AN ORGANIZATION'S WORK ENVIRONMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The prime objective of this paper is to study the work environment prevalent in International Islamic University Malaysia. Based upon the framework of the organizational climate, this study aims to identify the perceptions of a group of academic staff towards the various aspects of the work environment. The instrument used in this study was a two section self-administered survey questionaire. The self-designed questionaire comprised twelve different dimensions of the work environment such as the working paradigm, formal structure, decision-making, leadership, communication, excellence and innovation, resolving conflicts, students focus, inter-staff relationship, research and scholarly activities, safety and the sense of belonging. Overall 120 academic staff participated in the study. The findings illustrate that despite some limitations, the respondents have a relatively high perception on almost all of the areas in the work environment. This can be interpreted as an indication that the majority of the academic staff are satisfied with their work environment. The practice of Islamic work cultures such as the principle of 'taqwa' (God consciousness) are rated highly. The areas that may warrant the attention of administrators include the dimensions on research and scholarly activities, safety issues and probably,the management of international staff. On the whole, the good status of the work environment is a key indicator of quality for the university. The high sentiments of the academic staff should serve as an impetus to the administrators as well as heads of departments to eradicate complacency, and to gear future strategies towards a culture of comprehensive excellence. A two-pronged work practices, the 'open door policy' and 'think-tank' committees comprising academicians and administrators would be constructive mechanisms to enhance the work culture in IIUM. There is also a need for academicians turned administrators to be trained in management to ensure efficiency, and competency. In order to provide a wide base of information of the local settings pertaining to institutions of higher learning, a guideline for future studies were then suggested.

INTRODUCTION

The conditions under which one works can influence one's performance. According to Hobfoll and Shirom,1996 (in Mohd. Puat B.Yusof, 1998), there is a significant relationship between the work place (working environment) with an individual's work performance. A comfortable, happy and encouraging work setting will influence productivity and vice-versa. Research studies show that when a workplace is made, for example, more conducive, or working hours more flexible, productivity usually increases, at least temporarily. (Schultz, 1998)

There are two main components of the work environment. It constitutes the physical environment (work sites, child-care facilities, landscaping etc) as well as the more subtle psychological factors such as employees' positive attitude toward management. It is the psychological and social working conditions, that is, the intrinsic environment, which has innumerable ramifications on employees' attitude and behavior. It is normally interpreted in terms of ' organizational climate.'

Organizational climate is the human environment within which an organization's employees do their work. We cannot see climate but it is there. It surrounds and affects everything that happens in an organization. In turn, climate is affected by almost everything that happens in an organization. In many industries today, consultants are managing the work climate with an aim to attract, energise and retain skilled professionals. One such company is IBM World Trade Corporation Malaysia. (New Straits Times, 22 August, 2000).

The scenario in the educational sector, and in particular the study of the work environment and the impact on the teaching staff whether at schools, colleges or universities is often limited. Apparently, a comparison among the three levels, would reveal that there are very few known studies of the work environment in universities.(Chan, 1998) Therefore, the rationality of studying the work environment in the university can be taken as a step to acknowledge the world of the academic staff (just like teachers or college lecturers)not only their teaching and research tasks but the kind of place they work in.

Statement of the Problem

Universities today are the 'front liners' in promoting culture of knowledge. In the Malaysian setting, public universities as part of the education portfolio, are challenged to articulate the practical implications of Vision 2020 and the Educational Vision. (Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid et al, 1996)

However, this tough feat is not without its problems. On the problem of staff leaving for private institutions, the Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad (The Sun, 5 August, 2000) was of the view that staff in universities leave because of various reasons like non-conducive workplaces and difficulty in obtaining support for their research activities and conferences. In contrast, he added that there are also many who do stay on because they like teaching in a public university, its environment and the students there.

The situation mentioned above seems to support the present scenario of academicians. Walter (1993) reported that recent studies of academics around the world reveal

dissatisfaction with work environments, disillusionment with career progress, and consequences of stress emanating from various aspects of the professional roles. Another confronting issue highlighted by the minister included the grouses that local universities had not been consistent in their efforts to enhance quality. He said, " We always say that we are institutes of higher learning. What exactly do we need to maintain or enhance the quality?" (News Straits Times, 7 August, 2000)

In this context, it is important then to highlight the attributes of the work characteristics, eliminate blindspots, reduce complacency, and induce a positive attitude to work in order to develop the right work climate in the organization.

Research Questions

1) What are the participants' (academic staff of IIUM) perceptions about the Administration and Processes Dimension - (a) working paradigm, (b) formal structure, (c) decision-making, (d) leadership, (e) communication, (f) excellence and innovation, and (g) resolving conflicts?

2) What are the participants' perceptions of the Task and Socioemotional Support dimension ? Specifically, their perceptions of the following (h) students' focus, (i) inter-staff relationship, (j) research and scholarly activities, (k) safety, (l) sense of belonging?

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge base on the organizational climate prevalent in education organizations. The results of this study will give an insight into the various predictors and salient features of the work environment in IIUM. The evaluation