

Full Length Research Paper

The key principles of managing people: The Brunei perspective

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Abstract

The paper's purpose is to examine the key principles of managing people in the Bruneian environment. The method used in this study is qualitative research method. To have a deeper understanding of the interviewees' thinking and perceptions of the key principle of managing people, the researchers interviewed civil servants as well as employees from Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Brunei. The study samples consisted of thirty-four (34) people, age ranging from 41 to 57 years old, whom the researchers knew/or were referred to them by contacts. Majority of the interviewees responded that managers must be trustworthy and lead by example; they must communicate and listen to their employees while gaining their support and commitment. Furthermore, they should stand tall in face of adversity while being of high integrity so that they can galvanise a high sense of unity among their employees within the work unit. These principles of managing people indicated by the Bruneian civil servants, employers and employees are very much similar and in line with what were mentioned in the Sultan of Brunei's *Titah* (55th royal birthday speech). To-date, no similar study has yet been carried out in Brunei. These findings hold relevance to Bruneian employees in term of understanding the key principles based on which Bruneian managers must lead their employees.

Keywords: People Management, Brunei, key principles of managing people, attitudes of managers.

INTRODUCTION

Peter Ferdinand Drucker (1909 – 2005), an influential American writer and management consultant said in his book, "There is NOT one right way to manage people. For the 21st century management challenges, one does not 'manage' people. The task is to lead people. And the goal is to make productive the specific strengths and knowledge of each individual." (Drucker, 1999: 21-22) According to that, a manager's most important, and most difficult, job is to 'manage' people. He or she must lead, motivate, inspire, and encourage them to work according to the organisational culture and goals. Sometimes He or she will have to hire (recruit), evaluate, discipline or fire employees. The aim and purpose of this paper is to investigate the key ways of managing people in the Bruneian environment or setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Resource Management and Effective People Management

The focus of human resource management (HRM) is "on managing people within the employer-employee relationship" (Stone, 2002: 4). HRM involves the productive use of people in achieving the organisation's strategic business objectives and the satisfaction of individual employee needs. In this respect, employees are seen as pro-active contributors to the organisation's strategic business objectives rather than as passive units to be allocated rationally along with any other factors of production. Consequently, HRM emphasises employee development, collaboration, participation, trust and informed choice. The purpose of practising human resource management is to generate resourceful employees for the organisations. This means that managers have to 'get it right' by creating the conditions under which employees can optimally perform (Kelloway,

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2004: 5). To attain effective HRM, there should be “a systematic process for improving organizational performance by developing the performance of individuals and teams” (Armstrong, 2006: 1). And therein lays the basis of several key principles of managing people. The authors believe that managing people is like managing the business or performance (Mohrman and Mohrman, 1995). The authors would also argue that when one leads (or ‘manages’) people, one would also want them to achieve excellent performance.

What Do We Mean By Key Principles?

A principle is defined as “a standard or rule of personal conduct” or “a set of such moral rules” (Collins, 2012). A principle is a general belief that one has about the way one should behave, which influences one’s behaviour. If one agrees with something in principle, one agrees in general terms to the idea of it, although one does not yet know the details or know if it will be possible (Collins, 2006). Hence, in this study, the key principles of managing people in Brunei lays in the practice of the core values or key beliefs amongst the Bruneian civil servants; and the private sector’s employers and employees on the way they should behave when managing people. The private sector in this context is the SMEs (small and medium enterprises).

The Principle of Promoting or Hiring the Best Candidates for the Jobs

When an organisation, in the beginning, hires individuals with the right skills, abilities and competencies for the jobs, it will help the manager in building a good competitive team of workforce to achieve organisational targets and goals. However, this will involve rigorous selection process (job analysis, screening and behavioural interview) for hiring the right individuals with the appropriate skills. By doing this way, it will enable everyone to know that their qualifications are critical to the organisational success; and in a way, upholding the good reputation and team spirit of the organisation (Kelloway, 2004: 6-7). If an organisation hires or recruits people who are not fit to the job requirements, the authors argue that the organisation would encounter unstable workforce resulting in unhappy employees intending to resign early or the employee(s) being released from the job due to incompetency or being unskilled which would affect the organisation’s productivity.

The Principle of Treating the Workforce Well

By treating the workforce well one may ensure that the

distributive, procedural and interactional justice are in place and practised in the organisation (Kelloway, 2004: 9). This is because it is a critical component of people management. Clearly, it does not make sense whatsoever for an organisation to hire the best and then treat them poorly. Yet this is precisely what we do in organizations day after day. Whether through neglect or intent, organizations seem to ignore the truism that “the best” must be treated as “the best”. Low’s (2011) study also noted that “talents, at most times, are mishandled, misused or become misfits, and consequently they become de-motivated or demoralized, they leave the company.”

The Principle of Managing Performance

Performance management is defined as an “ongoing process that articulates organizational vision and objectives, identifies and installs organizational and individual performance standards in light of these objectives, and takes corrective action to ensure accomplishment of these standards using systems and procedures that are well-integrated with organizational culture and practices.” (Das, 2003 cited in Kelloway, 2004: 9). Performance management systems focus on performance improvement through collecting, analyzing, and communicating information in a timely fashion. Performance management systems integrate performance planning, support for high performance, performance development and performance appraisal. Performance management identifies strategic organizational objectives and sets performance standards related to those objectives. Those standards involve both individual and team (or unit) performance. In this way, individual performance is evaluated in an organizational context and not isolated. An organisation does not require elaborate management tools or compensation system (designed by high priced consultants) in order to measure its performance effectively. Rather, what has proven to be effective in managing performance is the combination of goal settings and constant feedbacks from all levels of the organisation for improving performance.

The Principle of Managers Being Responsible and Accountable

Indeed, managers need to be responsible and accountable. In this regard, in one of his *Titahs* (speeches), His Majesty, the Sultan of Brunei, delivered a scathing and critical review of the failures, faults and shortcomings that the government has failed to rectify other than His Majesty, himself. He questioned the government as such, “Do you have to wait for my order? Can’t you think about this? Has anyone ever thought of it

seriously? Is it because you are scared to plan until I myself mention it repeatedly? Is this a right approach or is the idea mature enough?" He felt that the kind of behavior exhibited by his government servants seemed to him selfish and unconcern about the matter. He detested the behavior of 'wait and see' attitude and he considered this to be a disaster in burdening the government and bringing misery to the people. He commented that the heads of department work 'just like a robot' with no discretion, initiative or common sense. They just wait for instructions, they will not take any steps even though they are mandated to make certain considerations and take logical steps. (The Borneo Bulletin, 2009 Website: http://www.sultanate.com/news_server/2009/15_jul_5.html). The Sultan would like his subjects to be humble and responsible in what they are doing. He stressed the importance of being caring and wanting to do more for others. He has often urged and stressed the importance of accountability on the part of his ministries, department, statutory bodies and government agencies. He highlighted that "(the) head of each government organizations and statutory bodies should be more accountable, responsible and not submit entrusted tasks off-handed to subordinate officers. This to ensure that government property would be more secure, not misused or misappropriated for personal gain" (The Government of Brunei's Website, 2012, http://www.royalbirthday.org.bn/eng/?page_id=155).

The Principle of Teamwork/Spirit

Just as the Malay saying, "*muafakat membawa berkat*", meaning that teamwork and cooperation will benefit everyone. His Majesty also acknowledges the importance of cooperation and teamwork in improving organizational performance. This can be illustrated from one of his speeches; "Ministries and government agencies must continuously be focused and committed towards improving organizational performance and human resource. Also, to encourage teamwork, discipline and high work ethics as well as commitments towards duties and responsibilities" (The Government of Brunei's Website, 2012, http://www.royalbirthday.org.bn/eng/?page_id=155).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted with a total of thirty-four (34) civil servants as well as the employers and employees from Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Brunei. This research is based on a series of interviews – each time approximately 45 minutes though some interviews might stretch to over an hour. The period of study was from 1 March 2011 to 30 November 2011. According to

business researchers, sample sizes larger than 30 and smaller than 500 are appropriate for most research. Qualitative studies typically use small sample sizes because of the intensive nature of such studies (Cavana et al, 2001: 279; Sekaran, 2000: 296–297 and Roscoe, 1975). The critical rationale behind choosing government civil servants as well as the employers and employees from Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) as the key sample for this research is because this study would hopefully help to cover some spectrum of society in relating with people management and hence the respondents' insights can be tapped to cast useful light on some key principles of managing people in the Bruneian context.

It is worthy to note that similar to Low's (2006, 2006a) and Low and Ang's (2011a) studies, being assured of confidentiality and anonymity, the interviewees expressed themselves freely. At the beginning of these interviews, the researchers started with some small talk to put the interviewees at ease. Very often, a light conversation on their personal likes and interests, detected in previous interactions or previous telephone calls, would serve as a springboard for further discussions on the motivational sources of the interviewees. This interview method is helpful since it enables much qualitative data to be collected from the interviewees. To get more information and data from the various interviewees, open-ended questions were deployed (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001); they were crafted as follows:

1. What are your views on managing people; in the Brunei perspective?
2. What are the key principles of managing people in the Brunei context?
3. How to manage people well in Brunei?
4. What sort of values do you need to embrace and to practise if you want to manage your people within the Bruneian context?
5. What are the things that you should not do if you want to manage people in Brunei?

Pilot-testing was felt necessary, as it was not easy to predict how respondents would interpret and react to the questions (Gill and Johnson, 1997). Checking was also done during the pilot testing to ensure that all the questions were understandable (Haworth, 1996: 47). They were also asked to suggest additional questions and to identify any highly relevant questions. To increase comprehension and improve clarity, this list of questions was then modified based on several respondents' feedback; for example, the above Question 2 was modified from "What are the ways of managing people in the Bruneian environment or setting?" Interestingly, these questions also allowed the researchers to gather more information on the various sources of motivation from the interviewees. In this way, the authors attempt to find out and understand the interviewees' key principles of managing people and what keeps a good manager motivated.

Table 1. Sample of key responses verbalized by the interviewees.

In Ascending Order	Key Principles Preferred In Managing People	Reasons Cited	No. of Interviewees	Percentage (%)
1	Lead by example	“It will inspire the employees to give their best”; “leading by example gives the manager unquestionable authority”; “managers should lead by example for their followers to emulate”; (s)he should take action and lead us” “ if a manager can shows us his or her good example, we will definitely follow him or her” and “Effective management must have managers who lead by examples”	24	70.6
2	Trustworthiness (<i>Amanah</i>)	“It is important that we trust the officers we recruited”; “we need to trust each other to work well together”; “Trust builds relationships” and “it builds team work or spirit”; “Trust helps to avoid working in silos; it thus builds cooperation”; “ <i>Amanah</i> is perhaps strongly influenced by Islam”; “We work well when we trust our manager”	23	67.6
3	Commitment	“Critical when doing the job, it will give a big effect in the results and productivity”; “when enforcing rules and regulation, managers need full commitments, and not just saying with no action”; “I like manager who mean what he says”; “I dislike manager who give empty promises”	23	67.6
4	Integrity	“A high level of integrity is needed to run school programs planned for the year, need to develop the staff’s trust to get their support”; “we like our manager and he has our trust and support because many times when he made a mistake, he openly admitted his mistake instead of keeping quiet or blaming his subordinates”; “I have no doubt about her integrity because she always keep her promises”	22	64.7
5	Teamwork	“Need to build synergies”; “through teamwork, work gets done”; “we always work in a team and we like to help each other so that we can complete the task on time and on budget”; “I cannot work alone as a manager; I need the help of my subordinates and also they must have good team spirit. If not, the job won’t get done”	21	61.8
6	Communication	“We give feedback and we get feedback”; “communication is vital”; “yes, my boss is approachable; he would stop by and talk to us. We always feel inspired and motivated by him” and “my boss is patient in explaining things that we say we don’t understand”	20	58.8
7	Listening	“Managers must be good listeners; they need to listen to the employees’ suggestions”. “Listening helps in communications and building good relationships”.	20	58.8
8	Loving and caring (We can also call it “passion”: “love for one’s work and others”)	“When the manager shows care and concern, this overall helps to generate bonding and a sense of belonging.” “4Cs: Managers should be caring, considerate, courteous and showing concern to their employees” “Being loving and caring makes it easy to get help from others and besides, people would often be happy to work with us”. “People will listen to us.” “Passion reflects one’s commitment and one’s getting the job done”.	20	58.8

Table 1 Cont.

9	Consensus (<i>syura</i>)	“Consensus helps to avoid conflicts and create harmonious working environment”; “it helps not only to create a sense of belonging, but also solidarity within the organization.” and “ <i>syura</i> (consensus) helps to put more weight to the decision(s) made and action(s)”	20	58.8
10	Wisdom (<i>Fatanah</i>)	“Good to be practical”; “managers should be wise”; “the manager’s understanding of his or her people is very important to manage them well”	20	58.8
14	Responsibility	“Managers should be responsible and accountable; they must fulfill their role(s)”; “ when managers delegate work to his or her subordinates , (s)he should still hold full responsibility instead of blaming his or her subordinates when something went wrong”	9	26.5
15	Knowledge	“Similar to know-how”; “knowledge builds one’s confidence and it gives the managers the necessary authority.” and “A knowledgeable manager has the confidence and full control in managing people”	9	26.5
16	Visionary	“As a manager, I need to know where to direct my people.”	1	3.3

FINDINGS

The remarks and statements made by each respondent was captured and recorded immediately during the interview. After each interview, the authors clarified with the interviewees those statements which were not clear and needed further explanation. In this respect, there were many occasions that repetitive interviews were carried out for one interviewee at different day, time and venue (Plate, 2011; 2010). This is the way the authors established the verification and the validity of the statements/remarks made by the interviewees. The following is the respondents’ remarks which have been sorted and categorised into several headings.(Table 1)

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

For centuries, Brunei Darussalam has been an Islamic Sultanate. The concept of Melayu Islam Beraja (Malay Muslim Monarchy, MIB) is a national ideology for the citizens to embrace the long history of monarchy, Brunei Malay culture, and Islamic values. Most importantly, it raised an important belief or key value that people should be treated like the leader’s family members (Low and Mohd Zain, 2008). This virtuous value of nurturing “all-in-the-family” feeling was also echoed in several literatures. (Low and Mohd Zain, 2008, Low and Tabyldy, 2007; Low, 2007; Low, 2006a; Low, 2005). In this respect, the authors feel that managing people are strongly focused on close relationship; and how to get the work done in an

effective way.

From the literature review and the responses from the interviewees, we can conclude that the key principles of managing people from the Bruneian perspective are as follows:

Principle 1

Managers must lead by example

“Managers lead by example” is just a simple management practice. Rather than continuing to follow the old saying, “do as I say, not as I do” (Low, 2008: 68; 2012: 121) which has become the core of bad management, managers need to start to put into practice ‘walk the talk’. Managers set examples; managers lead by example. If a manager chooses to do something without considering and reflecting on what their employees are likely to think and subsequently learn from, then he or she needs to sit in the corner and thinks about how much better his or her business could be if he or she lead by example. In today’s competitive economic environment, we believe that everyone is hurting - businesses, employees, their suppliers and of course the customers. In these tough times, it is important that all parts of the business should tighten their belts. In this respect, if a manager is trying to save cost or to drive down the costs of a business, he or she should start with how he or she operates. He or she should be seen to be considerate enough by reducing his or her executive’s

spending and doing things more cheaply for the organisations. Take for example, when an individual is on a business trip, he or she should fly on an economy class instead of a first class passenger seat; takes a taxi rather than a limo; stays in a 4 star not a 5 star plus hotel; eat at good but not the best restaurant. And most importantly, he or she should not take liberties with government or shareholder's money. In this study, twenty-four interviewees or 70.6 percent of the total number of interviewees agreed that one of the key principles of effective people management is that "managers (must) lead by example". "It will inspire the employees to give their best"; and "leading by example gives the manager unquestionable authority". "It will inspire the employees to give their best"; "leading by example gives the manager unquestionable authority"; "managers should lead by example for their followers to emulate"; he or she should take action and lead us"; "if a manager shows us his or her good example, we will definitely follow him or her" and "effective management must have managers who lead by examples".

Principle 2

Managers must be trustworthy

When there is a high level of trust between managers and their subordinates, managers would have ample time and energy to concentrate on their business activities and problems that face them. They can devote their time and energies towards progress, moving the business forward and improving performance, rather than towards fixing problems, correcting misunderstandings and resolving conflicts. Therefore, an effective organisation requires high levels of trust. In this research, twenty-three interviewees or 67.6 percent of the total number of interviewees indicated that '*amanah*' or trustworthiness is one of the key principles of managing people. They also give remarks such as "It is important that we trust the officers we recruited"; "we need to trust each other to work well together"; "trust builds relationships" and "it builds team work or spirit"; "trust helps to avoid working in silos; it thus builds cooperation"; "*amanah*" is perhaps strongly influenced by Islam" and "we work well when we trust our manager".

Principle 3

Managers must gain the employees' support and commitment

Since managers interact directly and frequently with subordinates they are usually more aware of how employees are feeling than the top executives are. "Time and time again, we have seen managers gain the support

and recognition they deserve by being genuine and humble instead of arrogant or fake" (Morris and Upchurch, 2012). Therefore, with good communication, managers are in a better position to know, for example, when employees are feeling alienated and disengaged from their work. Gaining employee commitment results in greater profits because enthusiastic employees stay, contribute discretionary effort, and engage customers. When customers are satisfied with the products and services; and when the number of customers increases, sales performance improves and soars. This is because of the fact that the executives, the managers, and the employees are working together in a collaborative team, united in achieving the common goals. In this study, twenty-three interviewees or 67.6 percent of the total number of interviewees expressed that a manager with commitment is dependable and can be trusted and some said, "Critical when doing the job, it will give a big effect in the results and productivity"; "when enforcing rules and regulation, managers need full commitments, and not just saying with no action"; "I like manager who mean what he says"; "I dislike manager who give empty promises"

Principle 4

Managers must stand tall; they need to be of high integrity

Integrity embraces honesty and trustworthiness (Low and Ang, 2012); others or the subordinates can depend on or trust us. Integrity refers to behaviour that is honest and ethical, making a person trustworthy. Honesty refers to trustworthiness rather than deception. Integrity is the most important asset that one can possess. (Lussier and Achua, 2007. pp.34). As highlighted by Low (2006), models should be assessed in the light of honesty and integrity. If the subordinates have doubts and question their managers' honesty and integrity, managers cannot be models. In business, a caring manager is courageous, honest and has a real sense of commitment to transparency. One has the mental and moral strengths to venture, persevere and withstand difficulties. In this research, twenty-two interviewees or 64.7 percent of the total number of interviewees indicated that manager's integrity is important for the followers to trust him or her. Some mentioned that, "A high level of integrity is needed to run school programs planned for the year, need to develop the staff's trust to get their support"; "we like our manager; and he has our trust and support because many times when he made a mistake, he openly admitted his mistake instead of keeping quiet or blaming his subordinates" and "I have no doubt about her integrity because she always keeps her promises".

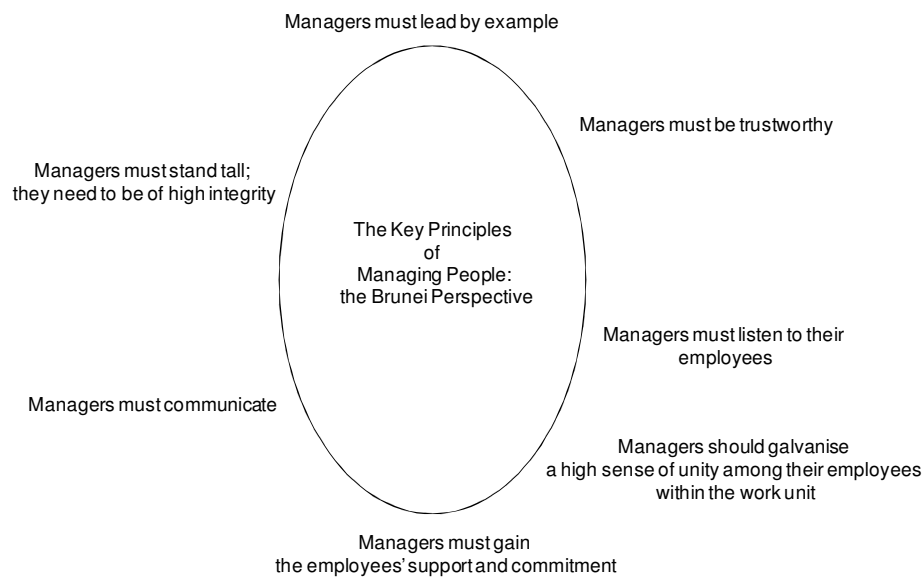


Figure 1. The key principles of managing people, The Brunei perspectives.

Principle 5

Managers should galvanise a high sense of unity among their employees within the work unit

Ang and Low's study (2012) noted that employees are motivated by teamwork and they ensure good team spirit amongst themselves; they stay united and help each other toward success and they work as a family because many hands make light work and boosting relationships, building goodwill in business, teamwork and team spirit are motivating for business. In this study, twenty-one interviewees or 61.8 percent of the total number of interviewees highlighted the importance of teamwork in managing people. There is a need for managers to bring about a high sense of unity and productivity within his or her work group or unit. This also coincides with what Low (2003) has highlighted team spirit is good for the work unit and in fact for the entire organization. As a result of the good teamwork and team spirit, the organization becomes effectively service-oriented in line with the total quality service; and that the internal units working in supplier-customer relationships provide quality services to the external customers. This is also linked to the principle that 'customer is always right' and customers are likened to queens and kings to be served satisfactorily.

Principle 6

Managers must communicate

Leaders/managers need to communicate (Baldoni, 2003 cited in Low and Ang, 2012: 46). Communication allows

the managers to better understand their employees' behaviour and team performance. In this research, twenty interviewees or 58.8 percent of the total number of interviewees agreed that one of the dimensions of managing people is effective communication and some urged "We give feedback and we get feedback"; "communication is vital"; "yes, my boss is approachable; he would stop by and talk to us. We always feel inspired and motivated by him" and "my boss is patient in explaining things that we say we don't understand"

Principle 7

Managers must listen to their employees

Listening to employees plays a very important role in maintaining their morale and commitment and support to the managers and the organization. Listening and talking to one's employees but not understanding them is not enough. This will even make things worse since employees expect something when they try to talk in front of their managers. When they seek help, they expect help. When they seek understanding, they expect understanding. One should not only understand them but it would be better if one also empathizes with them (Business Accent, 2009). Twenty interviewees or 58.8 percent of the total number of interviewees agreed that another dimension of effective management is listening and some said, "Managers must be good listeners; they need to listen to the employees' suggestions" and "listening helps in communications and building good relationships.

Figure 1 illustrates a synthesis of the key principles of managing people in the Brunei perspectives.

It is worthy, at this juncture, to point out that in spite of knowing and understanding all these good key principles of managing people in Brunei, the authors get the feeling that the people appear not to have enough gravity or bold enough to make key decision(s) for the organisation. Many of the managers would, in fact, “be reluctant to make any decision(s) so that they are always on the safe side of the business” (several interviewees’ comments). This is because some of them “prefer to wait” and/or have “the attitude of taking the safer way” that is, “waiting for the top-down instructions”, rather than attempting or venturing out to make decision(s) themselves for the organisation.

This study, may be to critics, supplies motherhood statements or even “a manual of perfect managing practices as reported in the literature for many years, and it seems nothing new exist”. One critic even says that, “It looks like heaven on earth. There probably are dozens of textbooks with exactly the same principles.” To these criticisms, the authors would respond that they may not be aware of the management ways as exist in the country; it is precisely that the present management practices there are quite different from those recommended in the various, if not, world literature. Such being the case, the authors believe they have made the study to show their points. Indeed, some key principles may be common sense (regardless whether one is familiar to Brunei and to those who are familiar to Brunei, they may take these for granted) yet seldom talked about, stressed upon or practiced.

The authors feel that in order to understand the people management of an organisation/nation, it is important to understand empathetically its culture and the core values that the people of the organisation/nation espouse or believe in and act on. Robbins (2002) had indicated that although individuals’ values differ, they overall tend to reflect the societal values and of the period in which they grew. In this respect, Brunei lives and upholds the concept of MIB (Melayu, Islam and Beraja) or 3 M (Malay, Muslim and Monarchy) which means that with strong people-orientation, the Malay leaders practice a directive yet benevolent, caring style of leadership (Low and Mohd. Zain (2008). The Malay leaders also show humility and mutual respect to connect, appeal and persuade their people to their point of view. They normally attempt to establish rapport, connecting with their followers, building an “all-in-the-family situation” and motivating them with a high sense of belonging, relationships and team spirit. Henceforth, the theory and the practice of Malay Islamic leadership principles are crucial for the nation (Low, 2011a; Low and Ang, 2011a). The Malay and Islamic leadership encourages leaders and managers to practice the value of faith, integrity, self-discipline, self-restraint, loving-kindness and giving; leaders are also encouraged to refrain from sinful acts and live life in moderation. (Al-Naquib al-Attas, 2007; Nasir, 2004; Noor, 1999; Naceur, 1994; Shafi, 1968 cited in Ang et al, 2012a)

Limitations and Benefits of the Study

The key limitations of this research are the time and the cost constraints, more so, as it is not sponsored or financed by any organisation. The sample size of thirty-four people may restrict the depth of analysis. Certainly so, if time and costs permit, the researchers would certainly like to expand the sample size to further enrich the data and analysis. Nonetheless, the benefits of the study include greater understanding of managing people as responded by the Bruneian civil servants; and the employers and the employees of SMEs. Most times, such a “managing people thing or topic” in a MIB setting may be seldom discussed, “considered as taboo topics or in fact, taken for granted and assumed as widely accepted and that is it!” (interviewees’ inputs).

CONCLUSION

Managing people in Brunei requires some key principles such as managers must be trustworthy and able to lead by example; they must communicate and listen to their employees; they must gain their employees’ support and commitment. Furthermore, they should stand tall in face of adversity and that they need to be of high integrity so that they can galvanise a high sense of unity among their employees within the work unit. These principles of managing people as responded by the Bruneian civil servants, the employers and the employees of SMEs are very much similar and in line with what were mentioned in the Sultan of Brunei’s Titah (55th royal birthday speech).

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