STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE PLANNING FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Strategic leadership is recognized as a vital tool in the transformation of rural organisation. Thus, this qualitative research study aimed at assessing the role of strategic leadership in the transformation of rural organisation. The study used a semi-structured interview schedule to collect data. Purposive sampling was used to select a cohort of sixty members of Villages Development and Security Committee (JPKK) of Malaysia. Those selected as participants include chairmen, secretaries and ordinary members. The study used an inductive approach for data analysis. The data analysis led to the development of five main themes of 'strategic direction', 'ethical practices', 'exploitation and maintenance', 'development of human capital' and 'sustaining a corporate culture'.

Keywords: Community leadership, local leader, rural development, strategic leadership, planning

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INTRODUCTION

For rural communities to be sustainable and successful, rural leadership is essential. Strategic leadership is critical to building sustainable and thriving communities in rural areas. Developing strategies to address their communities' particular needs and difficulties is the responsibility of rural leaders (Rami et al., 2022). Rural leaders must possess a range of skills, including the ability to set a clear vision, develop effective strategies, communicate effectively, and inspire and motivate others towards a common goal. By leveraging these skills, rural leaders can build strong and resilient communities that are capable of adapting to changing circumstances and building a brighter future for their residents.

Most policies concerned with rural development always aimed at creating a highly progressive, and knowledgeable population in the rural communities to establish a secure and better place for a community to live (Tantoh and McKay, 2020). The implementation of different policies or initiatives requires strategic leaders who are able and willing to influence a positive change in the community (Bertolini, 2019). Rashid, Ngah and Misnan (2019) and Rami et al. (2020) indicate that maintaining a desirable rural community development trend requires a strategized development program aimed at the general transformation of rural communities in the areas of economic development, infrastructure transformation, human capital development, and enhancement of social welfare. These various effective development strategies allow leaders to achieve success in different socio-economic development programs. Previous studies also mentioned that rural development programs must be efficient to boost the process of rural community transformation. Ensuring effectiveness of the development programs is feasible by enhancing the program implementation strategy through strategic leadership.

BASELINE RESEARCH
Strategic Leadership and Community Development

The relevance of community leadership has also been observed in the times of COVID-19. Local leaders have acted on behalf of the government to ensure successful implementation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) as ways of preventing the spread of Coronavirus in the rural areas. It is evident that strategic leadership is the focal point of rural community transformation though there may be other supporting factors such as establishing good relationships with the local population, cooperating with the top government leadership, and ensuring proper utilisation of resources.

In essence, the supposition drawn from the above is that the importance of strategic leadership is not in doubt when it comes to the development or transformation of a particular community. That is to say, it plays a far-reaching role in the matter of fortune or failure of the populace. Contemporary researchers, such as Muzee (2016) and Olaka (2017) have confirmed that the effectiveness

and performance of compelling strategic leadership in rural areas are associated with such leadership, and is heavily influenced by the ideals of the community leader. Moreover, in the ambiance of rural study, strategic leaders are an important component in community development and are very influential in deciding the direction of developmental programs and consequently determine the success level of development programs, especially in the social-economic perspective.

These community leaders are usually appointed by the government to act as community transformation agents of the government, whereby they act on behalf of top leaders in trying to actively participate in community development initiatives. Hence, community leaders can always be recognized as an intermediate agency that links people's needs to the different top government authorities (Olaka, 2017). Community leaders play a vital role in a matter of lobbying, implementation and supervision of different developmental programs in the community that are aimed at enhancing rural community development (Fuertes et al. 2020). This section presents the components of strategic leadership.

Strategic Leadership	Strategic direction
	Ethical practices
	Exploitation and maintenance of core competencies
	Development of human capital
	Sustaining a corporate culture

Source: Fuertes et al. (2020)

Determining Strategic Direction in the Community
Strategic leadership is the essential method of determining the strategic trajectory of a community. Such approach makes certain the development of a long-term and sustainable vision to steer the community toward achieving various strategic goals and objectives. In 2020, Fuertes posited that community heads should actively participate in formulating or establishing the most sustainable strategies to foster community development. Lear (2012) had previously suggested that enhanced business and organisational thinking has increased the need for community empowerment, involving equal participation of stakeholders or community in the different developmental activities.

Fuertes (2020) further proclaimed that achieving the desired level of transformation in the community requires extremely strategic leaders that have the ability and the enthusiasm to make proper decisions and consequently deliver merits. To add weight to this assertion, Ching and Loke (2016) also establish a staunch and indisputable connection between strong leaders and effective strategies as regards community development.

Ethical Practices

A large and established body of research evidence has shown the significance of literature concerning ethical practices in leadership and how they are able to influence community development tremendously. A case in point, according to Lear (2012), though ethical leadership is a subset of strategic leadership and it plays a conspicuous lead in the general development of people and their surroundings. However, most of the literature only covers the element of leading ethically without further discussion on the various attributes of ethical leadership, especially in the context of community development. In light of this statement, yet there was deterioration by most community leaders which then brought ethical leadership and strategic leadership to the public eyes.

As mentioned by Lear (2012), strong ethical leadership is based on very effective leadership strategies that help to enhance the level of morality in society thereby enhancing the level of community development.

Exploitation and Maintenance of Core Competencies

According to Lear (2012), core competencies simply mean the different resources and capabilities that help an organisation to enhance its competitiveness. Vanclay et al (2013), stress further that core competencies enable community leaders to perform effectively beyond their capability in order to achieve community's imminent transformation or development.

In the community development perspective, competencies are basically associated with the different resources and personnel that help the community to achieve its desired growth or development. Most recent studies have pointed out that the most ideal source of sustainable development originates from the community's core competencies, which are associated with skills, morals, and abilities of both leaders and local population (Muzee 2016; Ching and Loke, 2016). Certainly, these traits ought to be nurtured.

Development of Human Capital

Olaka (2017) claimed that human capital is much associated with knowledge and skills of the organisation's employee group. In conjunction with the community perspective, human capital can be explained as a representation of different skills or capability of community leaders and the local population that influence the level of community transformation. This clearly emphasises that adequate human capital is absolutely necessary in the matter of utilisation of core competences towards enhancing rural community transformation.

Studies by Vanclay, Baines and Taylor (2013) suggested that a reliable group of leaders in a community that are associated with different attributes enable them to achieve different developmental goals and objectives.

Sustaining A Corporate Culture
Corporate culture represents a complex set of core values, ideologies, thoughts or symbols which are shared by various stakeholders of an organisation along with stimulating the level of performance (Olaka, 2017). Apropos of community context, corporate culture is composed of different core values shared by the different community leaders and their subordinates. Thus, according to Schneider et al. (2013), the importance of corporate leaders are: (i) knowing the corporate culture, (ii) changing the corporate culture and/or (iii) leverage the corporate culture to create competitive advantage.

Moreover, it is important to emphasise that strategic leaders' characters are essential to promote the spirit of entrepreneurship and self-reliance in people, which consequently nurture a desirable culture which promotes concentrated learning, sharing of knowledge and improved community development (Olaka, 2017).

Community Leader Competencies
Evidently, strategic leaders are constantly immersed in decision making to help their community to effectively develop, nurture, invigorate, leverage and consequently exploit core competencies (Olaka, 2017). In no doubt, the nature of decisions undertaken by leaders greatly influences the level of transformation in the community (Muzee, 2016). Muzee (2016) and WN Jasmina (2023) confirms that hiring the right person for the job is the essential key to organisational success.

Research indicates that utilising the different competencies in communities involves equal allocation of resources across all essential units in the community (Olaka, 2017). Therefore, it signifies that dedicated performance of top community leadership is fundamental for maintaining a sustainable level of development in the community.

METHODOLOGY
This research responded by aiming to understand leadership difficulties by a thorough investigation of the lived experience of local leaders, moving away from demonstrating or disputing predefined theories. Accordingly, it was decided that a qualitative method would be better suitable for this study (Taylor et al, 2015), since it provides unfiltered inputs that may be used to uncover the subjective experiences of local leaders. In order to address the issues addressed by this study, a qualitative phenomenological research methodology was used.

The phenomenological approach may qualitatively map out the various ways that individuals are engaged in their experiences, conceptualization, perception, and knowledge of a phenomena as a study tool (Green and Thorogood, 2018).

Data Collection

The study was conducted in the states of Terengganu, Kedah, Selangor and Johor Malaysia, which has the highest number of rural areas in Peninsular Malaysia. This study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection and used an inductive approach to conduct the analysis. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used as sampling. The state's designated zone and localities, where research data were gathered through interviews and observations, served as the study area. As a result, the research included people, local community members, officials from the appropriate government agencies, and community leaders (JPKK) as stakeholders (See in Table 1).

Table 1: Research participants from selected zone

Community	Chairman	Secretary	Members
East Zone - Terengganu	2	2	10
North Zone - Kedah	2	2	10
Southern Zone - Johor	2	2	10
Central Zone - Selangor	2	2	10
Stakeholders	-	-	7

The interview questions probed on subjects related to their daily activities, a leader's role in managing community affairs, including gatherings and meetings, as well as the relationship between local communities and government and non-government agencies in selected villages in Malaysia.

Data Analysis

The method of data collection in this study is through in-depth one-to-one interviews and focus group discussion. A total of 60 respondents were selected which comprises community leaders, locals residence and officials in the relevant government agencies. Each interview lasted at least 30 and up to 45 minutes. The study followed four steps of trustworthiness mentioned by Lincoln and Guba (1985) by checking credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To locate major and minor themes, Atlas.ti was utilised to obtain reliable sources gathered through interviews and records. Moreover, to verify the challenges of community leadership, respondents from various fields of expertise and backgrounds were interviewed.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The review confirms the fact that strategic leadership is embedded in different components such as strategic direction, ethical practices, exploitation and maintenance, development of human capital and sustaining a corporate culture. The findings of studies indicate that the strategic direction of a community is normally aligned with the community's strategic intent and this involves all

community leaders and the local population being committed to working together towards achieving specific development goals in a manner that is highly unique as compared to other communities.

Strategic direction set by the community leaders
The result clearly shows that success of different community development projects, most especially in rural areas, is greatly influenced by the level of strategic leadership applied by different stakeholders of development in the community. The different strategies applied by the community leaders help to break the barriers that could have affected the effectiveness of different community development programs or initiatives (Rami et al., 2020).

"... For your information, we have a village planning plan. This planning was made for a period of 5 years with the help of the district office and an officer from INFRA…"(Chairman3)

"…This Blueprint covers aspects of economic development, personality and social development of youth and education… This year alone, we have successfully organised 7 programs for single mothers, youth and other programs with allocations from the ministry, KEMAS and district offices..." (Chairman3)

"…During the covid19 pandemic period, JPKK has drawn up a plan to help the community remain competitive. The impact of this pandemic has had a major impact on the socioeconomic development of rural communities. In fact, to rise immediately, the state government has given a one off allocation of RM4000 to each JPKK to implement programs in their areas…" (Chairman3)

"…As one of the exemplary communities in this district, we set aside political differences. Always cooperate in making the activities and response of each program organised very well. Everyone is involved…" (Secretary1)

"…All parties will be involved in providing input to policies or activities that will be organised by us. After all the input and enough information, we will seek expert advice before making a decision in the meeting…" (Secretary1)

The effectiveness of a leader's leadership and functioning is determined by how he uses his ability to influence the behaviour of others (Yukl, 2010). Community leaders should build relationships with internal and external

stakeholders. Moreover, it is important to address that leaders are fundamentally required to enhance, strengthen and initiate long term goals with the stakeholders as they are "informant agents". However, with the presence of competent leaders who have a strategic direction, complaints of problems and one-off assistance from the government can be channelled accurately and fairly to the affected groups. Along with the same line, community leaders need to prioritise the needs of the community despite having different political backgrounds.

Ethical practices
Leaders who practise the concept of ethics are still debated to this day. However, in a pandemic environment that probes the ability of local leaders in performing their duties fairly and responsibly. The results of the interviews show that the concept of ethics in performing duties has been understood by JPKK leaders.

> *"...I understand the word ethics in performing duties, yes I agree, as a leader, ethics should be given priority in ensuring that we perform duties with full trust ..."*

> *"...Sometimes it is difficult for us to apply this ethical practice. Because our organisation is a community organisation that does not have full authority like working in an office. Everything is done willingly and ethics has to be forgotten ..."*

Leaders who take a transformational approach often set extremely high expectations for moral and ethical conduct. However, based on these study findings, it illustrates that on certain occasions, ethical practice in leadership is formidable to apply especially in uncertain circumstances. In contrast to leaders of formal organisations or leaders of public organisations, community leaders need to be more flexible and find it extremely difficult to be bound by ethical practices.

Exploitation and maintenance of core competencies
In the perspective of community development, capabilities are essentially associated with the different tools and resources that enable the community to achieve its desired growth or development. Based on the findings, local leaders have shown that strategy implementation core competencies contribute to the JPKK committee as a whole in various functional skills.

> *"...Throughout 2019, we have implemented programs for the community. Nearly 15 programs were implemented and 3 programs were implemented on a large scale. But, this year (2020) we have to cancel many programs because of this Covid-19 situation..."*

"…Our JPKK members have a clear vision and path to ensure that our community benefits from all development activities, no one is marginalised…"

The findings demonstrate that community leaders have always been vital to the success of rural community development programs. Furthermore, competencies have been identified as another vital component affecting strategic leadership's effectiveness in enhancing community transformation. This is possible by the implementation of various methods, such as partnering with government officials, universities, training institutions and also involving in the community decision-making processes relating to rural community development projects. However, Covid-19 calls on all community leaders to conduct an unforeseen action for the communities. Novelty threat and new norms demand new skills set from the leaders to adopt and adapt. In this light of pandemic, even though the government may provide suitable platform and guideline for the leaders, their competencies in tackling new matters are in fact can be complicated and unbearable, but as a leader, skills need to be learned and earned despite they are also a part of the community that also affected with the threat.

Development of human capital in rural community
Leadership is an important element in human capital. Human capital can be viewed from a community perspective as a reflection of various skills of community leaders and the community that affect the level of community transformation. This clearly demonstrates that sufficient human capital is essential for the use of core competencies in order to enhance the transformation of rural communities. Based on the interviews conducted, main leaders of JPKK agreed that the aspect of human resource development is indeed still weak. This is because the social and economic factors of different populations are different. However, they have tried to diversify their main methods in the field of education, skills upgrading by organising programs with government and private agencies.

"…We are in the early stages, we ensure that our area is equipped with basic facilities to increase economic, social activities and facilitate the movement of people…"

"…Youths are given vocational skills while students at primary and secondary levels provide free tuition services…"

"….Transforming rural areas requires physical and economic development as well as enhancing human capital which is the core engine of growth…"

The development of infrastructures can lead to an increase in economic activities in the rural areas, which in turn would translate into higher income for the rural population. This can be combined with education and skills enhancement, as well as capacity building for rural communities, to enable rural populations to be resilient to current and emerging challenges.

Sustaining a corporate culture
To ensure good community governance, community leaders are advised to adopt a corporate work culture to be able to develop the socio-economy of local people (Rami et al, 2021), generate employment for youth in rural areas (Ricketts, 2008) ensure rural communities are not left behind in development. In the philosophy of strategic leadership in profit-based organisations, the thinking of the leader should always find a way, creating opportunities for the organisation to be more competitive. In the rural context, this culture is still lacking because community organisations are still based on voluntary work by not prioritising profit making and community management is very different from the corporate structure.

> *"...Changing the work culture requires a lot of time and energy, especially changing the culture of rural communities..."*

> *"...Yes, I understand ... A systematic work culture and management is very important in more effective rural governance. However, a voluntary community work culture requires a more friendly and more tolerant approach..."*

> *"...It is difficult for us to adopt work slavery as public and private organisations. Rural communities, different from the others..."*

Strategic leadership is an essential aspect of effective management that involves the ability to set and execute the long-term vision of an organisation. It involves the capacity to anticipate and respond to changes in the external environment, while also aligning the organisation's internal resources and capabilities towards achieving its goals. Strategic leaders must possess a range of skills and traits, including a strong strategic vision, effective communication skills, and the ability to inspire and motivate others towards a common goal.

One key aspect of strategic leadership is the ability to develop and communicate a clear and compelling vision for the organisation's future. This vision should be grounded in a deep understanding of the organisation's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and should be aligned with the organisation's values and mission. By communicating this vision to all stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and partners, strategic

leaders can build buy-in and create a sense of shared purpose that can help drive the organisation forward.

In addition to setting a clear vision, strategic leaders must also be able to develop and implement effective strategies to achieve that vision. This involves assessing the organisation's current position in the marketplace, identifying key trends and opportunities, and developing plans to leverage the organisation's strengths while mitigating its weaknesses. Strategic leaders must also be able to anticipate potential obstacles and develop contingency plans to ensure that the organisation can adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing environment.

Effective communication is another key aspect of strategic leadership. Strategic leaders must be able to communicate their vision and strategy clearly and convincingly to a range of stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and partners. This involves not only presenting complex ideas in a simple and accessible manner but also listening actively to feedback and incorporating it into their plans. By fostering open and transparent communication channels, strategic leaders can build trust and credibility with their stakeholders, which can help to mitigate risks and build long-term partnerships.

Finally, strategic leaders must possess strong interpersonal skills and be able to inspire and motivate others towards a common goal. This involves creating a culture of collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement, where employees feel empowered to contribute their best ideas and work together towards achieving the organisation's goals. Strategic leaders must also lead by example, demonstrating a commitment to the organisation's values and mission and setting high standards for themselves and others.

In conclusion, strategic leadership is an essential aspect of effective management that involves setting a clear vision, developing and implementing effective strategies, communicating effectively, and inspiring and motivating others towards a common goal. By possessing these skills and traits, strategic leaders can build organisations that are adaptable, resilient, and capable of thriving in a rapidly changing environment.

CONCLUSION

The literature review study clearly shows that strategic leadership positively influences the level of rural community development. The study indicates that the different aspects of strategic leadership, most particularly strategic direction, capacity to learn, managerial wisdom and capacity to change play a key role in the general transformation of rural communities. For rural communities to achieve the desired level of development, leaders must be in position to apply the different components of strategic leadership in engaging with the local population and other stakeholders of development in such rural areas. This speeds up the

process of rural transformation since it limits the different barriers to development such as intolerance or lack of cooperation from the local population.

The active role of community leaders is associated with basing in the different components of strategic leadership to organise the community, spearhead the decision making and implement processes of development initiatives. This is in addition to playing a supervisory role through monitoring and evaluating the ongoing or completed projects. Critical assessment of the different requirements for rural community transformation shows that it is always complex to achieve the desired objectives without applying the most effective developmental planning strategies. This justifies the importance of strategic leadership in enhancing the sustainable community planning and development.

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