A STUDY ON TEACHERS' FOLLOWERSHIP STYLES AND STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING FOLLOWERSHIP SKILLS IN SOOCHOW UNIVERSITY, CHINA

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Abstract: The study was conducted to identify teachers' followership styles at Soochow University; to identify the most important followership skills and characteristics; as well as the important followership skills that the university lacks in its training program as the teachers perceived at Soochow University, and to provide some key training themes and suggestions that will help develop teachers' followership skills at Soochow University. The examined population was comprised of 133 randomly selected instructors from seven different departments of Soochow University. The primary source of the data was a questionnaire including 3 parts of variables. The data obtained from the returned questionnaires were analyzed by frequency, percentage and content analysis. The study found that: (1) teachers' followership styles from the most often acted to the least acted at Soochow universities were: exemplary followership, pragmatist followership, alienated followership, conformist followership, and passive followership. (2) The top ten important followership skills and characteristics as perceived by the instructors from the sampled departments from the most important to the least are: responsibility; persistency in work; self-confidence; unity and cooperation; self-critical; objective on the facts; mind of participating; break through innovatively; mind of serving; and communication abilities. (3) Eight followership skills or characteristics that the university lacks most in its training program as the teachers perceived from the sampled departments ranking from the most to the least are: dare to speak out; flexibility; unity and cooperation; break through innovatively; persistency in work; selfless contribution; work without complaints; and responsibility. (4) Five suggested training activities are recommended to conduct at Soochow University including "Followership Skills Development Training— Speaking up to the Leader"; "Followership Skills & Leadership Development Training— How to be flexible at work and whose responsibility"; "Quality Team Building—Unity and Cooperation"; "Strategic Leadership: Creativity and Innovation in Work—Break through innovatively", and "Values in Leadership and Followership—Persistency in Work; Selfless Contribution; Work without complaints; Responsibility", and so on.

Background of the Problem

Followers have been in existence for as long as there have been leaders. Not until 1967, has there been any official mention of the importance of followership, when Wiles states that followership and leadership may be equal, despite not exploring the dynamic of their relationship. Then in 1988, Robert E. Kelley comes up with a groundbreaking text on the existence, and importance, of followership. Ira Chaleff follows with *The Courageous Follower* (1995), bringing the dynamic of "courage" to followership analysis. Both of these works call for more research. Of the researchers who take up this challenge are Dixon and Westbrook (2003), who validate the existence of followership at all organizational levels. The current status of followership research is that it is highly decentralized, though thoughtfully considered in a number of different sources. The authors of these sources lend years of experience in their fields to justify their claims of the importance of followership. However, the ratio of leadership to followership books is 120:1. The lack of research and emphasis on followership relative to leadership in the world is ironic considering that the two are so intertwined.

Diversities and changes in the workplace highlight the need for examining followership in more depth. Cross and Parker (2004) state that the traditional organizational hierarchy between leaders and their followers has eroded over time, thanks to expanding social networks and the growing empowerment of followers through their ability to access information more easily. The advent of the information age has highlighted the need for more flexible leader-follower relationships. These changes have made the study of followership increasingly necessary as organizations seek new ways to select, train, and lead followers for maximum productivity. Flexibility is a key ingredient for both leaders and followers when it comes to their overall approach to work.

Into the 21st century, these changes also happened in educational fields, with more international universities being established and more international communications being promoted. Since the traditional rigid up-and-down structure was limiting for the development of universities, more educational leaders tried to signify the need to reevaluate the tendency to focus on leadership to the exclusion of followership. Therefore, recently many educational leaders in higher education institutes and universities focused more on developing their teachers' skills so as to create high performance organizations. And the developmental approaches such as "total quality management", "team building", "quality of work life", "job enrichment", "empowerment", and "management by objectives", were not only used in the business world, but also were used in university educational administration and leadership work.

Soochow University is one of those advanced universities. It is a first-rate provincial comprehensive institution in east China's Jiangsu Province with one hundred years of its educational history. Based in the historic city of Suzhou, encompassing 135 hectares, the university has more than 35,000 students. The University

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has three centers for post-doctoral students, 14 centers for doctoral candidates, and 73 centers for graduate students. Soochow University has established institutional relationships with more than 100 colleges and universities in Japan, France, Korea, Singapore, Germany, America, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. At this era, the university leadership team is doing their best with unprecedented verve, courage, and insight to build up Soochow University into a national, first-rate comprehensive university.

To study teachers' followership styles at Soochow University can help the top leader understand more about most teachers' followership styles and the most important followership skills. The study will also help to change the traditional China thinking that the "leader is always at the center"; it is accord with the expectation of the university leadership and the trend of university development at present. Since Soochow University is a typical provincial key comprehensive university in China eastern area, followership study in such a big and compressive institution can also provide some enlightened ideas for other "State 211 Project" institution of higher education that are in the education administration reform.

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to reignite the focus on followership styles, discuss what are the most important skills or characteristics of being a good follower, and what kind of training that the institution should provide for those teachers as the followers; so that the leaders in educational administration or leadership position could take advantage of the findings to understand more of teachers' followership styles and skills. Three objectives have been set in order to accomplish the purposes: first, to identify the teachers' followership styles at Soochow University, China; second, to identify the most important followership skills or characteristics as teachers perceived at Soochow University, China; third, to identify the important followership skills or characteristics that the university lacks in training as teachers perceived at Soochow University, China; and in addition, to propose some key training themes and suggestions that would help to develop teachers' followership skills at Soochow University.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study would be beneficial to university students who are studying Educational Administration, Educational Leadership and Human Resource and Public Relationship in order to learn more ideas about followership, educational leadership and institutional relationship management.

Likewise, the results of this study would benefit instructors in international universities at Soochow University, China. They could know more about what their followership styles were and what efforts they should put to become the best followers in their current and future management, and could conduct more effective practices from now on.

Administrators and university leaders in Soochow University, China, would also benefit from this study which promotes their consideration of what were the significant factors affecting teachers' followership, what system and training they should provide for their followers to help them become the best followers, and how to improve the quality of followership and help them create a better environment or improve institutional productivity.

Future researchers and educational organizations in other countries could also utilize this study, which included some clues and elements to study teachers as followers and their leaders.

Research Instrument

The researcher prepared a questionnaire with three parts. The first part is "Followership Style Survey", based on Kelley's categories of followership styles. The second part is a checklist of important followership skills and characteristics based on the previous researchers' findings and comments that ask the respondent to rank or add as they perceived. The last part has two opened questions. Question one asks the teachers' opinion about what followership skills and characteristics are very important but are also very difficult to develop, and which the university is lacking in its training program. And question two asks teachers about what kind of training they are expecting the institution to provide for them. The teachers were asked to write brief comments for both questions. All the questions were adjusted and rewritten to meet the objectives and needs of this study and the real situations in China.

Sample, Population, Participants

A total population of 133 full-time instructors, who were working in the sample faculties at Soochow University, China, was used in the study. In the population, 54 were from the Department of General Medicine, 11 were from the Department of Applied Biology, 24 were from Department of Biological Science, 12 were from Department of Food Safety, 20 were from the Department of Horticulture, 6 were from the Department of Urban Planning, and 6 were from the Department of Interior Decorating Design.

The sample group was selected in different departments by using "Stratified Random Sampling". The researcher asked all the sample instructors to respond to the instrument. There were 93 instructors selected from 7 different departments.

Data Collection

The researcher requested permission from the Vice Presidents of Soochow University by letter before distributing the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed to the related departments by the researcher and her assistant since January 27th, 2009. To the end of March, the researcher and her assistant personally went to

the related departments at Soochow University, distributed questionnaires and collected 78 valid questionnaires (84%).

Data Analyses& Method

To analyze the data for objective number 1: frequencies and percentages were used to identify the teachers' followership styles at Soochow University, China.

To analyze the data for objective number 2 and number 3: frequencies were used to identify the important followership skills and characteristics at Soochow University, China, and to identify the followership skills and characteristics which the university lacks in their training program as the teachers perceived.

To analyze the data for objective number 4: content analysis was used to summarize the teachers' suggestions and comments on how to develop the important followership skills and characteristics by training programs or self-study.

Findings

1. Identification of teachers' followership styles at Soochow University, China.

The statistically significant results showed among 78 teachers who were working in the sampled departments of Soochow University, 56 respondents (72%) were acting as an exemplary follower; another 12 respondents (15%) were acting as a pragmatist follower, 6 respondents (7.8%) were acting as an alienated follower; 2 respondents (2.6%) were acting as a conformist follower; 2 respondents (2.6%) were acting as a passive follower. As the results show, most respondents were acting as exemplary followers at Soochow University, China. Therefore, teachers' followership styles from the most often acted to the least acted at Soochow University were: exemplary followership, pragmatist followership, alienated followership, conformist followership, and passive followership.

2. Identification of the most important followership skills and characteristics as the teachers perceived at Soochow University.

The statistically significant results showed the top ten important followership skills and characteristics as perceived by the instructors from the sampled departments from the most important to the least are: responsibility; persistency in work; self-confidence; unity and cooperation; self-critical; objective on the facts; mind of participating; break through innovatively; mind of serving; and communication abilities.

3. Identification of the important followership skills and characteristics that university lacks in its training program as the teachers perceived.

The statistically significant results showed eight followership skills or characteristics that the university lacks most in its training program as the teachers perceived from the sampled departments, from the most to least are: dare to speak out; flexibility; unity and cooperation; break

through innovatively; persistency in work; selfless contribution; work without complaints; and responsibility.

4. Suggestions for developing teachers' followership skills at Soochow University.

The results of the content analysis showed that to develop the important followership skills and characteristics by training programs or self-study, professional development activities including seminars, conferences, meetings, self-study, or training programs are suggested to be conducted before the employee starts to work at a university position or at the beginning of the academic year. The activities and training should focus upon the following themes: give more opportunities for the teachers to speak out their own ideas; provide directions for helping the teachers increase flexibility when facing difficulties; be concerned with more teamwork based fostering unity and cooperation; encourage the teachers and provide them a good atmosphere to help them break through innovatively; and focus more on persistency in work and responsibility.

Moreover, many teachers commented that "selfless contribution", and "work without complaints" are also very important as followership skills and characteristics, but it seems impossible to develop these two characteristics since people's nature won't be perfect. "Total selflessness" and "work without complaints" are only ideal thoughts.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

Soochow University should focus more on cultivating exemplary followers by providing more opportunities for training teachers to develop the important followership skills characteristics including; dare to speak out; flexibility; unity and cooperation; break through innovatively; persistency in work; selfless contribution; work without complaints; and responsibility. The suggested training activities are recommended to be conducted at Soochow University from time to time. Teachers' feedback of these training activities should be recorded and referred in planning future training programs. More workshops on followership rather than leadership are encouraged to be conducted in the future at Soochow University.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research regarding teachers' followership are: (1) further research can explore more why the teachers worked as exemplary followers for the most part at Soochow University, China; (2) future research can explore more about other important followership skills and characteristics at other institutions in China or other countries; (3) future research can develop more practical strategies and training programs to cultivate more exemplary followers and to improve the followers' skills and develop their characteristics, so that can build up a strong team in the institution with high performance and harmonies; (4) further studies on followership styles, skills and characteristics are encouraged to conduct in a more

wide scope and extent; (5) and comparative studies in different contexts and countries are welcomed to explore more about what factors influence teachers' followership styles, and how to develop the desirable followers in different cultures and contexts.

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