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Multidimensional Frontline Management Styles: Testing HRM Strength, Workgroup Loyalty, and Helping Behaviours

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Multidimensional Frontline Management Styles: Testing HRM Strength, Workgroup Loyalty, and Helping Behaviours

Abstract

Purpose: To investigate the relationships between various frontline management (FLM) styles, HRM system strength and employee helping behaviours as a form of organisational citizenship behaviours. The research also examines the moderating role of workgroup loyalty on the association between HRM system strength and employee helping behaviours.

Design/methodology/approach: The research uses survey data collected from 315 government workers in Malaysia. Structural equation modelling was employed to test the hypothesised relationships.

Findings: Two FLM styles, 'policy enactor' and 'employee coach', positively predict employee helping behaviour. However, the 'organisational leader' FLM style did not significantly lead to employee helping behaviour. HRM system strength significantly mediates the relationship between three FLM styles and employee helping behaviours. Finally, workgroup loyalty significantly moderates the relationship between HRM system strength and employees' helping behaviours as organisational citizenship behaviour.

Originality: The originality of this paper is that it acknowledges and empirically examines the heterogenous nature of FLM styles, through signalling theory, in enacting HRM policies and links the growing FLM literature to the HRM system strength research. These concepts have also been tested for the first time in the Malaysian context.

Paper type: Research paper

Key words: HRM system strength; frontline management (FLM), signalling theory,

workgroup loyalty, organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB)

Multidimensional Frontline Management Styles: Testing HRM Strength, Workgroup Loyalty, and Organisational Citizenship Behaviours

Introduction

In 2007 Purcell and Hutchinson argued that FLMs have been largely ignored in the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature. Since then there has been an increase in studies on the role of the FLM in the HR literature (Kehoe and Han, 2019; Kilroy *et al.,* 2023). In this developing stream of research, FLMs have been presented as an important conduit in both the devolvement and subsequent implementation of HRM policies (Bainbridge, 2015; Bos-Nehles *et al.,* 2013) and delivery of employee performance (Gilbert *et al.,* 2011). Despite Marchington and Grugulis (2000) explaining that FLMs do not behave as robotic conformists to organisational intention without any consideration of boundary conditions, Townsend and Dundon (2015) continue to urge caution and point out that there is an implied homogeneity in the application of the FLM construct – that all FLMs will act the same way in policy implementation. It is argues that there are 'multiple faces of frontline managers' (Kilroy and Dundon 2015, p. 413) that not only lead to different employee outcomes (including organisational commitment and turnover intention) but the FLMs roles do not have defined demarcations and actors rotate between roles as the situation dictates (Townsend et al. 2022).

We adopt the Purcell and Hutchinson (2007 p. 4) definition of FLMs as 'those in the lower echelons of the management hierarchy with immediate responsibility for their subordinates' work and performance'. FLMs can be seen as the primary implementers of HRM and that strong and consistent signals – both to, and from FLMs – lead to high levels of HRM strength (Ostroff and Bowen, 2016). FLMs play a central role in transforming HRM signals in a way which makes sense to employees and, at the same time, encourages employees to exhibit behaviours that are helpful to organisations. Contemporary research suggests that HRM system strength is crucial in determining employee outcomes, such as entrepreneurship behaviours

(Tang *et al.,* 2019), organisational commitment (Cafferkey *et al.,* 2019), and employee wellbeing (Heffernan *et al.,* 2022). Bowen and Ostroff (2004) presented HRM system strength theory as a higher order organisational level construct, however in 2016, the authors recognised that it has primarily been measured at the individual level. HRM system strength has three dimensions: distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. Bowen and Ostroff (2004: 208-213) suggest: 1) Distinctiveness concerns the uniqueness of the HR approach and compromises areas such as visibility, understandability, legitimacy of authority and finally relevance; 2) Consitstency concerns the repeated reinforcement of the signalling through instrumentality, validity, and consistent HRM messages; and 3) Consensus comprises agreement among principal HRM decision-makers, and fairness. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) argue that when an organization's HRM signalling process is concurrently distinctive in approach, is consistent in it application, and has consensus among decision makers and employees, this creates a 'strong situation' and subsequent performance improvements. Critically, it is the FLMs that are key characters in ensuring high levels of system strength. We align our study with these empirical studies testing this theory by taking an individual level perspective (see for examples: Cafferkey *et al.,* 2019; Li *et al.,* 2011).

Kehoe and Han (2019, p. 1) extend this argument and urge caution to the oversimplification of the assumed singular and unidimensional role of FLMs. Along the same line of inquiry, Kilroy and Dundon (2015) and further, Kilroy et al. (2023) drew on the existing HRM literature to provide three 'ideal-typical' FLM styles: the policy enactor; the organisational leader; and the employee coach. The 2023 study demonstrated that FLMs with a predominantly 'policy enactor' style generate greater employee organisational commitment and lower turnover intention. With this in mind, it is important to expand the theoretical understanding of FLMs and their role as primary implementers of HRM signaling mechanisms (Ostroff and Bowen,

2016). That is to say, the FLM is tasked with interpreting the signals that intended policies from the HR department are meant to send and then implementing those intended policies in to practice. Drawing on signalling theory (Cafferkey *et al.,* 2019), we extend this line of theorising through incorporating HRM system strength as a mediating mechanism to better understand how different FLM styles will lead to strength within the HR system – and as a consequence – have differentiating affects on employee helping behaviours. As an integral aspect of OCB, helping behaviours emphasize employees' voluntary efforts to aid colleagues and new hires with work-related challenges. Helping behaviours have been extensively studied due to its strong implications for organizational performance (Chou and Stauffer, 2016).

Our argument aligns with previous research (Meier-Barthold *et al*., 2023) advocating the application of signalling theory (Connelly, 2011). We argue that employees rely on FLM practices and behaviours to shape the organisation's HRM system (Meier-Barthold *et al*., 2023). Specifically, supportive FLM styles are anticipated to positively impact HRM system strength, signalling organisational support and fairness. Consequently, this will likely enhance employees' inclination to engage in helping behaviours. We further refute the narrow implementation narrative as being the sole HRM role of the FLM and promote the multifaceted influence on a given organisations' HR processes. This research acknowledges the key role of FLMs in transmission, translation, simplifying, and subsequently implementing HR practices (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Kehoe and Han, 2019). However, this research is also cognisant of the FLM beyond having a simple agency role by acknowledging their key individual characteristics in determining how they influence HR activities (Bos-Nehles *et al.,* 2013).

This article makes three distinct contributions. First, this research contributes by testing the dimensions of FLM styles and how these affect employee outcomes, specifically helping

behaviours as a dimension of OCBs. In doing so, this research shows that FLM styles influence additional employee outcomes other than commitment and turnover intention as proposed in Kilroy et al.'s (2015; 2023) work. Despite increased scholarly interest in the motives behind helping behaviour, there remains a dearth of understanding regarding how various styles of FLM influence such behaviour (Chou and Stauffer, 2016).

Our second contribution relates to testing FLMs and HRM system strength together and presenting FLMs as the primary implementers of decisions made by upper management. Our research contributes to existing HRM system strength theory by revealing that HRM system strength mediates to differential affects of FLMs on additional employee outcomes not considered in previous research. This research supports the argument to broaden the existing perception of FLM from a singular all-encompassing individual type, to a more comprehensive and inclusive perception to accurately reflect and represent both the individuality of the FLM role as well as the multiple styles and roles they play (Kehoe and Han, 2019; Kilroy and Dundon, 2015; Kilroy et al., 2022). These contributions broaden our understanding of the way FLMs can potentially contribute to both employee work experiences and organisational performance.

Our third contribution is one of contextual understanding. We argue that work group loyalty moderates the relationship between HRM system strength and employee helping behaviours. Workgroup loyalty implies a strong commitment and dedication to the group and its members regarding professional collaboration and interpersonal relationships (Riketta and van Dick, 2005). In most research, workgroup loyalty leads to improved organisational outcomes through increased employee cooperation and commitment (Nishii and Wright, 2007), and helping behaviours ought to be higher when workgroup loyalty is high. Thus far, the testing of the FLM

styles has been confined to Western, for-profit organisations. Malaysia offers a unique context to test our understanding of predominantly Western concepts and theories in an alternative setting (Yiing and Kamarul, 2009), particularly since Malaysia is considered a collective society (Hofstede, 1980). With over 80 per cent of Malay public service staff being Muslim, the prevailing work culture emphasises strong group collaboration and obedience to leaders (Aun, 2023). Consequently, authority is accepted as proper, with subordinates expected to respect and obey their superiors (Melahi and Wood, 2004, Li *et al.,* 2011).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, a literature review is provided wherein the hypotheses are developed. Then the research methodology is presented, followed by the findings. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed before the article ends with recommendations for further research and the limitations of this study.

FLMs and HRM system strength

Recently, scholars have emphasised the role of FLMs in the implementation of HR policies to frontline employees (Kellner *et al.,* 2016; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Central to this debate is the devolution aspect, which argues that the HR department generates policies and subsequently relies on line managers to ensure that these policies are properly implemented and interpreted by employees (Bainbridge, 2015; Perry and Kulik, 2008). This implementation process is characterised by many challenges and is rarely achieved in the intended way, resulting in a difference between intended and actual implemented HRM practices (Khilji and Wang, 2006). This suggests that the intended message of HRM can become somewhat lost between the HR department and frontline employees (Townsend *et al.,* 2012; 2022). Kehoe and Han (2019) suggest that FLM could potentially deliver a completely different suite of HRM practices contrary to organisational intention through misunderstanding, misinterpretation or

by means of idiosyncratic deals with individual employees, suggesting that a clearer picture of the relationship between various FLM types and HR system strength is warranted.

The body of research on the multiple roles FLMs have in influencing a diverse range of workplace practices and subsequent employee outcomes while growing, remains poorly understood (Townsend *et al.,* 2022). Previous studies indicate that the Malaysian public sector organizations are largely influenced by the relationship between managers and employees in terms of enhancing organizational effectiveness by engaging employees (Ahmad & Saad, 2019). "Malaysia scores very high on the power distance dimension (score of 104 out of 120), which means that the society accepts a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and it needs no further justification" (Sumaco, Imrie, & Hussain, 2014, p.93). Considering this, we believe that employees look at their managers for decision-making and direction. The challenges might include integrity and reliability regarding the relationships between managers and employees (Fadzil et al., 2021). This underscores the significance of frontline managers in molding the relationships between managers and employees.

FLMs have been found to influence workplace conflict and industrial disputes (Teague and Roche, 2012); improve sickness and disability cases (Cunningham *et al.,* 2004); performance management (Harris and Ogbonna, 2001); employee voice (Townsend and Loudoun, 2015) and discretionary effort (Purcell *et al.,* 2003). Despite the obvious importance of the roles the FLM exhibits, there remains a presumption that their implementation of HRM does not differ a great deal. In essence, there has been an assumption that there is a generic FLM (Kehoe and Han, 2019). One does not have to delve deep into the management/ leadership literature to recognise that there are indeed multiple types, yet, in general, this variance has not found its way into mainstream FLM discourse. Seminal work, for example the study of Hales (2005), makes it clear that FLMs are required to perform a number of different roles throughout their

working week and have to constantly rotate between roles as required, yet these boundary conditions are rarely explored. There is limited research on the notion that FLMs may have different approaches to their day-to-day work, which subsequently has various effects on their immediate work group such as frontline employees.

The existing conceptual and empirical understanding of the FLM appears to be locked in a chasm of homogeneity. Kilroy and Dundon (2015), having reviewed the literature, note several contradictions in how FLMs are defined across various studies. The review observes disparate labels, responsibilities, and a general lack of understanding of the specifics of the FLM role in relation to employees, which has often been operationalised simply as the receiving of supervisory support. Hence, Kilroy and Dundon (2015) discern three *a priori* FLM styles that exist within the extant literature that are testable as independent constructs. This conceptual model of FLM styles has recently been tested further by Kilroy et al. (2023) who confirmed that there are indeed different FLM approaches, such as policy enactment, leadership behaviours, and coaching behaviours, that each have a differential effect on employee outcomes.

The first FLM style has been termed the policy enactor. In this FLM style, FLMs operate in a way that makes HR policies very clear to subordinates, i.e. stressing how and why the policy should be applied. Policy enactor FLMs rely heavily on the organisation's hierarchy, and as a result, employees are likely to perceive the FLM's behaviour as dominated by the appropriate execution of HR practices. In essence, the policy enactor is a FLM that makes sense of HRM policies and then transfers these policies to their subordinates in a way that makes sense to them. Extant research has shown the policy enactor FLM styles to have the greated effect on performance outcomes (Kilroy and Dundon, 2015; Kilroy et al., 2023).

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The second FLM style is the organisation leader. The organisation leader operates in a way that considers what is best for overall work harmony. This style sees FLMs sometimes as taking initiatives that go beyond policy implementation when it is deemed to be in the best interests of either the organisation or the team. This FLM is the quintessential organisational citizen who displays citizenship behaviours and puts the interests of the organisation and the employees as a top priority. Importantly, the authors differentiate the FLM organisation leader from the broad 'leadership' research by situating the individual studied as an FLM *within* their role as a HRM implementor.

The final style presented by Kilroy and Dundon (2015) is the employee coach. The FLM employee coach operates in a way that is tailored to the needs of every single employee and uses HR policies to enhance an individual's competence. There are three features to this style, firstly, the FLM's approach; secondly, the degree of the team members' receptiveness; and thirdly, the maturity of the parties' relationship.

Kilroy and Dundon (2015) argued that any FLM will have a dominant style and that each of these styles can operate within the same HRM system. Certainly, these styles are not exhaustive, but they provide a starting taxonomy to begin extending our theoretical knowledge of FLMs in practice. Hence, it is possible that there exist different FLM styles and variations in employee experiences within the same HR system which in return is likely to lead to variations in performance.

When considering different FLM styles operating in the same HR system, the implications for strong systems should be acknowledged. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) argue that a version of

signaling theory (Kelley, 1974) is relevant within the system strength thesis. It has been demonstrated in the past that organisations quite often send mixed signals of their HRM strategies to employees (Townsend *et al.,* 2012) and that the FLM is the last line of management assisting employees in interpreting such signals. FLMs interpreting these organisational HRM signals and ensuring implementation as close as possible to the intended organisational HRM policies if often important for senior management. Hence, a strong HRM system which has clear signaling from higher management, can be strengthened through FLM styles. HRM systems are further explained by Ostroff and Bowen (2016), who suggest nine meta features of HRM systems, and their explanation is replete with examples of the important role FLMs play. Hence, there is a greater likelihood of an organisation having a strong HR system strength where FLMs are supportive of the organisation's HRM strategies and policies and work towards implementing them effectively for the benefit of both the organisation and the employee (Ostroff and Bowen, 2016). Previous research offers substantial evidence supporting the fact that FLMs, acting as leaders, coaches, and policy implementers, have the capacity to positively influence employee behaviors. According to Adele et al., (2023), managers who adopt a coaching approach foster a greater sense of belonging and purpose among employees. FLMs acting as leaders through practices such as transparency, mentoring, and fostering teamwork can assist employees in organizational adaptation and cultivating trust within the organization (Kapoor et al., 2022). Likewise, endorsers or enactors can employ legitimization, assertiveness, and inspiration to champion both organizational and employee interests (Kurdi-Nakra and Pak, 2022).

In summary, there is a growing body of literature arguing for a more nuanced approach to understanding the role of FLMs within HRM research. There is also a maturing body of literature that helps us to understand the benefits of a strong HRM system. Thus, we draw on

this body of work to test different FLM styles, and how system strength mediates these different

FLM styles to differentially affect helping behaviours. Therefore, we hypothesise:

H1a: The FLM style of policy enactor is positively associated with employee helping

behaviours.

H1b: The FLM style of organisational leader is positively associated with employee helping

behaviours.

H1c: The FLM style of employee coach is positively associated with employee helping

behaviours.

H2a: HRM system strength positively mediates the relationship between the FLM style of

policy enactor and employee helping behaviours.

H2b: HRM system strength positively mediates the relationship between the FLM style of

organisational leader and employee helping behaviours.

H2c: HRM system strength positively mediates the relationship between the FLM style of

employee coach and employee helping behaviour.

Work Group Loyalty and Employee Helping Behaviours

Workgroup loyalty is commonly viewed as a defining feature of group cohesion or the desire

of individuals to maintain membership in any particular group (Zander, 1979). Within

organisations, work groups are seen by people to be more proximate and therefore cognitively

familiar than the broader organisation and therefore elicit a greater connection (Cafferkey *et*

al., 2020; Riketta and van Dick, 2005). For some decades, OCBs have been an important proxy

for measuring performance in organisations. For example, Organ (1988) explains OCBs to be

the discretionary behaviours adopted by employees but not formally recognised by an

organisation's reward system and improve the overall effectiveness and efficiency of

organisational outcomes. OCBs are divided into two broad categories: those that support and

benefit the organisation as a whole and those that benefit employees and indirectly contribute to the organisation (Williams and Anderson, 1991). The latter includes helping behaviours and occurs when an employee helps an absent colleague by completing their work. Thus, we use the helping behaviours component of OCBs as the dependent variable because there is a body of research linking this to overall performance outcomes in organisations. Keeping our dependent variable aligned with existing research allows us the opportunity to add to theory with our FLM styles and HRM system strength approach.

We anticipate that when work group loyalty is high, so too are helping behaviours. As suggested by Cafferkey et al. (2020), through social identity theory employees have a emotional attachment and place high value on being part of a salient group, especially where others place value on being part of said group. Therefore when loyalty is high this would lead to higher levels of reciprocation among the group members in terms of helping behaviours (Christiansen, 1999). Workgroup loyalty, expressed through group attachment and pro-group behaviours, is likely to be more significant when driven by shared values endorsed by their superiors (Cheng et al., 2022). The fact that employees need their organizations and leaders to help them make sense of the organizational procedures and climate (LaGree et al., 2024) underscores the importance of HRM system strength employed by managers to shape employees' work behaviours. Therefore, the hypothesis is posited as:

H3: Work group loyalty moderates the relationship between HRM system strength and employee helping behaviours.

The research model for this study is presented in Figure 1.

(Figure 1)

METHODS

Respondents and Procedures

Respondents were employees working in two departments the government sector in Malaysia. The public sector in Malaysia comprises 1.7 million workers or 4.5 per cent of the workforce making Malayisa one of the most bureaucratic countries in the world. This provides a unique context to study FLM styles as the public sector is considered to be a very stable aspect of the economy, determined by hierarchy and with a consistent suite of HRM afforded equally to all employees. The two government departments were selected due to their publicised commitment to upskilling their employees. To collect data, questionnaires were distributed to employees directly via an online survey. Non-managerial employees were specifically chosen as the respondents as this research focuses on their perception of their FLM. Initially, requisition letters were sent to the respective department's HR manager to request their permission to do the survey. Once agreed, the questionnaires were sent to the respective companies by email. The sample comprised of 315 respondents, their demographic information is presented in Table 1.

(Table 1)

Measures

Frontline Management (FLM) Styles

To measure the three FLM styles, the scale developed by Kilroy and Dundon (2015) was utilised. The FLM role of policy enactor had ten items where employees had to indicate the extent to which employees have experienced their FLM enacting the HRM policies as well as agency behaviour (e.g. "My frontline manager is good at keeping everyone up to date with changes"). The organisational leader FLM style was measured using a five-item scale (e.g. "My frontline manager considers my goals and values"), and the employee coach FLM style

was measured using a seven-item scale (e.g. "My frontline manager limits my ability to develop and improve" reverse coded). All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale.

HRM System Strength

HRM system strength was measured by an 11-item scale developed by Delmotte et al. (2007) for example: This scale contained four items on distinctiveness, three on consistency and four on consensus. Sample items were "In this organisation it is clear what belongs to the tasks and what's outside the field of the HR department" (Distinctiveness); "In this organisation HR policy changes every other minute (R)" (Consistency); and "HR management in this organisation is established by mutual agreement between HR management and line management". HRM system strength can be measured at the individual level. For example, Heffernan et al. (2022) showed employee based assessment of HRM system strength.

Work Group Loyalty

Developed by Zhang et al. (2014), workgroup loyalty was measured using seven items related to relational identification with cooperative work relationships, such as sharing common respect and working with group members and informal non-work relationships with group members, such as communicating outside work. An example of a question was: "I coordinate my own work well with other members".

Helping Behaviours

Helping behaviours, as a form of OCB, was measured with a construct developed by Ackfeldt and Coote (2005). Helping behaviours was measured using a 5-item scale, for example "I support employees who have problems at work".

Data Analyses and Results

The study employed structural equation modelling (SEM) and adopted partial least squares (PLS) to evaluate the proposed model and test the hypotheses. PLS-SEM is a widely used

multivariate analytical technique in HRM research, featuring explanatory and predictive analyses of research models (Hair *et al*., 2019; Ringle *et al*., 2020). This technique is particularly suitable for handling higher-order models (Sarstedt *et al*., 2019), as evidenced by Uraon and Gupta (2021) and Ul Hassan and Ikramullah (2023). Furthermore, as all measures in this study were from a single source at one point in time, we conducted Harman's one-factor test to assess whether a single factor accounted for most of the variance in our data (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The first factor explained 36.16% of the variance, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 50%.

Utilising Smartpls 4.0 (Ringle *et al*., 2015), we performed a disjoint two-stage approach to examine our model, given the reflective-reflective components of the HRM system strength construct. Initially, we conducted the measurement model to derive latent variable scores. Subsequently, the three dimensions of HRM system strength were operationalised into observed indicators for each construct based on their latent scores (Sarstedt *et al*., 2019).

Assessment of measurement model (Lower-order)

The reflective measurement model is assessed for its reliability and validity. Table 2 displays the results. Hair et al. (2019) state that all variables exceeding the 0.70 thresholds for Cronbach's alphas and composite reliabilities indicate acceptable internal consistency. Our Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values surpassed 0.50 for all variables, affirming convergent validity.

Loadings above 0.50 are acceptable when convergent validity and internal consistency reliability criteria are met. In our study, all outer loadings were above 0.60, signifying convergent validity (Hair *et al.,* 2019). Additionally, squared correlations were lower than the

AVE values for all variables, and all Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios of correlations were below 0.90, confirming discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.,* 2015) (Table 3).

(Table 2)

(Table 3)

Assessment of measurement model (higher-order)

The satisfactory results of the lower-order model confirmed the construction of a higher-order model. HRM system strength, comprising three dimensions (distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus), was formed as a reflective-reflective higher-order construct. Following Sarstedt *et al.*'s (2019) two-stage approach, the reliability and validity of the higher-order model were assessed. The findings, presented in Tables 4 and 5, indicate that the higher-order model achieved satisfactory internal consistency reliability ($\alpha > 0.70$), as well as convergent validity (AVE > 0.50) and discriminant validity (HTMT < 0.90). In additions, means, standard deviations and correlations of the study variables were shown in Table 6.

(Table 4)

(Table 5)

(Table 6)

Assessment of structural model

Based on Hair et al. (2019), we assessed R^2 values of endogenous variables, multicollinearity, and the model's predictive relevance (Q^2). The R^2 values for helping behaviours and HRM system strength were 0.438 and 0.359, signifying that the model's antecedents demonstrate moderate explanatory power. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values for all endogenous variables were below the maximum threshold of five, indicating no collinearity issues. Moreover, the Q^2 values for helping behaviours and HRM system strength were 0.383 and

0.344, signifying medium predictive relevance as outlined by Hair et al. (2019). Additionally, to assess the model's fit, we followed the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) method, following recommendations of Henseler et al. (2016). With an SRMR value of 0.070, which is below the benchmark of 0.08, our findings indicate a satisfactory fit between our model and the data.

(Table 7)

Direct effects

To evaluate the significance of each path coefficient in our proposed model, we followed a bootstrapping method with 5000 re-samples in PLS-SEM. Table 7 presents the results, which support H1a and H1c, indicating direct effects of FLM style of policy enactor (β: 0.160, p < 0.05) and FLM style of employee coach (β: 0.186, p < 0.01) on employee helping behaviours, that are both positive and significant. However, H1b is not supported, indicating direct effects of FLM style of organisational leader on employee helping behaviours are insignificant (β: -0.111, p > 0.05).

Indirect or mediating effects

Following the product co-efficient approach (Hayes and Scharkow, 2013), we performed bootstrapping to assess mediation effects. A nonzero value between the upper and lower bounds of confidence intervals (CI) would signify the statistical significance of the indirect effect. The results support H2a, H2b and H2c, indicating indirect effects of FLM style of policy enactor [β: 0.051 (0.309*0.165), p < 0.01, CI= (0.014, 0.114)], FLM style of organisational leader [β: 0.031 (0.190*0.165), p < 0.05, CI= (0.011, 0.07)], and FLM style of employee coach [β: 0.027 (0.163*0.165), p < 0.05, CI= (0.008, 0.06)] on employee helping behaviours through HRM system strength are positive and significant.

Moderating effects

(Figure 2)

The study showed that workgroup loyalty moderates the effect of HRM system strength on employee helping behaviours (β: -0.101, p < 0.01). Figure 2 depicts that although the direct impact of HRM system strength on employee helping behaviours is larger at a high level as opposed to a low level of workgroup loyalty, the magnitude of the difference in employee helping behaviours decreases significantly as HRM system strength increases. Consequently, H3 is supported.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate different FLM styles to better understand how various styles influence employee helping behaviours through HRM system strength. The second purpose was to investigate the moderating role of workgroup loyalty between HRM system strength and employee helping behaviours as a form of OCB.

To do so, we developed and tested a model that demonstrates different FLM styles are important in predicting HRM system strength, and influence employee helping behaviours to varying degrees. The results show that the pathway between various FLM styles and HRM system strength provides interesting avenues in, firstly, operationalising Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) conceptual model as a mediating mechanism between FLM styles and helping behaviours, and secondly, understanding the moderating role of workgroup loyalty between HRM system strength and such behaviours. The results suggest that the policy enactor FLM style and employee coach FLM style outweigh the influence of the organisational leader FLM style in eliciting employee helping behaviours. These results offer an interesting nuance to

understanding the influence of FLMs styles on certain employee outcomes in the public sector, while simultaneously offering insights into a divergence from what would be the commonly held cultural view of leadership in Malaysia (Heffernan et al. 2022).

The results of this study appear to contradict to research on countries that Hofstede (1980) would describe as having a high-power distance and the managerial right to manage that is assumed to constitute the landscape in Malaysia, where loyalty is almost assumed on the part of organisations (Cafferkey *et al.,* 2019). Li et al. (2011) suggest that this managerial prerogative is viewed almost as 'laws' where it is an employee's duty to implement the requests of management. This study found the opposite where the human relations approach of the employee coach and the consistency of the policy enactor approach outweigh the predictive influence above that of the organisational leader. The public service context that this research is carried out in must be acknowledged when considering our findings. The public service offers more stability and security in employment, and subtle differences in leadership can become more pronounced due to the perceived lack of competitive pressures (Blom *et al.,* 2020). This nuanced finding provides an important advancement to HRM theory and literature in four areas; firstly, it provides avenues to develop an understanding of the management of the employment relationship by explicitly acknowledging the multiple styles of the FLMs. Secondly, this research acknowledges a symbiotic relationship between FLMs and HRM system strength whereby FLMs are viewed as primary implementers of HRM (Townsend *et al.*, 2022). To capitalise on the implementation of HR practices, FLM styles must be acceptable to, and influence the behaviour of subordinates. Thirdly, acknowledging the lower order influence of various FLM types may in fact complement the higher order (HRM system strength) perspective of Ostroff and Bowen (2016) and thus open up the potential of HR system strength even further in eliciting positive, and desirable work outcomes. Aligned with signaling

theory, FLM styles adopting supportive leadership and employee coaching effectively implement HRM policies for the mutual benefit of the organisation and employee helping behaviours (Townsend *et al.,* 2012). Finally, this finding provides advancement beyond what is commonly assumed to be the managerial or leadership optimum for both the public sector and a high power distance society such as Malaysia.

The second key finding of this article suggests that workgroup loyalty significantly moderates the relationship between HRM system strength and employee helping behaviours. This finding is what one would presume in suggesting the relationship between HRM strength and employee helping behaviours is stronger when workgroup loyalty is higher. However, the negative moderating results suggest that when an organisation's HRM strength improves, the observed difference between an employees' high and low workgroup loyalty and helping behaviours reduces. When an organisation's HRM practices effectively communicate support and fairness, employees may demonstrate consistent citizenship behaviour regardless of their level of workgroup loyalty. Though a significant body of research indicates that the commonly held perceptions of the loyalty or commitment of employees are changing, our study highlights aligned loyalty in employees' work and group membership (Redman and Snape, 2005; Riketta and VanDick, 2005; Cafferkey *et al*., 2017). In societies where collective relationships matter more, our study emphasises the role of collective workgroup relationships in shaping employees' citizenship behaviours (Farndale and Sanders, 2016; He *et al*., 2016).

Practical Contributions

The research underscores significant implications for HRM studies and practices, emphasizing the pivotal role of frontline managers in providing support and guidance to enhance employee behaviors aligned with organizational objectives. The FLMs posses considerable influence on

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shaping employee behaviours through their transfer of knowledge and guidance. While not generalizable from our findings, the results do offer valuable insights for organizations, particularly those in developing or non-western countries struggling with the modernization of their HR systems and where HRM research experiences issues of both divergence and convergence (Malik et al., 2022). The study presents implications for the HRM research and practices where the transfer of support and guidance from the frontline managers is crucial to improvise the employee behaviours towards organizational goal attainment.

With literature demonstrating the importance of FLMs in HRM implementation and the robust nature of Bowen and Ostroff (2004) 'system strength' argument, HR practitioners are increasingly able to focus their attention on the way the system and FLMs interact to employee and organisational outcomes. Our results indicate that HRM system strength does indeed enhance the impact of FLM styles on employee helping behaviours. Echoing Kilroy et al.'s (2023) results, the employee coach FLM style followed by policy enactor FLM style had the largest impact on the dependent variable. One plausible explanation for this result is that in the Malaysian context, with a high-power distance, employees may prioritise coaching from their FLM to enhance their decision-making abilities rather than relying solely on clear rules, instructions, and direction. We argue that the approach taken by the policy enactor is most akin to what is theoretically predicted within a strong system. That is to say that with the policy enactor style, employees know what to expect and there is consistency within the HR system. Consequently, when HR managers can ensure that FLMs enact policies the way these policies were designed and intended (a strong HRM system), there is a greater likelihood of enhancing performance through workgroup loyalty and employee helping behaviours. Thus, organisations will benefit from FLMs trained specifically in the application of policy enactment, especially when FLMs have significant responsibility for HRM.

Future research directions

This study has drawn together two theoretical models of HRM delivery, one presented by Kilroy and Dundon (2015) and further developed by Kilroy et al. (2023) arguing that there are different FLM styles, and the second presented by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) suggesting that HRM system strength will influence organisation and employee performance outcomes. Our research provides further empirical evidence that FLMs are not homogenous and we suggest that further studies can tease out this finding to other performance outcomes. These performance outcomes should not be limited to organisational outcomes, but employee outcomes should also be studied. These might include wellbeing, access to flexible working arrangements, and job security. For example, is an employee coach style of FLM more likely to have a positive influence on employee wellbeing than an organisational outcome, like productivity enhancement? This may allow organisations to allocate FLMs that more naturally fit one of the ideal-typical styles to workgroups depending on the outcome priorities at different times.

Future research ought to investigate the organizational factors and underlying motivations that drive organizations to embrace certain frontline management styles. This would assist both practitioners and researchers in developing more effective models for incorporating and implementing management styles. We propose examining factors such as organizational culture, management philosophy, and organizational structures, as each of these elements holds significant relevance for frontline management.

Future research could also consider the unexpected findings in relation to the organisational leadership aspect of FLM beyond the context of public sector workers in Malaysia. Malaysia

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does offer a unique context to test the understanding of Western concepts and theories in an alternative setting (Yiing & Kamarul, 2009), and because this research has presented some unexpected findings related to organisational leadership, further testing these ideas in other non-Western countries allows understanding whether this study's findings can be generalised.

Limitations

Our results must be read with a recognition of the study's limitations. The data is cross-sectional data collected from two government organisations in the same country. Time-interval, longitudinal studies and a wider sample of organisational contexts would both benefit empirical and theoretical development in the area of FLM styles and their effect of employee and organisational performance. We also relied on individual's self-reports on all model variables. While this is a common practice within HRM research, it does raise concerns regarding common method bias. This means that some of our results may be due to systematic measurement error, hence the way we collected our data may have some effect on the results. Self-report measures, though, appear to be the best means of measuring the constructs used in this study. Nevertheless, we encourage researchers to collect data from more objective sources, such as organisational records and FLM managers, to test our findings further. Finally, our research model is by no means exhaustive, nor did we have the scope in this article to test all possible relationships within our data. There are many additional factors that can be added to our model and tested, for example, the "Zone of reciprocity" model presented in the Kilroy et al. (2023) study. The research model and empirical testing in this article build on previous FLM styles research, but we argue the need for more research to explain how HRM system strength influences performance and the variation that different FLM styles have on employee and organisational outcomes.

Conclusion

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This study contributes to our understanding of how various FLM styles link with HRM system strength. Focusing on the important role FLMs play in the HR system, we developed a model that links these elements to employee helping behaviours. FLMs must be further encouraged in their policy enacting and employee coaching roles as these approaches enhance the employee helping behaviours. We provide evidence that FLM styles are a relevant concept in understanding how HRM system strength relates to employee outcomes.

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Table 1: Demographics

Gender		
	Male	50.5%
	Female	49.5%
Age		
	1946 – 1960	4%
	1961 – 1980	26.7%
	1981 – 1999	54.3%
	2000 – above	14.6%
Education		
	High School	10.5%
	Diploma	28.3%
	Bachelor's	43.4%
	Postgrad	17.8%
Tenure	**< 2 years**	17.5%
	2 – 5 years	40.6%
	6 – 9 years	18.7%
	$\geq$ 10 years	23.2%

Table 2: Assessment of reliability and validity (lower-order)

Variable and Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Consensus		0.825	0.842	0.655
Consensus 1	0.844			
Consensus 2	0.777			
Consensus 3	0.841			
Consensus 4	0.772			
Consistency		0.738	0.761	0.654
Consistency 1	0.741			
Consistency 2	0.870			
Consistency 3	0.810			
Distinctiveness		0.746	0.764	0.565
Distinctiveness 1	0.711			
Distinctiveness 2	0.808			
Distinctiveness 3	0.773			
Distinctiveness 4	0.711			
FLM Employee Coach		0.898	0.907	0.626
FLM EC 1	0.771			
FLM EC 2	0.853			
FLM EC 3	0.859			
FLM EC 4	0.787			
FLM EC 5	0.858			
FLM EC 6	0.747			
FLM EC 7	0.639			
FLM Organizational Leader		0.892	0.900	0.699
FLM OL 1	0.821			
FLM OL 2	0.891			
FLM OL 3	0.867			
FLM OL 4	0.813			
FLM OL 5	0.783			
FLM Policy Enactor		0.901	0.906	0.531
FLM PE 1	0.676			

FLM PE 2	0.772			
FLM PE 3	0.797			
FLM PE 4	0.762			
FLM PE 5	0.639			
FLM PE 6	0.767			
FLM PE 7	0.698			
FLM PE 8	0.643			
FLM PE 9	0.736			
FLM PE 10	0.778			
Helping Behaviours		0.865	0.868	0.651
HB 1	0.821			
HB 2	0.843			
HB 3	0.829			
HB 4	0.814			
HB 5	0.722			
Workgroup Loyalty		0.870	0.882	0.562
WGL 1	0.704			
WGL 2	0.794			
WGL 3	0.733			
WGL 4	0.770			
WGL 5	0.822			
WGL 6	0.759			
WGL 7	0.653			

Note: FLM EC= Frontline Mangement Employee Coach; FLM OL= Frontline Mangement Organisational Leader; FLM PE= Frontline Mangement Policy Enactor; HR= Helping Behaviours; WGL= Workgroup Loyalty.

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Table 3: Assessment of discriminant validity (lower-order)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Consensus								
2. Consistency	0.647							
3. Distinctiveness	0.666	0.779						
4. FLM Employee Coach	0.443	0.485	0.586					
5. FLM Organizational Leader	0.498	0.537	0.533	0.823				
6. FLM Policy Enactor	0.492	0.531	0.610	0.776	0.776			
7. Helping Behaviour	0.402	0.499	0.445	0.583	0.489	0.610		
8. Workgroup loyalty	0.441	0.455	0.424	0.643	0.621	0.700	0.665	

Table 4: Assessment of reliability and validity (higher-order)

Variable and Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
HRM System Strength		0.780	0.783	0.695
Consensus	0.807			
Consistency	0.841			
Distinctiveness	0.852			

Table 5: Assessment of discriminant validity (higher-order)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. FLM Employee Coach						
2. FLM Organizational Leader	0.823					
3. FLM Policy Enactor	0.776	0.776				
4. HRM System Strength	0.621	0.632	0.661			
5. Helping Behaviours	0.583	0.489	0.610	0.546		
6. Workgroup Loyalty	0.648	0.626	0.700	0.515	0.689	

Table 6: Means, Standard deviations and correlations for study variables

	Mean	Standard Deviations	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. FLM Policy Enactor	3.76	0.64	-					
2. FLM Organizational Leader	3.80	0.72	0.691**	-				
3. FLM Employee Coach	3.72	0.69	0.696**	0.736**	-			
4. HRM System Strength	3.79	0.52	0.549**	0.519**	0.506**	-		
5. Workgroup Loyalty	3.85	0.62	0.617**	0.544**	0.566**	0.436**	-	
6. Helping Behaviours	3.97	0.65	0.536**	0.430**	0.513**	0.439**	0.576**	-

Note(s): **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

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Table 7: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Effect	β	t-value	Outcome
Direct Effects				
H1a	FLM Style of Policy Enactor → Helping Behaviours	0.160	2.200*	Supported
H1b	FLM Style of Organizational Leader → Helping Behaviours	-0.111	1.514	Not Supported
H1c	FLM style of Employee Coach → Helping Behaviours	0.186	2.483**	Supported
Indirect Effects				
H2a	FLM Style of Policy Enactor → HRM System Strength → Helping Behaviours	0.051	2.508**	Supported
H2b	FLM Style of Organizational Leader → HRM System Strength → Helping Behaviours	0.031	1.858*	Supported
H2c	FLM Style of Employee Coach → HRM System Strength → Helping Behaviours	0.027	1.738*	Supported
Moderating Effects				
H3	HRM System Strength * Workgroup Loyalty → Helping Behaviours	-0.101	2.962**	Supported

Note: **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

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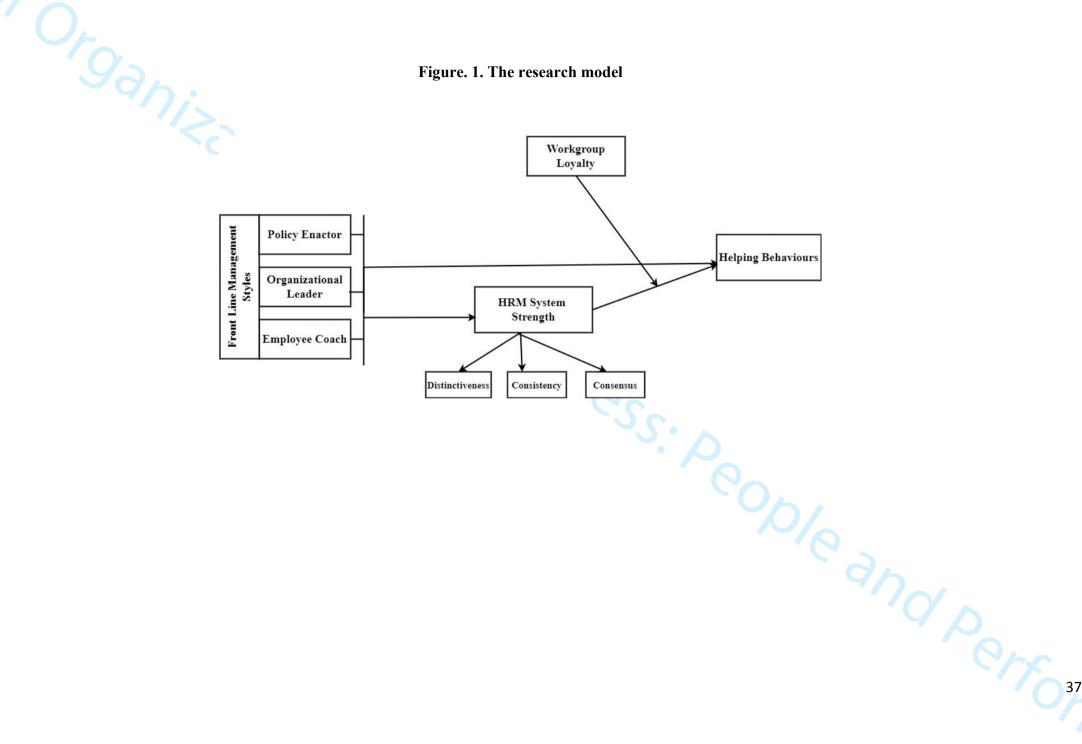**Figure. 1. The research model**

Figure 2. The moderating impact of workgroup loyalty between HRM system strength and employees' helping behaviours