by a panel of experts in the area of leadership, management, language, and statistics and was deemed valid and reliable in measuring the components. A six-point Likert scale ranged from 1 to 6, with 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very Often, and 6 = Always, were used to measure the respondents' agreement levels.

Section B of the questionnaire is used to measure the support staff's perceptions of their access to the six components of workplace structural empowerment which are access to opportunity, information, support, resources, informal power, and formal power as proposed by Kanter (1977). Laschinger *et al.* (2001) Conditions of Work Effectiveness Questionnaire-II (CWEQ-II) was adapted to measure the items. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 with 1 = None, 3 = Some, and 5 = A Lot, was used to measure the respondents' agreement levels, with higher levels of empowerment indicated by higher scores on the scale.

Section C of the questionnaire consists of 17 items and was used to measure the support staff's perceptions of their leaders' trustworthiness based on the components proposed by Mayer and Davis (1999) which include ability, benevolence, and integrity. Although many different components of trustworthiness have been proposed in the past, Mayer *et al.* (1995) argued that the three components parsimoniously encompass the important features of the expectation about others' intentions and behaviors. The perceived trustworthiness items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 = Disagree Strongly, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Agree Strongly.

Demographic information was collected in Section D of the questionnaire, including details about the respondents' backgrounds such as their faculty or school affiliation, Higher Learning Institutions, gender, age, period of service, position, and academic qualification.

#### 4. Analysis

The Pearson-Moment correlation was utilized to ascertain the relationship among the variables in this study. Table 1 presented the Pearson correlation coefficients between the eight components of leadership soft skills with structural empowerment and perceived trustworthiness. The results presented in Table 1 suggest that the correlation between the eight components of leadership soft skills and structural empowerment was significant ( $p < .01$ ), moderate to substantial and positive. The main findings suggest that among the eight components of leadership soft skills, people development or coaching has the strongest association with structural empowerment ( $r = .436$ ;  $p < .01$ ). On the contrary, collaboration or teamwork, had the weakest ( $r = .333$ ;  $p < .01$ ) relationship.

In contrast, the correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .01$ ) between the eight components of leadership soft skills and trustworthiness. The degree of this association ranged from significant to extremely high and favorable. Personal effectiveness or personal mastery was shown to have the highest correlation with perceived trustworthiness over the eight components of leadership soft skills ( $r = .702$ ;  $p < .01$ ), while cooperation or teamwork had the least correlation with perceived trustworthiness ( $r = .628$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 1: Correlation Coefficients between the Eight Components of Leadership Soft Skills with Structural Empowerment and Trustworthiness**

| Components of Leadership Soft Skills        | Structural Empowerment | Trustworthiness |
|---|------------------------|-----------------|
|   | <i>r</i> value         | <i>r</i> value  |
| Collaboration and Teamwork                  | .333**                 | .628**          |
| Communication Skills                        | .393**                 | .692**          |
| Initiative                                  | .385**                 | .642**          |
| Leadership Ability                          | .356**                 | .678**          |
| People Development and Coaching             | .436**                 | .689**          |
| Personal Effectiveness and Personal Mastery | .408**                 | .702**          |
| Planning and Organising                     | .386**                 | .687**          |
| Presentation Skills                         | .393**                 | .673**          |

\*\* Significant at .01

In analyzing the mediating function between the variables, this study concurs with the recommendation of Baron and Kenny (1986), whereby the mediating function can be analyzed using multiple regressions. As such, in this study, multiple regression was utilized to examine the mediating role of structural empowerment (SE) on the relationship between leadership soft skills (LSS) and perceived trustworthiness (PT).

The regression analyses involve three steps: Step 1, with structural empowerment (SE) as the mediator, and leadership soft skills (LSS) as the independent variable (predictor); Step 2, with perceived trustworthiness (PT) as the dependent variable and leadership soft skills (LSS) as the independent variable (predictor); and Step 3, with perceived trustworthiness (PT) as the dependent variable and structural empowerment (SE) as the mediator and leadership soft skills (LSS) (predictor) as the independent variables. In the estimated regression equation of the first step, Path A, which is regressing the mediator (SE) on the independent variable (LSS), the unstandardized coefficient of leadership soft skills (LSS) ( $B = .335$ ) was significant at .01 ( $t = 8.074$ ,  $p < .01$ ), implying that leadership soft skills (LSS) had a positive impact on structural empowerment (SE). This showed the existence of Path A.

In the estimated regression equation of the second step (Path C), which is regressing the dependent variable (PT) on the independent variable (LSS), the unstandardized coefficient of leadership soft skills (LSS) ( $B = .587$ ) was significant at .01 ( $t = 19.392$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaning that leadership soft skills (LSS) had a positive impact on perceived trustworthiness (PT). This proved the existence of Path C. In the estimated regression equation of the third step (Path B and C) which is regressing dependent variable (PT) on both the mediator (SE) and independent variable (LSS), the unstandardized coefficient of structural empowerment (SE) ( $B = .043$ ) was not significant at .01 ( $t = .996$ ,  $p > .01$ ). This means that structural empowerment (SE) did not affect perceived trustworthiness (PT). Therefore, the existence of Path B was not proven.

However, the unstandardized coefficient of leadership soft skills (LSS) ( $B = .573$ ) (path C) remained significant at .01 ( $t = 17.038$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaning that leadership soft skills (LSS) had a positive impact on perceived trustworthiness. This again proved the existence of Path C but did not establish the existence of Path B. Therefore, it is concluded that structural empowerment did not function as a mediator between leadership soft skills and perceived trustworthiness. In other words, structural empowerment (SE) did not mediate the relationship between leadership soft skills (LSS) and perceived trustworthiness (PT).

**Table 2: Summary Statistics of Regression Analysis to Test for the Mediating Role of Structural Empowerment (SE) on the Relationship between Leadership Soft Skills (LSS) and Perceived Trustworthiness (PT)**

| Step   | B              | Std. Error   | $\beta$      | t              | p-value      |
|--|----------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| Step 1 (Path A)<br>Mediator: SE<br>Predictor: LSS                      | .335**         | .041         | .434         | 8.074          | .001         |
| Step 2 (Path C)<br>Predicted: PT<br>Predictor: LSS                     | .587**         | .030         | .757         | 19.392         | .001         |
| Step 3 (Path B & C)<br>Predicted: PT<br>Mediator: SE<br>Predictor: LSS | .043<br>.573** | .044<br>.034 | .043<br>.738 | .996<br>17.038 | .320<br>.001 |

\*\* Significant at .01

### Discussion

The findings of this study have several consequential ramifications for scholars and researchers. This statement holds particularly true as it allows for a deeper comprehension of the functions that leadership soft skills and empowerment can have in enhancing the belief of trustworthiness for achieving organizational excellence. The findings of this study indicate that the empowerment of administrative personnel was principally moderately associated with people development and coaching, and least moderately associated with collaboration and teamwork. These findings indicate that administrators should enhance people development and coaching by promoting collaboration and teamwork, therefore empowering their employees in the workplace. This is consistent with the published results of Ahmad et al. (2023), which suggest that leaders should take into account the well-recognized principles that underpin strategies of empowerment. In this regard, administrators may require the capacity to understand and oversee their personnel by directing their attention away from rigid control and toward the synchronization, integration, and facilitation of their staff's tasks (Kanter, 2001). This could be done by increasing their people development and coaching by increasing support to their staff such as providing tools necessary for them to be effective, expressing confidence in their staff, and giving prompt feedback or guidance needed by their staff.

Furthermore, administrators could enhance collaboration and teamwork by allocating time to establish connections with their staff, being physically there for their staff, attentively listening to and being sensitive to their staff's needs, freely speaking with their staff, and establishing positive relationships with their staff during difficult periods. The extent to which the leadership style and the organization's potential for growth are complementary to one another (Radi Afsouran *et al.*, 2022). Thus, to promote collaboration and teamwork, administrators may need to cooperate and work together and may need to make relationships a top priority so that staff feel comfortable and secure working with them. Subsequently, the moderate relationships between staff empowerment and all the components of leadership soft skills highlighted in this study signify that administrators may need to increase their overall leadership soft skills as an important strategy in enhancing staff empowerment.

This study contributed to the existing body of knowledge by elucidating the crucial role of the perceived trustworthiness of the administrator in relation to their leadership soft skills practices. The collected results



also showed a considerable, positive, and robust correlation between perceived trustworthiness, personal effectiveness, and personal mastery. This statement elucidates that administrators who supported a personal and active dedication to continuous learning were regarded as more dependable by their employees. The conclusions of this study are dependable as administrators showed a strong dedication to ongoing education and personal growth to still be current and excel in their abilities, particularly in advancing their careers as Heads of Faculty. Increased perceptions of trustworthiness in administrators' implementation of personal effectiveness and personal mastery are significant as reduced perceptions of administrators' trustworthiness may hurt the effectiveness and efficiency of the staff and the organization. Afshan *et al.* (2021) suggested that to keep employees engaged and healthy, it is imperative to establish well-being policies and provide stress reduction training, employees should not be held accountable after work, and the company should, if necessary, reward such conduct.

Additionally, the results of this study revealed that collaboration and teamwork have the least significant correlation with perceived trustworthiness. Thus, administrators may have to enhance and fortify collaboration and teamwork to be seen as more reliable by their personnel. To enhance and fortify collaboration and teamwork in the workplace, administrators should establish relationships and connections through high-quality interpersonal contacts, promote teambuilding whenever feasible, exhibit mutual concern, honor diversity and inclusion, and distribute authority among their staff. The robust correlation between perceived trustworthiness and all the elements of leadership soft skills implies that the belief of trustworthiness is intricately linked to the administrator's direct engagements with their subordinates.

The results obtained also provide evidence that structural empowerment did not function as a mediator between leadership soft skills and perceived trustworthiness. This shows that administrators' perceived trustworthiness as the outcome is directly related to leadership soft skills and is not mediated by structural empowerment. Therefore, administrators need to consider the importance of empowerment as a mediating role that affects perceptions of trustworthiness. This finding may imply that administrators may have to provide opportunities for staff to grow and develop, as well as share information with their staff to show that they trust their staff, as trust is crucial for empowerment. In addition, administrators may also need to create autonomy so that each member of staff can feel that his or her contribution is valuable. This also means that every effort must be made by administrators to increase structurally empowering work environments, providing the necessary resources for their staff in their jobs to influence perceptions of trustworthiness. This is critical as supporting staff in their work environment is an important component of workplace empowerment which increases staff's perception of trustworthiness and enhances organisational effectiveness and performance.

Therefore, administrators with soft skills must establish relationships and alliances with their staff and build work conditions that empower people to accomplish their tasks to cultivate trust inside organizations. Administrators must in essence enhance the perception of trustworthiness. On this deficiency, educational administrators should possess expertise and maintain a state of alertness regarding the notion of soft skills, trustworthiness, and structural empowerment.

## **5. Managerial Implications, Limitations and Future Research**

This research adds to the existing information and literature on leadership soft skills, empowerment, and perceived trustworthiness for educational leaders, namely in higher educational institutions in Malaysia and leaders in organizations in general. Furthermore, this study aims to deliver a benefit to administrators by easing the development of high-quality interpersonal relationships with individuals they interact with and associate with, therefore fostering a favorable working atmosphere. In addition, the study aims to ensure that the results can sufficiently equip administrators with the essential leadership soft skills needed to empower and establish trusted connections with their personnel. Mainly, this study aims to provide administrators with a set of guidelines to develop into proficient leaders with strong interpersonal abilities in the professional environment.

Conclusively, the growing importance of leveraging the potential of human resources in the workplace has been fairly recognized. Therefore, this study can be regarded as making a crucial contribution to organizations and

administrators in the endeavor of cultivating high-quality human resources. In Higher Education Institutions and other organizations, this is especially correct, as the success of organizations relies heavily on the individuals within the organization. Considering this, the fundamental components of leadership in the twenty-first century will persist as soft skills, empowerment, and trust.

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