Academic leadership commences by self-leadership

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Abstract. Enhancing leaders and leadership are major elements when pursuing improvement of learning and teaching in the higher education sector. This study was conducted to investigate the self-leadership skills of the academic staff in the Lebanese higher education sector. It is stated that "an effective academic leader must be able to lead oneself effectively before he or she can lead others within and outside the classroom". Through a survey, academic staff (instructors) were asked to rank self-leadership skills that they believe they possess and apply. This survey also presented questions that allowed the researcher to identify whether academics have a clear comprehension of this concept in Lebanese universities and what prevents them from attaining and applying them. The data collected was analyzed using SPSS. The findings indicated that the skills of self-leadership were not being applied effectively and the concept was not clearly comprehended by the Lebanese higher education institutions. Thus, it is recommended to train the academic staff to improve their knowledge, attitudes and skills regarding the concept of self-leadership and it presented potential strategies that facilitated sharing innovations to effectively apply such leadership and promote the importance of quality teaching experiences.

1 Introduction

Regarding employment and development of leadership practices and styles in learning and teaching, limited knowledge is available on how academics apply such concept when they are employed in non-formal leadership positions, unlike the knowledge and previous literature found on formal leadership positions in higher education [1]. It is known that leadership is important to be applied not only for the whole organization, but also on the personal level. So, self-leadership or personal leadership refer to the personal actions of leaders [6]. In other words, it is the personal features or attributes of a leader that have a moral basis. The highly significant attributes include expertise, trust, caring, sharing as well as ethics of a leader [2]. The presence of such personal leadership attributes reflects as well on the whole organization especially by having a more engaged, motivated and team-working workforce, improving the goal setting process and its outcomes, managerial enhancements and increased emotional intelligence levels for better interactions as well as maximizing the employees' effectiveness [3].

Self-leadership or personal leadership is claimed to shape how teachers communicate values, proficiencies and knowledge to students as they are in a position of responsibility

when it comes to preparing learners for a successful career path. Thus, strong self-leadership is deemed to be vital component to an effective teacher leadership implementation and is a key factor in the students' learning process and career preparedness [5].

That's why, this study's target is to acknowledges strategies and skills of self-leadership of academics in the Lebanese universities and their attitude towards the matter. In addition, the study aims at identifying any barriers that might be inhibiting the acquisition and practices of self-leadership strategies in order to provide recommendations to overcome such obstacles and improve the implementation of the concept in the higher educational sector of Lebanon.

Therefore, this study was guided by the following research questions:

– To what extent are university instructors aware of self-leadership, its strategies and skills?

– What are the barriers that prevent instructors to acquire and practice the strategies and skills of self-leadership?

2 Leadership and Self-Leadership

Constant researches are being conducted in order to explore the vital activities and manners for leadership that lead to an effective implementation. Browning claims that leadership is considered to be a sophisticated art that starts with self-leadership [9]. According to Hersey and Blanchard's situational theory of leadership, when applying such leadership, an emotional response is most likely to be triggered in followers in addition to an affect on their performance that will be noticed [10], unlike the leaders that displays command and coercive practices in order to engage or empower their followers [11, 12].

In the teaching profession, self-leadership is essential as it is all about shaping attitudes of and providing knowledge to their learners. Having self-leadership attributes, or even acquiring them on the way, will aid them in making decisions, self-expression and building experience and expertise [13].

When speaking of self-leadership, it is important to focus on self-awareness or self-discovery and self-acceptance. However, a predecessor of self-awareness exists, that is self-reflection. Self-reflection aims at looking at ones' own life, experiences and reactions to circumstances in order to understand oneself more [15]. Once self-reflection is achieved, self-discovery or self-awareness follows in order to know what personal development goals does one wants to achieve, how can one improve performance and enhance one's whole life. Once sufficient self-awareness is developed, the person must now accept and be knowledgeable of his or her own strengths and weaknesses [16]. Unfortunately, a large number of teachers tend to focus on daily tasks rather than focusing on what they want to offer to their learners on the long-run, thus they lose their ideal selves and fail in self-discovery [14].

In addition, leaders should take into consideration elements out of their own control when aiming to improve what they want and can improve [17]. Thus, self-awareness of all attributes should be a step forward to achieving one's ideal self. Effective leadership means the ability of a leader to control his or her thoughts and behavior to avoid any conflicts and this is a significant factor of self-acceptance. For instance, with poor performers, having bad feelings and emotions can closely affect decisions made in leadership positions, unlike the influential leaders who transform such feelings into learning opportunities and work hard on themselves in order to succeed in the future [18,19]. Therefore, successful leaders are those who not only meet their teams' and followers' expectations but also provide them with a good vision of their future. So, self-acceptance acknowledges that the person is good enough to lead others noting that there is always room for improvement [20-23]

3 Self-Leadership Strategies and Principles

Self-leadership allows you to remove any barriers and provides a person loads of opportunities. Through it, people can know themselves, accept themselves and lead others for the purpose of professional as well as personal success.

Moreover, the majority of effective leaders of self-managing teams adopt behaviors that enable self-leadership strategies such as self-observation, self-goal setting and self-reward, and this was later expanded under a label named "thought self-leadership" [24]. Thought self-leadership allows employees to achieve the goals of well-being as well as superior efficiency and it was demonstrated in training programs [25]. The outcomes of thought self-leadership training included improved intellectual performance, increased enthusiasm and motivation, higher job satisfaction, and diminished nervousness.

Researchers have also researched the internal and external precedents of self-leadership on both the personal and organizational levels [27]. With its significance to individual self-leadership, studies have shown that internal predecessors on an individual level target internal or natural rewards and 'thought self-leadership' as people who choose their work positions on such basis and entrench their careers with impulsively stimulating duties more likely come to be self-leading in their workplace. Furthermore, such internal predecessors exist on a group level, which will in turn affect the whole organization [28].

Referring to previous literature, various principles and strategies exist when targeting self-leadership which include behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies [26, 29]. Regarding behavior-focused ones, these include self-observation. Self-observation refers to increasing a person's own awareness of the time and reason of adopting certain behaviors. It is a kind of self-awareness that is essential for altering or diminishing ineffective and unproductive behaviors.

As for the natural reward strategies, these include self-goal setting as well as self-reward, which aim at creating situations of motivation or reward by intrinsically pleasurable features of the task or activity.

When setting one's goals, specific behavioral objective of various situations will be created and when rewarding one's self, the reward may be tangible or intangible and is given every time a certain goal is achieved.

Finally, constructive thought pattern strategies are those that include self-control and self-management that aid in determining and substituting unfitting beliefs and assumptions, mental images and optimistic self-talk. In self-control, the unexpected circumstances must be expected in order to anticipate the response to challenges. As for self-management, it helps rate emotions and reflect on alternative strategies you can use to adapt to the context in the following time.

Therefore, there are various self-leadership strategies that can be adopted and if done correctly, will breed effective teacher leadership and improve the way teachers lead and shape their students.

4 Methodology

This study investigates the expertise in self-leadership in higher education in Lebanon. It's based upon self-leadership academic research, perspectives of expertise, and analysis of surveys conducted. The questionnaire was founded on guidelines derived from both previous literature and expertise and were distributed to investigate the approval of the mentioned variable.

4.1 Research Tool

Based on an extensive review of the literature of self-leadership, a questionnaire consisting of 34 items was adopted. The survey instrument consisted of two sections: A and B. Section A, consisting of 25 items, requested participants to identify the characteristics of self-leadership enjoyed by them through their own lens. Section B consisting of 9 items, requested respondents to identify barriers that inhibited them from practicing self-leadership. A Five-point Likert scale was used to rank participants' responses. Response choices were: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree.

4.2 Data Analysis

The feedback from the respondents had been analyzed using SPSS v.18. In order to analyze the data, a relative index analysis was adopted in order to rank variables based on their perceived significance. This index is computed using the below formula:

$$RI = \sum \frac{W}{A \times N} \tag{1}$$

W – The weight given by respondent on a scale from 1 to 5.
A –The highest weight given.
N – The total number of participants (sample size).
According to Akadiri (30), five important levels are transformed from RI values: high ($0.8 \leq RI < 1$), high medium (H–M) ($0.6 \leq RI < 0.8$), medium (M) ($0.4 \leq RII < 0.6$), medium-low (M-L) ($0.2 \leq RII < 0.4$) and low (L) ($0 \leq RII < 0.2$).

Table 1. Analysis of Relative Importance Index Values adopted from Akadiri [30].

Values	Importance
$0.8 \leq RII \leq 1$	High
$0.6 \leq RII < 0.8$	Medium-High
$0.4 \leq RII < 0.6$	Medium
$0.2 \leq RII < 0.4$	Low-Medium
$0 \leq RII < 0.2$	Low

5 Results and Discussions

Based on the results of the questionnaire gathered, 46 of the respondents were females and 54 were males, of which, 18 respondents are Full-time Professors, 30 Associate Professors, 25 have PhD and 27 have a Master's Degree as their highest educational level. As for the ages of respondents, 17 are older than 20 years and 40 have between 11-20 years of working experience. From these, 24 respondents belong to universities established for 15-20 years, 34 belong to those established for 16-26 years, 14 belong to respondents 27-40 years, and 28 respondents belong to those established since more than 40 years.

According to Table 2, the characteristics were chosen by the majority of university academics. Based on the results of the Ranking Importance Index technique, we can say that the highest-ranking factor when determining self-leadership refers to the ability to learn from past mistakes and experiences, followed by self-confidence, in which the academics believe in themselves and finally responsibility held for actions performed and respondents' accountability. Each of these elements had high importance in self-leadership with indices greater than or equal to 0.93.

Table 2. Ranking of Relative Importance Index for Self-Leadership Characteristics.

Question	Question	Rank	RII	RII – Level
I learn from the past: I learn from my mistakes and the difficulties I've faced in the past.	25	1	0.97	High
I trust myself and believe in myself.	2	2	0.94	High
I am completely responsible for my decisions and reactions, and I hold myself accountable for them. I do not hold others responsible for my actions.	4	3	0.93	High
I have a high level of reputation with others, and they trust me.	3	4	0.93	High
I have a set of simple beliefs and values that guide my actions in my life, which makes it easy for me to gain others' trust.	1	5	0.92	High
I am a lifelong learner who aims to develop my knowledge and skills in a number of fields.	21	6	0.92	High
In all aspects of my life, I work hard to get to know myself and grow self-awareness.	5	7	0.91	High
I value a servant's heart as well as a high level of humility.	23	8	0.90	High
I have a lot of patience and will not give up in the face of a difficult mission.	16	9	0.89	High
I set simple (short-term) goals for myself and work toward them.	9	10	0.89	High
I try my hardest to improve my intelligence in all areas: psychological, linguistic, mathematical, and so on....	6	11	0.88	High
I make a priority list for my tasks (based on their value and necessity) and stick to it.	10	12	0.88	High
For all aspects of my life, I think and make long-term plans.	11	13	0.87	High
I am concerned about my physical and mental well-being.	8	14	0.86	High
I let go of any behaviors that might be impeding my progress in life and replace them with those that will assist me in achieving it.	12	15	0.86	High
I use my money wisely and in accordance with my financial capabilities (I don't waste money and don't care to be courteous in front of others).	7	16	0.85	High
Despite some past mistakes and a few doubts about the future, I speak positively to myself.	19	17	0.85	High
I know how to ignore or deal with material negative energy. Furthermore, I am capable of controlling my surroundings in order to inspire myself and strengthen my positive behaviors.	22	18	0.85	High
I examine and assess my actions on a regular basis in order to change it.	13	19	0.84	High
I push myself to leave my comfort zone, so I don't hesitate to take on new responsibilities or difficult tasks, even though I don't think I'm up to the task (such as lack of some skills).	24	20	0.84	High
I make it a point to surround myself with optimistic, effective people who encourage and motivate me. I stay away from people who want to stop anyone from doing what they want and who have no regard for the worth of something	17	21	0.82	High
I set aside time for reflection and contemplation on occasion in order to represent my areas of strength and weakness.	20	22	0.82	High
I use a self-rewarding technique in which I reward myself when I put in a lot of work on a task or accomplish a significant goal.	14	23	0.79	Medium-High
I create visual representations of what performance looks like for a specific task that I plan to complete in the future (I view details for carrying the task and envision results prior to inception).	18	24	0.79	Medium-High
When I struggle to complete a task or realize that I am not putting in the required effort for a task, I often resort to self-punishment. In this scenario, I deprive myself of activities that I enjoy (and/or use a self-criticism strategy).	15	25	0.59	Medium

The factor with least ranking represents self-punishment, which has been seen to be rarely used by respondents and thus have a medium importance in self-leadership for academics responding, with an index of 0.59. Therefore, based on the forgoing, it can be concluded that only 22 out of 25 self-leadership characteristics listed in table 2 enjoyed by the majority of RII High level. However, the comparison between two 8 top characteristics shows that responses of participants may sometimes lack objectivity and certainty.

Referring to the below table (Table 3), the most perceived barrier rated by respondents refers to the insufficient financial capital to apply self-leadership, having an index of 0.77 showing a medium to high importance level. Similarly, all the other questions show a medium to high importance having an index ranging from 0.72 to 0.75. The least perceived obstacle was related to personal difficulties as the ranking index equals to 0.6 showing a medium importance when applying these practices. However, the obstacle that was highly ranked, being insufficient financial capital, proves that respondents lack a clear understanding of what the concept of self-leadership is and how it is applied.

Table 3. Ranking the Barriers of Applying Self-Leadership in Higher Education Perceived by Academics.

Question	Question Number	Rank	RII	RII – Level
Insufficient financial capital	5	1	0.77	Medium - High
Incentives are scarce.	9	2	0.75	Medium - High
These ideas seem impractical in light of the country's political instability.	7	3	0.73	Medium - High
Stakeholders are unconvinced by this definition.	8	4	0.73	Medium - High
Administrative duties are stressful on a regular basis.	1	5	0.72	Medium - High
Insufficient university preparation or on-the-job training	2	6	0.72	Medium - High
This idea, in my opinion, has little to do with increasing the competitiveness of higher education institutions.	4	7	0.72	Medium - High
A scarcity of time.	6	8	0.72	Medium - High
Personal difficulties.	3	9	0.60	Medium

6 Conclusion

The study was conducted for the purpose of understanding the level of awareness and application of self-leadership in the Lebanese higher education institutions. It showed a positive overall view of self-leadership as demonstrated and exercised by the sample of university academics in Lebanon. However, a contradiction lies amongst the responses of participants that indicated their elusive understanding of the concept. So, without a clear understanding of self-leadership, it cannot be utilized to the maximum.

Moreover, when asked about the challenges or barriers that were preventing academics from learning and exercising self-leadership, a large number of those were identified and are of great importance. The majority of them believe that the lack of financial resources inhibits them from acquiring self-leadership skills, thus, it can be inferred of their vague understanding of the concept in the first place, in addition to the fact that they didn't see its effect on the productivity of the institution. This, however, refutes the self-leadership literature which claim that certain practices related to developing self-leadership skills are

either affordable or free of charge and emphasize the significance of applying such strategies in order to guide others and impact their performance.

Furthermore, in reference to the responses and finding of the study, it allows the inference that training providers, colleges and universities, and stakeholders in general might not place the suitable value on the principle of self-leadership where participants stated that the reason behind their inability to become self-leaders is the lack of training and preparation done by the university. Moreover, it can be concluded that universities do not exert the needed effort to provide the needed understanding on self-leadership. The previously mentioned barriers must be taken into account when recommending university scholars to lead themselves before they lead others.

Further studies ought to target a wider and more diverse sample of university academics from various Lebanese universities and colleges. This is essential in order to gather a more detailed understanding on the views regarding practices of self-leadership. Recommendations include that academics improve their understanding of the concept and its benefits and the ways they can apply it on their own even without training from the employing higher educational institution. It can be achieved by reading books, articles, blogs on self-leadership or forming communities to share information about such concept. It can also be supported with the universities' efforts to enroll its academics in training classes or courses, to hold conferences by providing the experience of famous leaders with self-leadership, or build personal or even professional learning networks – PLNs, that can help improve productivity of their employees and thus reach their goals faster, based in their budgets.

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