LEADERS WE PREFER: PERSPECTIVES FROM MALAYSIAN GEN Y EMPLOYEES

Sharkawi S., Mohamad S.J.A.N.S., Roslin R.[*]

Abstract: The current workforce in Malaysia is experiencing changing employee demographics. Generation Y, those age 34 years and below (born in 1980 – 1999), makes up to nearly half of the labour force today. They will be playing a vital role in the Malaysian labour market by helping to spearhead the country's future economic growth. However, a dilemma confronting leaders today is the limited understanding when leading the Gen Y and it is ironic that organisation's future vitality is dependent on its ability to work effectively with Gen Ys. Although Gen Y characteristics and needs are documented in existing literature, leadership preferences and approaches that best support such needs are not clear. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the leadership dimensions preferred by Malaysian Gen Y employees in the private sector. In this study, participants were purposely selected based on certain criteria. In depth semi structured interviews were conducted with the intention to obtain real life experiences of the participants. It was found that the participants of the study preferred leaders who are (i) competent and knowledgeable; (ii) give guidance and develop employees; (iii) personable and caring; (iv) trust and respectful of other; (v) provide direction; and (vi) lead by example.

Key words: leadership; generation Y, private sector, qualitative method

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Introduction

As Baby Boomers and Gen Xs are retiring and exiting the workforce, Gen Ys, born between the 1980 – 1999, are rapidly entering the workforce. According to the data by the Department of Statistics of Malaysia, 2014, approximately 50% of the labour force is aged 34 years and below. With individuals from the Baby Boomers approaching retirement and about 20% of Gen X is predicted to retire by 2025, the number is expected to increase to 75% within a relatively short span. Their entry into the workforce in large quantity has given them the power to reshape the rules of play at work. This phenomenon has ignited concerns from academics and practitioners alike, over the ramification this new generation may have on our 21st century workplaces. We have heard so much about the notorious reputation of Gen Y employees; whereby they are perceived to want flexibility and autonomy yet desire directive and frequent feedback from their leaders (Morton, 2002). Cash and rewards are their main motivating factor yet work-life balance and social

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contribution is key to a more satisfying job (De Han and Xikun Su, 2011; Ng et al., 2010). As highlighted by Downe et al. (2012), these contrasts of characteristics of the Gen Y have led the managers in a state of irony. In view of this dilemma, leaders are finding it challenging to manage the Gen Ys effectively. Many Malaysian CEOs have lamented that Gen Ys do not stay long enough in one company more so be in a job for them to be groomed as successors (Taing, 2013).

So the questions that arose frequently in the minds of CEOs and HR Directors are how do we manage these Gen Ys? How do they want to be led? How do we get our Baby Boomer and Gen X leaders to manage them effectively? These Gen Ys will be the heartbeat or lifeline of organisations in the future. They will make or break the organisation.

In this study, researcher has decided to focus on the Malaysian perspective particularly looking at the leadership preferences of Gen Y employees who are currently working in the private sector. Private sector was chosen because it is within this sector where high turnover and issues of retention of employees are more prevalent in Malaysia. The abundance of studies on Gen Y in the Western literature investigating on Western samples would not be applicable to the Malaysian context. Moreover, there is a plethora of empirical research of the Y generation but the findings are conflicting and incongruent – there are too many non-conclusive results which lead to more confusion. As stated by Deal et al. (2010), *"the relative sparse empirical research published on Gen Y is confusing at best and contradictory at worst"*. In addition to that, the intention to study on leadership preference is due to the little attention that has been paid by researchers to understanding leadership expectations and preferences of Gen Y in specific. Moorthy (2014) has stated that many existing studies investigated on the leadership styles of managers, but there is a lack of evidence on the specific leadership preferences of Gen Y. Thus, with better understanding of what the Gen Y wants from their leaders it would then be easy for the leaders to emulate those elements and lead them more effectively.

Therefore, this brings light to the purpose of this study which is to explore and understand the leadership preferences of Malaysian Gen Y employees in the private sector. It is hoped that this research will uncover some useful findings that can help shed some light to academics and practitioners alike on ways to leading the Gen Ys. This paper is divided into four main sections. The section after the introduction briefly outlines the research methodology for this study. Section three highlights the main findings and the themes that have emerged from the data transcripts. And the final section concludes this paper with some discussion and suggestions for recommendation.

Method

This research, designed to elicit understanding of Gen Y's leadership preference, from their own self-descriptions (Hiller, 2005; Dulin, 2008), is qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive in nature, using an interpretivist perspective.

Qualitative research focuses on individuals' lived experiences (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 2002), and is useful for discovery of new or additional information related to a research topic that is not well understood (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, in keeping with the qualitative research method, an in-depth one-to-one interviewing with open ended questions was administered to generate the textual data for analysis. A purposive sampling technique was used in which, participants were carefully chosen based upon established criteria. Beginning with a professional network of contacts, identified participants were chosen and have met the following criteria; i) Generation Y (Malaysian between the age of 21-34 years old); ii) Working in private or corporate organisations; iii) In the workforce for at least 2 years; iv) Working professional of at least junior executive position; v) Regardless of gender, multi-cultural diversity and socio-economic status.

Table 1. Participants' demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Position Level	Industry
P1	32	Male	Senior Executive	Aviation
P2	31	Male	Assistant Manager	Aviation
P3	28	Female	Executive	Banking
P4	26	Female	Senior Executive	Conglomerate

Table 1 displays participants' names, age, gender, years of experience and industry of current organisation. In total, 4 participants were interviewed one-to-one and in depth for the duration of between 45 to 90 minutes. An informed consent letter was sent to the participants to obtain permission and notifying the security and privacy considerations when participating in this research. In addition to that, researcher had connected with the participants several times prior to the interview via email, WhatsApp messages and through phone conversation in effort to create the trust and comfort between the researcher and participants. Interview questions were not shared prior to the interview session to ensure spontaneity of response. It is important that participants have to be as candid as possible and share their experiences of their past leaders that they have worked with. So during the interview, the participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, that is, to understand what their leadership preferences are. A few open ended questions were asked based on their own experiences working with past leaders.

Each interview was audio taped and later transcribed. Full transcripts were then analysed utilising constant comparative technique. This method requires the researcher to take one piece of data (i.e. one interview transcript) at a time, follow an iterative process of coding as set forth by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and compare it all to other pieces of data that are similar or different. The first stage of coding, termed open coding, sought to identify discrete ideas. At this point, the ideas can be expansive and anything that is significant to the research question is possible to be coded. Data that appeared pertaining to similar ideas were then clustered into categories and subcategories. This process of grouping your open

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codes is called axial coding, the second type of coding. Open and axial coding was not conducted in a linear fashion, instead the researcher moved back and forth between them to refine the categories. The final type of coding, selective coding was used to identify the main themes that emerged from the data.

Several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness of findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). First, rich and thick description was used to convey the findings, thereby sharing the experience of the discussion with the reader (Creswell, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994). By bringing the reader closer to the participant, the researcher created a sense of shared experience between the reader and the participant (Creswell and Miller, 2000). The researcher presents the findings of the study through thick narrative description using excerpts from the interviews to emphasize meaning and a sense of being there for readers. Second, researcher is a trained interviewer. Having worked in the human resources field for more than 10 years, researcher has experience conducting numerous job interviews employing the behavioural and competency interview techniques. Questions asked were open ended in nature and specific examples and incidences were probed to describe the situations and experiences confronted vividly. Third, researcher had used paraphrasing in the interpretation of participants' responses immediately after each question and clarify with the participants that what was understood by the researcher was correct. This method is an informal way of member checking, which gave the participants an opportunity to react to the researcher's interpretation and to correct if the researcher had interpreted incorrectly. As noted above, appropriate measures were employed to establish trustworthiness and credibility in the qualitative research.

Findings and Analysis

Several key themes emerge from analysing the transcripts. These themes are organised into the exploratory model presented in Figure 1.
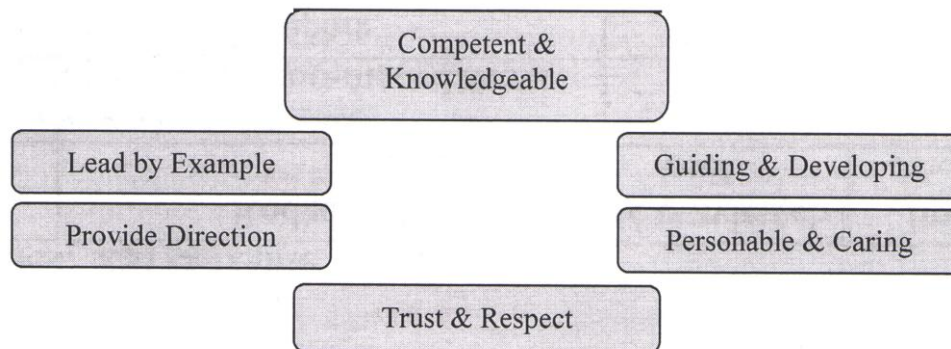

Figure 1. Leadership preferences of Malaysian Gen Y employees evolved from data analysis

As the model shows, six categories of variables surfaced as the leadership preference of Malaysian Generation Y employees and they are; (i) competent and knowledgeable; (ii) guiding and developing; (iii) personable and caring; (iv) trust and respect; (v) provide direction; and (vi) lead by example. Each of these categories is discussed in detail in this section to familiarise the reader with the themes. The excerpts from the in depth interview are included in the findings to provide additional details and understanding of the leadership preferences of these Gen Y employees.

Theme 1: Competent and Knowledgeable

The participants felt that to be a leader one must have the competency and the knowledge to do the job. As the younger workers within the group, they look to the leaders for advice and expect them to show the path, but if the leader is not able to show them, the participants felt that the leaders were lacking in competency. Below are some of the excerpts from the interviews with the participants;

P4: ....they must have the skills necessary to do the job. If you are say a HR head, I would expect you to have at least 60-70% of the skills. If you don't know the technical of it, employ somebody who can help you.....

P1: A leader must be qualified and have relevant skills......they know how to direct me to do certain things, why we approach this way and that way....but at the end of the day....for me I think you may have the qualification but the skills comes a lot from your experience.

Therefore, the participants look for leaders who are qualified, technically sound, experienced, expert in the field i.e. knowledgeable on their subject matter. As they are at the early stage of their career, the steep learning curve is of priority to them and this could only be realised if they are reporting to leaders who are highly experienced and technically sound.

Theme 2: Guiding and Developing

All the participants wanted leaders who can guide and teach. It is of most important as they are hungry and eager to learn at this age. They felt that leaders must be able to tell them on what is right and wrong through regular feedback. Leaders must be able to make the time and effort in developing the Gen Ys and show appreciation of their commendable hard work. Gen Ys believe that employees will follow wherever the good leaders go. Below are some of the excerpts from the interviews with the participants;

P3: I know leaders are always busy but when there's time, we would like to have a conversation about our career, how we can actually broaden our skills, how to develop ourselves, you know... us Gen Y, we are really ambitious...like for me, if I have a mentor, I would like the mentor to guide me and be at least at his or her place in the future....like becoming a successor.

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P2: A leader is a person who guides. I mean…. guide has a broad meaning right….you can define as to show you how to do it, or show you how to think to do it, decide on how to get the things done and so on ….so the best is guidance, leader is the person who guides

Thus, the participants look for leaders who can give guidance, willing to teach and be more of a mentor, provide timely and necessary feedback, spend the time to develop for future career growth and show appreciation when deserving. Their eagerness to learn and ambitious to succeed makes the Gen Y look for leaders who are willing to impart they knowledge and experience.

Theme 3: Personable and Caring

Malaysian Gen Y employees in this study prefer leaders that display a friendly and caring demeanour. They felt there should be a good follower-leader relationship where the leaders must be approachable and easy to talk to. It is critical to Gen Ys to have a conducive working environment where learning can take place without fear and anxiety. In view of this, the leader has to be someone who takes the trouble to get to know the whole team and shows concern on the employees' wellbeing. This concern on the employees' wellbeing is not just limited to work but personal and social aspects as well. Below are some of the excerpts from the interviews with the participants;

P1: ….a leader for me should be someone that I can easily talk to, have easy access. My current boss is not just a boss but a good friend too, she is very approachable and sometimes when I have a lot of ideas, I can easily talk to her and she will listen attentively.

P4: She treats us as peers, there is no such thing as hierarchy…like when we face any problems she will be there for us and we can speak to her on any number of things.

Synthesising participants' input, it was evident that Gen Ys in this study favour leaders who are approachable, friendly, humble, understanding and reasonable, concern and caring. Being part of an organisation where fun is cultivated is a way of maintaining a healthy emotional balance for the Gen Ys. Thus, a leader who is friendly and inculcates this kind of culture will surely make a Gen Y happy and stay longer in an organisation.

Theme 4: Respect and Trust

Participants described trust and being respectful of others as important in a Gen Y's view of a leader. They want to have sincerity of the relationship with their leaders and preferred leaders who demonstrate respect towards employees. They seek for empowerment and want to be given the opportunity to take up challenging roles and tasks. The participants expressed they are always looking for better ways of doing things in which leaders should be open and accepting to their suggestions. Below are some of the excerpts from the interviews with the participants;

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P3: Some supervisors they are like... "hey, what is this?" yelling and shouting at you when they are not happy with your work. Luckily I never experienced that, my boss showed respect and said to me nicely when I make any errors and she will say it in private and not in public.

P4: A leader must respects everybody from all walks of lives in their organisation regardless....you know when we go for lunch with the bosses, I always see how these bosses treat the waiters because from how they treat the waiters, you can kind a guess what kind of person they are...

P1: The boss I had was open to suggestions and allowed the subordinates to be more empowered;

Synthesising the theme on respect and trust, it was discussed that the participants preferred leaders who are respectful of others, give trust and allow some form of empowerment to the Gen Ys and are also open to suggestions for improvement. Therefore, trust and respect is very important in a leader and if the leader cannot be trusted, he or she will not obtain the support and respect of his or her followers.

Theme 5: Provide Direction

Participants described the importance of having a leader who provides clear direction. They felt that the expectations of the outcome must be conveyed clearly by the leaders and help them in some ways to steer the path in achieving those goals. It was evident from the interviews that participants do not want to be left in the dark. They need to understand the goal they need to work towards and these expectations must be communicated consistently and clearly. Below are some of the excerpts from the interviews with the participants;

P3: .....we just want to have a clear direction. For me a leader has to give clear instruction so that we know what is expected. He should know how to manage the boat, so that it would be like a great ship in future..

P4: Leaders must be able to tell me what the end goal is, what they expect from me because only then I can work from backwards and plan my time accordingly. You can't give me a lofty idea to somewhere and expect me to pave the road for it. I'm not saying the leader should lay down from A to Z but at least have an idea on what the outcome is going to be...

After synthesising the results, it pointed out the importance of leaders to provide clear direction, give clear expectation of the outcome, to have the end in mind and being visionary. Gen Ys want to feel that they are contributing and that their work will make a difference for the betterment of the organisation. And this could only be achieved if the leaders are able to give a clear picture and expectations of the outcome.

Theme 6: Lead by Example

Participants stated that leading by example as an essential facet of leadership. A leader provides followers with a role-modelling template to be emulated.

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Leaders need to align their words with their actions and they should carry through their commitments, rather than saying they would do something but not doing so. The action-word alignment is important as it will generate trust and respect of the Gen Ys on their leaders. Below are some of the excerpts from the interviews with the participants;

P3: My ex-boss was the type that doesn't do what she says. Simple example...like for me, I don't mind to come over the weekend, because we know it's on project basis and we have to come as it is our responsibility, so she will say, "okay guys, you have to come over the weekend....you have to put aside other matters, we have to deliver we cannot afford any hick-ups"...but when the day comes she was not there.....

P4: A leader is somebody who walks the talk....They are in the position where they can influence so what they do and say have an impact to the followers and thus the organisation.

Thus, leaders are always being observed and assessed by their followers. With respect to the Gen Ys, they admire leaders who can be like a role model, one who "walks the talk", who is not afraid to get their hands dirty, collaborative, responsible and accountable. Leaders have to act what they preach and once it is not being demonstrated, they will not be credible to the eyes of the Gen Ys.

Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this study is to gain some understanding on the leadership preferences of the Malaysian Gen Y employees who are working in the private sector. Generational diversity has generated major changes in how leadership, communication, employee engagement and motivation are being dealt with across generations. And as Gen Y continues to become larger in numbers within the workplace, leaders must not just adapt but develop a variety of behaviours to manage and motivate the Gen Y cohort effectively.

Through in-depth interviews, the questions posed were able to elicit leadership characteristics from their past and current experiences with leaders. The following core themes emerged from the four participants interviewed on the leadership preferences of leadership: (i) competent and knowledgeable; (ii) give guidance and develop employees; (iii) personable and caring; (iv) trust and respectful of other; (v) provide direction; and (vi) lead by example.

The findings of this study appear to support previous research by Stogdill (1948) aas well as Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) whereby intelligence and competency as the preferred traits of leaders. Gen Y participants in this study appreciate leaders who are knowledgeable and experienced within their leadership roles. Participant 4 had indicated that *"you need somebody who has the technical ability, can question your decision and shoot you down when necessary"*. Leaders, as asserted by all participants in the study, should lead by example. According to P1, a leader is someone *"that I look up to and can try to emulate"*. Thus, leaders have a strong

impact to their followers and serve as catalysts for changing their behaviours and attitudes. Kouzes and Posner (2002) associated leading by example with modelling the way, in which a leader's actions earn the respect of followers and serve as a directional compass to credible leadership. Leaders walk the talk, aligning their words with actions and doing what they say they will do. As P4 highlighted, a respected leader behaves *"through action and not just words"*. Malaysian Gen Y employees in this study suggested that a leader should give guidance and make the effort to develop. The theory of situational leadership by Hersey and Blanchard (1982) had revealed that a leader must provide support given the situation and the "level of maturity" of the followers. Depending on the "level of readiness" to assume greater responsibilities, participants in this study believed that they are at the stage where they need a lot of coaching and guidance. P2 acknowledged that *"a leader is a person who guides"* and P3 had pointed out that "*the leader has to be more like a mentor and guide on career development, what it takes to reach our goals"*.

Therefore, it could be highlighted that the findings of the study could supplement knowledge to "one of the world's oldest preoccupations," the practice and science of leadership (Bass, 1990). The conclusions seem to appear parallel to prior studies of leadership even though it does not fit into any theory of leadership identically. The findings of the study can provide insights to leaders in understanding on what is expected of them and the structure needed to implement strategies. Gen Y relates better to leaders who spend more time building an interpersonal relationship with employees and who make the effort to provide guidance. Leaders need to earn the respect of this new generation. To prove themselves to the new generation of workers, leaders must be humble, open to suggestions, have a clear expectation of the outcome and walk the talk. Having a set of leadership practices will ensure success with this cohort which includes (i) establishing a coaching relationship, (ii) giving opportunities of empowerment, (iii) being flexible with schedules and assignments, (iv) providing constructive feedback, (v) showing appreciation and acknowledging performance, and (e) providing challenging work. However, the suggestions of strategies are not limited to these only. Leaders can also try to re-establish their leadership styles and abilities by understanding the generational diversity within their organisation and establishing communication strategies that allow each generation to share and collaborate.

Future researchers in leadership preferences of Gen Y are encouraged to conduct studies with quantitative methods to validate the findings. Since this is a preliminary study which only had four participants, it would be interesting to see the findings of a larger number of participants up to the point of saturation. The current study was limited to the private sector regardless of any particular industry. Other researchers might wish to refine or expand this initial investigation by replicating in other industries and sectors. The number of studies specific to the leadership behaviours preferred by the Malaysian Gen Y employees of their leaders is limited. The need to understand them is critical as it can lead to numerous

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benefits to organisations. Therefore, from the findings uncovered in this study it is hoped that these insights should shed some light on the ways to manage the Gen Ys more effectively, making them satisfied in their job and retaining them longer in organisations.

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LIDERZY, KTÓRYCH PREFERUJEMY: PERSPEKTYWY MALEZYJSKICH PRACOWNIKÓW POKOLENIA Y

Streszczenie: Obecnie rynek pracy w Malezji doświadcza zmian demograficznych. Generacja Y, czyli osoby w wieku 34 lat i poniżej (rocznik 1980 - 1999), stanowią obecnie prawie połowę siły roboczej. Będą oni odgrywać istotną rolę na malezyjskim rynku pracy, pomagając przewodzić przyszłemu wzrostowi gospodarczemu kraju. Jednak dylemat, przed którym stają dziś liderzy, to ograniczone rozumienie dotyczące kierowania pokoleniem Y. Przyszła witalność organizacji zależy od zdolności do efektywnej pracy z pokoleniem Y. Chociaż cechy i potrzeby pokolenia Y są udokumentowane w istniejącej literaturze, jednak preferencje przywódcze i podejścia menadżerskie, które najlepiej wspierają takie potrzeby nie są jasne. W związku z tym, celem niniejszego studium jakościowego było zbadanie wymiarów przywództwa preferowanych przez malezyjskich pracowników pokolenia Y w sektorze prywatnym. W badaniu, celowo wybrano uczestników na podstawie określonych kryteriów. Przeprowadzono dogłębnie, częściowo ustrukturyzowane wywiady z zamiarem zidentyfikowania prawdziwych doświadczeń życiowych uczestników. Stwierdzono, że uczestnicy badania preferują liderów, którzy są (i) kompetentni i doświadczeni; (ii) udzielają wskazówek i rozwijają pracowników; (iii) są ujmujący i opiekuńczy; (iv) są zaufani i szanujący innych; (V) ukierunkowują; (vi) służą dobrym przykładem.

Słowa kluczowe: przywództwo, pokolenie Y, sektor prywatny, metoda jakościowa

我們的領導者：來自馬來西亞GEN Y員工的觀點

摘要：馬來西亞目前的勞動力正在經歷不斷變化的員工人口統計。一代Y，34歲及以下（出生於1980-1999年），佔今天勞動力的近一半。他們將在馬

來西亞勞動力市場發揮至關重要的作用，幫助領導國家未來的經濟增長。然而，當今領導者面臨的困境是領導第Y代時的有限理解，具有諷刺意味的是，組織的未來活力取決於其與Y世代有效工作的能力。雖然在現有文獻中記載了Y世代的特徵和需求，但領導偏好和最能滿足這些需求的方法尚不清楚。因此，這種定性研究的目的是探討馬來西亞第三代僱員在私營部門中首選的領導層面。在本研究中，根據某些標準故意選擇4名參與者。進行深入的半結構化訪談旨在獲得參與者的真實生活經驗。發現研究的參與者優選具有以下能力的領導：（i）能力和知識；
（ii）指導和培養員工；（iii）有愛心和有愛心；（iv）信任和尊重他人；
（v）提供方向;和（vi）為例.

關鍵詞：領導;第Y代，私營部門，定性方法