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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Democratic Leadership Among Department Heads in Sabah, Malaysia: A Quantitative Study on Lecturers' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership in Sabah, Malaysia. Sixty-one lecturers from four private higher education institutions in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah completed a questionnaire on Google Forms and data were analyzed using SPSS 29.0. Results showed that only a low number of lecturers tends to perceive their department heads as democratic (52.5 to 68.9 percent). Only one item received a higher level of agreement at 78.7 percent, whereby lecturers agreed that their department heads merge staff's knowledge and expertise to obtain optimal results or outcomes. On the other hand, nonparametric tests indicated nonsignificant differences by way of gender, age, and job experience in perceived democratic leadership. Additionally, Wilcoxon signed rank test based on a hypothesized value of 3.5 showed that all democratic leadership items were significant at $p < 0.001$, having medians that were significantly different from the test value, and were likely to indicate strong disagreement. In light of the findings, some recommendations were made on ways to promote democratic leadership within the context of PHEIs in Sabah, Malaysia.

Contribution/Originality: This research offers a valuable contribution by examining lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership among department heads in Sabah, Malaysia. Besides narrowing the gap that exists in the educational leadership literature, it is the first quantitative study that examines lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership in the Bornean state, thus adding to the limited evidence base on the extent to which leaders at Malaysian private higher educational institutions

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value staff's opinions and ideas to foster a sense of ownership, organizational engagement, and autonomy.

1. Introduction

Democratic leadership refers to a leadership style in which all levels of employees participate fully in organizational decision-making. Northouse (2018) asserted that democratic leaders treat staff as followers who possess the full capability to accomplish tasks autonomously. Rather than commanding staff, democratic leaders strive to work complementarily with them, while endeavoring to treat everyone equitably, without elevating their own status or acting superior. Essentially, they perceive themselves as mentors, facilitators, or coaches rather than executives. According to Forbes Councils (2022), although democratic leaders give employees the opportunity to freely share ideas and engage in discussion, they still have the final verdict over any organizational change in terms of structure, strategy, or overall approach. Sometimes referred to as participative management, democratic leadership enables leaders to foster a supportive workplace culture by encouraging staff to participate in decision-making grounded on collaboration, open communication, and shared responsibility.

According to Woods (2021), democratic leaders often take staffs' views into consideration rather than simply treating them as subservient followers. They prioritize transformative dialogue, which is a communicative process that aims to modify perspectives, inspire action, and build relationships to resolve conflicts or disagreements. Further, they also create space for individuals with differing viewpoints to engage in meaningful conversations that result in greater understanding, empathy, and desirable change. To promote holistic learning and development, they encourage staff to become well-rounded, ethical citizens who possess relational wellbeing, a sense of belonging, and individuality. Lastly, as emancipative leaders, they strive to help staff develop a greater sense of agency, while eliminating power differences to create a shared, collaborative experience that allows them to act as coleaders who can contribute novel ideas, innovative strategies, or inventive services to drive change.

On the same vein, Uy et al. (2024) appraised that democratic leadership tends to foster a supportive learning environment that positively influences academic achievement. By involving stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, staff, community members) in decision-making, democratic leaders often promote collaboration, trust, and inclusivity, thus fostering a favorable school climate characterized by such conditions as bilateral communication, collaborative decision-making, and a shared sense of purpose among stakeholders. Such conditions are instrumental in nurturing positive teacher-student relationships; students who have approachable and supportive teachers are more likely to actively engage in the learning process and seek academic assistance when necessary. Moreover, democratic leaders strive to foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation within their institutions by soliciting input from all stakeholders to implement evidence-based practices and initiatives aimed at enhancing educational processes and outcomes. Further, by encouraging experimentation and adaptation to address evolving educational needs and requirements, they create a dynamic intellectual environment that underscores multiculturalism and diversity, which in turn, promotes academic achievement, creativity, innovative problem-solving, inclusivity, and cross-cultural understanding amongst students.

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1.1. Advantages of Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership offers several advantages to individuals and organizations (Forbes Councils, 2022), including private higher educational institutions (PHEIs). Most important, this leadership style makes academics feel valued, regardless of what team they belong to or what their occupational status is. Democratic leadership ensures that all staff have a say in the organization's vision and mission, besides raising the morale, productivity, collaboration, and a sense of equity amongst staff. Besides fostering creativity amongst staff, democratic leadership also enhances their decision-making skills, which can be highly beneficial for entry-level staff as they strive to climb the job ladder. Additionally, democratic leadership enables PHEIs leaders to instill trust and respect in staff; by inviting staff at all levels to share ideas and engage in open-ended discussions, they are able to find more opportunities to connect with individuals whom they rarely meet.

Laoyan (2025) maintained that democratic leaders offer four advantages. First, democratic leaders leverage on staff's expertise to encourage brainstorming, thus allowing them to generate a wide range of ideas that leads to innovation, unique problem-solving processes, and geminal resolutions. Besides, democratic leaders also empower staff by allowing them to share serendipitous, fortuitous, or contributive viewpoints. Second, as opposed to solving complex problems in a silo, democratic leaders often form diverse, multifaceted teams to collaboratively utilize the innovation funnel to generate unique ideas, and ultimately, select the most viable option for prototyping. Third, they often increase job satisfaction and psychological safety amongst staff; staff tend to display more job pride when their leader values and incorporates their thoughts and opinions. Besides, staff who feel secure enough to share their thoughts and ideas often gain a sense of psychological safety, which in turn, increases critical problem-solving behavior, team spirit, and staff retention. Lastly, democratic leaders facilitate an organizational culture that prioritizes team cohesion, which promotes open communication, productivity, and a more collegial work community, while providing ample opportunities for personal and professional growth.

On the other hand, Masionis (2023) reiterated that democratic leaders bring three benefits to organizations. First and foremost, they provide adequate space for staff to generate novel ideas and alternative approaches to revitalize and thrive. Not only do they actively solicit staff's views and opinions, they also acknowledge and try to implement them, which allows multidimensional viewpoints to drive decisions. By removing obstacles and hindrances, they accelerate processes and choices to better suit the needs and expectations of the majority of staff. Second, democratic leaders foster improved work engagement by encouraging staff to truthfully and regularly share their thoughts and insights, taking action on staff's decisions, and making staff feel truly appreciated and respected. Third, they establish a robust feedback channel and platform that are often digitally powered, which provides real-time data and statistical analysis on staff engagement and enhancement. Third, democratic leaders often exert a favorable influence on organizational communication and collaboration by promoting positive interpersonal communication through the imparting or exchanging of information via oral, written, and digital means. By allowing autonomous reciprocity of information, they support an accessible and transparent work environment that keeps all staff updated on team endeavors, which allows them to identify further opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

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1.2. Statement of the Problem

A review of literature showed that quantitative research on college staff's perceptions of democratic leadership is lacking in Malaysia, especially in the context of PHEIs in Sabah. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to examine lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership at four PHEIs in Sabah, Malaysia, which would help fill the research gap and establish a theoretical framework for the study. Lastly, findings of this study would generate novel knowledge on the extent to which department heads at local PHEIs adopt democratic leadership principles, besides offering a benchmark to implement democratic leadership to foster inclusivity, empower individuals, enhance interpersonal communication, and cultivate a productive and meaningful learning environment that is conducive for developing relevant occupational skills and generic attributes amongst graduates.

1.3. Research questions

Three research questions have been formulated to provide focus and direction in the study. Serving as a compass, they keep the authors on track, thus allowing them to concentrate on the relevant areas of investigation. Besides providing a framework for the entire research process, they also help in defining the scope of the study, thus ensuring that the research remains manageable and targeted. The research questions are as follows:

i. What were the descriptive statistics of democratic leadership among department heads at PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah and implications?
ii. Were there any significant differences in lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership in terms of gender, age, and job experience?
iii. Were any of the democratic leadership items significantly different based on a hypothesized value of 3.5?

1.4. Significance of the Study

Quantitative research on democratic leadership at PHEIs is significant for various reasons. First and foremost, it highlights the positive impact of involving staff in decision-making, which can lead to increased job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and productivity. It provides empirical evidence that this leadership style can foster a more engaged and committed workforce needed to boost organizational performance and innovation. Moreover, this study highlights the role of democratic leadership in positively impacting various aspects of organizational performance, including an autonomous work culture, staff morale, and institutional rankings. Findings can provide a useful framework for PHEI leaders to foster a culture of trust, transparency, and accountability, which are crucial for long-term organizational success. Lastly, findings imply that PHEIs should adopt democratic leadership because it is not merely about a particular management style, but rather a philosophy that underscores participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility, which ultimately promotes a more inclusive and equitable environment for both staff and students to effectively adapt to changing circumstances and challenges in the real world.

2. Review of Literature

A literature review was conducted to establish a foundation for the study by providing a comprehensive overview of existing research, theories, and methodologies relevant to

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the research topic. Besides, by analyzing the existing literature, the authors are able to pinpoint areas where further investigation is needed, thus justifying the study. Further, the review process also helps clarify and refine the research questions, thus ensuring that they are relevant, focused, and contribute meaningfully to educational leadership in the Malaysian context. Lastly, it helps the authors identify relevant theoretical frameworks that can guide their study and provide a lens for interpreting their findings.

The literature review indicated that research on democratic leadership in the context of Malaysian PHEIs is scarce. In an earlier study, Kilicoglu (2018) revealed that a strong relationship tends to exist between democratic leadership, distribution of leadership functions, and coherent leadership team characteristics. Besides, teachers were found to perceive democratic leadership as moderate at their schools. Findings imply that, since democratic leadership tends to distribute responsibility amongst staff, it is crucial for principals to encourage, guide, and empower them by promoting self-determination, decision-making, and equity. In the same year, Al Khajeh (2018) appraised that democratic leadership tends to have a positive relationship with organizational performance. It appears to induce staff to perform more enthusiastically in attaining organizational goals through decentralized decision-making and group participation, whereby praise and criticisms are frequently administered in an objective and responsible manner. By allowing staff to express and implement their creative ideas, democratic leaders also prepare aspiring leaders to effectively manage the organization in the long run. Lastly, Wachira, Karanja, and Iravo (2018) disclosed that democratic leadership, characterized by human values, work flexibility, and autonomy, tends to be significantly and positively related to organizational performance. Findings imply that organizations should practice democratic leadership to involve a wider range of staff in decision making or building consensus through the generation, evaluation, and prototyping of innovative ideas.

In a quantitative study, Caillier (2020) concurred that democratic leadership tends to enhance the performance ratings of a superintendent, while autocratic leadership tends to decrease them. Moreover, respondents' public service motivation was found to have a positive effect on performance ratings, while democratic leadership tends to moderate the relationship between public service motivation and performance ratings. In brief, individuals with high public service motivation tend to give democratic leaders higher performance ratings compared to those with low public service motivation. In their investigation into the moderating effect of contingent reward on the relationship between democratic leadership and organizational performance, Hilton, Arkorful, and Martins (2021) disclosed that both democratic leadership and contingent reward tend to exert a significant and positive influence on organizational performance. Further, contingent reward was found to significantly enhance and moderate the relationship between democratic leadership and organizational performance. Findings imply that democratic leadership, together with contingent reward, can yield higher organizational efficiency and operational performance. Moreover, in their study on the impact of democratic leadership on teacher effectiveness, Raupu et al. (2021) divulged that it tends to have a significantly strong influence on teachers' performance. Besides, democratic principals were found to reinforce teachers' work motivation, enthusiasm, and job commitment, which positively impact the teaching and learning process. Findings imply that democratic leadership tends to incentivize teachers, which encourages them to act as competent trainers, mentors, and coaches through mastery of critical educational endeavors.

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In their investigation into the impact of democratic leadership on employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty, Vincent and Baptiste (2021) revealed that democratic leadership tends to be positively related to employee job satisfaction and customer satisfaction. Findings imply the cruciality of adopting democratic leadership to enhance job satisfaction, which is a prerequisite for employee commitment and customer loyalty. On the other hand, Oussible and Tinaztepe (2022), who examined the impact of democratic leadership on organizational productivity, indicated that democratic leadership tends to be highly preferred by staff. Moreover, more experienced staff were found to be less influenced by leadership, probably due to greater familiarity with their duties. Lastly, democratic leadership was found to propel staff in displaying a greater level of job satisfaction, productivity, and coordination.

In their examination on the impact of democratic leadership on university management, Syakur, Narimo, and Prayitno (2022) indicated that democratic leadership tends to have a significant influence on university management, which allows subordinates to solve problems independently, encourages innovation and creativity to enhance task performance, and spurs subordinates to participate equally in decision-making and problem-solving. Moreover, Ebuzoeme (2023), who probed the impact of democratic leadership on corporate performance, concluded that democratic leadership tends to have a significant impact on corporate performance, explaining 16.7 percent of its variance. Additionally, democratic leaders were found to assign tasks without being authoritarian, elaborate future goals to staff, encourage staff to participate in decision making, and show empathy toward staff, all of which tend to boost corporate image and competitiveness.

According to Dike and Madubueze (2023), democratic leadership tends to act as key to influencing staff performance by equipping managers with the ability to make appropriate decisions through constant consultation with staff, promote inclusive participation, and develop problem-solving skills amongst staff. Besides, by instilling higher levels of trust, democratic leaders tend to motivate staff to reciprocate by exhibiting higher levels of organizational performance. Additionally, Arshad, Ashraf, and Pervaiz (2023) concurred that democratic leadership tends to have a positive impact on project success, mediated by innovative work behavior. Findings imply that organizations should appoint democratic leaders as they tend to adopt a distinctive approach to building and maintaining team relationships, which plays a pertinent role in goal realization, task accomplishment, and project fruition.

In their research, Zahari, Akbar, and Situmorang (2024) discovered that democratic leadership tends to have a significant and positive effect on employee performance, mediated by job satisfaction. Findings imply that democratic leaders tend to increase organizational performance and job satisfaction by establishing positive relationships, practicing open communication, and deliberating problems with staff. They also assume full responsibility for the decisions they have made and act according to specific standards. Moreover, in a study on the impact of democratic leadership on the job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior among telecommunications staff, Chrairi (2024) reiterated that democratic leadership, characterized by inclusivity and staff participation, tends to have a positive effect on job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior, while management control systems tend to mediate the relationship between democratic leadership, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior. Findings reflect the importance of democratic leadership in

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ensuring job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior through effective management control systems.

Finally, the most recent study by Imran, Bano, and Rashid (2025) investigated the impact of democratic leadership on employee innovative behavior at hierarchical and collectivist organizations. Findings revealed that democratic leadership tends to significantly and positively impact employee innovative behavior. Besides, psychological safety and creative potential were found to mediate the relationship by creating an environment that is conducive to brainstorming, generation, adoption, and implementation of innovation ideas.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

A quantitative research design was adopted to allow the authors to systematically investigate perceived democratic leadership through the use of numerical data and statistical analysis to quantify lecturers' perceptions of the management style, with the primary aim of drawing meaningful conclusions and generalizing results to a broader lecturer population in Sabah. Further, statistical methods were used to calculate means, percentages of agreement, and significant differences by way of age, gender, and work experience. The key elements of the quantitative research design included (1) three succinctly stated research questions, (2) a convenient sample of lecturers as a representative subset, (3) a list of democratic leadership variables to be measured, (4) an appropriate data collection method, (5) specific statistical methods to analyze data, and (5) ethical considerations (i.e., informed consent and privacy protection).

3.2. Research Location

This study was conducted in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, the capital city of the island state where quantitative research on leadership styles at PHEIs is scarce. Kota Kinabalu was chosen for its distinctive educational landscape, which includes 16 PHEIs that can provide a sufficiently representative sample of the lecturer population in Sabah, thus allowing for a relatively fair assessment of lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership at local PHEIs.

3.3. Sample and Justification

The sample of this study comprised 61 lecturers (n = 61) recruited from four PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, who possess at least a bachelor's degree, English proficiency, and a full-time contract at their respective institutions. Initially, deans, coordinators, and registrars of eight randomly PHEIs were contacted via email and phone, but eventually, only four agreed to participate in the study. Subsequently, they shared the survey link with lecturers and urged them to respond. Voluntary participation and convenient access were the main considerations of this selection procedure, which could yield a realistic and contextually relevant sample.

Respondents come from culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse communities in Sabah. The sample size was determined according to theoretical and statistical considerations. According to the central limit theorem, a minimum of 30 participants is generally sufficient to ensure statistical power and generalizability for basic survey

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research (Roscoe, 1975; RUBIKTOP, 2023). Additionally, the sample was deemed representative of lecturers from the local PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu; hence, selection bias was minimized. Systematic random sampling of PHEIs was initially done, whereby every second college on the list was contacted. This selection method was practiced for its ability to capture a diverse range of perspectives across different age, gender, and work experience among lecturers. By allowing all eligible PHEIs an equal chance of selection, this method could prevent the under- or over-representation of specific groups, while increasing the generalizability of findings to a broader population of PHEI lecturers.

Additionally, PHEIs were chosen based on their physical proximity to the university college where the first author serves as program leader in its Master of Education in Leadership. In general, the study was delimited by proximity, accessibility, and administrators' willingness to participate in the research study. A total of 61 lecturers responded to the questionnaire online; completion of the questionnaire was interpreted as informed permission, with all participants assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

While the sample size seemed small, it met the minimum requirement for quantitative research in the social sciences, particularly in educational leadership and educational psychology. For example, Roscoe (1975) recommended a sample size of 30 to 500 for most statistical research. This rule of thumb is supported by the central limit theorem, which stipulates that sampling distributions will approach normality when there are 30 or more respondents, thus allowing for acceptable statistical inference. Furthermore, the current sample size ensured a reasonable margin of error and enough power to identify modest effects in nonparametric analyses, such as the Kruskal-Wallis, Mann-Whitney U, and Wilcoxon signed rank tests, which were used to interpret data in the current study.

The sample consisted of 36.1 percent males and 63.9 percent females. Age-wise, 68.9 percent are 25 to 35 years old, 26.2 percent are 36 to 46 years old, 19.6 percent are 47 to 57 years old, 1.6 percent are 47 to 57 years old, and 3.3 percent are above 57 years old. Experience-wise, 29.5 percent have worked for one to five years, 37.7 percent have worked for six to 11 years, 19.7 percent have worked for 12 to 17 years, and 13.1 percent have worked for more than 18 years (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents (n = 61)

Profile	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	22	36.1
	Female	39	63.9
Age	25-35	42	68.9
	36-46	16	26.2
	47-57	1	1.6
	57 and above	2	3.3
Working experience	1-5 years	18	29.5
	6-11 years	23	37.7
	12-17 years	12	19.7
	More than 18 years	8	13.1

3.4. Instrument

The Democratic Leadership Questionnaire was administered to examine lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership at four PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. It consists

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of six Likert-scale items derived from the literature (Northouse, 2018; Toastmasters International, 2016), with responses ranging from strongly agree = 5 to strongly disagree = 1.

To determine the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted on 30 lecturers and data were analyzed by using SPSS 29.0. Cronbach analysis was used to assess its reliability; results indicated that its Cronbach's alpha is .859, suggesting that the items within the questionnaire are internally consistent and measuring the same underlying construct (democratic leadership). The high coefficient also means that the items are closely correlated, and are therefore, measuring the same concept.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

PHEI lecturers were required to complete the questionnaire online and were told that completion of the survey was their indication of consent to voluntarily participate in the study. Ethical issues were prioritized throughout the data collection procedure. All participants were given informed consent in relation to the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and the possibility to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. To ensure confidentiality, all responses were anonymized and the data were securely stored. Only the first writer has access to the data, thus guaranteeing that they would be used solely for scholarly purposes.

Data were automatically transferred onto a spreadsheet and subsequently analyzed using SPSS 29.0. First, the mean score and percentages of agreement on perceived democratic leadership were calculated. Second, Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership in relation to age and job experience. Third, Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were any significant differences in terms of gender. Fourth, Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to determine if any of the democratic leadership items were significant at a hypothesized value of 3.5.

4. Findings

4.1. Mean and percentages

The mean score of perceived democratic leadership was 3.64/5.0. Percentages of agreement (strongly agree/agree) were collapsed to gain an overview of lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership. Results showed that low percentages of lecturers strongly agreed/agreed that their department heads tend to practice democratic leadership. A low of 52 to 59 percent strongly agreed/agreed that their department heads sometimes allow them to take the lead and elicit their opinions before making important decisions. Only 60.6 to 68.9 percent strongly agreed/agreed that their department heads tend to allow stakeholders to have a say in decision-making, empower staff by engaging them in the decision-making process, and believe that all staff need and deserve to be heard and respected. Lastly, a higher proportion of 78.7 percent strongly agreed/agreed that their department heads tend to incorporate staff's knowledge and expertise to obtain optimal results or outcomes (see Table 2).

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Table 2: Percentages of Agreement on Democratic Leadership

Item	1	2	3	4	5	4+5 (Collapsed)
My department head allows every stakeholder (staff, students, parents, and the public) to have a say in decision-making	4.9	6.6	27.9	50.8	9.8	60.6
My department head elicits staff's opinions before making important decisions	8.2	1.6	31.1	45.9	13.1	59
My department head merges staff's knowledge and expertise to obtain optimal results or outcomes	4.9	6.6	9.8	55.7	23	78.7
My department head sometimes allows staff to take the lead (guide/direct a group or activity, set goals, make decisions, and motivate others)	4.9	3.3	39.3	44.3	8.2	52.5
My department head empowers staff by engaging them in the decision-making process	6.6	1.6	26.2	50.8	14.8	65.6
My department head believes that all staff need, and deserve, to be heard and respected	4.9	4.9	21.3	45.9	23	68.9

Strongly agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly disagree = 1

4.2. Kruskal-Wallis H Results

Kruskal-Wallis H test showed nonsignificant differences in lecturers' perceptions of democratic leadership in relation to age and job experience, while Mann-Whitney U test indicated nonsignificant differences in terms of gender (see Table 3).

Table 3: Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H Results

Democratic	Nonparametric test	*p*-value
Gender	Mann-Whitney U test	0.307
Age	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.845
Job Experience	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.258

4.3 Wilcoxon Signed Rank Results

Lastly, Wilcoxon signed rank test showed that all democratic leadership items were significant at a hypothesized value of 3.5, with medians that significantly differed from the test value, indicating strong disagreement (see Table 4).

Table 4: Wilcoxon Signed Rank Results on Democratic Leadership (Hypothesized Value = 3.5)

Item	*p*-value	Conclusion
My department head allows every stakeholder (staff, students, parents, and the public) to have a say in decision-making	<0.001***	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My department head elicits staff's opinions before making important decisions	<0.001***	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating

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		strong disagreement
My department head merges the staff's knowledge and expertise to obtain optimal results or outcomes	<0.001***	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My department head sometimes allows staff to take the lead (guide/direct a group or activity, set goals, make decisions, and motivate others)	<0.001***	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My department head empowers staff by engaging them in the decision-making process	<0.001***	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My department head believes that all staff need and deserve to be heard and respected	<0.001***	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement

***$p < .001$

5. Implications

5.1. Authoritative, Paternalistic, and Hierarchical Leadership

Findings imply that PHEI department heads in Sabah tend to be non-democratic in their leadership. Previous research showed that Malaysian organizations tend to be more authoritarian, paternalistic, and hierarchical, which is in stark contrast to democratic leadership principles. Peter (2017) ascertained that leadership issues in Malaysia are predominantly linked to culture, which heavily influences the way Malaysians conduct business. First, while feedback is a good mechanism for leaders to address and resolve problems and issues, it is often difficult to elicit honest feedback from Malaysian employees due to the nation's high power distance. Oftentimes, soliciting quality feedback is perceived as interrogation; staff are therefore compelled to focus on protecting their self-interests rather than furnishing accurate and authentic information. Another factor that influences the feedback mechanism is that Malaysian employees tend to possess a low level of uncertainty avoidance, which not only makes them overly optimistic, but also prevents them from setting contingency plans. Second, the Malaysian organizational context tends to be highly paternalistic. When leaders declare that they will assist the staff, it usually denotes that they will resolve the issues on their behalf. While this approach often makes employees feel protected and grateful, it restricts their critical problem-solving or independent thinking, while making them become overly dependent on the leader.

Third, Malaysians tend to treat time as fluid or flexible by upholding a concept known as rubber time, which does not align with democratic leadership. Since punctuality is not strictly enforced, social interactions and interpersonal relationships often prevail over adhering to a predetermined schedule. Employees may claim that they are already enroute, but arrive only 40 minutes later. Besides, they may agree to reach a desired outcome or result soon, but this is often said to please the leader rather than meeting the deadline. Lastly, due to high power distance, Malaysians are reluctant to openly admit their lack of understanding with regard to instructions or specifications; after explaining to their staff what to do, many leaders often ask if they understand the requirements. Usually, the staff will emit an affirmative response although they have not fully grasped the directions; consequently, they are unable to accomplish the assigned tasks on time,

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which ultimately creates the impression that they possess negative work attitudes (Peter, 2017).

Past research showed that authoritarian or patriarchal leadership tends to be the most prominent management style among family businesses in Malaysia, at 59 percent (KPMG, 2022). While it is the least preferred leadership style globally, it tends to be most favored among Malaysian business executives, which is reflected through strong family bonds and their emotional attachment to the businesses. Moreover, socioemotional wealth, indicated by heavier emphasis on nonfinancial and internal social performance among business leaders, also seems to reinforce the regenerative power among Malaysian family businesses.

Finally, rather than adopting democratic leadership, many organizations in Malaysia, especially those in the public sector, tend to practice directive leadership, which is rule-oriented, inflexible, and characterized by a silo mentality (Abidin, 2025). It also poses additional barriers due to the nation's hierarchical and bureaucratic systems, multitudinous departments and services, and diverse reporting structures. Therefore, Malaysian organizations need to replace their largely authoritarian leadership with a more democratic governance style to become more driven, dynamic, and enterprising in the face of 21st century challenges.

5.2. Cultural, Historical, Economic, and Political Values

In contrast to democratic leadership, Paiement (2024) reiterated that leadership styles and organizational behavior in Malaysia tend to be influenced by such core values as respect for authority, communal harmony, and a strong emphasis on tradition. In Malaysian culture, hierarchical structures and respect for authority often extend into the workplace, where leaders are perceived as judicious and enlightened authority figures who can maintain organizational equilibrium, uphold social harmony, and foster a collaborative environment. Further, Malaysian leaders' perceptions and personality traits are often influenced by sociohistorical, cultural, and political circumstances. Sociocultural norms that emphasize solidarity and conflict avoidance tend to make Malaysian leaders withdraw during stress to regain social poise, which is further reinforced by the nation's sociopolitical milestones and pluralistic milieu that underscore prudent decision-making and avoidance of sensitive situations or issues. Moreover, deeply entrenched hierarchical systems may also exacerbate the tendency to withdraw during stressful times as leaders tend to act as sole problem-solvers with little outside assistance. Lastly, Malaysian leaders tend to be highly skeptical, which makes them become censorious, apprehensive, or cynical under challenging situations. Nevertheless, their skepticism often serves as a useful tool for critical thinking and risk management within a business culture that values due diligence.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Democratic Decision-making, Openness, and New Management Skills

Findings imply that PHEI leaders tend to non-democratic in their management style. Democratic leadership appears to be a more favorable leadership style for making decisions that directly impact staff's daily work (Forbes Councils, 2022). For example, it enables PHEI leaders to decide which project management software to use and how often they should schedule meetings or extracurricular activities, besides encouraging

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staff to regularly contribute or share their opinions to reach consensus or resolve conflicts. Further, leaders can also develop a more democratic leadership style by encouraging reciprocal communication, thanking staff for their efforts, being open to new ideas, and learning from fellow executives.

To be more democratic, leaders should introduce some changes to their typical decision-making process and show appreciation for staffs' contributions (Forbes Councils, 2022). PHEI leaders can create avenues for staff to willingly share their thoughts with the top management, for example, they can administer a survey to solicit staff's feedback before making decisions. By turning staff members into active decision-makers, PHEI leaders can help them feel like they are making a difference. Besides, acknowledging and rewarding staff for their contributions will make them become more engaged in their work. By thanking staff for providing feedback and emphasizing that their opinions are valued, PHEI leaders can instill a sense of achievement and belonging amongst them.

Additionally, democratic leaders tend to be more receptive to new ideas and willing to refine their management skills (Forbes Councils, 2022). PHEI leaders should make consequential organizational decisions and resolutions based on staff's input or feedback since they often hold diverse and divergent perspectives. By being accepting and broad-minded, PHEI leaders will become more willing to adjust their curricular plans or programs through staff's concordance and accord. Lastly, PHEI leaders can augment their democratic management skills by learning from others in similar roles. To gain insight from other democratic executives, they should network by attending leadership webinars or joining a professional organization to get advice from peers whenever they have to make formidable decisions.

6.2. Creativity, Collaboration, Feedback, Team Play, and Tips

Democratic leadership is effectual for organizations that want their staff to be proactively involved with problem-solving and decision-making; it primarily aims to boost employee engagement within their role and in the organization to stay invested. Democratic leaders encourage creativity and collaboration, regularly solicit feedback, act as team players, and prioritize transparency and communication (NSLS, 2022). First, PHEI leaders need to obtain a wide range of perspectives and value the free flow of ideas to promote innovation and creativity. This principle enables them to create opportunities to collaborate, facilitate brainstorming, or obtain input from staff before making substantial decisions. Second, PHEI leaders should regularly seek feedback and appreciate staff's views and opinions by asking open-ended questions or evaluating staff's input. Third, by acting as team players who prioritize collaboration, PHEI leaders can demonstrate that they value teamwork, while actively guiding and supporting staff. To instill this mindset in others, they should ensure that nothing is deterring staff from completing their tasks by offering clear directions, specific instructions, and frequent encouragement to help them navigate complicated situations or achieve crucial goals. Third, PHEI leaders should keep flexibility at the forefront to allow staff to accomplish tasks autonomously by delegating decisions to them and trusting them to oversee certain situations. While allowing others to choose certain avenues, PHEI leaders are held accountable for the final outcomes, besides establishing certain parameters or requirements to ensure on-task behavior. Lastly, PHEI leaders need to underscore transparency and dual communication by keeping the channels open and sharing information with staff, which in turn, help establish a strong sense of trust, inculcate excitement over new projects, and promote staff volunteering.

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Srivastava (2022) elaborated on four tips for adopting a democratic management style at work. Leaders should (1) decide if the style is suitable for the situation at hand, (2) be open and transparent, (3) ensure that staff commit to execution, and (4) find time for reflection. First, PHEI leaders should be aware that democratic leadership is not universally applicable because there are times when other styles are more effective. Before deploying democratic leadership, they need to determine what the primary goal is and its significance, potential impact, execution time, and outcomes. Second, PHEI leaders need to have a framework to justify why they are adopting the democratic approach, specify the goals, identify potential pitfalls, and finally, collaboratively set up and communicate a process to maximize effectiveness. Besides, they can also encourage staff to discuss questions related to making the final decisions, creating a safe and open environment for idea-sharing, deciding what to do if a consensus cannot be reached, and delivering the best outcome without being constrained by specific ideas. Third, PHEI leaders need to ensure that the whole team are committed to their deliverables and stay accountable in executing the decision or plan, although team members whose ideas are approved may be more engaged than others. Fourth, PHEI leaders need to reflect immediately once the decision has been implemented, which helps them prime for success when facing a similar situation in future. Lastly, to regroup and review the process, they need to assess what has worked well, the primary outcomes, and steps for further improvement.

6.3. Democratic Strategies, Training, and Systemic Collaboration

Leaders can become more democratic by adopting certain strategies (Carter, n. d.). PHEI leaders should practice active listening with the intention to consume and metabolize all the input and feedback available. Therefore, they should show genuine and authentic interest in what others have to say. Besides, effective listening occurs best in a calm setting that reinforces open communication, which allows staff to relax and connect without distractions. As active listeners, leaders should take notes, provide data, suggest alternatives, and make other gestures that demonstrate their interest and commitment. A learnable and transferable skill, active listening can be acquired through appropriate training; for example, PHEI leaders can enhance their active listening by meeting with team leaders, facilitators, and staff on a regular basis.

Additionally, leaders can become more democratic by demonstrating confidence, enthusiasm, and empowerment (Carter, n. d.). PHEI leaders should consistently demonstrate their confidence in the organization's future by defining tactics and strategies, besides showing conviction of their communal capabilities and processes to successfully attain goals. Further, they can effectively model enthusiasm and energy by showing optimism and hope for future endeavors, which gives them the self-assurance to delegate well. Besides acknowledging the success of others, they can also increase their sphere of influence by sharing the organization's vision and mission with individuals whom they trust and respect. Overall, they can seek a meaningful and productive organizational future that rewards all staff for turning it into reality.

Finally, leaders should also receive democratic leadership training to develop the fundamental mentality and to implement the concept of systemic collaboration (Carter, n. d.). PHEI leaders should join training programs that reinforce critical thinking, team practice, and decision-making to gain greater ability in promoting productive dialog, knowledge-sharing, and facilitation, which can help increase workforce engagement, organizational productivity, job enthusiasm, and a sense of responsibility amongst staff.

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Additionally, democratic organizations often thrive on systemic collaboration, which becomes an integral part of their function and purpose. PHEI leaders should therefore encourage staff to share freely, form positive interpersonal connections, and make unanimous decisions that drive a better future. Moreover, they should be aware that systemic collaboration also manifests in varied behaviors, which include delivering small acknowledgments as well as noteworthy gestures. They need to utilize emotional connectedness as a new civil currency to underwrite the evolving social contract with staff. In sum, systemic collaboration requires leaders to assume an emotional and psychological commitment to staff's interests, voices, and capabilities by prioritizing reciprocity and mutual respect, which foster organizational cohesion, stability, and sustainability.

6.4. Limitations

To conclude, this study has yielded useful findings on democratic leadership among PHEI leaders. However, generalizability of findings tends to be limited because of using a convenience sample and questionnaire. Due to the potential for bias, findings from a convenience sample may not be generalizable to the wider population. Besides, the lack of random selection and potential for bias may further compromise the accuracy of data. Participants in the convenience sample may share similar characteristics, thus resulting in a lack of diversity in perspectives and experiences. Additionally, the questionnaire may have some limitations, including the potential for biased responses due to social desirability or ambiguous wording, fixed response options, and low response rates. Besides lacking flexibility, it does not capture nuanced opinions and can be affected by respondent fatigue. Therefore, future research on democratic leadership should adopt more comprehensive data collection methods, interpret results more cautiously, and consider alternative or complementary data collection methods.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were ascertained of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly confidential. They were also informed that the study was of low risk and that they could stop participating any time without any repercussions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no potential conflict of interest regarding this study in terms of the research or publication of this article.

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