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A Comparative Study of Leadership Styles and Leadership Traits between Gen X & Y: Malaysia as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: The study is about comparison of leadership styles and leadership traits between generation X and Y in Malaysia. The study was motivated by the fact that the older generation namely the baby boomers and generation X are beginning to retire from the workplace. Understanding the new generation differences help managers to manage the expectations of the new generation and prepare organizations to tackle these expectations. **Objective:** The study used a purposive random sampling where 100 undergraduate, postgraduate students and lecturers were asked to respond to self-administrative questionnaires. It was a one-time cross sectional study where the unit of analysis was individual. **Results:** The study found that there is a significant difference between gen X and gen Y in leadership styles and leadership traits. Generation Y tends to prefer supportive leadership style where they are being guided in their early state of their career. Generation Y prefer to have mentor who can guide them and provide them opportunities for career growth. Gen Y are also more achievement oriented and are more ambitious than the other generation and they want to be challenged by their manager. Leadership traits of gen Y are also significantly different from gen X. Whilst gen X prefer more directive leadership style, and are more individualistic, resilient, adaptable and have strong sense of independence, gen Y prefer innovation, new challenges, creativity and they seek for job and professional satisfaction. However, gen X and Y differences should be determined in relation to their values, experience, education levels and background. **Conclusion:** Malaysian organizations and the government should accommodate these generational differences to build a more viable leadership strength and talent pipeline for the future workforce.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia as a country is facing a number of challenges. Those challenges, among others, relate to formation of a thriving community with a balanced economy and development of an advanced democracy (Mahathir, 1999). The silent generation and first wave of Baby Boomers are beginning to retire from the workplace, taking decades of valuable experience with them, while generation X (“Gen X”) and generation Y (“Gen Y”) are becoming the fastest growing age groups in the organizations and the next generation of leaders. Understanding generational differences and managing the expectations of the various age groups is not a stress-free task. However, it can facilitate building a sustainable talent pipeline and leadership bench-strength as well as propel organizations into new dimensions of performance. Good understanding of generational differences is

imperative because in the twenty-first century generations are working together while bureaucratic organizations are moving toward extinction and horizontal style, new technology, globalization, and a more information-friendly atmosphere are emerging. Western researchers have concluded that generational groups of workers have different work characteristics and prefer different leadership styles (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Acknowledging the generational differences are of importance to organizations as well as society because generations originate from different values, attitudes, ambitions and mind-sets of people. Generations are products of historical events that leave potent emotional memories that shape feelings about authority, institutions, and family (Zemke, 2001; Conger, 2001).

Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) are currently in the helms of affairs of the Malaysia

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while generation Y are expected to assume leadership roles soon, relating it to vision 2020, it has become imperative to provide an in-depth, intergenerational viewpoint.

By the year 2020, it is expected that gen Y (born between 1981 and 2000) will be saddled with the responsibility of developing the country in different areas. They will be responsible to move the country forward to become a vibrant economy. By then, the age range of gen Y workforce will be making up from 15 to 40 years old. It could be estimated that nearly 12 million of them will be in the workplace (Department of statistics Malaysia, 2013). This generation are soon-to-be leaders in Malaysia however do this generation have awareness of the roles to be played by them as future leaders? Leadership development among the youths will exert changes in the future because of the major role played in several trends. Such trends will have a major role in our future understanding and practice of leadership among generation Y (Hernandez-Broome & Hughes, 2004).

Based on this background, this research is bent to examine the level of significant differences between gen X and Y in terms of leadership traits and leadership style. The hypotheses of this study are:

H1: There are significant differences in leadership style in increasing the propensity towards leadership between X generation and Y generation.

H2: There are significant differences in leadership traits in increasing the propensity towards leadership between X generation and Y generation.

Literature Review:

According to Zemke (2001), generational differences are of importance to organizations as well as society because generations originate from different values, attitudes, ambitions and mind-sets of people. Conger (2001) added that generation are products of historical events that leave potent emotional memories that shape feelings about authority, institutions, and family.

Lancaster and Stillman (2002) observed that leveraging generational strengths can boost morale, control costs, reduce turnover and increase sales and profits. Good understanding of generational differences is imperative because in the twenty-first century generations are working together more than ever before. Bureaucratic organizations are moving toward extinction and horizontal style, new technology, globalization, and a more information-friendly atmosphere are emerging. Western researchers have concluded that generational groups of workers have different work characteristics and prefer different leadership styles. The work characteristics of Baby Boomers and gen X are different in many respects, and this difference can be explained by many factors such as the differences in

living environments when the values of these generations were formed.

Gen X and Y have different personality preferences (Boag, 2009). Gen X like to become independent and desire for work-life balances (Watson, 2010). Loomis (2000) concluded that Gen X tend to be more independent, self-motivated and self-sufficient. Baby Boomers, on the other hand, tend to be more diligent on the job and prefer a more stable working environment. Keaveney (1997) stated that Gen X are technically savvy and are eager to update knowledge and application into their work. This technological capability is due to the fact that Gen X grew up with rapidly changing technology and the availability of massive amounts of information.

Gen Y are better in multi-tasking and work in higher efficiency (Watson, 2010). They have distinguished their leadership style through the differences of the style they adapted. However, some scholars disagree on the fact that Gen X and Y have adapted different styles for each group. Duquesnoy (2011) argued both generations prefer supportive leadership style. He observed that a leader is the leader of a group who is concerned about the employee's needs and preferences. However, Meijer (2011) informed that supportive leadership style is used by Gen X, not by Gen Y. He found that the fact the Gen Yers prefer directive leadership behavior and achievement oriented leadership behavior (Meijer, 2011). This finding is in line with the finding of research which was carried out by Martin (2005). It was asserted by the research that Gen Y support clear directions and managerial support from superiors. They choose the best ways to achieve goals where older generations would never have conceived. They used to structure their lives and crave guidance in their work environment (McIntosh-Elkins, McRitchie & Scoones, 2008).

Some scholars argued that both generations used different leadership styles other than the proposed supportive and directive leadership. They proposed that the leadership style that can be preferred by Gen X is transactional leadership and transformational leadership can be referred by Gen Y (Horeczy *et al.*, 2011; Boag, 2009). They believed that Gen Y have attributes and traits such as socialization skills, self-confidence, eagerness to learn, productivity tendencies, and dislike for being told what to do. Bass and Avolio (1994) characterized the transformational leadership behaviors as the "Four I's": Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, Intellectual stimulation, and Individualized consideration. Gen Y preferred to work as a team and have a close team around them (Boag, 2009). They were also dynamic leaders who can work smartly and efficiently in a fast paced environment. Although Gen Y have adapted better leadership style to achieve goals, they should adapt different type of leadership to improve their effectiveness in dealing

with problems (Horeczy *et al.*, 2011). Besides, Gen Y should have regular competency assessment, regular assessment of their skills. They should also consider introducing remuneration categories to improve their effectiveness too (Boag, 2009). Finally, McGregor (1996) proposed that the changing nature of the job/task itself and the changing nature of subordinate characteristics have made it imperative to change the leadership styles too. Some experts recommend that a relationship-oriented style is most appropriate for Gen X because they do care about pats on the back and they do things that will lead to rewards (Levin, 2001).

Warner and Sandberg (2010) have found that workplace with more than one generations can be categorized as one cohesively behaving group, based on eras in which they grew up or are influenced in their formative years. In order to handle the diversified workforce, a manager must understand the dynamics within and between each generation. On top of that, as explained in Generations Collide (GC), managers need to employ an “ageless thinking” attitude to have an unbiased thinking toward all generations. Since the scope of study was limited to generation X and Y, baby boomers and traditionalist will therefore be exempted from the research. Generation Y are believed to be generally high in confidence because Internet and technologies have been modernized and easy to get when they started to enter the workforce. So, most generation Y can easily adapt to change and expect instant information.

The traditional criteria used to define successful leadership are no longer fit into today’s modern workplace. The new science of leadership requires a mixture of skills, such as professional skills, experience, and education (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Proponents of modern leadership style; Zenger, Ulrich and Smallwood (2000) suggested that more efficient job results would be achieved if leadership development programs could develop leadership skills and increase the knowledge of executives. However, the research has yet to confirm

whether the goal of efficient job results have been reached or not to train leadership quality in both generation X and Y. According to Colvin, Demos, Mero, Elliott and Yang (2007), the command and control model of leadership are not useful in the recent time. In order to get the desired outcomes, managers would have to learn to limit dictatorship styles and at the same time, build working relationships with employees that foster positive learning and working environment for better goals. (Colvin, *et al.*, 2007). Researchers have argued that leadership style among generation X and Y are determined by the type of education they have access to. Zenger, *et al.* (2000) found that traditional leadership programs were more on theories and analysis, and that it has less time on implementation. Without actual implementation, theory and analysis has little value for a good leadership. Hence, modern day leadership programs which include teamwork, interpersonal relationship, and self-awareness should be a medium to educate both generation; X and Y to be a good leader.

Methodology:

This study is an exploratory study whereby the purpose is to describe the level of significant differences of leadership style and leadership traits among gen X and Y. For this study, the population is UUM population which includes the undergraduate students, the postgraduate students and the lecturers. The selected samples were the students and lecturers of UUM. One Hundred questionnaires were distributed to respondents that belong to gen X and Y among the students and lecturers of UUM, cutting across all the departments. Population was sample through the use of simple random sampling technique. In simple random sampling technique, as observed by Sekaran (2003), all elements in the population are considered and each element has an equal chance of being chosen as the subject. The questions instruments were taken from SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988).

Findings And Discussion:

Table 1: Independent Samples Test

Statistic	Generation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Leadership Style	Gen X	50	3.5758	.95697	.13534
	Gen Y	50	2.9533	.92791	.13123
Leadership Traits	Gen X	50	3.0600	.72083	.10194
	Gen Y	50	2.5240	.73833	.10442

The table (see appendix 1) indicated that there are significant differences in leadership style and leadership traits between gen X and gen Y. Therefore, it can be established that both generations have different worldviews. The results of this study concur with the findings of the study carried out by Sessa, *et al.* (2007); Meijer (2011) and Watson (2010).

There can be leadership crisis among employees with the influx of more gen Y in the workplace. Meijer (2011) observed that gen X would prefer the supportive leadership style, whereas gen Y prefers a directive leadership style and an achievement-oriented leadership.

Studies have shown that transformational leadership is the most preferred style by Baby Boomers, Gen X', and Gen Y. However, some other

studies indicated that gen X prefer a leader who invest time in them and provide mentoring and skills training. Gen X wants frequent feedback from their leader and they want to be trusted and respected for the work they perform. The manager in a supportive role seems to be very important for this generation. These results are confirmed by the theory of Tulgan (1996), which stated that gen X prefers a coaching type as a leader. A reason for this may be that Gen X tends to be more independent, self-motivated and

self-sufficient. They do not like to have a manager which is directing them explicitly about what they should do. They rather would like to hear what they have to do and then decide how they will do it. Maybe that is also the reason that gen X did not make a lot of statements, which are related to the directive leadership style. However this generation is not the only generation, who would like to see that a manager trust them and having respect for the way they work.

Table 2: Descriptive analysis for the variables.

Independent samples test	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means						
	F		Sig.	T	Df	Sig.(2tailed)	Mean Diff	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Leadership Style	Equal variances assumed	.003	.953	3.302	98	.001	.6225	.189	.248	.997
	Equal variances not assumed			3.302	98	.001	.6225	.189	.248	.997
Leadership Traits	Equal variances assumed	.113	.737	3.673	98	.000	.536	.146	.246	.826
	Equal variances not assumed			3.673	97.944	.000	.536	.146	.246	.826
Descriptive Statistics										
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness				
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic				
Leadership Traits	100	1.00	4.00	2.7920	.77429	-.191				
Leadership Style	100	1.42	5.00	3.2646	.98858	-.311				
Valid N (listwise)	100									

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis of Demographic Data.

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	34	34.0
Female	66	66.0
Total	100	100.0
Generation		
Gen X	50	50.0
Gen Y	50	50.0
Total	100	100.0
Ethnicity		
Malay	47	47.0
Chinese	36	36.0
Indian	15	15.0
Other-Punjabi	1	1.0
Other-Iban	1	1.0
Total	100	100.0
Level of Education		
Higher Diploma	27	27.0
Bachelor's Degree	64	64.0
Master's Degree	6	6.0
Doctorate's Degree	3	3.0
Total	100	100.0
Work Status		
Employer	4	4.0
Paid employee	44	44.0
Self-employed	2	2.0
Student	50	50.0
Total	100	100.0

On the other side, gen Y, also likes to see these characteristics in a manager. This generation prefers leaders who are mentors which are supporting them and to help them around the typical bureaucracies. This is supported by the results of this research and it can be clarified by the fact that this generation is just entering the labor market. This implies that they don't have any experience and that they would like to have a leader, who is a mentor for them. However this generation prefers a supportive leadership style

to guide them in the early state of their career, instead of a directive way of management. This is supported by the results that show that a directive leadership style is the least popular leadership style of this generation. They also want leaders who want to teach them and give them opportunities for growth. This is maybe the reason, that the results of this research show that the second most mentioned leadership style is achievement oriented management style. People of gen Y seem to have more connection

with this leadership style than other generation. A reason for this lies in the fact that they are very idealistic compared with the previous generations (Tulgan, 1996). The outcome of the focus groups is that this generation is more ambitious to achieve at a higher level than other generations and they want to be challenged by their manager. This is in agreement with previous literature, because people from gen Y are also the most demanding of all the generations and wanted to be challenge by their manager.

Robbins (2008) has observed that consistent traits such as intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability can best define a leader and non-leader style. Kirkpatrick & Locke (1991) observed that trait is a good factor in deciding the desirability of leadership. In our research, both generations have their own set of traits when related to leadership.

Among the traits of gen X are that they are self-motivated and self-sufficient, cynical, pessimistic, individualistic, resilient, adaptable, and culturally progressive. They have strong sense of independence and they like to question authority.

Gen Y value lifestyles, career development and travelling far. They need personal flexibility, immediacy for job satisfaction and professional satisfaction. They thrive on innovation, new challenges and creativity. They expect responsibility earlier on in their career. They also value intrinsic aspects of work such as mentoring.

The overall result is that there are significant differences in leadership traits and leadership styles in increasing the propensity towards leadership between X generation and Y generation.

Conclusion:

Generally, there are differences between gen X and gen Y in terms of their attitude, perception, knowledge, and character, leadership traits and style. Gen X and Ys' propensity towards leadership should be determined in relation to their experiences, educational levels, leadership traits, and leadership style. Understanding and leveraging generational diversity in the workplace can facilitate improved talent attraction, retention and engagement, increased competitive advantage that keeps customers loyal, enhanced workplace productivity and an expanded view of succession planning and building a viable leadership bench strength and talent pipeline for growth and sustainability. Therefore, it is recommended that Malaysian organizations and government as well should seek to understand each generational group and accommodate generational differences to be able to capitalize on generational differences in attitudes, values, and behaviors. This will consequently result in building a viable leadership bench strength and talent pipeline for growth and sustainability.

Future studies can explore further the comparison between the two generations; X and Y in

relation to leadership and entrepreneurship intention. More so, the future researchers can add more variables to examine any similarities or dissimilarities between the two generations. The results of this study is of much benefit to the organization because it makes them to be aware and ready for the differences of the generation attitude, character, skill, working intention and their knowledge.

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