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Exploring the Impact of Leadership on Encouraging Innovative Behaviours: An Employee's Perspective

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Abstract

Innovation is crucial in the current business environment amidst uncertainties and heightened competition. The study explored how employees perceive their leaders' behaviour regarding innovations in the service sector. An in-depth interview technique has been employed as part of a qualitative research approach to identifying leaders' behaviours likely to enhance or discourage employees' innovative behaviour. Eight participants with extensive experience in the service sector were selected from various sectors, including consultancy, financial services, and the telecommunications industry in Malaysia. Thematic analysis was used to identify leaders' behaviours that encourage or discourage employees' innovative behaviour at work. The study observed 15 different leader behaviours related to employees' innovative behaviour. Eight behaviours directly drive innovation, five behaviours are indirectly related, and two behaviours hinder employee innovation. The study found that employees' perceptions of innovative role modelling, empowerment, recognition, consultation, development, identifying innovation champions, and rewards positively influence innovation. In contrast, constant monitoring and high workload pressure are seen as obstacles to innovative behaviour. The study contributes to the existing literature by comparing the inventory of leaders' behaviours. It reveals that employees view Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) positively in terms of innovation, suggesting that further research could explore the magnitude and significance of CSR in various contexts. This study highlights the

importance of organisational leaders gaining insight into their employees' perspectives to cultivate idea generation and implementation. When leaders understand their employees' attitudes towards creativity and innovation, they can adjust their leadership style and behaviour to foster a work environment that encourages creativity and innovation.

Keywords: Employees' Behaviour, Leadership, Innovation, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis

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1.0 Introduction

Innovation remains a cornerstone of organisational success in today's ever-evolving business landscape. The pivotal drivers of innovation are, in fact, the dedicated individuals within an organisation. Breakthrough innovations can emanate from individuals in seemingly routine roles and those working in conventional departments and professions (Kesting & Ulhøi, 2010). Like Amabile's (1983), the componential theory of individual creativity proposes that individuals possessing typical cognitive capabilities can produce work of at least moderate creativity within certain domains periodically. The theory further underscores the impact of the social context on influencing the extent and occurrence of creative behaviours. The work environment and leadership significantly influence the three primary elements of the theory, namely expertise, creative thinking skills, and task motivation (Sengupta et al., 2023). Therefore, innovation requires maximum internal support to translate more ideas into products (Coakes & Smith, 2007).

There is considerable evidence in the literature suggesting that leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the context and substantially impacts employee behaviour (Lee et al., 2020). Much literature has explored how various leadership styles impact employees' innovative behaviour. As an illustration, in a meta-analytic review, Lee et al. (2020) examined 266 studies that investigated the correlation between 13 distinct leadership styles and employees' creative and innovative contributions. Their findings revealed that authentic, empowering, and entrepreneurial leadership exhibited strong associations with creative performance, whereas transactional and supportive leadership were more pertinent to innovative performance. In an alternative examination exploring the connection between the negative aspects of leadership and innovation, Mehraein et al. (2023) reported inconsistent results, suggesting a more complex relationship between the two. The results of these studies indicate that fostering innovation does not depend on a singular effective leadership style. Instead, leaders should adeptly switch between various behaviours and tailor their response according to the context, guided by an awareness of the opposing drivers inherent in the innovation process (Bledow et al., 2011).

While there is a significant focus on the impact of leadership on employees' innovative behaviour, the current body of literature lacks empirical evidence regarding the influence of a leader's daily conduct as perceived by the employees. De Jong and Den Hartog (2007) conducted a qualitative study to examine a leader's perspective and presented a list of leadership behaviours that may enhance or discourage employees' innovative behaviour. However, understanding what influences or triggers an employee's creativity or innovation can be best understood from the employee's perspective. Extensive quantitative studies that have primarily examined the influence of distinct leadership approaches on diverse employee outcomes, such as engagement, performance, job satisfaction, and well-being, have frequently centred on employees' perceptions of leadership (Cheng & Osman, 2021; Jain, 2023; Khan et al., 2020). In addition, Jo and Shin (2025) observed that transformational leadership enhances employee engagement while reducing burnout. Another study examines how leadership styles, specifically directive and supportive leadership, impact employees' task performance (Cheng & Osman, 2021). Hence, the current study fills the gap by providing the employees' (subordinates') perspective on how leaders influence their innovative behaviour.

This focus is critical because employee behaviour is driven by perception, not just objective reality. Furthermore, exploring employee perceptions provides a nuanced understanding of how different leadership behaviours are experienced, informing more effective leadership development and organisational change initiatives to promote innovation (Jönsson et al., 2020). By understanding these perceptual nuances, organisations can better leverage leadership to unlock their full innovative potential. Furthermore, leaders can indirectly impact employees' innovative behaviour by shaping the work environment. Therefore, the primary aim of the research is to explore how employees perceive the behaviour of their leaders regarding creativity and innovation. Moreover, most theories regarding creativity and innovation have been formulated and validated in developed Western nations. However, Thomas and Pekerti (2003) argued that it is essential to consider the role of culture in moderating the situation's impact on behaviour and in shaping culturally embedded normative behaviour.

Malaysian leadership culture is less individualistic and risk-taking than Western leadership in fostering innovation. While Western leadership is more inclined towards

autonomy, risk-taking, and directness, Malaysian leadership emphasises relationships, consensus, and respect for hierarchy (Ly, 2020). Malaysian leaders can be paternalistic and relational, facilitating innovation through jointly driven rather than individually driven efforts (Aafaqu, 2004). Furthermore, cultural norms discourage assertiveness, and innovation, as such, is typically developed through outlined direction rather than revolutionary change (Kennedy, 2002). This insight contrasts with Western paradigms, where entrepreneurial and transformational leadership encourage autonomous choice and experimentation.

The current study differs from earlier studies by shifting focus towards employees' perceptions of leader behaviours rather than broad leadership styles. It bridges the cultural gap by utilising knowledge from an Eastern developing country (Malaysia) to expand leadership theories beyond Western contexts. Although past research highlights the role of leadership in promoting innovative and creative behaviour, the present research emphasises that no single leadership style can guarantee innovation; instead, leaders need to implement context-sensitive behaviours. Therefore, the current study is conducted in Malaysia to provide the perspective of an Eastern developing country. Thus, it will provide answers to the following questions:

- i. How does a leader's behaviour influence employees' innovative behaviour?
- ii. How do employees perceive a leader's day-to-day behaviour in relation to innovations?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Leadership

Leadership has been defined in several different ways. Duckett and Macfarlane (2003) have defined leadership as one of the most observed and least understood phenomena. According to Chemers (2014), leadership involves a social influence process in which an individual can enlist support and endorsement from others to achieve common goals. Over the last twenty years, research in this domain has primarily centred on leaders' traits and behavioural attributes. Different styles of leadership, such as transformational,

charismatic, and participative, have been scrutinised (Miao et al., 2012; Nusair et al., 2012). Numerous studies have also investigated the relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity (Nusair et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2011).

Zhang et al. (2011) found that transformational leadership is positively associated with group-level creativity in Chinese organisations, whereas authoritarian leadership showed no significant relationship with creativity. In contrast, Miao et al. (2012) reported that transformational leadership was not significantly related to subordinates' innovative behaviour in similar settings. Additionally, Wei et al. (2010) identified a link between transactional leadership and creativity in Chinese firms. At the individual level, authentic leadership has been associated with creativity, while at the group level, it has been linked to innovation (Černe et al., 2013). Scholars have recently begun integrating multiple theoretical perspectives to understand better how leadership influences employee creativity and innovation. For example, Iqbal et al. (2023) examined the comparative effects of the servant and transformational leadership on innovative behaviour. Similarly, McMahan and Ford (2013) explored the relationship between leader heuristic transfer (LHT) and employee creativity. Bledow et al. (2011) introduced the concept of ambidextrous leadership, suggesting that different leadership styles can stimulate innovative behaviour and that contextual factors influence the effectiveness of specific leadership behaviours. More recently, spiritual leadership (Jain, 2023) and inclusive leadership (Sürücü et al., 2023) have also been shown to enhance innovative behaviour in the workplace.

From the above discussion, it remains unclear which leadership style or behaviour is most important for enhancing employees' innovative behaviour. Consequently, it is more meaningful to focus on leaders' day-to-day behaviours rather than relying solely on defined leadership styles, as suggested by Toor and Ofori (2008). Bledow et al. (2011) also emphasised the importance of leaders flexibly switching between behaviours and adapting strategies based on situational demands. Bastian et al. (2024) also noted that belief systems and boundary control mechanisms indirectly influence innovation performance. In light of these insights, the present study aims to examine the everyday behaviours of leaders in influencing innovation. Furthermore, most studies in this area

employed quantitative research techniques; however, Newton (2009) recognised that leadership is not defined by a fixed set of personal qualities or specific leadership styles, but rather an ongoing activity. Leadership is inherently a social phenomenon and can be better explored in a broader social context. Therefore, the current study uses qualitative methods to understand how leaders influence employees' innovative behaviour.

2.2 Innovative Behaviour

According to Mathias et al. (2024), innovation refers to a multifaceted concept that encompasses the successful implementation of creative ideas. In contrast, through mental and physical efforts, creativity involves generating novel and appropriate ideas across various domains, including science, the arts, education, business, and everyday life. These ideas must be fresh and distinct from previous endeavours but should not be merely unconventional; they must be suitable for addressing the given problem or seizing an opportunity. This approach views innovation as a process that begins with idea generation (creativity) and the successful implementation of the idea. Table 1 presents the key characteristics of the leaders in innovation from different leadership styles, as summarised below.

Table 1: Key Characteristics of Innovative Leaders

Leadership Style/Theory	Characteristics of Leaders	References
Transformational Leadership	Inspires creativity, acts as a role model, mentors employees, and fosters a vision for change.	Bass (1985), Duckett and Macfarlane (2003)
Servant Leadership	Focuses on employee development, listens to ideas, and prioritises team needs over personal gains.	Greenleaf (1977)
Participative Leadership	Encourages collaboration, decentralises decision-making, and values employee contributions.	Vroom and Yetton (1973)

Leadership Style/Theory	Characteristics of Leaders	References
Transactional Leadership	Uses rewards and monitoring, sets clear expectations, and reinforces efficiency.	Bass (1990)
Innovation Leadership	Creates an innovation-friendly culture, provides resources, and drives continuous improvement.	Hunter et al. (2011); Mumford and Licuanan (2004)

The literature has employed various interpretations of the terms "creativity" and "innovation." For instance, most research has focused on generating ideas within the innovation process (Zhang et al., 2011) or has defined innovation as a single construct (e.g., Scott & Bruce, 1994). Some studies have referred to creativity as both idea generation and implementation (Mumford et al., 2012). The central emphasis of the literature on creativity has been on recognising individual differences, cognitive style, and demographic characteristics (Shalley et al., 2004), as well as the organisational context that constrains individual and group creative performance (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013). Several studies have studied the influence of leaders' behaviour on fellows' creative or innovative behaviour using quantitative techniques; nevertheless, as mentioned previously, these quantitative inquiries have scrutinised the impact of transformational, transactional, and participative leadership on the creativity and innovativeness of followers. For instance, De Jong and Den Hartog (2007) argued that although there is general agreement on the critical role of leaders in fostering employee innovation, the direct relationship between leadership and innovative behaviour has not been thoroughly examined in an integrated manner. Therefore, the current study explores this relationship from the employees' perspective, focusing on how leadership influences their innovative behaviour.

3.0 Methodology

Innovation in the service sector is highly complex and contextualised. Muller and Doloreux (2007) asserted that innovation and technological change analysts have paid

insufficient attention to studying service firms. The current study employs the in-depth interviewing technique to identify the behavioural attributes of leaders that influence employees' innovative behaviour. In-depth interviews are more suitable when researchers aim to gain insight into how individuals perceive and interpret situations, including their understanding and lived experiences of reality. The semi-structured interview is widely favoured due to its flexibility, ease of use, and comprehensibility. One of its notable benefits is its capacity to uncover fundamental and frequently concealed elements of organisational conduct (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The interview guide was prepared based on Myers and Newman (2007), and the instrument was developed based on innovative work behaviour measures by Janssen (2000) and De Jong and Den Hartog (2010), which helped to explore different behaviour characteristics in idea generation and promotion to convince employees to support new ideas.

A purposive sampling technique has been used to select information-rich cases. Purposive sampling is useful for selecting cases that provide sufficient information required to explore phenomena (Patton, 2002; Memon et al., 2024). The service sector was chosen because innovation in this sector primarily emerges from employees' involvement and critical understanding of the service delivery process and development (Bowen, 2016). Furthermore, innovation in the service sector is highly complex and contextualised. Muller and Doloreux (2007) asserted that innovation and technological change analysts have paid insufficient attention to studying service firms. Respondents from various industries within the service sector increase the diversity of perspectives on innovative leadership behaviour. Since innovation and leadership dynamics vary across different service industries, this approach offers a comprehensive understanding of the patterns and similarities in leadership practices. This study aims to explore the insights that can be applied across multiple sectors while acknowledging contextual differences rather than aiming for broad generalisation.

Table 2 provides the respondents' profile information. The respondents include five males and three females from various service sectors operating in Malaysia, including consultancy, financial services, and telecommunications. The years of experience in their organisation vary from 3 to 15 years. The interviews were carried out in person and had an average duration of one hour. Respondents were asked questions

about the importance of innovation for their organisations, how the behaviour, motivations, and strategies used by different levels of leaders stimulate employees' innovative behaviour, and the role leadership plays in creating an environment conducive to innovative behaviour among employees. All interviews were recorded with the respondent's permission and transcribed immediately after the interview. The interview process continued until it was recognised that the additional information regarding new themes, insights, or variations was negligible. Continued review and comparison of new data with existing patterns were conducted to ensure rigour.

In this study, researchers employed saturation and purposeful sampling across multiple service sectors to create a broad and representative dataset for determining the sample size. Determining saturation is primarily tied to the stage of data collection. When the researcher observes that the collected data is no longer yielding fresh themes or codes, it is regarded as a sign of reaching saturation (Rahimi, 2024). This study reached the saturation point when further data collection ceased to yield novel findings. Moreover, since qualitative studies traditionally centre around the thorough examination of experiences with a small group of participants, usually ranging from 5 to 30 individuals (Coyle & Tickoo, 2007), this ensured that the sample size adequately covered all facets of the phenomenon being researched (Rahimi, 2024). Purposeful sampling enabled the strategic selection of participants, yielding significant and rich data. This approach can ensure that the results are applicable and useful (Palinkas et al., 2015). Rather than focusing on the quantity of data, this method emphasises its depth and quality, aligning with top standards in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Table 2: Respondents' Profile

Respondent/ Gender	Industry	Basic Activity	Years of Experience
Female	Financial services	Process loans, conduct credit analysis, meet potential clients, and assess individual as well as corporate potential clients' performance.	3

Respondent/ Gender	Industry	Basic Activity	Years of Experience
Female	Education	Designing, implementing, and monitoring programs and curriculums.	10
Male	Consultancy	Assess clients' existing structures and performance, propose new programs, and train employees at various levels.	15
Female	Telecommunication	Dealing with international operations, negotiating on minutes and traffic.	13
Male	Consultancy	Managing all the company's web marketing efforts.	5
Male	IT services	Creating a fully functional e-commerce website, web marketing services, and customised applications.	7
Male	IT services	IT manager, IT networking, handling IT projects, and marketing.	10
Male	Consultancy	Assess clients' existing structure and performance, and propose new programs.	14

All interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent and transcribed promptly after each session. The transcribed data were then thoroughly analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring categories and patterns of meaning. Once the initial categories were identified, this study organised and grouped them in alignment with themes drawn from the existing literature. In addition, De Jong and Den Hartog's (2007) inventory of leaders' behaviour was used as a reference. Based on interviews with organisational leaders and an intensive literature review, De Jong and Den Hartog (2007) developed a list of leader behaviours related to employees' innovative behaviour. Seven of the thirteen original categories were retained as they aligned with the response categories in the current study. The category 'organising feedback' was renamed "communicating". A final list of fifteen categories emerged from the interview transcripts, each supported by empirical evidence from the literature. In the present study, fifteen

categories emerged from the interview transcript; all categories were discussed along with empirical support from the literature. All of the respondents reported that innovation is crucial for their organisation. However, the degree of innovation at different organisational levels varied among respondents. The collected data, using interviews, has been utilised to provide a list of leadership behaviours that stimulate or hinder employees' innovative behaviours.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The 15 identified behaviours were classified into three categories: behaviours that directly promote innovation, behaviours that hinder innovation, and behaviours that are indirectly related to innovation, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Leader Behaviours that Influence Employee Innovation

No	Behaviour	Details
1	Innovative Role-Modelling	Lead by example, be knowledgeable, generate and implement innovative ideas, and be a good mentor. Come up with new ideas all the time, share new ideas, and do research.
2	Foster Innovative Thinking	Receptive to change, regular group brainstorming, asking for new ideas, and giving particular attention to new ideas. Weekly brainstorming sessions. Get excited about new ideas, have a positive attitude toward new ideas and their implementation, and be adaptive to change.
3	Empowering	Decentralised decision-making, trusting employees, and delegating.
4	Recognising	Appreciating employees for innovative performance and poster innovation through positive reinforcement.
5	Consulting	Seek opinions while making decisions, listen to the employees, encourage bottom-up idea generation, and be open to suggestions.
6	Developing	Providing training and coaching, developing employees, teaching, and showing how to perform.

No	Behaviour	Details
7	Monitoring	Continuous interruption to ensure effectiveness and efficiency (negative relationship).
8	Workload Pressure	High workload, tired and stressed employees (negative relationship).
9	Communication and Collaboration	Regular formal and informal meetings, friendly relationships at the employee level, and cross-functional meetings are also important.
10	Identifying Innovation Champions	Understanding employees, giving individual attention to employees, identifying and motivating creative employees.
11	Consistency and Resource Provision	Provide the necessary resources to implement new ideas. Be Consistent in resource provision and support for new ideas, providing money, financial resources, manpower, and continuous support throughout the implementation.
12	Social Responsibility	Be socially responsible. Foster innovation through corporate social responsibility.
13	Creating Climate and Culture for Innovation	Encourage innovations through organisational structure, culture, and environment. Always look for better ways of doing work and improve efficiency. Continuous improvement is a priority at every level; everyone takes responsibility for driving improvement.
14	Rewarding	Providing financial as well as non-financial rewards to encourage innovative behaviour.
15	Developing Dynamic Capabilities	The change management team implements changes smoothly and shares knowledge.

4.1 Behaviours Promoting Innovation

This study identified eight (8) leadership behaviours that are directly linked to innovation.

4.1.1 Innovative Role Modelling

The majority of participants expressed the view that leaders should exemplify innovative behaviour. Employees in the sample recognised that a leader's capacity for innovation plays a crucial role in inspiring and driving innovative behaviour among employees. According to our respondents:

...he (the leader) has to be a good role model.

... for me, the leader has to lead by example, and that is the best way.

Several studies have associated innovative role modelling with employees' creativity and innovativeness (Kremer et al., 2019; Sumanth et al., 2023). A recent study by Liu et al. (2024) revealed how creative leadership fosters employee creativity through a self-regulatory focus. It highlights that leaders who embrace unconventional approaches can enhance creative thinking and innovation in organisational settings. Similarly, Sumanth et al. (2023) suggest that unconventional leadership styles can fuel creative performance by fostering psychological safety and proactive behaviour. Ye et al. (2022) also documented a positive correlation between leadership creativity and employees' innovative behaviour, highlighting the significance of acting as an innovative role model.

4.1.2 Foster Innovative Thinking

Unanimously, participants concurred that when leaders actively promote innovative thinking, there is a heightened likelihood of generating novel ideas. Moreover, these leaders play a crucial role not only in initiating novel concepts but also in the subsequent execution of those ideas. Encouraging employees to be innovative, seeking their opinions, and supporting their ideas fosters an environment that promotes innovation. Respondent 6 stated:

Our leader encourages us to be innovative. He always asks us about our opinions or comments. Of course, some opinions and suggestions will not be good, but they (leaders) will still discuss them. They don't simply reject new ideas.

These findings are consistent with Sharif et al. (2024) and Mulligan et al. (2021). More specifically, Sharif et al. (2024) studied how transformational leadership influences innovative work behaviour through leader-member exchange, knowledge sharing, and voice behaviour. The study reveals that knowledge sharing plays a crucial role in driving innovation. Similarly, Fan et al. (2023) also observed that supportive co-workers and leadership had been associated with employees' creativity in several studies.

4.1.3 Empowering

Empowerment stands out as a crucial leadership behaviour influencing the innovative tendencies of employees. The consensus among respondents strongly affirms that empowering employees significantly amplifies their innovative behaviour.

One of the respondents stated:

...we are given the freedom to decide on time. ... usually, the leaders will give us the power to make the decision.

Another respondent stated:

...empowerment will stimulate innovative behaviour, and micro-management will hinder innovative behaviour.

Existing studies also discovered the link between structural empowerment and subordinate creativity. Alshwabkeh et al. (2024) investigate the mediating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity. Similarly, Mutonyi et al. (2020) reported a direct influence of empowering leadership on employees' innovative behaviour. Collectively, these findings, along with the current study, establish a connection between empowering leaders and employees' innovative behaviour.

4.1.4 Recognising

Employees want to be recognised for being innovative. The present study found that when they were not recognised for thinking outside the box and coming up with new ideas, they felt very demotivated. According to our respondents:

...You know something more important than money to many people is simple recognition.

Conversely, another respondent said,

...When I wasn't given any recognition for thinking out of the box and coming up with this new idea, I felt very demotivated.

Existing studies also revealed that recognition is important for idea generation and application (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2007; Khan & Mohiya, 2020). Studies also suggest that recognition is the key pathway through which leaders influence innovation and is crucial for fostering and maintaining creativity among individuals and teams. Likewise, Khan and Mohiya (2020) discovered that rewarding and recognising employees benefits innovation.

4.1.5 Consulting

Unanimously, the respondents recognised consulting as a pivotal factor influencing innovative behaviour within the organisational framework. The consensus among participants highlights the importance of seeking input and advice as integral components that contribute to creating an environment conducive to innovation. As our respondent shared:

...we communicate daily, and our organisational team leader will just call us and ask for our opinion, without any formal meeting or even SMS.

Another respondent stressed:

...providing an opportunity to listen is the key element that they (the leaders) need to have to implement the ideas of the employees who know the market due to their direct connection with the market.

Conversely, another respondent said:

...it's not good just to listen to (take ideas from) the outside people and make your employees try to work on it, where your employees think like, this doesn't make sense.

The present study resonates with Ike et al. (2017) research, emphasising the pivotal role of consultation in both idea generation and application. Similarly, Ike et al. (2017) observed that employee participation in decision-making positively correlates with organisational citizenship behaviour, which can foster a more innovative work environment.

4.1.6 Developing

The interview revealed that respondents believed leaders must develop employees to foster innovation. Leaders can enhance the development of their followers through diverse methods, including training, coaching, offering valuable career advice, and taking actions that support skill acquisition, professional growth, and career progression. For example, our respondent stated:

...The ABC company always sends us for training so that they can get us to innovate and be more creative.

Similarly, another respondent said:

...if you teach somebody how to do something; they are going to do it better. But if you just tell them to do it, they will do it possibly out of fear of losing their job. But they will not be exercising innovativeness.

As emphasised by Huang et al. (2022), leaders play a crucial role in shaping expertise and innovation by overseeing strategic decisions, managing resources, and facilitating environmental scanning. Although limited research directly explores the link between employee development and creativity or innovation, Yukl (2012) highlights that promoting continuous improvement and supporting learning and development are key characteristics of innovative leadership.

4.1.7 Identify Innovation Champions

Some respondents believed it is pivotal for the leader to identify the right employees who are more likely to be innovative or active supporters of innovations. Drechsler et al. (2021) emphasised that the importance of identifying innovation champions in establishing Communities of Innovation lies in fostering additional innovations with effective support. Similarly, Reibenspiess et al. (2018) explored the pivotal role of champions in generating and endorsing ideas within the innovation process. Additionally, by recognising individual differences in innate creative abilities among employees, leaders can strategically identify and motivate inherently creative individuals to unleash their full potential (Gonlepa et al., 2023).

4.1.8 Rewarding

Although rewarding innovative behaviour through recognition is viewed positively regarding innovation, the respondents have perceived monetary incentives or extrinsic rewards differently. One respondent stated:

...I am not suggesting that this is the best way or the only way to do something. But a lot of people place value on money as a way of judging value. Let's put it that way, sometimes money and incentives are the best ways to get ideas.

Conversely, another respondent argued:

...Monetary incentives will not lead to innovation.

The results contradict Mikelson et al. (2022), who found that financial rewards influence both the quantity and quality of idea generation and application behaviour. However, Mehta et al. (2017) observed that financial rewards may not always be the most effective way to generate innovative ideas, which supports our present study's results.

4.2 Behaviours Hindering Innovation

Close monitoring and excessive workload pressure have been perceived as barriers to innovation. The details are summarised below.

4.2.1 Monitoring

Yukl (2012) defines monitoring as the collection of information regarding the operations of an organisational unit, covering aspects such as work progress, individual subordinates' performance, product or service quality, and project or program success. In the current study, most of the respondents believed that continuous monitoring would discourage their innovative behaviour. One respondent said:

...You (the leader) cannot directly go to the employees and consistently interfere or ask for reports haphazardly, as it just disrupts their normal routine of work and creates more tension.

Research on the influence of leaders' monitoring behaviour on employees' creativity and innovative behaviour has yielded mixed results. Lee et al. (2019) observed a U-shaped relationship between supervisors' close monitoring behaviour and employees' creativity. The study found that though some monitoring can be beneficial, excessive oversight can hinder creativity.

4.2.2 Workload Pressure

Leaders may affect employees' innovative behaviour through the workload. Roskes (2015) argued that when people are in threatening situations where they fear failure or negative outcomes, they're driven by avoidance motivation, often resulting in diminished creativity. Similarly, intensive workloads and time pressures have been found to reduce creativity (Yesuf et al., 2024). On the contrary, Shao et al. (2019) proposed that experiencing workload pressure does not necessarily yield negative outcomes; it can, in fact, foster learning and spark creativity under certain circumstances. According to one of the respondents:

... in a lot of cases, you have so much work to do.you also don't have that much free time to be so innovative and to think of new things to be implemented in the organisation.

4.3 Behaviours Indirectly Linked to Innovation

The study identifies five leadership behaviours indirectly linked to employees' innovative behaviour.

4.3.1 Communicating and Collaboration

All of the respondents agreed that communication is crucial for stimulating innovative behaviour, both for idea generation and implementation, stressing that ideas should come from employees who perform the job and that these ideas should be communicated effectively to ensure successful implementation. In the words of our respondent:

...we have regular meetings to brainstorm and come up with new ideas and how to implement those ideas.

Effective communication has long been linked to achieving high performance, requiring a certain level of creativity (Balakrishnan et al., 2024). Singh and Jha (2024) found that frequent leader-member communication enhances member involvement in

team activities and decisions, contributing to team innovation. Another study by Eisenberg et al. (2019) examined the role of team communication and transformational leadership in geographically dispersed teams. It highlights that effective communication mitigates the challenges of dispersion and supports innovation.

4.3.2 Consistency and Resource Provision

All respondents unanimously emphasised the importance of leaders maintaining consistency in their behaviour regarding innovation and implementing new ideas. These research findings underscore that, beyond financial resources, the adequate allocation of time is pivotal for fostering innovation. As one respondent succinctly expressed:

...I think they (the leaders) need to show a continued interest. The problem is not solved, by coming up with a solution. The problem is solved when that solution is applied to that situation, and it has to be applied consistently to the situation.

Consistent support and resource provision have been identified as pivotal factors influencing followers' innovative behaviour. While it is indisputable that resources play a critical role in shaping creative outcomes, researchers offer varying perspectives. Tripp (2024) emphasises the importance of providing ample resources and time to empower employees to explore alternative approaches in collaboration with leadership and supervision.

4.3.3 Social Responsibility

Some of the respondents believed that leaders could enhance their innovative behaviour through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). For example, one of the respondents said:

... we do a lot of charity work so how it relates to our work is because we need to do something to give back to society, so that encourages us to be innovative and come up with new ways of giving back to society.

Similarly, another respondent said:

...they (leaders) are very good in terms of CSR so it's very encouraging for us to think and do things differently to support the community

In the contemporary landscape, prioritising social responsibility is paramount. However, there is a dearth of research examining the interplay between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and innovation. Rexhepi et al. (2013) contend that embracing CSR can be an initial step toward fostering proactive innovation. Nevertheless, empirical studies yield conflicting findings regarding the correlation between CSR and innovation. For instance, Anzola-Román et al. (2024) discovered a positive association between CSR and organisational-level innovation, suggesting that the relationship varies across the implementation of organisational practices. The study observed that environmental CSR enhances process innovation. However, social CSR contributes to technological innovation, indicating that this relationship is sector-dependent.

4.3.4 Organisational Climate and Culture

The respondents of the present study argued that leaders are required to stimulate creativity and innovation through the culture and climate of the organisation. González-Torres et al. (2023) posit that organisational culture and climate encompass a collection of attitudes, values, and practices that define the members of a specific organisation. Organisational culture and climate support for innovation and creativity have been given due consideration in the literature. For example, according to our respondents:

...the leaders can't always interfere directly, they must create the environment and make sure the culture is right, which will allow this freedom (for employees) to explore through.

Studies have sought to identify the diverse cultural and climatic characteristics that contribute to creativity and innovation. Aldabbas et al. (2023) contend that, alongside supervisory support, organisational encouragement is crucial for enhancing creativity. This highlights the importance of leaders creating a conducive culture and environment that fosters creativity. Studies have also observed that a supportive culture

encourages collaboration, creativity, and risk-taking, which in turn enhances product innovation (Smith & Lee, 2022). Research suggests that when aligned with a pro-innovation culture, human resource systems have a significant impact on enterprise performance (Kraśnicka et al., 2018).

4.3.5 Developing Dynamic Capabilities and Team Spirit

Half of our respondents believe that leaders have to work on developing the dynamic capabilities of the business. Successful teams consist of diverse, skilled employees and those who understand the organisation's dynamics. One of the respondents emphasised:

...I think a good leader is somebody who knows how to create team spirit and develop a system where everyone wants to contribute. Everyone is willing to contribute because, at the end of the day, it is a group effort that will lead to innovation.

Some respondents believe that team spirit is vital for the application of ideas:

...The leaders need to be able to get everyone on the same page to implement new things, shared one respondent.

Hence, to promote innovative behaviour, leaders should cultivate an organisational culture and climate that fosters innovation. The present study's findings align with several leadership theories on innovation and employee empowerment. The identified 15 themes are based on various theories of leadership. Transformational leadership deals with inspiring and motivating staff to innovate and improve (Alharbi, 2021). Most behaviours mentioned, such as innovative role modelling, fostering innovative thinking, empowering employees, and recognising contributions, are typical of transformational leadership. Furthermore, consulting, developing employees, and identifying innovation champions are analogous to servant leadership behaviour, concern for employees' needs, and building a supportive environment (AlAhmari, 2022). Concurrently, consulting, communicating, collaboration and decentralised decision-making are participative leadership traits that enable cooperation and joint decision-

making (Alharbi, 2021). In addition, monitoring, workload pressure, and rewarding are transactional leadership behaviours.

This involves providing comprehensive employee support and creating an environment that actively encourages and facilitates innovative initiatives. The present study has focused only on leaders' attributes. Future research can include a quantitative exploration of the impact of different leadership styles on employees' innovative behaviour. Moreover, cross-cultural studies can explore cultural differences in promoting innovative organisational culture. These results contribute to overall theories of leadership and innovation by verifying that successful innovation encompasses visionary leadership, empowering employees, systematic support, and a culture of accepting change. Organisations that include such behaviours in their leadership will likely sustain innovation and remain competitive in fast-moving environments.

5.0 Limitations and Future Research Avenues

There are some limitations of the study. Although several categories emerged from this study, a relatively larger sample size might lead to a more comprehensive list of behaviours. Another limitation that may arise is the potential for bias in self-reported data. This can arise from social desirability or personal perceptions. Respondents may consciously or unconsciously provide answers that they believe are more acceptable. To improve reliability, this study assured the respondents that their responses would be kept anonymous and several cross-checks were performed on the responses. The conclusions from the study are based solely on in-depth interview techniques. Collecting data through observation or a quantitative survey via triangulation might further validate the results. Although generalizability is not a primary aim of qualitative research findings, the study focuses on service firms, and the results can't be extended to other industries. Finally, the relative importance of each behaviour regarding innovation is not clear, and perhaps a follow-up quantitative study might provide a clearer picture as to which behaviour is more meaningful. Additionally, some participants perceived that rewards are unrelated to innovation, indicating another potential area for future research.

6.0 Conclusions

Organisations cannot innovate without their employees, whereas leaders play a crucial role in either enhancing or discouraging employees' innovative behaviour. The present study investigated the impact of leadership on employees' innovative behaviour as perceived by employees in the Malaysian service sector. The findings identify ten leadership behaviours directly linked to innovation, eight of which drive innovation and two of which hinder it, and further reveal five additional behaviours that are indirectly associated with innovation. The finding underscored the imperative for leaders to function as innovative role models, emphasising the necessity of their exemplary conduct to ensure that employees not only follow suit but also actively engage in innovative practices. Leaders must proactively foster and support innovative behaviour among employees, demonstrating a commitment to creating an environment that encourages and nurtures creative thinking. In addition, leaders are tasked with empowering employees, granting them the autonomy and support necessary to express and exercise their innovative capabilities. Incorporating employees' input into decisions that impact them is paramount. Engaging in consultative processes ensures a collaborative and inclusive approach, fostering a sense of involvement and collective responsibility for innovation in the organisation.

Some employees are more creative than others; therefore, leaders need to identify innovation champions in their organisation and provide them with the necessary support and recognition to keep them motivated to contribute more. Leaders need to develop their employees to enhance their expertise and thinking skills. Close monitoring, high workload and time pressures are likely to discourage innovative behaviour. Leaders can enhance innovative behaviour among employees by opening up new channels of communication to ensure that employees can freely express their ideas. Developing team spirit and knowledge sharing among team members is also important for both idea generation and implementation. Therefore, leaders must play their role in developing team spirit among employees and encouraging knowledge sharing within the organisation.

To be innovative, employees need to be given flexibility, time, and resources to generate and implement new ideas within an organisation. Leaders can further foster innovative behaviour by cultivating an organisational culture and climate that is conducive to innovation. This involves providing comprehensive support to employees and fostering an environment that not only encourages but actively facilitates innovative initiatives. Leaders can elevate employees' innovative behaviour by embracing corporate social responsibility. Engaging in socially responsible practices not only aligns the organisation with ethical values but also inspires a sense of purpose and innovation among employees. Ultimately, developing organisational dynamic capabilities positively influences innovation in an organisation. The study contributes to the existing literature by comparing and contrasting the inventory of leaders' behaviours developed by De Jong and Den Hartog (2007) from the employees' perspectives. It reveals that employees view Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) positively in relation to innovation, suggesting that further research could explore the magnitude and significance of CSR in various contexts.

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