

# A Study of Spiritual Leadership Values in a Malaysian Educational Institution

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**Abstract.** The study is to explore the set of spiritual leadership values embraced by Malays, Chinese and Indians leaders or managers in a Malaysian educational institution. Spiritual leadership values enable employee to work intrinsically for an organization. This is a qualitative study which utilized semi structured interview. The study revealed understanding and praise are the common values, however, there are some differing values which were discovered among the three races. The study provides an understanding of spiritual leadership values which upheld by the three races in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Spiritual leadership, values, race, educational institution

## 1. Introduction

Leadership is the process of influencing others to work enthusiastically to achieve common goals of an organization [1][2]. A leader is a person who has the ability to influence others in order to attain the shared objectives, whereas a manager plans, administers and organizes resources. Many organizational behavior or leadership study try to differentiate both of the roles [2][3], however, a manager could be the leader if the manager is able to influence the employee to achieve the organizations goals. Therefore, the leader in this study refers to a superior who is able to influence their employee to achieve the common goal of an organization.

Spiritual leadership comprises values, attitudes and behavior that motivate individuals intrinsically in order for them to have a sense of calling and membership to an organization [4]. Values that are embraced by employees will motivate the employees intrinsically which will subsequently motivate the employees to work not only for the reward but for their own satisfaction or enjoyment. Values are essential in shaping an organization philosophy, mission and vision, strategic plans and subsequently influence employee performance, and superior and employee relationship [5]. According to Fry, Vitucci and Cedillo, values are able to cause positive changes to an employee because an employee believe in the set of values that he or she is upholding and thereafter will benefit the organization by their performance and commitment [6].

Malaysia is a multiracial country which encompasses three main races namely Chinese (24.6%), Indian (7.3%) and Malay (67.4%) [7]. The three races embrace different set of values which are influenced by their cultural background and subsequently pervade their perception and thoughts. For example, one essential force that affects thinking is a culture system of logic. Malaysians are prone to be more intuitive and place importance on relational factor as harmony within the in-group is the utmost imperative [8]. Hence, spiritual leadership values are important to an organization in order to drive their employees to perform and harvest success to the organization.

A comparison on scholarly fields emphasizing values relating to ethical and spiritual wellbeing was done by Fry and his colleagues to explicitly illustrate the facets of spiritual leadership values with religion, ethics and positive psychology [9]. There are a few studies in Malaysia focus on cultural differences between the ethnic groups [5] [10], however, there are limited studies on Malaysia spiritual leadership values that are able to provide guideline for multiracial organizations. Therefore, the aim of the study is to identify spiritual leadership values in Malaysian education institution that are embraced by the three major races.

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## 2. Literature Review

Malaysia being a multiracial nation which comprises of Malays, Chinese, and Indians; can result in ethnic variations in the affiliation of cultural values. Ahmad indicated that most Malays are motivated by their sense of connection to groups which are teamwork (*gotong royong*), friendly and supportive working environment between superior and colleagues [10]. Loyalty and maintenance of harmonious relationship with colleagues are another values embraced by the Malay community [5]. Teamwork encourages Malay community to work together and promote team spirit in order to maintain the harmonious relationship.

The main idea of Confucius is *ren*. It means goodness and humanity. Tsui, Wang, Xin, Zhang, and Fu found out the Chinese community practices Confucius values which are kind, benevolence and approachable [11]. Humble or modesty [12] and hardworking [13] are another values embraced by the Chinese. Conversely, values embraced by the Indians society are corporation [5], consideration [14] and nurturing [15].

Zawawi discovered Malays, Chinese and Indians have similar value which is politeness, whereas Malays and Indians embrace piousness. The common values for Malays and Chinese are honesty, filial piety (respect the elders) ambitious and trustworthiness [14]. Another research found out that Malays and Indians emphasized more on morality, religion and trust compared to Chinese managers which related with their values and religion background [16].

According to Fry and Matherly, spiritual leadership values encompasses of vision, hope and love [8]. Love consists of loyalty, forgiveness, integrity, honesty, courage, kindness, empathy, patience, excellence and fun [8]. Yukl refers spiritual leadership as ethical leadership which consists of integrity, honesty and consistency between an individual's moral values and behaviours [17].

## 3. Method

A semi structured interviews were carried out to understand spiritual leadership values that are embraced by the manager or superior of an educational institution. There were 20 employees who agreed on participating in the study at the initial stage, however, due to work commitment, there were only 15 employees were successfully interviewed. The interviewees consist of nine Malays (56.3%), four Chinese (26.7%) and two Indians (13.3%). Among the interviewees there are six lecturers (40%), six executives (40%), two non-executives (13.3%) and one manager (6.7%). Six employees (40%) have worked for more than 10 years in the organization and others have worked for 1 to 9 years in the organization.

## 4. Research Findings

The interview has ascertained there are some common and different values among Malays, Chinese and Indians in perceiving spiritual leadership. Ten spiritual values were identified in this study. The spiritual values are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Spiritual leadership values embraced by Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia

Values	Malays	Chinese	Indians
Vision / ambitious	√		
Respect	√		√
Understanding / considerate/ empathy	√	√	√
Teamwork	√		
Lead by example		√	√
Patient	√		
Praise / recognize	√	√	√
Fairness		√	√
Humble / modesty		√	
Integrity		√	

There are two common values for the three races. The common values are understanding and praise. Understanding in this study refers to considerate, caring and empathic. The three races believe a manager or superior in a company need to be understanding, caring, considerate and empathic in order to motivate employee in their work force. Below are the responses and feedbacks attained from Malay, Chinese and Indian.

*“My superior understands my work and family struggles, she allows me to go off during lunch time to send my son to school. Work place is my second home.”* (Malay interviewee)

*“One day I did not have breakfast because I was late for work. When my superior talked to me in the office, he heard my stomach making noise. He asked me to go for my breakfast before I continue my work.”* (Indian interviewee).

*“He always gives me work at the last minute. Therefore, I have to stay back to finish it as the deadline is the next day. He does not care about my feeling and personal life.”* (Chinese interviewee)

Another common value for the Malays, Chinese and Indians leaders is praise when the employees exhibit good performance. Praise is a form of recognition from the superior to the employees for their work. The employees feel appreciated and their hard work is recognized.

*“He praise me in meeting when I perform well, he recognize the effort I have put in my work.”* (Malay interviewee)

*“She introduces me to others for my work which contributed to the department. She did not take the credit.”* (Chinese interviewee)

Vision is a value which a leader should embrace. Malays believe a leader need to foresee the future and be the navigator for the department or team. One of the Malays respondents mentioned as below:

*“A leader should have vision and foresee what is good for the department.”*

Team work and patience are another two values that are perceived as important by the Malays. Team work always can be observed in Malays society during the festive season or celebrations such as Hari Raya, wedding and new born ceremonies. Two of the Malays respondents mention as below:

*“We are not only having Hari Raya lunch, we also have year end lunch every year as well where everyone contributes to it. We are the only department organize the Hari Raya lunch for all the muslim in the organization.”*

*“I like to work in this department as everyone is willing to help each other. It is very easy for me to get information that I want for my work.”*

Patience is another vital spiritual value in Malay community. Anger is something perceive negatively by the Malays society. Two Malays interviewee explained their feeling working with a leader who is patient does not get angry easily.

*“My superior never shouted to anybody in the department even though he is angry. He always speaks gently and explains to us whenever problem occurs. I enjoy working with him.”*

*“She never raises her voice even though she is frustrated.”*

The common values for Chinese and Indians beliefs that a leader should possess are fairness and lead by example. Fairness is treating the employee with transparent and without favouritism. The employee feel frustrated when they are treated differently from their colleagues.

*“He is not transparent in funding and decision making. He gives chances to people who his favourite.”* (Indian interviewee).

*“He is a fair person. He gives everyone chances to attend workshop or training. Hence we have the opportunity to grow in our career.”* (Chinese interviewee).

Chinese and Indians believe a leader should be able to lead by example. Both races think that leader who walks their talk is a genuine leader. Leaders do not mean what they say are not able to earn trust from the employee.

*“She is always does things together with us. She knows the work flow and process well before implement some new rules.”* (Indian interviewee).

*“His word does not congruent with his action. I am not really believed in what he says.”* (Chinese interviewee).

Conversely, Malays and Indians think that a leader should respect their employee. A spiritual leader is someone who is willing to listen and discuss with the employee and do not practice autocratic management style.

*“When problem arise he is willing listen from the staff and not being judgemental.”* (Malay interviewee).

*“He practice autocratic style and never listens to employee opinion. He is not ready for open discussion. I find difficult to speak to him.”* (Indian interviewee).

Chinese think that a leader should be humble or modest. A humble person is a person who will admit their mistake and not boastful of their ability.

*“My superior is a knowledgeable person. He always comes to our level provides explanation and clear guidance to us. I learnt a lot from him.”*

*“My Head of department will admit and apologize for his mistake.”*

Another value that the Chinese expect a leader should have is integrity. Integrity is to be consistent in decision making which based on the organization rules and regulations.

*“He never gives in when he pressure by others in formal meeting or informal discussion on decision making. His decision made is based on organization rules and regulations. He always upholds and practice integrity.”*

## **5. Conclusion**

Praise and understanding are the common spiritual leadership values for the three races. Conversely, there are some common values shared between Malays and Chinese, Chinese and Indians, and Malays and Indians. It is important for a leader or manager to understand the spiritual leadership values for different races as the three races are the main human power which is able to have an impact on organizational performance. Good paid has been the factor influence employee performance across gender [18] and country[19], however,

monetary is not the only factor that improves the performance of an employee, but values play an equal role as well. However, these values need to be tested with a justified sample size in order to be generalised. On the contrary, for future study it can be extended to observe the relationship of the spiritual leadership values and organizational commitment, and performance.

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