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THE HARD TRUTH ABOUT SOFT SKILLS

Exploring the Association between Leadership Competency and Career Advancement

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INTRODUCTION

- Employee engagement has a significant impact on employee performance, and an engaged employee is critical to the organisation's success. Furthermore, with employee turnover a growing issue in healthcare organizations in the world, organisations are increasingly looking to engage their employees.
- Despite this need, studies have shown evidence that global employee engagement is stagnant or falling, with many managers uncertain of the causes or necessary interventions. With only 59% of the local workforce engaged, Singaporeans are among the least engaged in Asia [1]. It is thus beneficial for healthcare organisations to focus on the determinants of employee engagement.

CAREER ADVANCEMENT

- Career advancement is a key determinant of career development. However, efforts to address this dimension appear to be lacking [2].
- A comprehensive analysis on leadership competency and its impact on the perception of career advancement within the healthcare setting has not been conducted. **As we believed that this information is crucial to the design of effective strategies to improve employee engagement**, we sought to examine the association between **leadership competency of healthcare professionals** and their **perceptions of career advancement**.

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY

- Leadership competency is complex and multi-faceted, and studies show it has a potential impact on career advancement.

METHODS

- An ecological, cross-sectional study design was used. Data was collected from September to November 2016 at the Allied Health Division (AHD) of Singapore General Hospital. In total, 191 Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) completed the AHEAD (Aspiring leaders in Healthcare-Empowering individuals, Achieving excellence, Developing talents) and the SingHealth Employee Engagement Survey (EES) (Table 1).
- We have recently developed and validated AHEAD - a 25-item instrument to holistically assess leadership competency in AHPs. Items are categorized under 2 domains – Values and Skills, and rated using a 5-point Likert scale. (The AHEAD instrument and more details can be found in <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4759728/>)
- The perception of career advancement was measured by 4 items through the SingHealth EES. Each item was rated using a 5-point Likert scale, and the average proportion of favourable (agree/strongly agree) responses was computed.
- Poisson generalized estimating equation models with an independent correlation structure and a log-link function were fitted to estimate the adjusted rate ratios (aRRs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the associations of the AHEAD items with the number of favourable responses on the career advancement items. In each model, we accounted for clustering by AHD departments and controlled for length of service as a confounder. All statistical analyses were done with the *geepack* R package.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

N = 191		
Department, N (%)	Dietetics	15 (7.9%)
	Medical Social Services	53 (26.7%)
	Occupational Therapy	38 (17.8%)
	Podiatry	3 (1.6%)
	Physiotherapy	88 (46.8%)
Job Grade, N (%)	13 (Junior)	101 (49.8%)
	14 (Senior)	53 (26.1%)
	15 (Principal)	29 (14.3%)
	16 (Senior Principal II)	16 (7.9%)
	17 (Senior Principal I)	4 (2.0%)
Length of service, N (%)	1 to less than 3 years	5 (2.6%)
	3 to less than 5 years	30 (15.7%)
	5 to less than 10 years	117 (61.3%)
	10 to less than 20 years	35 (18.3%)
	20 years and above	4 (2.1%)
EES scores by department, %	Dietetics	57.5%
	Medical Social Services	61%
	Occupational Therapy	61.3%
	Podiatry	30%
	Physiotherapy	46.4%

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

- The association between leadership competency and the perception of career advancement was generally supported. Figure 1 shows the correlations among the component and total measures of AHEAD items and Career Advancement. Overall, total AHEAD score was strongly associated with the rate of favourable responses (aRR for a 1-point increase, 1.36; 95% CI, 1.19 to 1.55). Specifically, a 1-point increase in overall AHEAD score was associated with 1.36 times higher favourable response rate on career advancement. Strong predictors of perception of career advancement included skills such as Writing Skills, Interpersonal Skills, and Domain Knowledge, and values such as Commitment, and Integrity.

SKILLS

- Professional competency and increasing one's knowledge, skills, and education is the strategy for success in advancement in healthcare organizations [3]. Domain knowledge is therefore a core component of an AHP's competency, which is inextricably linked to job performance. This, in turn, is an essential factor in career advancement. That said, in our study, "domain knowledge" was not the only predictor. Nor was it the best predictor. Thus, our findings suggest that while hard skills are necessary, they are not sufficient.
- Soft skills** - in particular communication and interpersonal skills, had a significant impact on the perception of career advancement. Writing skills is the top AHEAD predictor, and the ability to analyse issues, write concisely and present ideas in a convincing manner are valued competencies in the public sector and healthcare organisations [4]. Furthermore, as this study was conducted with employees in an Academic Medical Centre where research, scholarly work and education are carried out, even greater importance may be placed on good writing skills.
- Interpersonal skills are also found to be a good predictor. This supports studies which found interpersonal skills and leadership competencies are typical for leaders in academia and healthcare. Furthermore, empathy, a core component of interpersonal skills, is also associated with professional competence and patient outcomes.

VALUES

- Values were also found to be among the predictors. Commitment and integrity associated with the perception of career advancement. While academic attainment and clinical skills are traditionally viewed as the primary predictors of career success, there has been a gradual shift in emphasis towards personal values, and these qualities are increasingly valued in careers, especially within healthcare. Values such as integrity and ethical behaviour are essential for building personal reputation, which is necessary for both leadership advancement and sustaining a leadership position.
- As regards Commitment, in this age of job-hopping, it is far less common for employees to stay in an organisation for an extended period of time. A 2017 report revealed 34% of Singapore professionals have no intention of staying with their current employers for more than a year, considerably higher than the global average of 26% [5]. A study has also shown that an employee's commitment in healthcare organizations does have an impact on job satisfaction, and thereby their job performance and engagement level.

LIMITATIONS

- Our study has limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of our study may establish an association but not necessarily causality. Furthermore, due to the ecological study design, we were limited to exploring associations at the group level rather than at the individual level. Hence, our findings can only be used to inform more general intervention efforts - and not individual-level interventions. **This limitation must be balanced by the fact that due to the sensitive nature of the EES, the anonymity of respondents is crucial in maximising the likelihood of honest and reliable responses.**
- As this study was conducted on AHPs, future studies should be conducted to evaluate whether our results may also apply to other healthcare disciplines.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

IMPLICATIONS

- Our study highlights the need for a balance between soft and hard skills: our findings emphasise the importance of training and improving the "softer" components of leadership competency in addition to professional domain knowledge. As leadership skills and values can be cultivated and improved with education and practice [6], AHEAD items are actionable components of leadership competency. Directing resources into developing the leadership competency of healthcare professionals with a focus on soft skills, could potentially help build an engaged workforce, and develop strong healthcare leaders.
- Our findings also suggest that a roadmap for career advancement could be plotted; involving a combination of hard and soft skills, and value-centric behaviour. Indeed, the competencies demanded from healthcare professionals are as complex and multifaceted as the ever-evolving healthcare landscape, and go far beyond just the scope of clinical skills and domain knowledge.

CONCLUSION

- Our findings show an association between leadership competency and the perception of career advancement. Because the AHEAD items are actionable, future studies are warranted to determine whether targeting and improving AHEAD increases overall employee engagement and performance.

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