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SUSTAINING ACADEMIC STAFF'S ENGAGEMENT THROUGH LEADER'S MOTIVATING LANGUAGE IN UNIVERSITI SELANGOR

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Abstract

Lack of job satisfaction and low motivation level lead to an increasing rate of turnover intention among academic staff in higher learning institutions. With the growing number of private institutions, it increases the choices for voluntary turnover among academicians who seek for better institutions. The best approach in retaining quality workforce is to maintain staff's engagement to the institution, which can be achieved with the establishment of job satisfaction. The Leader's Motivating Language (LML) specifically focuses on the three main aspects of leader's communication which can elevate employees' job satisfaction. This study investigated the use of LML by faculty's academic administrators and examined the relationship between the use of LML and academic staff's job satisfaction level. A quantitative approach was employed, with 185 academic staff from Universiti Selangor (UNISEL) recruited through purposive sampling to provide the required data for this study through a questionnaire. The findings revealed that the LML is practiced at a moderately high level within the faculties of UNISEL. It was also found that there is a strong, significant and positive relationship between the use of LML by the academic administrators and academic staff's job satisfaction. This study has theoretical implications for understanding how the use of LML strongly relates to the level of job satisfaction which can help sustain UNISEL academic staff's engagement in the institution hence reducing staff turnover intention and increasing talent retention.

Keywords: Academic staff, job satisfaction, motivating language theory, staff retention

1. Introduction

Higher learning institutions are seen as an academic organisation that is intensively focused on knowledge, with its greater work output depending heavily on their academic staff's engagement and commitment to the job. It is important to retain academic staff who are engaged to the institution to ensure institutional success involving the students' achievement and educational objectives accomplishments because it has a positive relationship with talent retention, reduction of employee turnover and organisation's survival (Albdour & Altarawneh, 2014; Bano et al., 2011; Tepayakul & Rinthaisong, 2018). With engagement and commitment to the institution, it reflects loyalty and job satisfaction among the academic staff.

It is crucial to retain the motivation level of the workforce as engagement is reflected through employees' commitment to work through various situations. This would give them satisfaction in their job. The establishing and retaining of motivation among academic staff is closely influenced by the leadership and verbal communication of the superiors or leaders within the faculty. This paper will further elaborate on the role of Leader's Motivating Language, conceptualised from Sullivan's (1998) Motivating Language Theory, in being the motivating factor to boost academic staff's job satisfaction.

1.1. Leadership and Verbal Communication

The effectiveness of leader's verbal communication will help reduce ambiguity in tasks, overcome communication barriers, as well as satisfying employees' social needs (Bornman & Puth, 2017). With varied purposes and types of verbal communication, successful leader-subordinate interaction is obtained and employees are motivated and satisfied (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Newnam & Goode, 2019). Previous studies have explored the impact of leader's verbal communication in achieving organisational goals through multiple communication dimensions (Edelman & Knippenberg, 2016; Refozar et al., 2017). However, the most important part in motivating employees at the workplace is the clarity and precision in direction-giving, reduction of anxiety and improvement on leader-subordinate relationship (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). Hence, Sullivan's (1988) theory on language and motivation, originated from Austin's (1962) Speech Acts Theory, is a suitable and practical model of communication for this purpose.

1.2. From the Speech Acts Theory to the Motivating Language Theory

Sullivan's (1988) Motivating Language Theory is founded based on the Speech Acts Theory by Austin (1962). Exploring the dimensions of utterances, this theory classifies the verbal language use into three different levels in order to achieve a goal. It is classified into locutionary act (literal meaning of utterances), illocutionary act (intended meaning from the speaker) and perlocutionary act (response or action that takes place affected by the first two acts). When the perlocutionary act is achieved, the whole utterance is then completed and successful. With the illocutionary act as the core focus of this theory, it highlights the power of speech in influencing other people's actions, leading to the development of leader's verbal communication, the Motivating Language Theory.

1.3. Leader's Motivating Language (LML)

From the Motivating Language Theory conceptualised by Sullivan (1988), the Leader's Motivating Language (LML) was proposed to be one of the practical theories for organisational motivation and communication. The LML brings forward the notion that employees' performance, job satisfaction and organisational commitment can be elevated through leader's communicated talks (Muhammad Haroon, 2018; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018).

The LML outlines three dimensions of leader's motivating speech as a guide for leaders to motivate employees' in the workplace. The first dimension is the direction-giving language (perlocutionary speech act) which refers to the communication of instructions and directions with the aim to reduce ambiguity and uncertainties in ensuring maximum comprehension of orders. The second dimension is the empathetic language (illocutionary speech act) which refers to a leader's approach in expressing emotion, appreciation, feedbacks and compliments to the employees (Muhammad Haroon, 2018). The third dimension is the meaning-making language (locutionary speech act) which refers to the language that assists employees' understanding of their nature of work and it is done through social exchanges between the leaders and the subordinates.

To accomplish the most benefits from the theory of LML, leaders should be able to utilise all the three facets of the speech acts in the LML. The direction-giving language should be delivered while taking into account employees' well-being and self-worth empathetically. To be empathetic, leaders must be able to avoid ambiguous or unintended meaning from the interaction, ensuring a meaning-making exchange. Successful execution of the LML will influence employees' job satisfaction.

1.4. LML, Job Satisfaction and Workplace Engagement

With an emphasis on facilitating organisational outcomes, the LML contributes to many organisational advantages such as the increase of employees' performance (Holmes & Parker, 2017), improvement of innovation and creativity (Paterson et al., 2016) and reduction of employees' turnover intention (Refozar et al., 2017; Ramasamy & Abdullah, 2020). Besides influencing the organisation as a whole, the LML also has an impact towards the employees as it leads to their job satisfaction. Hoppock (1935) defines job satisfaction as the feeling of fulfilment with one's job. This is influenced by not only physiological and environmental conditions, but also psychological circumstances. Employees' motivation has been proven to have an impact towards employees' levels of job satisfaction (Breaugh et al., 2018; Steijn & Van der Voet, 2019).

With the conceptualisation of LML, it allowed researchers to explore the roles of the three motivating language concerning the act of instruction delivery, employees' well-being as well as meaningful interactions. Previous studies across various settings proved a positive relationship between the usage of LML and employees' job satisfaction at their workplace (Gutierrez-Wirsching et al., 2015; Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Madlock & Hildebrand Clubbs, 2019; Nyenyembe et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2020). This relationship also persisted in organisational settings of various cultures (Madlock & Sexton, 2015: Rowley Mayfield et al., 1998; Simmons & Sharbrough, 2013). Some of the previous studies explored the education sector and found the impactful role of motivating language use towards faculty

members' job satisfaction (Meilani et al., 2021; Muhammad Haroon, 2018; Nyenyembe et al., 2016; Refozar et al., 2017; Suwanto & Eka, 2020). In the local setting, the previous studies progressed from investigation in the public sectors (Goh & Zhen-Jie, 2014; Voon et al., 2011) and exploration in the educational setting itself, involving local higher learning institutions lecturers in the Klang Valley (Louis, 2017).

The maintaining of job satisfaction that is accomplished via the use of LML will lead to positive workplace engagement by the academic staff (Abraham, 2012; Ali & Farooqi, 2014; Bano et al., 2011; Owen et al., 2018; Shmailan, 2015; Tepayakul & Rinthaisong, 2018; Vorina et al., 2017). Many of the previous studies highlighted the important role of job satisfaction in catalysing and establishing employees' engagement. With high job satisfaction, the academic staff were found to be more engaged in their work, thus helping the institution to achieve academic goals (Aboramadan et al., 2020; Owen et al., 2018; Tepayakul & Rinthaisong, 2018). With the accomplishment of high job satisfaction level, employee engagement can be established, thus leading to the retention of talent, and the avoidance of high employee turnover (Albdour & Altarawneh, 2014; Bano et al., 2011). Thus, with effective use of motivating language, it will increase employees' intent to stay in their workplace by 5% (Farr & Lind, 2019; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

Retaining highly skilled academic workforce in higher learning institutions for the sake of the institution's sustainability has always been a bigger challenge than obtaining it. As complex education organisations, higher learning institutions have resources that are often limited (Aboramadan et al., 2020) and turnover intentions among employees will only put them at disadvantage by how costly recruitment and training of new academicians would be. Not only that, a halt in the institution's academic achievement due to the departure of skilled academicians will lead to a paused contribution in research output and will further affect the ranking of the institutions (Ang et al., 2018). This calls for the need to maintain highly engaged academic staff to ensure academic and institutional goals are continuously achieved. Lack of job satisfaction has been found as one of the reasons employees depart voluntarily from organisations (Ainer et al., 2018; Ngo-Henha, 2018). In 2017, there was an 18% rate of turnover among faculty members in universities (Ramasamy & Abdullah, 2020) which surpassed the healthy 10% turnover rate for a smooth-running organization (Gartenstein, 2019).

In order to gain and sustain competitive advantages, the retaining of committed and engaged academic staff is required. Effective use of LML is seen as a way to intrinsically motivate academic staff and lead them towards high level of satisfaction in their job. With high level of job satisfaction, academic staff is more likely to stay committed and engaged, hence lowering their turnover intention.

A considerable number of studies have been conducted on the roles of a leader's communication skills on employees' job satisfaction. However, most of these studies focused on non-education, private sectors, or organisations (Gutierrez-Wirsching et al., 2015; Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Madlock & Hildebrand Clubbs, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020). While some recent studies did explore into the education field (Meilani et al., 2021; Muhammad Haroon, 2018; Nyenyembe et al., 2016; Refozar et al., 2017; Suwanto & Eka, 2020), only a few had explored on the roles of motivation towards academic staff's job

satisfaction in Malaysian private universities (Ramasamy & Abdullah, 2020) which is also more focused on turnover intentions rather than the use of LML itself. There are also only a few studies done in the local context (Goh & Zhen-Jie, 2014; Louis, 2017; Voon et al., 2011). Hence, this paper wishes to determine the effect of leaders' motivating language on job satisfaction as perceived by the academic staff of a local private higher learning institution, Universiti Selangor (UNISEL)

3. Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the Universiti Selangor's academic staff's perceptions towards their leaders' usage of Motivating Language (ML), as well as to explore the association between leaders' ML and academic staff's job satisfaction level. The research questions are as follows:

    i.   How do academic staff perceive the usage of Motivating Language by their immediate superiors?

    ii.   How does a leader's usage of Motivating Language influence academic staff's job satisfaction?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study investigates the enhanced model of ML and its application in the higher learning institution setting as a practical approach for sustaining academic staff's engagement in the institution. With the attitudinal outcome (job satisfaction) included in the model used, this study provides useful suggestions for the higher management of the institution involved in enhancing the training for a better performance of the leaders. This study also emphasises the need to synergise the use of all three Motivating Languages to develop a stronger dynamic of the internal communication among the employees and the higher management. This is to reduce costs concerning employees' work output and turnover, as well as to increase work productivity following the positive and humane atmosphere at the workplace.

5. Research Methods

To investigate the relationships between variables, as well as determining what influences the outcome (job satisfaction), the quantitative method was employed. This decision also takes into account that most previous studies on ML and employees' job satisfaction also employed this approach (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2018; Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Madlock & Hildebrand Clubbs, 2019; Refozar et al., 2017).

5.1. Instrument, validity and reliability

Besides the demographic section, the rest of the instrument used in this study is based on the two scales developed by previous researchers. The Motivating Language Use scale with 24 questions is based on the Leader's Motivating Language theory by Sullivan (1988) and Rowley Mayfield et al. (1998). Meanwhile for the Job Satisfaction scale, it is based on the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ)

with 11 adapted Likert questions. Both scales have been used in previous studies (Sharbrough et al., 2006; Muhammad Haroon, 2018) hence its content validity is assured. Cronbach's alpha (α) was done for reliability analysis and the result showed high levels of reliability for Motivating Language scale (α.=0.9558) and Job Satisfaction (α = 0.93). The pilot test also revealed high reliability with the value of 0.961 for the Motivating Language scale and 0.881 for the Job Satisfaction scale. Alpha values that go beyond 0.9 show exceptional internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951; Mohajan, 2017)

5.2. Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The academic staff of Universiti Selangor (UNISEL) was chosen for the population. Purposive sampling was chosen to recruit respondents in consideration with the aim for approachable target of respondents and to obtain the most information from the intentionally selected population. 185 academic staff were recruited and the size is determined appropriately using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling table based on the total number of academic staff at 340.

5.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was set on the online survey platform, Google Form which accepted responses for two weeks. The link to the form was shared with the Deans of each faculty for dissemination. The data obtained from the Google Form spreadsheet was then coded and keyed into the 20 Version Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software. Mean score interpretation was conducted for the first research question while a Pearson's correlation analysis was done for the second research question to examine the use of LML and to determine the relationship between the investigated variables.

6. Findings

Descriptive analysis and inferential statistics were conducted, and the results are presented further along with the discussion of each finding.

6.1. Demographic Analysis

In terms of gender, 67.6% of the respondents were female academic staff, while the other 32.4% were male. Most of the academic staff in Universiti Selangor falls into the age group of 36 – 40 years old (26.5%) and is followed closely by the age group of 41 – 45 years old (24.3%). On the other hand, only 7.6% of the participating respondents belong to the age group of 50 years and above. In terms of academic qualification, the majority of the respondents are master's degree holders with a representation of 74.1%. This is followed by 20.5% of the respondents with the qualification of Doctorate (Ph.D.) and lastly the bachelor's degree holders who represented 5.4% of the total sample size. In terms of academic titles, most of the participating respondents are Lecturers (85.4%). This is followed by respondents who are Assistant Lecturers (7.6%), Senior Lecturers (5.4%), and lastly Associate Professors (1.6%).

6.2. The Usage of LML

To determine the participating respondents' perception of their immediate superiors' use of LML in their faculty, 24 statements categorised into three sections (direction-giving language, empathetic language, and meaning-making language) were analysed

Based on the data shown in Table 1, the overall mean score for all 24 statements in the Motivating Language scale is 3.78 (S.D. 0.516), which is classified under the level of moderately high (positive) based on the mean score interpretation by Norasmah and Salmah (2011). With the moderately high level of positive perception towards their immediate superiors' usage of ML, it is concluded that all three types of motivating languages are practiced at a moderately high level within the faculties of UNISEL. Following that, the empathetic language was perceived to be used the most compared to the direction-giving language and meaning-making language. This shows that the academic administrators in the faculties within UNISEL practice not only the instructive interaction needs towards their staff, but also utilised other communication aspects such as empathy and meaningfulness in their interactions. This finding is in accordance with the study done by Refozar et al. (2017) and Buenviaje et al. (2017) who also found positive perception and response by their respondents of the motivating language use among faculty's leaders. This finding is a progress from the early practice of communication in management which would usually focus on one style of interaction.

Table 1. Academic Staff's Overall Perception towards Leader's ML Use

Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
3.78	3.80	.516

Based on Table 2, all three dimensions of Motivating Languages achieved moderately high perception in terms of usage as perceived by the academic staff of UNISEL. The highest mean score was obtained by statements under the Empathetic Language variable (M = 3.862, S.D. = 0.66), which is then followed by the Direction-Giving Language (M = 3.861, S.D. 0.60). The lowest mean score was obtained by the statements under the Meaning-Making Language (M = 3.61, S.D. = 0.56). Earlier study by Madlock and Sexton (2015) previously revealed that supervisors or superiors often employ direction-giving language, which receives favourable responses from the subordinates as well especially within the virtual setting of telecommunication and this contrasts with the current finding. However, this current study's finding is in line with a more recent study by Kock et al. (2019) which revealed that empathetic leadership increases innovation and better work output among the employees, leading to the utilisation of more empathetic language in leader-subordinate communication. This study's finding is also supported by Newnam and Goode (2019) who found in their study that communication laced with relationship-enhancing elements is the most employed in the organisations they investigated as it improves trust and respect within the workplace. These findings are hence in line with the current study's finding, in which the academic administrators in the faculties practice MLs, and empathetic language is perceived to be used the most.

Table 2. Academic Staff's Perception towards Leader's ML Use

Motivating Language Dimensions	Median	Std. Deviation	Level of Perception
Direction-Giving Language	3.86	.595	Moderately High
Empathetic Language	3.86	.655	Moderately High
Meaning-Making Language	3.61	.558	Moderately High

6.3. The Influence of LML on Academic Staff's Job Satisfaction

A Pearson Correlation analysis was done to examine the relationship between leaders' use of LML and academic staffs' job satisfaction level. The result is presented in Table 3, showing the correlation at r = 0.694 which is significant at the value of its 2-tailed significance p = 0.00. There was a positive, significant correlation between the use of ML among leaders and academic staffs' job satisfaction level (r = 0.694, p < 0.01). With the value of r = 0.694, the strength of relationship is noted as strong (Kowang et al., 2015). This result shows that with an increase and effective use of ML within the faculty by the immediate superiors, it hugely elevates the academic staffs' job satisfaction level. This finding is in accordance with previous studies done across various sectors by Goh and Zhen-Jie (2014), Gutierrez-Wirsching et al. (2015), Madlock and Sexton (2015), Madlock and Hildebrand Clubbs (2019) and Nguyen et al. (2020). In the education setting, this finding is also in accordance with the results from the studies done by Louis (2017), Muhammad Haroon (2018), Meilani et al. (2021), Nyenyembe et al. (2016), Refozar et al. (2017), Suwanto and Eka (2020) and who similarly revealed positive and significant relationship between motivating language and job satisfaction.

Table 3. Correlation between Leader's ML Use and Academic Staff's Job Satisfaction Level

		Motivating Language
	Pearson Correlation	.694**
Job Satisfaction Level	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	185

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Next, another correlation analysis was done to examine the strength of relationship for each of the Motivating Languages with the academic staffs' job satisfaction level. Table 4 presents the result of this analysis. Out of the three Motivating Languages, the Empathetic Language obtained higher positive significant correlation value with the level of job satisfaction (r = 0.675, p < 0.01). The second one is the Direction-giving Language (r = 0.647, p < 0.01). Based on the correlation strength interpretation by Kowang et al. (2015), both Empathetic Language and Direction-giving Language have a strong relationship with academic staffs' job satisfaction level. The Meaning-making Language, on the other hand, has weak but still significant and positive correlation with the job satisfaction level (r = 0.471, p < 0.01).

This shows that empathetic language was found to have the strongest significant relationship with job satisfaction level among the academic staff (*p* = .000). This finding indicates that addressing academic staff's needs through empathetic language prompts satisfaction among them. This is in accordance with the core foundation of Sullivan's Leader's Motivating Theory (LML) in 1988, the

illocutionary power, that was aligned with the elements of empathetic language in the LML theory. It was known from previous studies (Drid, 2018; Suresh & Sudhri, 2020) that illocutionary acts also have the biggest impact in eliciting actions or effects from the listeners. This finding is in line with previous studies which also found that during times with crises, empathetic language has the ability in providing the required psychological support to employees thus enhancing their productivity and satisfaction (Bakar & McCann, 2015; Gutierrez-Wirsching et al., 2015; Kock et al., 2019; König et al., 2020; Robbins & Judge, 2014).

Table 4. Correlation between Leader's ML Use and Academic Staff's Job Satisfaction Level

		Direction-Giving Language	**Empathetic Language**	**Meaning-Making Language**
Job Satisfaction Level	Pearson Correlation	.647**	.675**	.471**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	185	185	185

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

7. Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study revealed that the academic administrators of UNISEL employed the usage of LML in their interaction with the academic staff based on the moderately high perception of its usage. Empathetic language was mostly used, which is relevant with the need to consider academic staff's well-being in the midst of a global pandemic crisis. It was also found that the use of LML positively influenced these academic staff's job satisfaction level. When there is an elevated use of LML, the academic staff's job satisfaction level increases. Engagement of employees in the workplace will also increase, which will further assist in the retaining and maintaining skilled and quality academicians who are satisfied in their job (Aboramadan et al., 2020; Albdour & Altarawneh, 2014; Bano et al., 2011; Farr & Lind, 2019; Owen et al., 2018; Tepayakul & Rinthaisong, 2018).

7.1. Implications

This study has theoretical implications for comprehending how the use of motivating language strongly relates to the level of job satisfaction among the academic staff in UNISEL. It was proven in this study that the practice of motivating language in interaction with academic staff in UNISEL leads to the enhancement of their job satisfaction level with the empathetic language and direction-giving language pointed out as the main contributors to this relationship. This highlights the need for the academic administrators in UNISEL to improve on the employment of meaning-making language in leader-employee interaction to strengthen academic staff's job satisfaction even more through the dynamic use of all three motivating languages.

7.2. Limitations

This study is limited to the responses from UNISEL's academic staff; hence it does not reflect the perception of the whole institution which is comprised of non-academic staff as well. This study is also

focused heavily on evaluating immediate superiors' use of LML, rather than selecting a single institutional leader. Hence, the perception and responses may vary if this aspect is considered.

7.3. Recommendations

Since this current research only focuses on one institution, UNISEL for its population, future research can include and involve more institutions locally and globally. The higher management team of the institution can be included to achieve a larger scale of insights and results. Future studies could also include the administrative staff as the respondents so that broader insights and comparisons can be obtained. It will also be insightful if there is an exploration of the difference of perception across gender.

Acknowledgments

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