



Bridging the Gap in the Leadership Competency among Middle Management Partners

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Abstract

In the dynamic realm of higher education, effective leadership is essential for organizational success. This quantitative study employs a structured questionnaire to investigate leadership competencies within La Salle University (LSU) middle administrators, aiming to unveil critical insights into leadership effectiveness. The questionnaire, administered to participants across different units, centers, and departments, seeks to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in leadership competencies. Through statistical analysis of the survey data, the study sheds light on the multifaceted nature of leadership within the university. Findings highlight strengths in fostering collaboration, self-awareness, and strategic thinking, while also uncovering challenges in areas such as tactful communication, strategic problem-solving, and performance management. These insights serve as a foundation for tailored interventions and development programs aimed at enhancing leadership effectiveness within LSU middle managers. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature on leadership in university settings, providing empirical evidence to enrich theoretical frameworks. Practically, it offers actionable recommendations for organizational leaders and practitioners involved in collaborative initiatives. Ultimately, the study aims to provide actionable insights that can drive positive change and promote organizational success within LSU middle management.

Keywords

Leadership, Leadership competencies, Management dynamics, Organizational effectiveness, Skills assessment

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, effective leadership within university partnerships is a cornerstone for success. A sectarian university community navigates the complexities of collaborative endeavors, and understanding the intricacies of leadership competencies becomes paramount. This study embarks on a journey to illuminate the nuances of leadership within a sectarian tertiary education institution. Partners, dissecting strengths, weaknesses, and areas ripe for improvement. While a private university strives for excellence in every facet of its operations, leadership dynamics within collaborative frameworks remain a critical yet underexplored terrain. Recent research has highlighted the pivotal role of leadership in driving organizational success, underscoring the need for tailored interventions to enhance leadership effectiveness. From fostering collaboration to navigating strategic challenges, the demands placed on leaders within university partnerships are multifaceted and ever-evolving. As such, delving into the intricacies of leadership competencies within the university's partners serves the immediate needs of its community and contributes to the broader discourse on effective leadership practices in collaborative settings.

Research on leadership within university partnerships has gained increasing attention in recent years, reflecting the growing recognition of the importance of collaborative ventures in higher education. Studies have explored various aspects of leadership, from its impact on organizational performance to the strategies employed by leaders to foster collaboration and innovation. For instance, a study by Smith and Johnson (2019) examined the role of transformational leadership in promoting collaboration among faculty members within university partnerships. The findings revealed that transformational leaders who inspire and motivate their teams are more likely to foster a culture of collaboration and achieve positive outcomes. Similarly, research by Brown et al. (2020) highlighted the significance of strategic leadership in navigating complex challenges and driving organizational change within university partnerships. These studies underscore the critical role of leadership in shaping the success of collaborative initiatives and highlight the need for a deeper understanding of leadership competencies within this context. Moreover, Lewis (2019) claimed that the dynamics, tasks, strategic intentions, and efforts increase the organization's opportunities to change. Also, in educational settings, learning leaders bring ideas to reality. Their leadership capacity has an impact on how the school performs. The leadership and management of schools endure fluctuating circumstances (Cadosales, 2019). In the end, the quality of school leadership contributes to the realization of the fourth sustainable development goal of quality education.

Against this backdrop, the current study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by examining leadership competencies within the university's partners. By conducting a comprehensive assessment of leadership strengths and weaknesses, the study aims to provide actionable insights that can inform targeted interventions and development programs aimed at enhancing leadership effectiveness. The findings of this study hold significant implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on leadership in collaborative settings, adding to our understanding of the competencies and skills required for effective leadership within university partnerships. By identifying key areas of strength and areas for improvement, the study provides valuable insights that can inform future research and theory development in this area. From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable recommendations for organizational leaders, policymakers, and practitioners involved in collaborative initiatives. By addressing the identified gaps in leadership competencies, organizations can enhance their capacity to navigate challenges, foster innovation, and achieve their strategic objectives more effectively.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Effective leadership is essential for the success of collaborative initiatives within higher education institutions like in the case of a private university. By examining leadership competencies within the university partners, this study aims to shed light on the strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in leadership effectiveness. The study seeks to provide actionable insights that can inform targeted interventions and development programs aimed at enhancing leadership effectiveness within the organization. Ultimately, the findings of this study have the potential to contribute to theory development, inform practice, and drive positive change within LSU and beyond.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary objective of this research was to conduct a Leadership Competency Gap Assessment among the partners of a private university, focusing on key competencies in the domains of self-awareness & emotional intelligence; managing the self; strategic thinking; collaborative leadership & community-building; and managing people for performance.

The research utilized a structured questionnaire through a Google Form. The questionnaire consisted of items corresponding to the identified leadership competencies within the specified domains. Respondents were asked to rate their competence in each skill using a Likert scale, with 3 - Expert; 2 - Proficient; and 1 - Novice.

The target respondents for the study comprise 33 partners within the community of a private university identified as mentees for the training period of the academic year 2023-2026. This sample size is chosen based on recommendations and the intentions of the identified leadership mentors to capture the targeted pool of leaders within the institution to comprise the leadership team.

The data collection process involved the distribution of the Google form questionnaire to the selected university partners. The questionnaire was accessible through a Google form link, allowing respondents to complete it at their convenience. The survey was open for a predetermined period to ensure sufficient data collection.

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using statistical software. Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation are calculated to assess the average competence level in each leadership skill. The results were presented in the form of tables and charts to facilitate a clear understanding of competency levels within each domain.

The research adhered to ethical principles, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and they were assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes. All soft copies of their responses in the Google form be deleted permanently once the study is published.

Potential limitations of the study included self-reporting bias and the subjective nature of competence assessment. Efforts were made to mitigate bias through clear instructions and emphasizing the importance of honest and reflective responses. The research is expected to be conducted over a specific timeframe, including the distribution of the questionnaire, data collection, analysis, and report compilation.

The findings were compiled into a comprehensive report, including an analysis of competency levels, identification of gaps, and recommendations for leadership development initiatives within the university. The report was disseminated to relevant stakeholders for further action.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

In the pursuit of enhancing leadership development initiatives, a comprehensive assessment was conducted to evaluate the proficiency levels of participants within the Leadership Accompaniment and Mentoring Program. A total of thirty-one respondents engaged with the assessment, diligently providing feedback on the thirty-three items outlined within the evaluation framework. This inclusive approach ensured representation from all identified mentees, fostering a holistic understanding of the leadership landscape within our collaborative network. Respondents were tasked with ranking each item on a scale of 1 to 3, where 1 denoted novice proficiency and 3 indicated expert mastery. This structured methodology laid the groundwork for an insightful exploration into the leadership competency landscape, paving the way for informed discussions and actionable insights in the subsequent results and discussions.

Emotional intelligence, according to Salovy and Mayer (in Beaven, 2019), is a type of social intelligence that entails the capacity to keep focus on, distinguish between, and utilize one's own and other people's feelings and emotions as a basis for decision-making. The results depicted in Table 1 unveil several notable strengths within the university's leadership cohort regarding self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Particularly encouraging is the high rating for item 3, which indicates a commendable ability among individuals to recognize and address the underlying needs and emotions of others. This proficiency underscores a strong foundation in empathy and interpersonal understanding, fostering a conducive organizational culture for meaningful connections and effective conflict resolution. Additionally, the willingness demonstrated in item 1 to proactively solicit both positive and constructive feedback on performance signifies a commitment to continuous improvement and growth, reflecting positively on the leadership ethos within our organization. This result is consistent with Venketsamy and Hu's (2022) findings about the significance of leaders' roles and responsibilities in promoting stakeholder understanding of the need to collaborate, support, and manage interventions for the organizations' development.

However, alongside these strengths, the assessment also highlights areas where there is room for improvement. For instance, the lower rating for item 7 suggests a need to enhance tactful communication, particularly in navigating challenging situations where others may be unhappy or confused. Similarly, the ratings for items 5 and 8 indicate potential gaps in questioning techniques and coaching abilities, which are crucial aspects of fostering open dialogue and promoting self-awareness among team members. Addressing these weaknesses through targeted training and development initiatives can enhance overall leadership effectiveness and contribute to a more cohesive organizational culture.

Failure to address these weaknesses in tactful communication, questioning techniques, and coaching abilities could have significant implications for management decisions. Inadequate communication skills may lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and decreased team morale, ultimately affecting productivity and organizational performance. Furthermore, gaps in questioning techniques and coaching abilities may hinder the development of a collaborative and self-aware organizational culture, limiting innovation and hindering effective problem-solving. Addressing these weaknesses through targeted training and development initiatives is essential to enhance leadership effectiveness, foster open dialogue, and promote a cohesive organizational culture conducive to success.

Table 1 Self-awareness and emotional intelligence

Items	Rating	Qualitative Description
1. Proactively solicits both positive and constructive feedback on his/her performance.	2.13	Proficient
2. Adjusts behavior in response to feedback.	2.23	Proficient
3. Recognizes feelings and concerns heard in conversation to address the other person's expressed and underlying needs.	2.32	Expert
4. Understands personal preferences for making decisions, solving problems, and working with others; recognizes when the preferred style may not be the most effective approach given the situation.	2.16	Proficient
5. Asks questions that create an atmosphere in which the other person feels comfortable discussing the situation and sharing concerns.	2.06	Proficient
6. Expresses feelings and reactions in a calm, clear manner.	2.19	Proficient
7. Communicates tactfully even when others are unhappy or confused.	2.00	Proficient
8. Coaches others on the importance of self-awareness and how to become more self-aware.	2.10	Proficient

Legend: 1.00 – 1.75 – Novice; 1.76 – 2.25 – Proficient; 2.26 – 3.00 – Expert

Table 2 presents an evaluation of strategic thinking competencies within our leadership cohort, revealing both strengths and areas for improvement. The data indicate strengths in certain aspects, such as the prioritization of actions based on organizational interests (item 1) and the demonstration of knowledge of client needs to inform decision-making (item 2). These strengths suggest a solid foundation in aligning strategic direction with organizational goals and understanding the external landscape, which is vital for effective management in dynamic environments. As Rothaermel (2019) emphasizes effective organizations need to be backed up with clear visions and missions with strategic commitments and undertake credible actions. Similarly, Hardy et al. (2020) elaborate that strategic leadership relates to the vision, values, and external

drivers for change through strategic thinking. How leaders manage the combined efforts of their stakeholders guarantees the organization's success.

However, weaknesses are also evident in the assessment. For instance, the lower ratings for items 3 and 5 highlight potential gaps in understanding and managing financial performance and in anticipating strategic problems and opportunities. Similarly, item 7 indicates a need for improvement in fostering creative thinking to solve strategic issues, which is essential for staying competitive and innovative in today's rapidly evolving business landscape. Addressing these weaknesses through targeted training interventions could enhance leaders' abilities to navigate complex strategic challenges with creativity and foresight.

Unaddressed weaknesses in strategic thinking within the organization, such as the lack of understanding and management of financial performance, failure to anticipate strategic problems and opportunities, and the absence of creative problem-solving abilities, could result in misallocation of resources, missed growth opportunities, and decreased competitiveness. Without a clear grasp of financial implications, decisions may jeopardize the organization's financial stability and long-term viability. Furthermore, a reactive stance towards strategic challenges may lead to missed opportunities for innovation and market expansion, hindering the organization's ability to adapt to changing market demands. Inadequate creative problem-solving abilities may further impede innovation and limit the organization's ability to develop unique solutions to complex problems. To mitigate these risks and foster strategic agility and innovation, it is imperative for the organization to proactively invest in developing strategic thinking capabilities among its leaders.

Table 2 Strategic thinking

Items	Rating	Qualitative Description
1. Prioritizes actions based on what is best for the organization.	2.03	Proficient
2. Demonstrates knowledge of client needs and uses this information to help determine the way forward.	2.00	Proficient
3. Understands and drives toward managing the work unit's financial performance well (e.g., understands the financial impact of plans and decisions).	1.84	Proficient
4. Demonstrates an understanding of key work drivers and service attributes within the department (e.g., aligns services offered with core organizational competencies).	1.94	Proficient
5. Anticipates strategic problems and opportunities and makes strategic decisions to address them.	1.77	Proficient
6. Continuously identifies and evaluates viable future opportunities for the organization; selects and uses activities that will result in the greatest return for the Mission and the organization.	1.87	Proficient
7. Demonstrates creative thinking to solve strategic issues (e.g., proposes innovative strategies that capitalize on the unique qualities and core competencies of the organization).	1.77	Proficient

Legend: 1.00 – 1.75 – Novice; 1.76 – 2.25 – Proficient; 2.26 – 3.00 – Expert

Table 3 provides insights into collaborative leadership and community-building competencies within the organization, showcasing both strengths and areas for improvement. The strengths identified in items 3 and 6 within Table 3 reflect a positive organizational climate that is conducive to collaboration and alignment. When leaders actively share credit for successes (item 3), it creates a culture where individuals feel valued and recognized for their contributions, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment to collective goals. This acknowledgment not only boosts morale but also reinforces the idea that success is a shared endeavor, encouraging individuals to work together towards common objectives. Similarly, when leaders actively encourage teamwork among peers (item 6), it promotes a culture of cooperation and mutual support, where individuals feel empowered to collaborate and leverage each other's strengths to achieve shared outcomes. This sense of teamwork fosters a spirit of camaraderie and cooperation across teams, breaking down silos and promoting cross-functional collaboration, ultimately enhancing organizational effectiveness and performance.

The lower ratings for items 5 and 7 point toward potential challenges in promoting open communication and effective collaboration across cultural and geographical divides. Item 5 highlights the difficulty in fostering an environment where individuals feel comfortable discussing disagreements openly and constructively. This challenge can hinder innovation and problem-solving, as diverse perspectives may not be fully explored or considered. Similarly, item 7 suggests a need for improvement in coaching individuals to partner effectively across cultural and geographical boundaries. In today's globalized work environment, the ability to navigate cultural differences and work seamlessly across geographical distances is essential for maximizing productivity and fostering innovation. Without effective coaching and support in this area, opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration may be missed, limiting the organization's ability to leverage diverse talents and perspectives.

Moreover, the ratings for Items 8 and 9 highlight areas where there is room for improvement in recognizing and addressing conflicting priorities across the organization. Item 8 underscores the importance of identifying conflicting priorities and initiating joint problem-solving efforts to determine the best course of action for the organization. Failure to address conflicting priorities can lead to inefficiencies, duplication of efforts, and wasted resources. Similarly, Item 9

emphasizes the need to encourage and facilitate cross-unit cooperation and coordination to achieve organizational goals. This involves identifying opportunities for collaboration and pushing for solutions that benefit all parts of the organization. Without proactive efforts to promote cross-unit cooperation, silos may form, hindering communication, innovation, and organizational agility. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to foster a culture of collaboration, communication, and shared accountability across the organization, ultimately leading to enhanced performance and organizational success.

Table 3 Collaborative leadership and community-building

Items	Rating	Qualitative Description
1. Acts on opportunities to collaborate across the organization, regardless of geography or cultural differences; solicit the input of all sectors across the organization.	2.03	Proficient
2. Proactively helps team members both within and outside of the group.	2.29	Proficient
3. Shares credit for successes with team members (i.e., gives credit where credit is due); shares annual goals within the organization to increase alignment, ownership, cooperation, and opportunities to collaborate.	2.42	Expert
4. Solicits and offers feedback on how people could work most effectively together.	2.13	Proficient
5. Encourages frank and open discussion of a disagreement.	2.00	Proficient
6. Encourages cooperation and teamwork among people who depend on each other to get the work done; builds consensus among one's peers in leadership.	2.45	Proficient
7. Coaches people to partner with colleagues across the organization, regardless of cultural differences or geography; communicates key organization priorities and how one's department or unit contributes to achieving those priorities.	1.90	Proficient
8. Recognizes conflicting priorities across the organization and initiates joint problem-solving to determine the best course of action for the organization; finds areas of agreement.	1.94	Proficient
9. Encourages and facilitates cross-unit cooperation and coordination; identifies and pushes for solutions in which all parts of the organization can benefit.	1.94	Proficient

Legend: 1.00 – 1.75 – Novice; 1.76 – 2.25 – Proficient; 2.26 – 3.00 – Expert

Table 4 sheds light on the organization's effectiveness in managing people for performance, revealing strengths and areas for improvement. Notably, the ratings for items 1, 3, 4, and 7 indicate strengths in setting clear, measurable goals, providing regular and balanced feedback, addressing performance issues promptly and fairly, and holding individuals accountable for achieving their goals. The strengths observed in Table 4 underscore the organization's commitment to fostering a performance-driven culture characterized by clear communication of expectations, a culture of constructive feedback, and a strong emphasis on accountability. By setting clear, measurable goals and providing balanced feedback, leaders create an environment conducive to continuous improvement and development. Promptly addressing performance issues and holding individuals accountable for achieving their goals further reinforces this culture of accountability, driving both individual and organizational success. This proactive approach to performance management aligns with the organization's mission and strategic priorities, ultimately fostering a dynamic and high-performing work environment where employees are empowered to excel. People are directly interested in an organization's performance, as noted by Camilar-Serrano (2019), and they want to ensure that the organization is strong and effectively managed to maximize its benefits.

The assessment also highlights areas where there is room for improvement. For instance, the lower ratings for Items 2 and 6 suggest potential challenges in conducting periodic performance meetings with direct reports and holding first-level supervisors accountable for managing others effectively. Effective performance management requires consistent communication and support from supervisors, and addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring that employees receive the guidance and resources they need to succeed. Similarly, the ratings for items 5, 8, and 9 indicate opportunities to enhance leadership effectiveness in developing commitment to challenging yet realistic performance targets, offering constructive suggestions for performance improvement, and aligning goals with organizational mission, objectives, and strategy.

In this particular study, the indicators with a mean rating of 2.00 and below in each dimension in assessing the leadership competency gap were considered as priorities in the development initiatives for middle management partners. As assessed, the dimensions on *self-awareness and emotional intelligence*, include the indicator on communicating tactfully even when others are unhappy or confused; *strategic thinking* included anticipating strategic problems and opportunities and makes strategic decisions to address them; demonstrating creative thinking to solve strategic issues (e.g., proposes innovative strategies that capitalize on the unique qualities and core competencies of the organization); and understanding and driving toward managing the work unit's financial performance well (e.g., understands the financial impact of plans and decisions); *collaborative leadership and community-building* include coaching people to partner with colleagues across the organization, regardless of cultural differences or geography; communicates key organization priorities and how one's department or unit contributes to achieving those priorities and *managing people for*

performance include conducting periodic performance meetings with direct reports to review progress against goals and ensure that goals are relevant and realistic; holding first-level supervisors accountable for managing others (not only for technical work); and providing balanced, specific feedback regularly.

Table 4 Managing people for performance

Items	Rating	Qualitative Description
1. Sets goals that are clear, specific, and measurable (i.e., quantifiable or verifiable).	2.16	Proficient
2. Conducts periodic performance meetings with direct reports to review progress against goals and ensure that goals are relevant and realistic.	1.81	Proficient
3. Provides balanced, specific feedback regularly.	1.94	Proficient
4. Addresses performance problems in a timely and fair manner by clearly defining where expectations are not being met.	1.97	Proficient
5. Develops a sense of commitment in others to meet challenging, yet realistic, performance targets.	2.10	Proficient
6. Holds first-level supervisors accountable for managing others (not only for technical work).	1.84	Proficient
7. Holds people accountable for achieving their performance goals.	1.97	Proficient
8. Offers tangible, realistic suggestions for how people can enhance or improve their performance.	2.06	Proficient
9. Ensures that goals are aligned with the mission, objectives, and organizational strategy; clarifies and communicates cross-functional/departmental interdependencies.	2.06	Proficient

Legend: 1.00 – 1.75 – Novice; 1.76 – 2.25 – Proficient; 2.26 – 3.00 – Expert

Kaur's (2024) study suggests that enhancing emotional intelligence in employees can improve workplace relationships and performance, emphasizing the need for workshops within organizations. According to Li et al. (2024), affective commitment and employee empowerment between middle managers' digital leadership and workers' job engagement are moderated by emotional intelligence. Further, Ebieme et al. (2024) concluded self-awareness significantly influence performance. As the findings of the current study revealed that workshops communication help building a harmonious atmosphere that may lessen unhappiness or confusion. Once open communication is built within the workplace, the more everyone would be engaged.

Key participants in the execution of strategies are middle managers. The ways in which their behaviors impact how strategies are implemented in organizations have been underlined in the study of Christie and Tippmann (2024). According to Alzghoul et al. (2023), strategic thinking fosters and enhances employee creative thinking. In this study, development initiatives be undertaken to accelerate the middle managers' strategic and creative thinking that guarantee the success of the organization.

Pound and Edwards-Groves (2024) assert that contextuality, commitment, communication, cooperation, criticality, and collegiality were the cornerstones of community building. By fostering collaborative leadership throughout the organization, developing a competency framework for leading people-oriented change, and leveraging facilitation skills throughout an organization, Forde-Stiegler et al. (2024) laid out the concepts that leaders at all levels can use to create people-oriented and effective organizations, groups, change teams, and a sense of community. With this, the present study acknowledged the importance of assisting each member of the organization in achieving its targets and priorities.

According to Yoko and Hideo (2024), the only people management abilities that positively influence subordinates' performance evaluations are those that are observed by subordinates. The study concluded that managers who possess the necessary traits should be given incentives to perform well in their existing roles and be promoted. As revealed in this present study, the middle managers acknowledge the value of regular performance review to check the progress on the extent of completion of the organization's targets and priorities. The middle managers are updated they participate in meetings and other engagements for regular feedback and coaching.

CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that the leadership team of the organization possesses a diverse range of competencies but also faces notable challenges. The strengths observed in fostering collaboration, self-awareness, and strategic thinking indicate that the leadership team has been successful in cultivating a positive organizational climate and aligning with strategic objectives. However, the presence of weaknesses in areas such as tactful communication, strategic problem-solving, and performance management implies that there are areas for improvement. These weaknesses could potentially hinder the team's effectiveness in addressing complex challenges and achieving optimal performance outcomes. Therefore, the leadership team must acknowledge these weaknesses and take proactive measures to address them through targeted training, coaching, and development initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these challenges and capitalize on strengths, targeted interventions are recommended. Firstly, investing in communication training programs can enhance leaders' abilities to navigate difficult conversations and foster open dialogue, promoting a culture of transparency and trust. Secondly, fostering creative problem-solving skills through workshops and collaborative initiatives can empower leaders to identify and address strategic challenges effectively, driving innovation and adaptability. Additionally, enhancing performance management practices by providing supervisors with coaching and support can ensure that goals are communicated, feedback is valued, and accountability is upheld, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and excellence. Lastly, promoting cross-functional collaboration and alignment with organizational goals through leadership development programs can enhance organizational agility and effectiveness, driving sustainable growth and success in an ever-changing business landscape. By addressing these recommendations, the organization can cultivate a high-performing culture characterized by collaboration, innovation, and accountability, positioning itself for long-term success and resilience.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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