Leadership Roles in Community Development in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

What are the leadership roles in community development in Malaysia? Initial research findings based on a survey and focus group interviews of committee members of Neighborhood Associations in Malaysia identified various leadership roles that relate to community development. This research is an extension of those studies using the in-depth interviews of eight Chairmen of the Neighborhood Associations in the state of Penang, Malaysia. Mintzberg’s and Yukl’s leadership roles were used as a theoretical framework for the study. The terms leadership and community development were also reviewed. Based on the findings of the study, the leadership roles and issues related to community leaders in Malaysia are identified and discussed in relation to community development in the country. They include the leadership roles such as being a leader in a multi-racial team, change agent, problem-solver, manager, communicator, negotiator and resource-linker. Some implications and recommendations for leadership development are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

What are the leadership roles in community development in Malaysia? To begin answering the question, let us turn our attention to the definition of leadership. There have been many discussions on the definitions of leadership by many authors, but they have not come to any agreement. Bass and Stogdill after reviewing about 5,000 published works on leadership cannot succeed in getting an agreed upon definition (Adler, 2001). Similarly, Bennis and Nanus (1985) after examining 350 definitions of leadership for the past 75 years indicated there is no clear understanding about leadership. However, a definition can help us in understanding the multitude of factors that affect leadership. Abu Daud Silong (2009), after examining almost 20 definitions on leadership, came to the conclusion that there are certain key elements important in the definition of leadership: (1) It is a group phenomenon – it involves the leader and the followers, (2) it occurs in a context, (3) it involves the process of influencing, and (4) it involves accomplishment of goals. This study involves leaders in the context of a Malaysian community, comprising of the Chairman of Neighborhood Associations.

There are various leadership theories that explain how well leaders can influence others. Abu Daud Silong (2009) identified four major groups of theories – the traits, behaviors, situational and the integrative theory. This research examined leadership roles, which is one of the theories classified under the behavior theory. In the context of community leadership, it examines some of the roles performed by leaders in order to accomplish the desired goals.

The study is conducted based on initial research findings of a survey and focus group interviews of committee members of Neighborhood Associations in Malaysia that identified various leadership roles related to community development. The focus interviews described roles of the community leaders. When those roles are ranked according to the survey findings, their importance are as follows: leading a multi-racial team, change agent, problem-solver, negotiator or mediator, planning and conducting community programs, communicator, resource-linker and manager (Madinah Mohamad, et al., 2008).

These roles were viewed from theories proposed by Mintzberg (1973) in his ten managerial roles and Yukl (1994) in his studies of managers’ dimensions of behaviors. Mintzberg (1973) identified ten roles of managers when they are conducting their daily activities. These roles include as a figurehead, leader, liaison, monitor, disseminator, spokesman, entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator and negotiator. Yukl (1994) proposed a related concept of dimensions of managerial behavior. He identified 15 behaviors that include: Planning and organizing, problem-solving,
clarifying roles and objectives, informing, monitoring, motivating and inspiring, consulting, delegating, supporting, developing and mentoring, managing conflict and team building, networking, recognizing, rewarding and representation. There are a lot of similarities between managerial roles described by Mintzberg and Yukl.

Community development is viewed as a process, method, program and movement (Sanders, 1958). As a process (Hope, 1980) it involves solving social and economic problems of the community by seeking help from government, non-government and private organizations. Through the process, the community develops from one state to another that involves a progression of changes (Sanders, 1958). On the other hand, as a method, community development puts emphasis on both the process and goals to be attained; as a program is said to be a set of procedures and activities to be conducted for community members; and finally as a movement, it is viewed as a crusade or a course to which people become committed to. Ploch (1976) defined community development as the active involvement of members of the community in improving life in the community.

Turning to Malaysia, Maimunah Ismail (1999) provides a more comprehensive definition of community development – it is a process of community activities that are planned and organized in such a way to raise the quality of life in the community in terms of economy, social, culture, spiritual and the environment through initiative and active participation of the community members and with minimum outside help. Abu Daud Silong et al. (2007) suggested a community development model that is more collaborative and comprehensive in nature. The model should utilize a participative kind of leadership, whereby community leaders need to involve community members in the early stages of program planning and also in the conduct of the program.

Madinah Mohamad et al. (2008) identified the following purposes of community program: (1) To achieve social, economic, spiritual and cultural development; (2) to develop functioning community groups and organizations; (3) to develop community leaders; (4) to improve relationship and cooperation among community members; (5) to maximize utilization of community resources; (6) to increase capacity of the community members to face challenges; and (7) to encourage planning and conduct of programs at the community level. “In general, however, the purpose of community development in the United States or any part of the world is to improve the quality of life of the community” (Mohammad Shatar Sabran, 2003: 12).

The main aim of this study is to identify some of the leadership roles performed by leaders of a Neighborhood Association in relation to community development in Malaysia. Based on the findings, some recommendations are forwarded to improve community leadership effectiveness in Malaysia.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research is a collaborative research between the researchers and the Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister’s Department Malaysia (locally abbreviated as JPNIN). It is an extension of initial studies based on data collected using the focus interviews and a survey. This research involved data collection using the in-depth interviews of eight Chairmen of the Neighborhood Associations in the state of Penang, Malaysia.

Names of the potential respondents were identified together with the Director, JPNIN Penang based on agreed upon criteria. Initially, about 15 names were identified to include leaders of various races such as Malay, Chinese and Indians and to include males and females. However after contacting the potential respondents, only eight of the respondents agreed to participate in the research. They were all Chairmen of the Neighborhood Association and comprised of four Malays, two Chinese and two Indians. Only one female participated in the study, since she was the only female Chairperson of the Association.

Appointments were made for the interviews. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed by the researcher that lasted about two to three hours and were conducted at their offices, houses or any suitable places agreed upon. The interview guide was pre-tested by the researcher. Some respondents required multiple re-arrangements before the final interview could be conducted. In some cases, follow-ups were necessary due to some unavoidable circumstances that the respondents had other matters to attend to.

The responses of the participants were very encouraging as they indicated that they were honored to be chosen as subjects of the research. The data collected from the respondents were believed to have reached the saturation point.
The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. The recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed qualitatively according to themes. The leadership roles of committee members of Neighborhood Associations in Malaysia were identified and discussed in relation to community development in the country.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on the discussion of the findings. It includes: (1) the reasons why the respondents wanted to be community leaders; and (2) the roles of the community leaders.

Reasons For Wanting To Be Community Leaders

Why did the respondents want to be community leaders? Based on the data gathered there were various reasons given:

1. Has strong desire to serve the community – “would like to solve community problem”; “feel responsible to help in the socio-economic development of the local community”; “to assist the community, who comprises of the poor, to develop the necessary vision to move forward”; “to provide the community with necessary information related to life and the government”; “to assist and develop the community from poverty and hence move forward”;

2. Has strong motivation wanting to do something – “cannot tolerate the community problems that are happening”; “strong feeling and priority to help solve community problems that occur frequently”; “see the opportunity to foster good relationship among community members”;

3. Strong interest, motivation and capability to be community leaders – “have the interest”; “have the potential and high motivation”; “have the experience and knowledge in leadership”; “have the caliber to hold positions with the help of friends and community members”;

4. Interest in participating in voluntary activity – “strong interest in conducting voluntary activities”; “interest and awareness to participate in voluntary activities”;

5. Supports – “supports from friends”; “motivation from other committee members who believe in his/her leadership traits”

LEADERSHIP ROLES IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In the Malaysian community setting, this study identified various leadership roles that are important. This includes the role of problem-solver, change agent, communicator, resource-linker, negotiator, manager and leading a multi-racial group.

Problem-Solver

There exist many socio-economic problems in the community. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia has identified about 23 serious social problems in Malaysia (Madinah Mohamad & Abu Daud Silong, 2003). A survey (Abu Daud Silong et al., 2007) identified several major social problems faced by selected Malaysian communities that include indiscipline among school children, drug abuse, illegal racing, unemployment, thefts, gambling and fights. Some of these problems were also identified by the respondents in the eight communities. They mentioned problems like “drugs, thefts, illegal sexual acts among Muslims, vandalism involving youths, indiscipline among school children such as truancy, fights between neighbors of different races and also cases of non-Muslim having dogs in flats that offend the Muslims”. The leaders have to tackle and solve these problems. Some of the ways they solve those problems were through making reports and consultation with relevant agencies such as to the police for cases involving drugs, thefts and fights; to the Drug Rehabilitation Centers for cases of drug abuse; to the Department of National Unity and Integration involving racial issues; and to the schools for indiscipline cases among school children.
The leaders also focused their efforts in assisting to solve economic problems in the community. These problems involved various groups such as those in poverty, the needy community members, old folks, those involved in accidents, the handicapped, women and single mothers, night market traders and sick community members. The leaders solve the economic problems by giving financial help to those in need, getting hospital treatment for those who were sick and involved in accidents, conducting sewing classes to raise additional income, develop entrepreneurial activities for women and single mothers, and preparing working papers to eradicate poverty for the community.

Manager

Another important role identified by respondents involved the setting of community development objectives – the direction where the community should be heading. Various objectives were mentioned that included:
1. To establish peace, harmony and unity among the community members
2. To develop programs for community members to come together
3. To provide services for the youths, needy groups, children and various other groups and members of the community
4. To get the interest and involvement of members in community programs
5. Develop functioning associations in the community such as developing the Neighborhood Association as a strong, active and recognized center for volunteerism
6. Establish the channel for information between the government agencies and the people and vice-versa. Example: to receive and act on complaints.
7. Solve community problems such as social, economic and health problems

The respondents also identified some of the ways how the objectives could be set. This included methods such as through observation, discussion with Committee Members of Neighborhood Associations and members of the community, getting participation from the people, making assessment of community activities and getting assistance from government agencies such as the Department of National Unity and Integration.

Who should be involved in setting objectives of community development? The respondents mentioned various groups of people that should be actively involved in setting the directions for the community. They included the local leaders such as the Chairman and committee members of Neighborhood Associations, heads of other NGOs, and government agencies such as the Department for National Unity and Integration.

As manager of the community, the leaders also had to conduct meetings, both informal and formal meetings. Various people were involved in the meetings such as the committee members and other relevant parties. Some of the things discussed in the meetings included yearly activities of the Associations, reports of finance and activities, current issues facing the community, community problems and solutions, community services, plans and directions for the Association, new ideas for the community and new appointments of Committee Members. The formal meeting must be conducted at least once a month with proper letters of invitation and agendas. Informal meetings could be conducted in a more ad-hoc manner, involving a few committee members and conducted in one of the members’ houses.

Besides conducting and attending meetings, community leaders had to attend a lot of functions on behalf of the Association. They had to attend activities organized by the Association, funerals conducted by members of the community, community religious events and activities, national celebration such as the Independence Day celebration, open houses organized by the District Officers and others, and functions organized by government agencies.

Resource-Linker

The community leadership also played an important role in linking community members to relevant parties and government agencies and vice-versa. Some of the agencies that played a significant role in the development of the eight communities in this study and often being referred to are JPNIN, Department of Health, local government clinics, the Local Town Council, Universiti Sains Malaysia, District Office, the Welfare Department, KEMAS (Community Development Agency), the Public Works Department, Islamic Council Penang, Police Department, Hospitals, local NGOs and the local politicians. Linking the community members to the government agencies and other relevant parties that helped facilitate the process of community development was very important. Any community development effort would need some kind of outside help and intervention plus the efforts of members of the community themselves.
Examples of roles of resource-linker in the communities were: When some of problems faced by the community could not be solved then the leaders indicated certain actions should be taken such as: “Refer to relevant ministries”; “Refer to officers (government) serving in the area”; “Request for help from local politicians (local political representatives)”.

**Change Agent**

One of the major roles of the community leaders was to bring about changes in the community. The respondents indicated that most often there was a need for social-economic development in the communities. For this to happen they had to conduct the relevant programs and activities for the communities that included programs in the areas of safety, entrepreneurship, health, education, infrastructures, economic, religious and social activities. These programs were conducted for various groups in the communities such as children, youths, women, single mothers, the handicapped and adults.

Besides organizing programs, the respondents also indicated that they organized training for community members. Some of the courses that they had organized were management and administrative courses, accounting courses, motivational camps, sewing and cooking classes, computer training, soccer training, cleanliness campaign, social awareness courses, character building and study visits. Some of the participants for the training programs included committee members of the Association, youths, adults, children, women, single mothers and interested members of the community. The training activities were funded by various sources such as government agencies, donations from local politicians and individuals, the private sector and collection of fees from participants. Some criteria were used in selecting participants to attend those courses and these were the interest shown, the potential of participants in the program, whether they were active community members or not and whether they were suitable for the training.

In attempting to bring about changes to the community, the respondents also indicated that there was resistance to the programs and training implemented. These were in the form of non-constructive criticisms, cynical remarks and wild accusations by “failed” leaders.

**Negotiator or Mediator**

The respondents also indicated that there were frequent quarrels, fights, conflicts and misunderstandings among members of the community. For example, there were quarrels among family members, quarrels among neighbors, religious conflicts, conflicts among youths, racial fights among children and youths, fights among drug addicts and fights among locals and foreigners. In many cases they had to act as negotiator or mediator by giving advice to those involved through face-to-face meetings, listening to those involved and providing counseling to parties involved. In other situations they had to refer the cases to relevant authorities such as JPNIN and also made reports to the police. All cases needed to be handled with great care and sensitivity, especially those involving racial or religious groups. At anytime these conflicts could be blown into full scale racial riots involving others outside the community that could be capitalized by various political parties. Malaysia has that potential since it is a multi-racial and multi-religious nation.

**Communicator**

As leaders of the community, the respondents were also involved in communicating to various groups of people. Their leadership responsibilities included making written and verbal communications to the other committee members, members of the community, officers from government agencies and other relevant parties outside the communities. Some of the written communication they had to attend to included letter writing, making advertisements, preparing reports, preparing minutes of meetings, writing speeches and preparing public notices. On the other hand verbal communication included making presentation on activities and programs of the Association, making speeches, communicating to government officers and politicians, giving ideas and opinions, seeking views from educated people, communicating to educated people, chairing meetings, presenting working papers, communicating with members of the community and people in high positions.

The respondents also indicated they had to give instructions so that those instructions were being followed. They had to do this in a firm manner, give accurate information, use the right language, provide examples and give
Leading a Multi-Racial Community

Malaysia has a population of a very mixed racial composition that consists of more than 64 ethnic and 217 sub-ethnic groups (Abu Daud Silong, 2005). In Peninsular Malaysia such as in the state of Penang, the population usually consists of three major races that include the Malays, Chinese and Indians and with some minority groups such as the Sikhs, Eurasian and others. In a country with 28.96 million people, the racial composition of the Malaysian population is made up of 17.95 million (67.0%) of the indigenous groups that include the Malay, 6.52 million Chinese (24.3%), 1.97 million Indians (7.4%) and 0.35 million (1.30%) others. In addition, Malaysia has recently been deluged with a new group of people, the immigrants. In 2010, the total immigrant population will come to about to 2.17 million (Government of Malaysia, 2006). They consists of people from neighboring countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, China and also countries as far as India, Bangladesh, African countries and also from the Middle East. The respondents represent communities that consist of at least the three major races and sometimes with minorities that may include immigrants. Thus one of the key roles of leaders in this kind of community is to lead people that have different languages, religions, customs and beliefs. Thus promoting unity and harmony among the various groups becomes the main thrust of leading Malaysian communities. The respondents indicated that they had to: “Promote harmony among people of various groups in the community”; “be involved in various social activities such as marriage ceremonies of various races”; “promote unity among youths of various races through games”; “holding activities for various groups to mingle with each other”; “conduct activities to promote racial unity”.

Racial harmony is of extreme importance to Malaysia since the Malaysian communities comprise of people of such diverse groups with different backgrounds. As such racial conflicts may happen at any time, which can develop into racial riots as it happened in May 1969 (Azman Amin Hassan, 2005). From time to time, racial flares can occur in any community that can develop into bigger conflict if not handled with care. Thus the community leaders have a very important role in ensuring racial harmony at the grass root level. This study indicates that there are racial conflicts that occur within the community, and in some cases it involves the foreigners. But in many cases, the Malaysian community leaders have good and necessary knowledge and experience in handling diverse groups. They usually have some ability to lead a multi-racial community and are able to monitor and handle racial harmony at the community level.

Malaysians can also accept leaders from other races in the communities. For example for “Communities 2 and 5”, the majority of the committee members and members of the community are Chinese but they have Indians as their leaders. Similarly for “Community 4”, the community is made up of a Malay majority, but they have more Chinese among the committee members of the Association. This phenomenon is acceptable in Malaysia because the country is ruled by a coalition that comprises of leaders from various races. The Malaysian government places strong emphasis on making unity among the races a key political agenda through policies and programs developed for the people at all levels, including the grass root level.

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Leadership and community development is closely associated. One of the keys to successful efforts in developing communities is the presence of leaders. Without leaders community development may result in poorly conceived programs to be implemented (Mohammad Shatar Sabran, 2003).

The respondents in these studies are community leaders, who occupy the position of Chairman, in the Neighborhood Association. As leaders in the neighborhood areas, they are able to influence some behaviors of individuals or groups towards the desired goals. The groups under the influence of the Association leadership include the children, youths, adults and the veterans in their respective areas. Also most of the communities under their leadership are multi-racial in nature, composed of the main ethnic groupings in Malaysia that includes the Malays,
Chinese, Indians and others. Malaysia is a highly diverse society with the Malay, Chinese and Indians as the major races of the population in Peninsular Malaysia.

The Neighborhood Association is a governmental NGO and hence all leaders are chosen on a voluntary basis. They are elected by the members of the communities and appointed by the Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister’s Department Malaysia. Thus it is very interesting to know why they want to become leaders.

Most of the respondents indicated that they have a strong desire to serve; doing anything that they can to help the community such as solving community problems and bringing about socio-economic changes. Other reasons being given include a strong motivation to do something for the community, have strong interest and high capability to be leaders, very interested in voluntary work, and they have the necessary support from friends and others.

In terms of leadership capability, it is probably due to the fact that most of the respondents have been in leadership positions for a long time. They have the experience, and over the years they may acquire some of the leadership skills and also have become more acceptable as leaders in the community.

Leadership, based on a strong desire to serve others, is more aligned to the idea of servant leadership as proposed by Greenleaf (1977). Serving others is the key to servant leadership as shown by a leader like Mother Theresa where “through her humble and ordinary nature, strong moral values and dedicated service to the poor and the afflicted – inspired hundreds of followers to join her order and emulate her example” (Lussier and Achua, 2007:330). As one respondent indicated, “it does not matter whether it is day or night, even if people come at 11.00 pm we still have to entertain them” (Madinah et al., 2008). Also another respondent said that “leader for the community must have high volunteering spirit and not self-interest; volunteer work means no reward, sacrifice and continue to work under all situations” (Madinah et al., 2008:156). Thus the respondents indicated they also have strong motivation to do something for the community, strong interest in voluntary work and wanting to be community leaders, have the capability to be leaders and have the necessary support from families and friends.

The desire to serve the community is there, and the way they serve others is through performing various leadership roles in the community. To be considered as effective leaders they have to perform those roles well. The research identified some major roles related to community leadership in Malaysia. These are the roles of leading a multi-racial group, problem-solver, negotiator, communicator, and manager.

As the manager, one of the main tasks the leader has to do is to set the directions for the community development efforts. They have to understand the audience that they have to serve which include various groups such as the children, youths, women, handicapped people, needy people, old folks and single parents. These groups also come from various races such as the Chinese, Malays, Indians and other minority races. Recently there is also the presence of foreigners such as the Vietnamese, Indonesians, Bangladeshis and others. So in setting the objectives of community development, the leaders have to really understand the situations or problems facing the community. They have done some assessment and consultation with others to determine the situation. However, in order to get an accurate assessment they have to rely on more professional approaches in analyzing community needs.

The needs analysis is crucial for them to perform the roles well. As problem-solver and change agent, they need to identify the problems of the community accurately. What are the changes necessary in the community? What are the problems facing the community? The usual way is to wait for complaints faced by members of the community. But this is more of a fire fighting approach, when there is a fire you try to extinguish it. This is more of a reactive approach rather than a proactive one. As such the changes that the leaders want to bring may not necessarily bring about the quality of life that they want to improve. The kinds of programs or training that they have conducted should be based on the identified needs. Similarly, the problems they solve may not be long-term efforts but more trying to help in solving daily problems.

The respondents also indicated that they have to communicate in writing and verbally to members of the community and others outside the community. They have to do presentations, speeches, prepare reports, write minutes, give instructions, delegate and provide advice. One of the keys to effective leadership is to develop and communicate some kind of central message to the community (Abu Daud Silong, 2009).
Other important roles of community leaders are to negotiate conflicts and link the community to outside people and resources. The role of negotiator or mediator is also extremely important since conflicts will frequently occur among family members, neighbors, youth groups, political groups and other groups. The conflicts that they have to resolve require them to be very cautious as these may involve fights between groups of different races and religions. They can be very volatile and erupt into bigger conflicts.

Also, in helping the community to develop, the leaders often have to link with others outside the communities, mainly government agencies and also other organizations. Thus networking is also a key element in conducting the role of resource-linker. The leaders have to know the relevant people in conducting community programs and solving community problems. Even though the leaders have to depend a lot on their own efforts in developing the community, help from others will also facilitate efforts of community development.

Some of the key issues that can be implied from this study are the involvement of women as top leaders, the involvement of youths and the professional groups in the committee members. While there are about 33.8% percent women involved as committee members, only one (12.5%) serves as the top leaders. There were various factors that prevent women to be top leaders (Zaharah Hassan, 2008). Also there is a lack of interest among youths and professionals to participate in the Associations. Many problems in the community come from youths and as such their involvement in leadership positions will help the community development efforts. Similarly, professionals are valuable human resource that can value-add to community development efforts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are various leadership roles identified in this study related to community development in Malaysia. One of the key roles is leading a multi-racial community since the Malaysian population is a very diverse group of people. In the communities being studied the population is composed of Malays, Chinese and Indians with some minorities. Thus the main objective of any community development efforts is to create a peaceful and harmonious living condition among the diverse groups of people. It was found that the leaders have a strong desire to serve the community. They do this through performing various leadership roles such as being a change agent, problem solver, manager, communicator, negotiator and resource-linker.

One recommendation that can be made from this study is to enhance the leadership competencies among those involved in the Associations. If they are more competent then there is a better chance that they can conduct their leadership roles in the community more effectively. Also JPNIN will have to conduct awareness campaigns of the need to involve youths and professionals in the Association and to prepare more women for top leadership positions. This is critical as more of the people in the community that need help are the youths and women.

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