

Leadership Framework: A Preliminary Qualitative Research Using the Critical Incident Method

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A myriad of definitions and conceptual models has been developed to understand the concept of leadership. To further contribute in broadening the knowledge, the authors proposed a leadership framework consisting of the four Ps, namely person, participant, performance, and perspective. A content analysis of critical incidents that were retrospectively self-reported by 58 MBA and Masters of Management students in an Asian business school was discussed. More than 200 incidents were collected and independently clustered into the four Ps. Examples of critical incidents were presented. There is preliminary support for the proposed model and the authors recommended a follow-up research using deeper interviews with leaders to capture the essence of the clusters representing the dimensions in the proposed leadership framework.

Field of Research: Management

1. Introduction

Leadership has been among the most researched concepts in behavioral science. Many definitions and conceptual models have been developed to understand this concept. Despite the great volume of literature on leadership the challenge of preparing for leadership remains. While past leadership studies present various descriptions and prescriptions of how to be an effective leader, there is still a dearth of studies that could help a learner discern the dimensions of leadership. If these dimensions were identified, these could serve as handles for learning about leadership and changing one's leadership style.

A starting point for learning and changing can be facilitated through reflection and self-evaluation. Critical incident analysis is one such useful learning intervention for organizational development (Davis 2006), for raising cultural awareness (Collins 2007) and for empowerment in project settings (Tuuli 2010).

To further contribute in broadening the knowledge, we propose a leadership framework that summarizes dimensions of leadership consisting of four Ps, namely person, participant, performance, and perspective, while using a tool that would help learners introspect and analyze events and how these turned life-changing for themselves. Taken together, the framework and tool could help learners relate their personal experiences to leadership theories.

The paper is organized starting with a literature review, followed by a proposed four P's framework of leadership. The research method is explained, the results are presented, and conclusions and recommendations for future research are given.

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2. Literature Review

There is a plethora of literature on leadership in psychology, sociology, political science, and management. The focus of leadership theories has shifted from individual personality characteristics to outputs generated, relationships with subordinates and external parties, or a combination of these factors.

Leadership is viewed as: (1) group processes; (2) set of personality characteristics; (3) act of inducing compliance; (4) exercise of influence; (5) act or behavior; (6) form of persuasion; (7) power relation; and (8) effect of interaction (Barrow, 1977; Stogdill, 1974; Yukl, 2012). There is a distinction between leadership and management. Rost (1991) points out that management is an authority between the manager and the subordinate in the process of production of goods and services for sale in the market and leadership as “a multidirectional influence process between a leader and the followers” to achieve change in the organization. In this paper, we focus on the concept of leadership as a social influence process, similar to Yukl’s (2012, p.7) definition that leadership “is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives”.

Early theories, such as the Great Man and Trait theories, were based on the notion that “leaders are born and not made”. Persons suited for leadership possess certain innate qualities. McCall and Lombardo (1983) cite emotional stability and composure, admitting error, good interpersonal skills, and intellectual breadth as factors that determine the success and failure of leaders. An individual with these qualities will arise when a “great need” compels him to do so.¹ Responding to the call for him to lead is a “fulfilment of his destiny.”

In contrast, behaviorist theories espouse the idea that leadership can be learned. Focus has been on the leader’s actions as a barometer for success. Defined roles, perceptions, and contextual factors shape both the behaviors and expectations. Studies conducted in the 1950s² have generated task-people models, wherein leadership style is a function of the leader’s priority between accomplishing the task and establishing good relations with subordinates.

Participative leadership expands the scope of leadership. It entails managing at the group and individual levels, and involves subordinates and other team members in decision-making. Emphasis has shifted from the attributes, potentials, and capabilities of the individual designated as “leader”, to the process of decision-making where the leader “shares the stage” (responsibility, commitment, and power) with subordinates and other parties in decision-making.

Lewin (1939) and Likert (1967) differentiate styles of leadership based on the extent of people involvement. Both identify participative or democratic leadership, wherein the leader engages more people in the decision-making process, as the most effective form of leadership.

Situational and contingency theories bring to the forefront the context and environment as influencing factors in leadership. Both assert that a leader’s style is a function of the leader’s perception, relationship with subordinates, and motivation and capability of the

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followers. Leadership style effectiveness is contingent on external variables and leader's interaction and relationship with subordinates.

More recent concepts are transactional and transformational forms of leadership. Described as management and relationship theories, respectively, the former focuses on the supervision, organization, and group performance while the latter highlights the connections between leaders and followers. Transactional leadership is based on a system of reward and punishment, while transformational leadership puts a premium on "inspiring others" to work towards a common vision and purpose.

A study conducted by Bolden et al. (2003) of leadership styles in private and public sector companies, including multinationals like Shell, FedEx, and Vodafone, showed that factors converge, in varying degrees, to intellectual capacity, task-orientedness, and people skills as critical in leadership effectiveness. These three broad elements encompass key personal characteristics that produce desired results.

Leadership has evolved from its beginnings as a psychological concept based on individual personality traits and behavior to that of a social process that influence leadership styles, relationships, and outcomes. Leadership roles have likewise changed – from a director to a manager, facilitator, or co-leader – to accommodate shifting contexts and expectations. Today, much is expected of an individual "who rises to the occasion" to address a compelling and urgent need. Our current understanding of leadership underscores the idea that the leader is not alone in the leadership process. The sheer volume of leadership literature could be overwhelming and confusing to the novice. There is a need to organize information about leadership and make it a practicable tool for leadership development and self-improvement.

This paper proposes a leadership framework we call the "Four P's of Leadership." that captures four dimensions, namely person (leader), participant (follower), performance (effectiveness), and perspective (context). Each dimension is discussed in the next section.

3. The Model: Four Ps of Leadership

This section aims to broaden the notion of leadership beyond the leader as a person to the performance demanded of leadership, the leader's relationship with all participants in the leadership process, and the environment or context the leader is in. With a broader view of the leadership factors comes the challenge of understanding the dynamic interplay between the factors in order to achieve an integrative, holistic view.

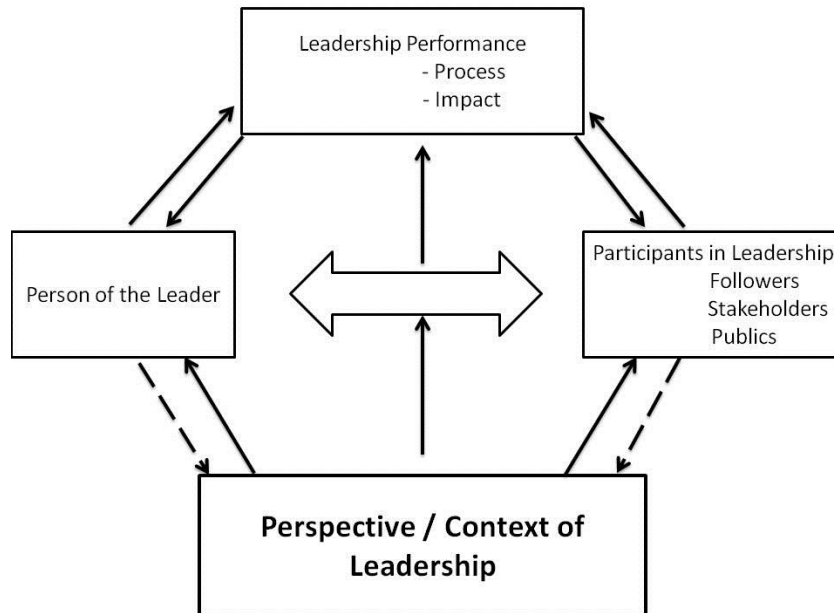
Beyond the leader's characteristics and competencies is the leader's underlying motivation or source of inspiration (the why and wherefore of the leader's actions). This affects outcomes as well as the leader's ability to lead and inspire others to achieve a common vision. Hierarchy, authority, and power are insufficient conditions for a leader in a mission-driven organization to compel others to move and share the vision.

The burden and responsibility of leadership ceases to become solely the leader's burden, as "followers" become partners and the envisioned change is shared by, and therefore becomes the responsibility, of all. As the notion of leadership is expanded, its performance is broadened, consequently affecting the larger community.

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Cutting across the three factors of person, participant, and performance is perspective. Leadership is situated in a particular context of history, culture, purpose, and situation that informs and influences the very process of leadership. Figure 1 depicts the proposed framework.

Figure 1: The Four Ps of Leadership



3.1 The Person as the Agent of Change: From Who to Why

The person of the leader has long been emphasized in much of the literature, including the early theories like the Great Man Theory that built on leaders with exceptional talents, skills, and personalities and Trait Theories that highlighted individual attributes, knowledge, and capabilities necessary to succeed in a leadership role.

Leaders, legitimized by their position in the hierarchy, make their followers do their bidding. Decisions were made at the top and cascaded to followers for implementation. As leadership theories evolved, this is no longer the most effective style, as other factors – such as the environment (situational leadership) and stakeholders (participatory leadership) – entered in the leadership equation.

Leadership in the context of hierarchy, authority, and power is expanded to include partnership, credibility, and the ability to inspire and gain the trust of others towards loftier ideals. In the private sector, this means going beyond profit margins and including issues of stakeholder engagement and sustainability of operations. Thus, leaders need to acquire a new set of skills, such as convening, collaborating, dialoguing with stakeholders, and negotiating, as they engage with other individuals and groups whose interests may be entirely different from that of their organization. Leaders are expected to have the ability to situate their organization's vision and mission in a larger context.

Recent literature has highlighted the capacity of the leader to develop a greater sense of self-awareness that leads to increased self-mastery. Major proponents, Senge (2008) and Scharmer (2009), emphasize that regular reflection on one's (personal) sense of mission and vision of change desired will enable leaders to be more effective.

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Connecting to one's personal motivation and reason for being allows the leader to focus on the important activities that facilitate achieving the desired change.

Moreover, constant reflection enables the leader not to lose sight of the goal given the busyness and urgency of the day-to-day. This allows the leader to better articulate the goal or vision in a manner that will inspire others and move them to the cause. It also leads to recognition of the leader's "default" leadership style developed from upbringing, education, and significant experiences. The simple question, "Why do I do what I do?" has triggered deep reflection among leaders.

3.2 Participants in Leadership: From Followers to Partners

The time when the leader is alone at the top, shouldering all the responsibilities, is long gone. The notion of followers has evolved – from agents executing decisions made at the top to stakeholders affected by decisions, participants involved in the change process, and partners in decision-making contributing to achieve the desired change.

Participants in the private sector have gone beyond being mere followers, stakeholders affected by the organization's decisions, and the general public consuming the products or services. This is confirmed by the Triple Bottom Line concept (Savitz and Weber 2006), which asserts that the business sector should include in its economic bottom line, the impact of the activities on the community as well as the environment. This requires a better understanding of external stakeholders who are not part of the organization's authority and hierarchical structure. Authority cannot simply be enforced; the leader must use other leadership styles to move people outside the organization to action.

For mission-driven organizations, realizing and feeling social impact often takes a long time. Therefore, stakeholders and actors need to be analyzed and segmented so that strategies more appropriate for engagement at different stages of the change process can be undertaken.

The extent and nature of participation or involvement of groups and/or stakeholders involved likewise affect how the shared goal is achieved. Although different groups and individuals may work together towards a common goal, motivations between and across groups and individuals may not be the same. Different interests intersect and lead towards the realization of a shared vision. The critical question that needs to be answered is, "What is in it for each participant?"

3.3 Performance: Achieving Desired Outcomes

Similar to the modified concept of participants in the leadership process, performance must be categorized for the appropriate leadership style to emerge. Short-term and for-profit objectives and outputs require a different set of strategies and leadership style from that of long-term, social goals and outcomes.

A private corporation operating primarily for profit requires different strategies and incentives to ensure that targets are met or exceeded. On the other hand, a business that observes the Triple Bottom Line concept requires a different leadership approach for the organization to achieve optimum performance level. The leader needs to balance conflicting economic, sustainability, and participatory goals. Favoring one goal may impinge on the other two and the overall performance of the organization.

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A mission-driven organization also necessitates a different leadership style, owing to the differences in its “products and services” and the type of followers (employees and volunteers) and stakeholders it mobilizes and deals with. The leader is tasked not only to ensure that targets are met (goods and services provided) but also to guard against volunteer fatigue and burnout.

In all cases, the process of determining desired outcomes, especially when there are conflicting interests, affect performance. It also influences perceived validity, salience, and significance of the outcome to the participants.

3.4 Perspective: Context of Change

The change agents (leaders, followers, and partners), the manner or process by which change is realized, and the leadership performance, are situated in a macro context affected by a confluence of external, historical, and cultural factors. Responding to the urgency of a disaster is executed differently by a mission-driven organization compared to that of a purely for-profit company or a business espousing the Triple Bottom Line. Based on each organization’s core thrust and the leadership style used, the nature and extent of involvement will differ across these organizations.

A crisis situation (e.g., calamity) may require a more authoritative form of leadership for greatest efficiency in responding to the needs. This type of leadership may be unnecessary, or even ineffective, in addressing a developmental challenge (e.g., meeting the MDGs) in a more democratic setting.

Certain conditions that are combinations of these situations necessitate a different approach or execution of conventional leadership styles. States in transition, such as Myanmar, require a mix of authority that does not border on military rule, safe spaces that encourage democratic processes, and short-term leadership results that promote trust in the government and confidence among the citizenry. While it is no longer in a crisis situation, its institutions and its people, are not yet prepared (or have the capacity) to more actively participate in decision-making processes and contribute to realizing outcomes.

The prevailing perspective, determined primarily by historical or cultural factors, affects the process by which desired outcomes are determined and carried out. In a context that places high premium on individuality, eliciting and ensuring participation in decision-making may not prove to be as critical or as effective as in an environment that values collective interests above all others.

Imposing one leadership approach across all contexts will not always result in superior performance. Leaders must have a clear understanding of the situation the participants are in and the challenges they face. This means backing up initiatives with data and factoring these in formulating effective strategies towards the envisioned change. Increased awareness of the existing perspective will also provide the leader deeper knowledge of the problem and sense of purpose and greater passion to want to solve it.

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4. Methodology

Leadership research has mostly been dyadic, asking subordinates to rate their leaders using questionnaires (Yukl 2012). For this exploratory research, we utilized a different approach, critical incident reporting where respondents self-reported actual events that happened in their lives in response to open-ended questions within relevant research domains. This technique “obtains a record of specific behaviors from those in the best position to make the necessary observations and evaluation” (Flanagan 1954).

The researchers used convenience sampling for this preliminary study to test the proposed leadership framework. Two sections of MBA students, for a total of 58 respondents in a prominent MBA program in Asia, were administered the instrument. For this research utilizing critical incident methodology, the “n” or sample size, is the number of “critical incident points” that were collected. There were 232 critical incidents that were collected in total. Due to responses that were unreadable or unintelligible, the researchers did not include those in the analysis, thus, a final total of 187 useable critical incidents (81%) were utilized.

Four steps were used. The first was the development of an instrument that went through three iterations to determine face-validity. The instrument was also pilot-tested prior to actual administration. The main sections included demographic information and open-ended items:

1. Describe an event when someone in your current organization helped you make sense of your new work environment.
2. Describe a critical event when you proposed something different that you valued as important in your new organization.
3. Describe an experience when you were involved in a visioning process for your organization.
4. Describe an event when others worked with you to complete a difficult project and you took a strong stance and fought for that project through to completion.

Based on our judgment, the items coincided with parts of the proposed model as follows:

1. Participant-centered critical incident (participants, followers, colleagues)
2. Perspective-centered critical incident (important value)
3. Person-centered critical incident (leader as visionary, future orientation)
4. Performance-centered critical incident (project completion)

The second step was the actual administration of the instrument. Students were asked to complete the instrument and return the questionnaire. The third step included our separate analyses of the critical incident narratives. And, the final step involved each of us independently clustering the responses and subsequently combining the clusters to ascertain face validity of the final groupings of the critical incidents.

To avoid researcher bias, neither of us was present in the room when the instrument was administered and we reviewed the responses independently. Furthermore, we did independent clustering of similar responses, and then in tandem, qualitatively clustered the responses into meaningful groupings. These groupings were in line with the proposed four Ps framework. Unexpectedly, we found a fifth cluster that streams across

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the four Ps – we labeled it “philosophy” cluster. The person or the leader, participants, perspective, and performance had their own underlying philosophies.

To assure internal validity, we adhered to several recommendations by Butterfield et al. (2005) including extracting the critical incidents using independent coders; cross-checking by participants; and having independent judges place incidents into categories. In addition, we were blinded as we clustered the critical incidents since the research assistants were the only ones who knew the identity of the respondents and the responses to the questions. Only after the clusters were identified that we were able to identify the demographics of the respondents.

There were 58 respondents who reported a total of 232 critical incidents. Due to lack of response to certain domains, unreadable/unintelligible responses, only 187 critical incidents were deemed useable. Demographic data of the respondents are shown in Figure 2.

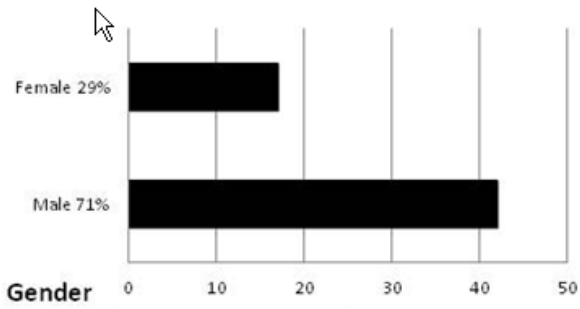
It appears that the typical respondent is male, from the Philippines, between the ages of 41 and 50 years, with 16 to 20 years of total work experience, and 1 to 5 years in the current position in the general management area of a service provider organization with 500 or more total employees.

From the 187 useable critical incidents, we proceeded to the next step of independently selecting 3 representative samples to capture the essence of the domain. The results are presented in the next section.

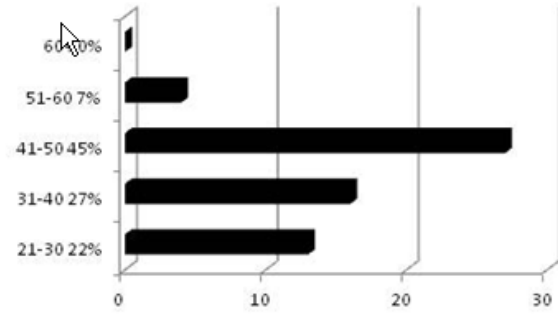
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Figure 2: Respondent Demographics

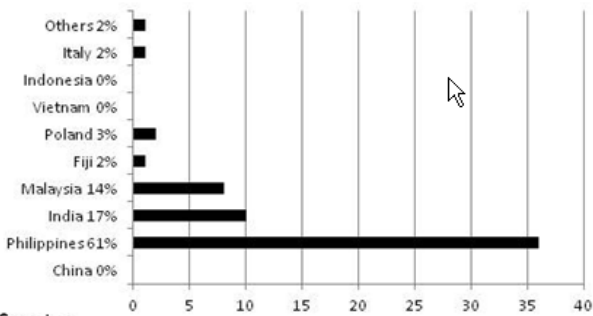
Gender



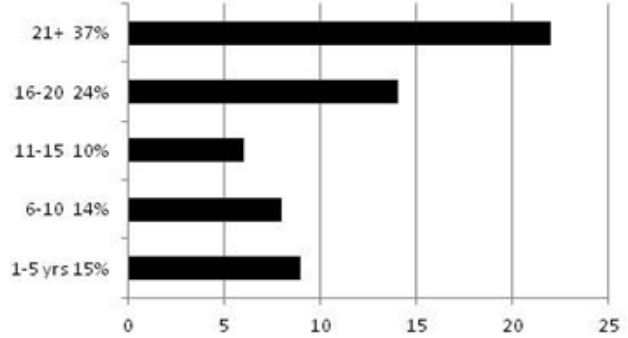
Age



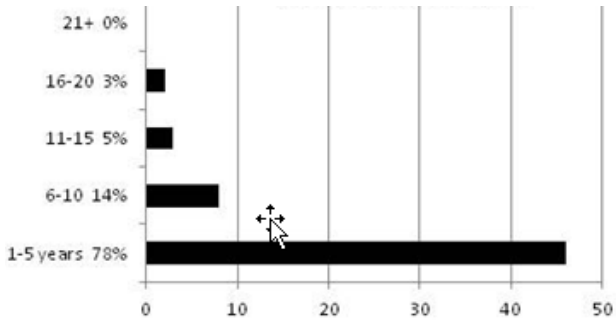
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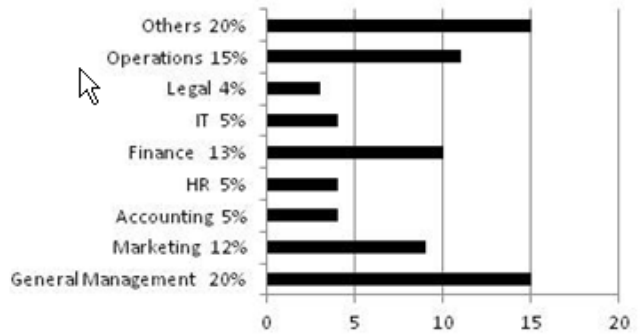
Work Experience



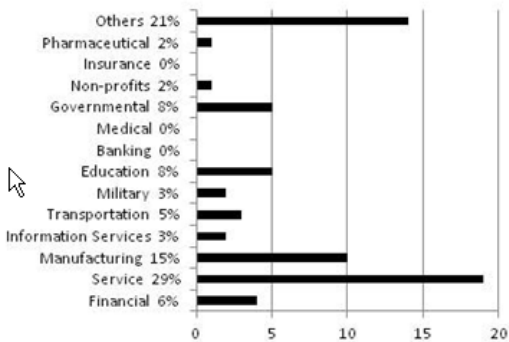
Years in Current Position



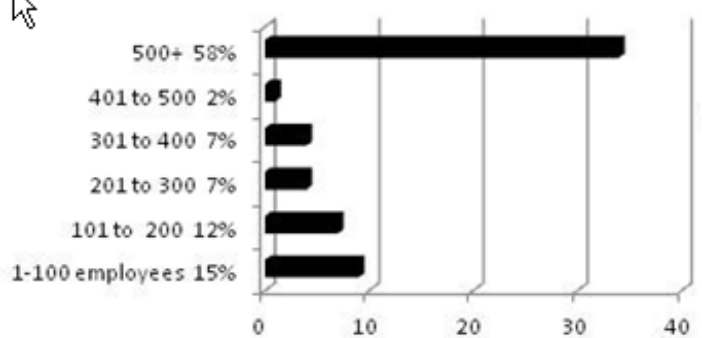
Functional Area



Type of Organization



Size of Organization



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5. Results

The incidents were randomized so that we read the incidents without prior knowledge of their domain. Without consulting each other, we proceeded to cluster the incidents. We obtained real-life confirmation of the framework's conceptual domains. The critical incidents provided some glimpse of the model's applicability.

We utilized 85 (37%) critical incidents that we independently categorized into the four domains. The other 147 incidents either did not fit into any domain or could be classified into two or more domains. In summary, we independently agreed on 15 incidents that fit the "person" domain, 40 in the "performance" domain, 19 in the "participant" domain, and 11 in the "perspective" domain.

Below are the 3 representative samples of critical incidents for each domain, presented verbatim.

5.1 Person Domain

"Two years ago, I had a 1-on-1 coaching with my group leader when she discussed with me the company's plans for my progression. More the requirements [*sic*] of my day-to-day job, she explained what are the skills and attributes that I should acquire and/or train for, for me to move to the next level."

"The position I am [*sic*] right now was created only a few years ago with me being the first person to hold the said position. Given that, and to a certain extent, the activities & job objective is still quite vague not only for myself but for my colleagues as well. I always refer to my boss, our president and CEO for guidance and reference of the position along with, and more importantly, my responsibilities."

"I joined my current organization already as a manager (I had a 7 years [*sic*] experience from a competitor). My current superiors made me sense my new work environment quickly. There was a culture shock the moment I stepped in the office. Leadership is more engaged and more direct compared to my previous job. Any good or bad performance is immediately raised and remedial actions have to be taken. I changed overnight, painfully adopting the new culture since I have to."

5.2 Participant Domain

"The most recent implementation of the cost standards involved the formation of a group composed of different departments to address questions from our customers (internal product lines) on changes in the product cost. This formerly involved finance tally but looking at the process it shows involve [*sic*] operations and engineering to facilitate analysis. I formed the group, invited the other department and sold them the process. There were resistance at first as this would entail additional work for all but upon presenting the whole process and the benefits of putting up the process everyone agreed. The customer appreciated the effort as this meant being able to deliver the analysis they required in time.

"There was this project with a very tight deadline assigned to me. I had to work with four people; two of them were audit seniors who also had other projects with other manager [*sic*]. It was difficult to manage because the seniors were not able to attend to my project

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because of other projects they had. It was a challenge because I have to manage new hires which didn't have enough experience yet. I had to step up for them because they rely on me to manage/lead them. In the end, we were able to finish the project and I was able to provide them with valuable learning experience."

"There was a meeting with all the most important people from the country in our organization and I was proposing new projects and the written down new formula of project management process. People had different backgrounds so it was hard to convince them that it is something very important for the organization."

5.3 Performance Domain

"The university was having a problem with the subsidiary not making profit for the [sic] present. After studying the subsidiary financial performance [sic]. I suggested to the CEO to restructure the subsidiary. At first there were resistance due to they have used [sic] to the culture whereby those who were their "buddies" will lead the subsidiary. After meeting and dialogue will the subsidiary have manage to [sic] restructure subsidiary and include academia, industry & administrator to the subsidiary. Now, with the collaborative effort from various backgrounds, academia, industry & administrative, the subsidiary works better & improve."

"In training and education, I noticed and observed that the way a course was planned, started or implemented varies and is always a tedious process. My idea and proposal is that since these are recurrent system [sic] and plans can be "boxed" so that whenever we need to carry out these tasks, we just pull them from that box."

"The aim of going for rebranding of the institution and ties [sic] it to be a research intensified university gives opportunity for my department to come up with ideas in constructing more residential [sic] for post graduate students especially married couple/family [sic]. The idea to go for alternatives e.g. build new hostels or via public finance initiatives or find developer (rental) was quite a good proposal to evaluate for long term agenda."

5.4 Perspective Domain

"When putting up a business plan and implementing the back-office offshore set-up in Africa region, the main challenge is the cultural diversity and the laws that emanate from that region. In the end, I studied how things work and behave by putting my skills and experience to come up with a successful project and offshore back office which is currently functional."

"The company was the first to adapt an opportunity-cost basis for pricing one of its core services. The concept was so different from what the "industry practice" is at that time that pricing levels are difficult to arrive at. However, the concept resulted in very profitable results."

"The overseas assignments helped me fully understand the inter-relationships not only cross-functionally but also cross-culturally across the regions and in different offices around the world. This makes me learn and prepare for to become a global leader, challenges me to put up a business model both organic and new acquisition initiatives [sic]."

6. Conclusion and Future Research

The twin ideas of globalization and market based societies are increasing their dominance as the preferred solutions to modern day social challenges. A consequence of these ideas is the notion of a single solution or approach that works best regardless of where you are. The hidden implication is that some will know better than others.

Our proposed leadership framework reminds us that bringing people to a higher level entails a deeper understanding of the different dimensions of the leadership process. The four Ps of leadership challenges those involved in the act of leadership to analyze deeply and to reflect on the person of the leader, participants, and performance, all within a unique perspective or context.

After we appreciate the four Ps separately, the next challenge is to see how the different dimensions influence and interact with each other as the desired changes happen over time. This will hopefully allow leadership to be more discerning and more relevant, and consequently, more effective in its impact to society.

This study is a preliminary qualitative research using critical incidents to find support for the proposed four Ps leadership model. While the results are indicative of the four domains of the model, we suggest future research along the lines of a more randomized sampling compared to the convenience sample of graduate students. In addition, one-on-one interviews from a randomized sample may be conducted to improve the depth of the incidents. This task would require more careful selection of potential respondents to clearly get samples from segments in various industries, multiple layers in the organization, and varying degrees of experience. Lastly, it might be worthwhile to ask participants in the study to “reflect upon and write down the meaning of the critical incidents, not just discuss them in a research interview” (Butterfield et al. 2005). Deep one-on-one interviews and group/panel interviews with probing questions about the recalled incidents could provide better understanding beyond retrospective recall. Nevertheless, the critical incident method provided preliminary support of the four domains in the proposed leadership model. Further, the testing and additional research using interviews could shed better light on the four domains.

Endnotes

¹ Gender sensitivity issues were not as stark then as it is now. A leader was assumed to be male, military, and Western.

² Michigan Leadership Studies and Ohio State Leadership Studies, among others.

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