

INFLUENCE STRATEGIES OF MALAYSIAN MANAGERS

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Abstract

This study examines the influence strategies of Malaysian managers. The problem being investigated here involves whether there is evidence of a particular influence strategy being favoured by Malaysian managers. Second, are demographic variables important in affecting the choices of influence strategies? A total 350 questionnaires were distributed with a 39% response rate. The study found that the rational persuasion strategy followed by the inspirational and consultation strategies was the most popular strategy while exchange strategy and ingratiation was the least used strategy by Malaysian Managers. Some relationships and differences were found between demography and influence strategy.

1 INTRODUCTION

As organizations become rapidly large in number and size, the issue of managers exerting influence to seek compliance from subordinates has become vital. Managers involved may instigate authority differently, swayed by one's predisposed personality as well as induced by demographic variables. There has been increasing empirical evidence supporting that various factors may affect the influence strategy used by managers (Carli, 1999; Egri, Ralston, Murray, and Nicholson, 2000; Ralston, Vollmer, Srinivasan, Nicholson, Tang, and Wan, 2001; Christie Kwon, Stoeberl, and Baumhart, 2003; Getz and Volkema, 2001; Husted, 1999; Doney, Cannon, and Mullen, 1998; Lu, Rose, and Blodgett, 1999; and Fu, Kennedy, Tata, Yukl, and Bond, 2001). Therefore, understanding how demography affect influence strategy and whether certain cultures have preference to use certain influence strategies in the workplace should be of value towards organizational success.

The nine proactive influence strategies identified by Yukl (1994) that are relevant for managers in organizations will be addressed by this study. The nine influence strategies identified are rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, consultation, ingratiation, personal appeal, exchange, coalition strategy, legitimating, and pressure.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Influence has been defined in terms of the strategy used to obtain a desired goal from a target individual (Farmer, Maslyn and Fedor, and Goodman, 1997) or as the process of changing someone's behavior, (Norlida, Za'faran, Rabiah, and Rohaya, 2011). Yukl (1994) sees influence as merely the effect of one party (the "agent") on another (the "target"). Buss (1987) sees it more as the means in which individuals purposely "alter, change, influence or exploit others".

Since 1980s the issue concerning influence strategy has received increasing attention. Many aspects of this theme were analysed in detail and examined. Among the areas researched in the area related to influence strategies are whether the "objectives of influence attempts varied with the direction of influence" (Erez, Rim, & Keider, 1986; Kipnis et al., 1980; Yukl & Fable, 1990); whether managers use different strategies with regard to the relative status of the agent and target (Yukl and Tracy, 1992; Yukl & Fable, 1990; Yukl, Fable, & Youn, 1993; and Enns and McFarlin, 2005); whether influence strategy used over a period of time changes (Yukl, Fable, and Youn, 1993); the effectiveness of different influence

strategies (Yukl and Fable, 1992), and lastly the effectiveness of strategy combinations, (Case, Dosier, Murkinson, and Keys, 1988; Yukle and Fable, 1992).

Research on the relationship between gender and influence strategies by Carli (1999) found differences in the influence strategies between men and women. Her study found that women usually have problems in utilizing influence as compared to men. This is especially true when the influence strategy is related to the expression of competence and authority.

With regards to the relationship between culture and influence strategies, Tsui, Nifadkar, and Ou (2007) stated that several patterns in the relationship were found by researchers between these two variables. In previous cross-cultural research using Hofstede's (1980) four cultural dimensions it has been found that the use of coercive influence strategy is related positively to power distance (Egri et al., 2000; Ralston et al., 2001). Power Distance was also found to be positively related to unethical decision making (Christie et al., 2003; Getz and Volkema, 2001) as well as perceived corruption (Husted, 1999). Ralston et al. (2001) in their research found that the Mexican and Hong Kong managers see that soft strategies to be less acceptable than did the Dutch and American managers and that hard strategies as reasonably more acceptable. In addition, the German and Indian managers felt the same way as the Mexican and Hong Kong managers in that soft strategies are less acceptable. Doney et al., (1998) and Lu et al., (1999) have found that within individualistic cultures, hard, assertive influence strategies tend to be more acceptable. However, the studies of Fu et al., (2001) have found the same hard, assertive influence strategies to be more acceptable in collectivistic cultures.

The present study will try to uncover the influence strategies favoured by the Malaysian culture and to understand the relationship between demographic factors and influence strategies. The research questions for this research are:

1. Which influence strategy is most prevalent among the Malaysian managers?
2. Is there a relationship between demographic factors and influence strategies used by Malaysian managers?

3 METHODOLOGY

The independent variable demography was broken down into seven dimensions, namely gender, age, marital status, years of working experience, job level, race, and sector category. The dependent variable influence strategy was operationalized by 9 dimensions: rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, consultation, ingratiation, personal appeals, exchange, coalition strategy, legitimating strategy, and pressure strategy.

This research analyzed the relationship between managers' demography and influence strategy used. A total of 136 managers from the Private as well as Public sectors in Northern Malaysia were surveyed through convenient sampling. The Schriesheim & Hinkin (1990) scale was used with slight modifications to measure the choice of influence strategy. Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point scale. Each of the influence strategy was measured through five to seven items. Reliabilities for the influence strategies range from .57 to .82. Internal consistency reliability coefficients for the nine strategies are .73, .82, .59, .71, .65, .67, .66, .72 and .57 respectively. All the strategies meet Nunnally's (1967) .50 or above criterion.

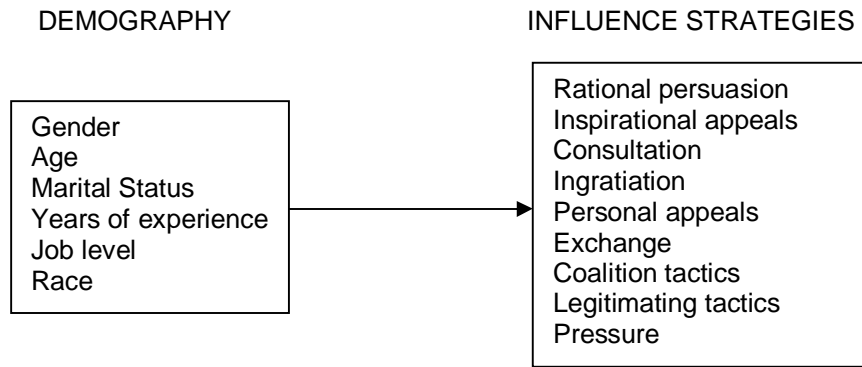


Fig. 1: The Theoretical Framework

4 RESULTS

From the results of the Friedman test, it seems that the most frequently used strategy was the rational persuasion followed by the inspirational and consultation strategies. Table 1 shows they all have mean scores above 5. The legitimating, ingratiation, personal appeal and exchange strategy were the least used strategy and as can be seen in Table 1 had mean scores below 4 on a 7 point scale.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviations of Influence Strategies

INFLUENCE STRATEGIES	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
Rational persuasion	5.478	0.841
Inspirational appeals	5.324	0.863
Consultation	5.162	0.849
Coalition strategy	4.361	1.003
Pressure	4.191	0.793
Legitimizing strategy	3.720	1.054
Ingratiation	3.688	0.847
Personal appeals	3.668	1.015
Exchange	2.871	1.018

The respondents for the study consisted of 84 (61.8%) males and 50 (36.8%) females. A t-test was conducted to test if differences exist between the influence strategy used between males and females. It was found that there exist a significant difference between males and females in their ingratiation, exchange, and pressure strategy ($p=0.05, 0.02, 0.03$). Males showed a slightly higher use all these three influence strategies than females.

A total of 104 (76.5 %) of the respondents were married and 31 (22.8%) were single. There exists a significant difference, in pressure strategy between married and singles group ($p=0.04$). The married group showed a slightly higher mean on pressure strategy than the singles group (married: mean 4.00, s.d. =0.94; singles: mean 3.92, s.d. =0.71). In terms of experience the sample consist of 25 (18.4%) of those with less or equal to 5 years, 81 (59.6%) of those between 6 to 15 years, and 30 (22%) of those more than 15 years. The results of the one-way Anova, showed a significant difference in only four of the nine influence strategies. Respondents with five years and less experience are significantly different in ingratiation, personal appeal, exchange and legitimating influence strategies (sig. $F=0.006, 0.0095, 0.001$ and 0.03 respectively). This group had higher mean than those within the 6-15 years' experience group and above 15 years' experience category.

The sample consisted of 51 (37.5%) Malays, 67 (49.3%) Chinese, and 17 (12.5%) Indians. The one-way Anova carried out show no significant differences between the three races. Age category was divided into three groups, with the less and equal to 30 years of age composed of 21.3%, the second group with 31 - 45 of age which made-up of 66.2% and the last group that is older than 45 (about 12.5%). Age category showed a significant difference in only one influence strategy which is the exchange strategy (sig. $F=0.03$). The youngest group (less or equal to 30 years old) scored the highest in exchange strategy with the mean = 3.29, while the 31- 45 age group had a mean= 2.78 and more than 45 years old had a mean 2.62.

The job level of the respondents composed of 14 (10.3%) executives, 56 (41.2%) assistant managers, 59 (43.4%) managers, 6(4.4%) general managers or director level. The General Manager/Directors group were found to be significantly higher than the other three groups of executives, Assistant Manager and manager groups (sig. $F=0.0138$) in only the inspiration appeals strategy.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The initial findings of this study suggest that demographics had a partial effect on the influence strategy used. Age has been linked with job performance such as turnover and absenteeism (Potter and Steers, 1973; Rhodes, 1990; Hackett, 1990). Individuals at any particular stage are thought to have common needs and similar ways of coping with and responding to certain situation. The study showed that as the age increases, the less likely it is for an individual to use the exchange strategy. This could be argued from the point of view that an increase in age provides a higher opportunity for interaction, which is assumed to develop individuals towards higher cooperation or need for more control. It would also provide individuals with more learning experience and help them make good social adjusters. Thus, they are less willing to make an offer of favour exchange in order to gain compliance.

Regarding the influence strategy used, the effect of job levels was found to be significant only on the inspiration appeal. Senior managers significantly use more of these strategies than the junior managers. Senior managers who are at a higher level of the organization hierarchy possess relatively higher power and status authority with their subordinates and have more clout to seek compliance from them. Their past successes and positions, would make inspiration appeal more attractive.

This study did not find any difference in influence strategy between the Malays and Chinese. This could mean that Malaysians regardless of their race do not show differences in influence strategies used. This could also indicate the homogeneity of the Malaysian managers regardless of their race or factors associated with race.

Years of work experience was found to have a significant effect on ingratiation, personal appeals, exchange and legitimating strategies with the shortest length of experience showing a higher mean than the other two longer experience work groups. This could be seen as that category seen as still in the period of needing to prove themselves and still under probation as far as management is concerned.

Married respondents showed a significance difference with the singles group in pressure strategy used with the married group having a higher score. This may be due to the married group having a higher tendency to control others, to lead, to persuade, to take charge of situation, to set a pattern or standard that others should follow. Those who are married, having role's status as the figure head of the family possessed a stronger need to be understood and followed. Therefore, it was quite conceivable to find that the married group reported a significantly higher use of pressure strategy.

With respect to influence strategy used, the study found that the legitimating, ingratiation, personal appeal and exchange strategy were the least used strategy by the Malaysian managers while the three highest used influence strategies are the rational persuasion, inspirational appeal and consultation strategies. This result could be explained from the Malaysian cultural perspective. Citing from Hofstede (1980), Malaysia ranked second lowest in individualism as well as by Asma (1992) who said that Malaysians are characterized by the "underlying values of teamwork, cooperation; respect for

seniors/elderly people and preserving face; respect for authority and hierarchy; and values of harmony". In other words, this means that Malaysia is rather within the collectivist dimension, where people see themselves as belonging to groups. From the Malaysian perspective, satisfaction at work comes more from enjoying warm interpersonal relationships with their colleagues, respecting each other and having harmonious relationships with everyone in the organisation. Thus, using these soft influence strategies seem to be more in line with the Malaysian culture and way of doing things. The results of the study have shown the relationship between demographic factors and influence strategy used. It is hoped that the results can be used for better understanding of the nature of influence strategy and potential use when managers are working in an environment that requires subordinates' compliance.

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