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Research Article

# Perceived leadership style of Jordanian academic deans in higher education institutions: Qualitative study

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focuses on the perceptions of two academic deans and their leadership styles. The leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire is used as a frame for analyzing data. Using qualitative methods, observation and interview data were collected. Two themes emerged, Initiating Structure, and Consideration. The Initiating Structure behavior of leaders was all are open to different strategies in problem solving and annual review to make sure faculty/staff members work to capacity. When it came to Consideration, the dominant behavior patterns among deans was having an open door policy with their faculty, willing to make changes, and having high morale within the college.

*Keywords:* Leadership styles, Initiation structure and consideration, Leadership behavior description questionnaire

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## INTRODUCTION

In Roman mythology, the god Janus was depicted as the god who had two faces. Simultaneously, one face turned to the front and the other to the back. Though academic deans are not in danger of deification, they also have two faces. One face is that of Initiating Structure and task oriented, the other face of Consideration and human relations. The deans hold the classic person-in-the-middle role; their academic future is tied firmly to the college, but their ability to represent the college effectively in budgetary and personnel matters is directly related to quality of their working relationship with faculty and staff members (Gmelch and Burns, 1994).

As many leadership theorists have revealed, there are at least two fundamental and distinct categories of leader behavior, one is concerned with people and interpersonal relations and the other with production and task achievement (Halpin, 1966; Blake and Mouton, 1985). In general, different degrees of emphasis are placed on the dimensions of leadership based on their behaviors. In this study, an instrument called Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) was used to measure the two basic dimensions of leader behavior—Initiating Structure (IS) and Consideration (CN).

Initiating structure refers to the establishment of well-defined patterns of organization, channels of communication, and methods of procedure. If a dean emphasizes task achievement and neglects human relations with faculty and staff, his/her leadership style could be described as that of Initiating-Structure- on other hand Consideration refers to the provision of friendship, mutual trust, respect, warmth and interest in the relationship between the leader and members of the group (Halpin, 1966).

There have been numerous studies using the LBDQ in different organizations, and universities. Findings have indicated that, Initiating Structure and Considerations are fundamental dimensions of leader behavior, and that the two dimensions provide a practical and useful means for measuring leader behavior. According to LBDQ, effective leader behavior is associated with high performance on both dimensions. High initiating structure combined with high consideration is associated with favorable group attitudes and with favorable changes in-group attitude (Halpin, 1966; Cheng, 1991).

Wolverton et al. (1999) studied the dean's perceptions of their effectiveness and found role ambiguity (e.g., knowing job responsibilities, having clear goals for the job, knowing amount of authority, knowing senior administrators' expectations) had a small negative effect on deans' perceptions of their job satisfaction, effectiveness, and commitment to the institution. Also, major findings of Rosser et al. (2000) indicated that unit size and external dollars generated positively related to perceptions of leadership effectiveness; that women are viewed as better leaders than men; and that the respondent's place in the organization affects his or her perception of the dean's effectiveness as a leader .

In relation to gender, Rosser's (2001) study examined the differences in the way female and male deans lead their academic units perceived by their faculty and administrative staff. Surveys were mailed to all 1950 faculty/staff members reporting to 22 deans at a major research university. Among the leadership dimensions, findings suggested that faculty members and administrative staff perceived that women and men reflect differing patterns in their role as leaders. Female deans were perceived to be more likely than male deans to enhance the quality of education in their units, engage in research, community, professional endeavors, promoters, support for institutional diversity, and manage personnel and financial resources fairly and effectively.

Deans and academic department chairs have a critical role in building college/department team climate (Gmelch and Miskin, 1993). They identify: (1) understanding the characteristics of an effective team, ability to identify team and non-team players and developing leadership characteristics encourages team effort, to influence faculty in that direction are the major roles that deans and department chairs play in building organization climate.

Qualitative studies addressing leadership styles of academic deans are limited especially in Jordan according to the researcher knowledge. Most researches were in quantitative approach, such as Al-Omari (2006) study that identifies leadership styles and style adaptability perceived by deans and department chairpersons at three institutions of higher education in Jordan. With regard to leadership style, both deans and department chairs selected selling as their primary leadership style and selected 'participating as their secondary style. Regarding style adaptability, deans and department chairs came in the middle range of scores.

Academic deans have the ability to exert power, control information, allocate resources, and assess the performance and promotion of their faculty and staff. They serve as academic facilitators between

presidential initiatives, faculty governance, and student needs (Astin and Sherrei, 1980). Therefore, this study was conducted in order to gain a better understanding of the leadership styles of the two deans. The purpose of study is to understand what type of leadership style these participants deans implement, when developing positive college climate, improving college performance, and how style relates to faculty and staff attitudes, as well as determining which of the two styles were more effective.

The questions that guided this research were designed to provide data that would describe the leadership styles of these deans. These questions are as follows: (1) how do two deans perceive their leadership style, and are they more likely to fall into the dimension of Initiating Structure or Consideration when leading?

### Theoretical perspective

The Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) is a traditional questionnaire that seeks to capture the dimensions of leadership styles. The instrument was originally developed by Halpin (1956) to measure the two dimensions of leadership style, initiating structure and consideration. It was modified into several different versions that added both complexity and items to it during the days of the Ohio State research studies in leadership. During the post WWII years there was a great deal of interest in leadership but no satisfactory theory or definition of the factors that constituted leadership. The LBDQ is famous for introducing two dimensions of leadership (consideration and initiation of structure or task orientation) that have remained very much a constant in leadership studies (Hoy and Miskel, 1991).

Initiating Structure includes any leadership behavior that delineates the relationship between the leader and the subordinates and, at the same time establishes defined patterns of organization, channels of communication, and procedures. Consideration includes leader behavior that indicates friendship, trust, warmth, interest respect in the relationship between the leader, and members of the work group (Halpin, 1966).

To neglect initiation of structure limits the effectiveness of the school; to ignore consideration reduces the satisfaction of the subordinates. Certainly, dynamic leader behavior-behavior integrates both attributes; initiating structure and consideration into a consistent pattern (Hoy and Miskel, 1991).

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The participants selected were two academic deans. Because quantitative researchers are interested in applying their findings to a larger population (generalizations), they work with a sample chosen randomly that is representative of that larger population (Ott, 1988). The concept of generalizability is very different for qualitative researchers and has little bearing on the choice of the sample.

The choice of participants in a qualitative study is more from a theoretical standpoint than a representative one. Usually the sample is smaller; some studies have even been done with one participant (for example, Wolcott's 1973 study of an elementary school principal.) The investigator's relationship with the participants in the study is also quite different. Rather than maintaining a distance from the object of inquiry, a separateness where one does not influence the other, there is interaction between the inquirer and the participant in the inquiry. They influence each other (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The two participants in this study were Jordanian and chosen because of their location (cost of traveling to their place of work and telephone calls was a factor), gender (I wanted one woman as one man). These participants were chosen purposefully. One was male, and the other was female. The first dean will be referred to as Adam. Adam has had five years experience as department chair at another institution before becoming dean at the current university, and has been dean for 4 years. His particular college is made up of three departments with 160 faculty and 32 staff working under him.

The second dean will be referred to as Anne. She has five years experience as a dean at the current university, and before she became dean she had a very illustrious career. She was as interim dean for one year; a department chair for one and half years, and was a department chair at another university for 3 years. Her college is comprised of two departments with 70 faculty and 22 staff respectively.

This study draws upon qualitative methods. A technique commonly used in qualitative research through in-depth interviewing (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). A basic assumption as in-depth

interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out the experience. The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to evaluate. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 1991). It produces a highly detailed description of the topic under investigation.

The field study consisted of a formal-structured, open-ended interview during which notes were taken. Interviews were tape recorded with permission of the participants. All participants agreed to be tape-recorded. Each dean was assured at the onset of the interview that the results would be kept confidential and that their remarks, if quoted, would be attributable to a pseudonym.

The data was then chronicled by categories that were identified by the researcher. Participants were used to check the accuracy of findings; the participants received transcriptions of the interviews for verification of accuracy.

Two dimensions of leadership styles; Initiating Structure and Consideration formed the general theory. The dynamic leader will be the dean who can integrate strength on both dimensions.

### Site selection

The university site is located in the North region of Jordan and is a public institution. The site was selected because of the convenience of the location and due to time constraints.

### Data collection

A brief consent letter was sent to each dean before personal contact was made. Each letter was followed up with phone calls to schedule appointments for interviews. Each interview took place in the office of the participant, and were recorded and transcribed in verbatim. The focus of the interview questions was based on the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire. These questions focused on leadership style. So, the formal interviews became the primary data source for analysis.

### Interview design

An interview guide was constructed in order to collect demographic information on each dean, to identify his/her leadership style, to elicit anecdotes illustrating their leadership style, as well as describing the process of becoming a dean.

Eleven questions probed leadership roles, they are as follows: (1) How willing are you making changes in your college? (2) How do you make time to listen to faculty and staff members? (3) How do you set goals in your college? (4) To what degree is getting staff approval on important matters important? (5) How important is stressing high morale in the group? (6) How open are you to incorporating different strategies for problem solving? (7) How do you outline the work that needs to be done? (8) What do you do to make sure that the staff/faculty members' work to capacity? (9) How do you let staff/faculty members know what is expected of them? (10) Provide in detail, the work that should be done, and (11) how should work be done?

At the end of interview, they were given an opportunity to make unsolicited comments about deanship. Further, they were asked, "What can you add that has not been asked that you think is important in leadership?"

*Data analysis.* Data analysis is based on the description of the constant comparison method provided by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The researcher identified themes and patterns to code data. Coding was accomplished by highlighting similar themes throughout these data. And these themes were arranged under the topic headings "Initiating Structure" and "Consideration."

## RESULTS

### Narrative

The following is the major data obtained from both deans through interviews. There were two major themes (1) Initiating Structure with sub themes (*Setting goals in college, Problem solving, Outline the work, Working to capacity, and Providing in detail the work*) or (2) Consideration with sub themes (Willing to make changes, Listening to faculty/staff members, getting faculty staff involved on important matters, faculty/staff morale, let faculty/staff members know what is expected of them).

*Initiating structure.* Initiating Structure includes leadership behavior that delineates the relationship between the leader and the subordinates and, at the same time establishes defined patterns of organization, channels of communication, and methods of procedures.

*Setting goals in college.* Goals are important, and the way of setting them is even more important. Adam said, "We set goals, probably two ways, top down goals ... we have a strategic plan for the college that was determined at faculty meetings and in consultation with staff... The other way the goals are set in the college by individual departments who look at the overall college strategic plan and *then have to set their own goals.*" Anne set goals for her college by saying "I developed a strategic plan for the college/university by working with the college administrators, I would set goals with the department chairs too, determine the visions and perspectives faculty concerns and perspectives of the department. Anne added, "...goals are driven by the strategic plan at the same time many of the goals are coming from the bottom up to the process where the faculty has the opportunity to discuss them."

Adam's approach to goal setting begins within his collective group. "I try to be collaborative when dealing with faculty. I don't set the goals centrally and every body follows them." After setting goals are set within my role to solve problems when they arise.

*Problem solving.* When asked how they are open to different strategies for problem Solving, Adam had this to say, "I think anything ethical that works is what I will try." And "I think there are different strategies for problem solving." Anne added, "I am open to incorporating different strategies and I don't think there is a right way to solve the problem. I have used different kinds of strategies, different kinds of processes to solve problems. I am always open to better ideas when someone else has some suggestions." After trying to solve problems, the deans need to outline their work and that is the third sub-theme that emerged in this study.

*Outline the work.* In regard to how deans outline their responsibilities, Adam commented, "There are several types of work. There are major projects that you need to basically follow on a regular basis. Much of the work is administratively set. There are times in which budgets have to be improved or assessed." During weekends he evaluates how things worked and begins planning for the next week. "I have several domains, it is domains of actions that you have to work in and I try periodically, usually over the weekends to sit down and see what happened this week and what should happen next week."

Dean Anne outlines her work through cooperating with others. "At the beginning of the year, we set some goals. We set the goals together for tasks to be accomplished in any given year and determine which of these goals can actually be accomplished." In addition to that, she added "You can do several things at one time, but you can't do a lot of big things at one time, because I don't think people have the energy to do that." She takes care of her groups at college through allowing them to determine the work that can be done by them. You can only move those people who are willing to move with you and so I think it is important not to outline too much at any given time, and also not to take on unachievable tasks. I also think it is important to get some support, so that, other people feel what you plan has any significance."

When deans outline their work, they want to be sure that every person in college works to his/her capacity.

*Working to capacity.* When responding to the question of work capacity, dean Adam had respond to this by saying, "Hire good staff and get out of their way, I usually make sure people understand the goals and their part and give them opportunities to perform independently and be recognized for doing well and then, I believe they will work to capacity." Anne offered an alternative point of view to Adam's. "I usually coordinate things with the department chairs, and the directors and the peoples who supervise other people."

After working to capacity sub-theme, the next sub-theme concerns to what degree do deans provide detail in their work in the major theme Initiating Structure.

*Providing in detail the work.* According to interest in details of the work, dean Adam said, "I am not much for providing extensive detail. I think the people that I hire are problem solvers and are able to figure out what to do for the most part of the work." Dean Anne said, "I don't think I provide details about what should be done. But she continued by saying "I guess, people who report directly to me, as the associate dean and finance officer and my administrative assistant, would be provided with more direction"

Adam added that, "work is specified in great detail by business policies and procedures, faculty manuals, academic policies and so on. I do on key issues, especially if the person is taking on a task that they have not done before. If something has been done many times, I usually don't worry about it."

Initiating Structure was one of the major themes in this study. The other was Consideration, and there were specific questions related to this major theme.

### **Consideration**

Consideration refers to the provision of friendship, mutual trust, respect, warmth and interest in the relationship between the leader and members of the group. The participants were rated in reference to this dimension. Both commented on their willingness to make changes.

*Willing to make changes.* “I am very willing to make changes in accordance with our strategic plan,” said Adam. He also tries to get approval from others, “I will do what is necessary to get the goals everybody agreed upon done.” He looks for change, not for change in it, look for good ideas; change for the sake of change is probably not a very good idea.”

Anne agrees with Adam and notes that changes happen to make things better. “There are different kinds of change. I guess you don’t have to be willing to make changes just because opportunities for change have surfaced. Certainly we want to make changes to get things better, and because we know change will improve current situations.” Anne said the reasons for making changes vary, regarding to both deans “... there are a lot of reasons for making the changes ...” said Anne. The importance of listening to faculty and staff members is one of the major sub-themes that emerged in this study and both of deans emphasized it.

*Listening to faculty/staff members.* Adam suggest that there is a need to address faculty concerns, “a scheduled appointment with my chairs and major administrative staff, mostly on a weekly basis. He noted that “my door is always open and I am very flexible.”

According to Anne, “I schedule at least one faculty meeting a year for all of the different faculties and talk to people and then anybody can make appointment with me at any time to talk with me. So I guess I keep an open door policy and people can make an appointment with me and use e-mails, I am very good in responding to everyone.” Thus, deans do not work alone, and they try to get approval on important matters from faculty and staff members.

*Importance of getting faculty/staff approval on important matters.* It is very important to get the approval on important matters from faculty and staff members. Adam feels it is essential. “You must gain agreement at the different levels on what the highest priorities are.”

Anne adds that, “it is very important to have faculty and staff understand the important matters with changes intended. I think that experience is important for people to buy into decisions, because I don’t think deans, can implement decisions by themselves ... I think it is very important to have a collaborative process between faculty and administration.” Getting approval from faculty and staff could have an affect on their morale. The following section addresses the theme of faculty and staff morale.

*Faculty/staff morale.* The capability of a leader to create the morale is very important. Adam said, “I tend to be positive in my outlook” at the same time “I think it is important stressing achievement, getting people to focus and keep high moral.”

Dean Anne added, “I think morale is much tied to motivation, people’s motivation and people’s job satisfaction and my goals are to make things work smoothly and effectively. It is very good place to work and so I guess ... it is very important to stress high morale.” Creating high morale among faculty and staff depends on how much they know what is expected of them.

*Let faculty/staff members know what is expected of them.* How faculty and staff know what is expected of them, is often translated by a dean. Adam commented, “I try to remind my faculty of the things that needs to be worked out in terms of specific assignments, specific activities, and I try to provide them with material that helps them understand what constitutes being a good chair.”

Dean Anne saw that, “the work that their expected to do in their job description. The faculty in sense has a job description too, and people are evaluated during the year according to their job description and according to their performance. They have an annual review every year where their performance is evaluated. Staff members too have performance reviews. So I guess there are two ways ... job descriptions and ... annual reviews.”

Both deans tried to create the best working environment in their colleges, and they concentrated on both dimensions of leadership, relations to people (Consideration), and the other (Initiating Structure). Two dimensions shape the major focus of the theoretical perspective of this study.



## DISCUSSION

Data in this study suggests that there were two different leadership styles among these deans. The two leadership styles helped to delineate whether the person is Initiating Structure or Consideration. Two categories emerged in relation to the styles of leaders. The first Initiating-Structure and the second Consideration are areas that distinguish how a leader will behave based on the conceptual framework of the Leader Behavior Description Model.

### Initiating structure

The results demonstrate that the deans share some similarities and differences when it came to the category of Initiating Structure. The similarities revealed themselves in response to the question, how open are you to incorporating different strategies for problem solving Both participants stated that they were open to “different strategies” for solving problems as high quality educational program required different strategies.

Another question that they agreed upon was, what do you do to make sure faculty/staff members’ work to capacity; they stated that through hiring good staff, make sure they understand the goals.

In regard to how they conveyed what works had to be completed and how it should be done. Both stated they aren’t providing details about the work, because there are other people—department chairs- who are able to figure out these details.

The contrasting answers from the deans showed the female dean answered some questions. Anne tended to be more cooperative with others through outlining the work “we set the goals together about what used to be accomplished about that year”. While Adam tended to work more with him “I set down the goals and see what happen this week and what should happen next week.”

### Consideration

The results indicated that the deans share similarities when it came to Consideration. The similarities came in when addressing the question how willing they were to make changes. Both stated that they were willing to change towards the better. Another question that they agreed upon was how they make time to listen to staff/faculty. Both deans stated that they had an “open door policy” and used appointments. Further, the question regarding whether high morale was of importance, both stated that it was. Adam and Anne both agreed that it increases productivity as well. Finally, in relation to the question of how important is getting staff approval on important matters both Adam and Anne stated that it is important to get staff approval. Also, both agreed that faculty and staff knew what was expected of them by using annual reviews for evaluation purposes and through detailed job descriptions.

## CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study has demonstrated that there are two different types of leadership behavior between these two colleges. The findings revealed that there were characteristics that were similar to both participants. In Initiating Structure some of these characteristics were openness to different strategies in problem solving, the use of annual review to make sure staff/faculty members’ work to capacity, and flexibility in the amount of detail they provided on how the work should be done. The contrast in Initiating Structure was in how they outlined their work. Results demonstrate that the female dean was more cooperative with other faculty and staff members. When it came to Consideration both deans (male and female) agreed upon having an open door policy with their faculty, willing to make changes in the department, and that having high morale was very important within the department.

Further research is needed on this subject and due to time constraints the researcher will continue following up the questions that arose from this research were: (1) When does a dean become a leader, and how does he/she know when he/she should switch from one of the two styles to the other? Are all styles of deans effective when dealing with their faculty/staff? These questions were developed when analyzing the data.

Naturally, this study is limited in various respects. Qualitative findings cannot be generalized. The procedures and findings described here cannot be seen as conclusive, but they do suggest that leadership styles of deans should be pursued and investigated in additional studies, either qualitative or of mixed design. Perhaps other concepts could emerge by asking different interview questions, or by using different levels of participants at the university and by including more participants as well.

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