TRUST BUILDING IN E-LEADER-FOLLOWER TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED RELATIONSHIPS IN ACADEMIC AND NON-ACADEMIC SECTORS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: *The transformation of leadership from traditional to e-contexed in academic and non-academic sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged trust in e-leader-follower relationships. This article examines the e-leader-follower level of trust in technology-mediated relationships and the institutional support provided in both academic and non-academic organizations. E-leadership has gained momentum globally during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the academic and non-academic sectors. A qualitative interview survey was conducted in this context employing a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire from academic and non-academic administrative leaders. The results have revealed that in the non-academic sector, e-leaders are satisfied with technology-mediated relationships with their followers, as, in their view, it is time- and cost-saving, transparent, and less argumentative. On the contrary, the leaders in the academic sector preferred a combination of both face-to-face and technology-mediated relationships. Further, it was recommended by both service sectors that continuous and effective training, institutional support, investment in technology, and e-incentives are the most demanding areas to enhance the effectiveness of the e-leader-follower technology-mediated relationship.*

Keywords: Trust, E-leadership, Technology-mediated relationship, Covid-19 pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

A leader-follower trust-based relationship is a positive and productive association in an exchange relationship among employees of an institute. Hence, this association in the workplace strengthens the social exchange relationships among the leaders and followers. Regarding the combined extrinsic and intrinsic motives, social exchange relationships encourage followers to support their workplace relations. Nevertheless, social exchange relationships need trust to mediate leader-follower relationships [1].

Trust is a crucial factor that influences teamwork in institutions; a high level of trust balances authoritative leader-follower relationships and cooperation, leading to better collaborative institutional performance. Molm [2] argued that leaders and followers develop trust through high-quality social exchanges. As reported by Trimble [3], during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees had to work from home due to government policies, including social distancing, to control the outbreak of COVID-19. Working from home has changed people's work behavior. There are both advantages and disadvantages to working from home.

The COVID-19 situation had unpleasant effects from emotional and economic perspectives. Trust becomes the most crucial factor in daily working procedures and relationships. However, such a situation demands leaders with strong leadership skills whom their followers can trust. As reported by the American Psychological Association [4], stress from a leader can cause more anxiety in the followers during COVID-19.

pandemic era. Therefore, effective communication is required from the leaders to reduce employees' stress and maximize trust.

2. E-LEADERSHIP

At the turn of the new millennium, the first literature on e-leadership was reported by Avolio [5], which provided a basic understanding of what e-leadership is in an organizational context. Leadership is about a reciprocal influence between leaders and followers in a social interaction process between individuals and groups for getting 'things done' through followers. Leadership involves a complex process aimed at achieving the goals of the organization [8, 10]. Leadership is a dynamic state, not a static one. It transforms along with the changing environment of leading, for which technology-mediated relationships form a remarkably new context for leaders as to skills requirements and challenges it in daily e-leadership-follower relationships.

3. UNDERPINNING THEORY

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory is based on the premise that interactions and communications between human beings occur through the motivation of rewards. The theory is also built on the premise that the outcome of mutually beneficial relationships is generally based on durable trust and attraction [6]. Additionally, it is believed that such social exchanges, which are profitable, tend to yield material and psychological benefits, including status in life, loyalty from partners, and general approval in professional and personal life.

4. METHODOLOGY

An interview survey was conducted in the academic and non-academic service sectors. Employing the semi-structured, open-ended eight interview questions, the interviewees were selected for administrative positions in their respective academic and non-academic institutes. An expert opinion was obtained for the questionnaire before conducting the semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The eight open-ended questions are mentioned below:

1: How prepared were you for technology use in the pre-

pandemic era?

2: Did you get training in technology from your institution, or you were on your own in this transition phase?

3: How supportive did your institution provide technology training to their employees? Was there any formal training provided?

4: How satisfied are you with your institution's technology use-

related support?

5: How do you perceive the e-leader-follower relationship in the e-context era?

6: Do you trust technology-mediated relationships or prefer the

traditional face-to-face interaction mode in your organization?

7: Do your followers trust technology-mediated relationships or do they prefer the traditional face-to-face interaction mode in your organization?

8. What measures will you take to develop the trust of the followers in e-leader-follower relationship?

5. RESPONSES AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the responses obtained from the interviews. In our sample, two interviewees are from administrative positions in the academic sector, and two interviewees are from administrative positions in the non-academic sector.

5.1 Interviewee 1: Chairperson of the Education Department in a Public University in the Philippines (*Academic*)

Interviewee 1 is the chairperson of a university department and has adequate proficiency in using MS Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, as well as using social media like YouTube videos for teaching purposes, even before the COVID-19 pandemic started. Upon the outbreak of the pandemic, the university was quick enough to identify the faculty's needs and provide all the information technology (IT) support required to develop and send course syllabi and other teaching materials to the Learning Management System (LMS). The university not only provided the required training and support but also invested in strengthening the university's internet speed and connectivity. Overall, the respondent ranked 9 on the 1–10 continuum scale, measuring the satisfaction of respondents with institution IT training and support, which means the respondent is highly satisfied.

This interviewee believes that a leader must be tech-savvy so that he or she can communicate and respond to the immediate needs of the faculty members. However, faculty members show concern about students learning in far-flung areas where internet connectivity is an issue. Many of the students cannot attend live class sessions, and they need to rely on recorded lectures, which they can watch at their convenience. In addition, the faculty member believes the best form of communication is face-to-face, and given the chance, she will prefer to teach students in class face-to-face, where she can gauge students' responses and adjust the teaching style accordingly, which would improve the quality of teaching and learning. For the recommendation, the faculty member suggested that a leader must have the necessary technical

skills to be an effective leader and develop a trustworthy relationship with his subordinates in the modern world.

5.2 Interviewee 2: Head of the Department of Social Sciences from a Public University in Malaysia (*Academic*)

Interviewee 2 admits that the e-leader-follower relationship is totally different and still requires a lot of work to improve. Further, respondents added that people believe this e-leadership and follower relationship is a substitute for face-to-face interaction, but still, this is not the best option. It will take a long time to adjust our teaching and learning habits with these e-learning platforms, as we have been trained and groomed in a traditional face-to-face teaching setup. Interviewee 2 mentioned that the technology-mediated leader-and-follower relationship will improve transparency in the organizational work life and that will help improve the trust level among all the stakeholders, which is another interesting perspective on looking at this paradigm shift. However, this respondent prefers a blend of traditional and e-teaching and learning environments, and whenever possible, traditional methods should be preferred.

Based on the responses from interviewee 2, this respondent had a basic knowledge of tools and techniques used in an academic environment but never took it seriously. But after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, this knowledge became very handy. Interviewee 2 mentioned that during the lockdown, additional IT training and support were provided by the university, but most of the training and required knowledge he already had, but now the time was to execute that knowledge smoothly and successfully. Overall, this respondent is highly satisfied with the institution in terms of technological support.

5.2 Interviewee 3: Academic Quality Manager, Saudi Arabia (*Academic*)

Interviewee 3 was aware that technology has become a vital component in teaching and learning. That's why we have insisted on using blended learning tools in teaching and learning, with the main focus on learning apps like Kahoot, etc. We ensured that all students have access to digital learning either through smartphones and/or pads. We have an integrated MIS, which also hosts learning tools. A few workshops were conducted to teach staff how to use different technological applications for teaching and learning not very satisfactory. Institutions lacked funds to fully integrate technology into teaching and learning. They have set up three full-fledged blended learning classrooms, but it is not enough to cover all courses. The internet connection was unreliable, and there were too many breakdowns in equipment. Technology haves and have-nots are the new areas of concern in the modern era. People who are technology-oriented have tremendous advantages over the have-nots when it comes to the job market (the digital divide). Unlike the previous era, where learning was teacher-centric, the new era is learner-centric, where the teacher performs the role of a facilitator. The learner himself is an e-leader, and he himself is a follower. Technology-oriented teaching and learning became essential after the pandemic. It is no longer an option. Though traditional face-to-face learning cannot be compared with other forms of learning, teachers are now required to upload

their lessons online, conduct webinars, and have online interactive sessions. So online learning methods are not an option now. We have to adapt to this mode of learning. The majority of learners prefer technology-mediated learning due to its flexibility and the privacy it offers. E-leaders should be more technologically savvy and use interactive methods to keep their followers interested. The methods should also be productive.

5.3 Interviewee 4: Public Service Sector, Pakistan (*Non-academic*)

Interviewee 4 was comfortable with technology in the pre-pandemic setting because of his previous post-secondary education experience. Further, the response to institutional support questions shows that the IT department did train their employees to work from home during the lockdown, and the overall respondent is satisfied with the technical support provided by the institution. In terms of e-leadership and followership relations, the respondent showed increased satisfaction, highlighting the increase in quality of work and performance in a technology-based work-from-home environment, mainly due to reduced travel time and the absence of late sitting in the office. In response to the question of whether followers trust technology-mediated relationships or prefer the traditional face-to-face interaction mode in your organization, it is mentioned that most followers do not trust technology-mediated relationships compared to face-to-face interaction, which contradicts earlier responses of the respondent. To enhance the trust level between e-leadership and followers, issue awareness and effective training could be vital for the success of the organization and employee satisfaction, as suggested by this respondent.

5.4 Interviewee 5: Officer from a Public Department, in Pakistan (*Non-Academic*)

Interviewee 5 was not well prepared or had sufficient background in the use of technology in the absence of face-to-face interaction, though his department provided sufficient training to work during the lockdown period. Overall, the respondent is satisfied with the support and training provided by the department to work from home. Interviewee 4 believes the e-leader-follower relationship is a new norm in the work setting, and it is a must to have and develop this trust and relationship. In addition to that, the respondent believes that technology-mediated relationships are better than face-to-face interactions. However, he mentioned that it varies from person to person; some people are more comfortable with the technology-mediated relationship while others are not. This respondent suggested that, based on the users' experience, continuous training and improvement in technology systems are required for the success of the organization.

5.5 Interviewee 6: Officer from a Semi-Government Institution, in Pakistan (*Non-academic*).

Interviewee 6 was not really prepared to use IT tools to take on work-from-home challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the respondent admits that sufficient IT training and support were provided by the department in a timely manner and shows overall satisfaction with the departmental support during this work-from-home transition phase. The respondent believes that the e-leader-follower relationship is a new norm in the work environment, and it is a must to have and trust this relationship for better performance at an organizational level. Further, this respondent shared that tech-mediated leadership was enjoyed by some colleagues; however, many were comfortable in face-to-face meetings and running the business in a traditional pre-covid style. The respondent recommended that there should be continuous training in the use of modern IT techniques to enhance leader-follower trust and performance in the coming days.

5.6 Interviewee 7: Officer from a Federal Government, Pakistan (*Non-academic*)

Interviewee 7 shared that at the emergence of COVID-19, the department divided the workforce into two batches. Batch 1 comes to the office in week 1, and the second in the week will work from home; similarly, batch 2 is operating in the same fashion in every alternative week. The department wanted to make sure that there was a presence of staff at the office all the time. The respondent accepted that he was not very active in using IT tools for office work. As soon as the lockdown situation started, the department started organizing IT tools awareness sessions on Zoom, and then after that, formal training sessions were organized. The respondent rated his satisfaction at 7.5 on a scale of 1 not satisfied to 10 highly satisfied. He highlighted that after a few training sessions, there was no follow-up, and the staff was struggling. However, the respondent mentioned that working from home with the use of IT is more cost-effective, saves travel time, and, in some cases, increases productivity. Still, this respondent strongly believes that face-to-face is the best way to work because people are not ready to work from home independently. He believes people are better prepared when they have a face-to-face meeting as compared to an online meeting. He added that a face-to-face meeting is more authentic and improves efficiency, and his preference would be face-to-face if given the opportunity. He shares another interesting perspective: that people just switch on their audio while traveling or sitting in a coffee shop, which not only reduces their concentration but also means sensitive information could be compromised as many people don't have an internet or Wi-Fi facility at home. Still, the respondent recommended continuous training for the employees, which can help improve operational efficiencies and employee leadership comfort levels.

5.8 Interviewee 8: Officer from a Federal Government, Pakistan (*Non-academic*).

Interviewee 8 mentioned that initially, the department had no preparation for the use of IT tools and the work-from-home option. However, he mentioned that comfort levels with the use of IT tools varied from person to person. Some were quite comfortable, but many were IT illiterate. Despite all the

weaknesses, respondents mentioned that the department was quick in responding to the needs of the hour. After a country-wide lockdown, initially, work hours were reduced to 50%, but then very soon the department reorganized the office setup and created five conference rooms to conduct IT awareness training, seminars, and presentations. On a scale of 1–10, the respondent showed 100% satisfaction with department training and support during this transitional period. However, he admitted that attendance in that training session was up 70% at maximum. Respondents believe working in an office is way better than working from home. He believes that in an office environment, we are more active and disciplined in our work compared to a work-from-home environment. He further added that at home there is no check and balance, and we become lazy and cannot manage time properly. He also mentioned that we are a kind of law enforcement agency, so the nature of our job requires that we be in office.

6.   KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

By looking at all the responses, we can say that generally, in the 21st century, people have a basic knowledge of various technological tools, depending on their individual and institutional requirements. However, the use of technology in leadership roles varies in different sectors of the economy. For example, in academics and related fields, IT education is usually higher than in non-academic fields. In the pre-COVID-19 era, many individuals and institutions were adopting technology at their own pace. COVID-19 became a trigger factor in accelerating technological change in all sectors of the economy. Individuals and organizations had no option but to resist; everyone had to learn, adopt, and use a technology-mediated work environment. The organizations did their best to bring in various technological tools, provide the required training to use that technology, and realize the importance of technology in the new work environment. Many of the organizations made the necessary changes to survive, but some went beyond that and made it an opportunity to not only survive but also create a success story in the industry. Respondents from both academic and non-academic sectors expressed satisfaction with the support they received from their institution and emphasized the importance of leaders being tech-savvy to foster a trusted leader-follower relationship in this new era. However, continuous IT training and support are vital for the success of e-leader-follower-trusted relationships.

7.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Internet and technology brought an impetus to revolutionize the way contemporary work environments work, and COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for this change. The results of this study show that organizations need to continuously assess their technological needs through employee and leader' feedback and continue to invest in modernizing the way we do work. The latest technology alone will never create miracles unless we develop a connection between humans and technology. Human resources are the most important asset of any organization. Management development, besides employee training and continuous support, would be key to reducing the resistance

to adopting the latest technological tools that make employees comfortable and succeed in the work setting.

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