Leadership during Flood Disaster in a Selected Community in Pahang, Malaysia

Haslinda, Abdullah*1, Rokhaya Taib2, Nur Hidayah Roslan1

1Faculty of Defence Studies and Management, National Defence University of Malaysia.
2Faculty of Business Management, Open University of Malaysia.

*Corresponding Author: Email: hba@upnm.edu.my

Abstract

Flooding is a yearly phenomenon, particularly to the state of Pahang in the eastern region of Malaysia. The floods usually happen during the monsoon season and this has affected the lives of the community in this state. Indeed, leadership plays an important role in ensuring effective disaster response and management. The objective of this study is to gain a true picture of the problems faced by the local community leaders in a selected housing area in Pahang, Malaysia. This study is to examine the community leaders' support and behavior as well as the community's perception on their leaders in managing floods that occur every year during the monsoon season. This study uses the exploratory descriptive approach in which interviews were conducted with the community leaders. Data from the interviews were transcribed and categorized to identify common themes. The findings showed that there is leadership support such as moral support, taking care of community's welfare during disaster as well as seminars and discussions in preparation for disaster were also frequently held. However, it is found that there are two groups of leaders with different political ideology and this has affected effective disaster response. The community also perceives their leaders as somewhat weak and have poor leadership skills. It is crucial that both the leaders and the community have respect and cooperation with each other as community leaders play a critical role in managing disaster and their behaviours can affect the perception of the community, thus successful disaster response and management.

Keywords: Leadership, Community, Disaster response and management, Malaysia.

Introduction

Malaysia is a country that is developing so rapidly. Various development plans, including agriculture, education, infrastructure, economy, industry, tourism and others have been implemented by the government of Malaysia. However, the phenomenon of frequent floods is a threat that could affect the country in achieving a developed status by year 2020. Numerous infrastructures have been established and uncontrolled development of these infrastructures is often associated with flooding [1]. It also due to exceptional heavy rainfall which usually occurs during the monsoon season in the months of November and January and may continue into the month of February-March for some areas in the states.

Flooding is a natural phenomenon that has been reported every year, regardless of where or when it will happen. When a flood, it will thus result in loss of property, loss of lives, livelihood and also cut off communication interrupted. According to a survey conducted by [2], human and economic losses due to floods have increased dramatically across the globe.
Researches made by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) stated that flood is the third largest natural disaster that causes loss of lives and damages to property, agriculture, livestock’s and businesses. These damages are in the millions and even billions of dollars and can have a tremendous impact on the country’s economy.

The state of Pahang, situated in the eastern region of Malaysia is frequently affected by floods during the monsoon season. This study focused on a selected residential area in the state of Pahang. The population of this selected area is estimated at 18,575 people and is taking into account the average household of 5 from 3,715 resident units for the whole of the eight areas / housing project phases in selected housing area. During floods, all the roads, communication, utilities, evacuation centers and religious centers are affected. A place for worship, especially to perform prayer also affected due to lack of space such as halls where there is no facilities. However, the state government already has annual plans and preparation to those victims in the disaster that happened in selected housing area. During the flood, the community leaders play an important role in ensuring the welfare and safety of the community. However, it is difficult for the local community leaders to evacuate the victims on time. This is because the community refuses to move to the evacuation centers where the assistance is provided to the victims. Hence, the objective of this study is to gain a true picture of the problems faced by the local community leaders. This study is to examine the community leaders’ support and behavior as well as the community’s perception on their leaders in managing floods that occur every year during the monsoon season.

Literature Review

Leadership Support

Leadership is the ability to inspire confidence and support among the people who are needed to achieve an organizational goal [3]. There are numerous articles and books that attempt to define leadership, with a common theme being that leadership is an interpersonal influence which is directed through communication towards goal attainment. Leadership can be seen as an act that causes others to act or respond in a shared direction or as the art of influencing people by persuasion or example to follow a line of action. According to [4], leadership support provides resources for leaders as well as teachers. It involves engaging leaders in professional learning and fostering relationships with their peers.

Moreover, leadership support attends to administrative needs in a responsive and differentiated way. It also sponsors and legitimizes leaders’ work. Leadership support provides resources that enable leaders to sustain their instructional improvement work, such as by raising funds, providing access to expert consultants and so on. Leadership support also acts in brokering relations with leaders’ peers and colleagues engaged in similar work by facilitating interactions among networks of principals, coaches, or central office staff. Furthermore, leadership support serves to sponsor and legitimize learning-focused leadership: for example, by giving visible political support to staff occupying new and unfamiliar positions. These leadership support activities and the forms of support they provide interrelate in many ways. Nonetheless, it is helpful to consider one at a time what these different facets of leadership support entail and the forms they can take in practice.

Leadership Role and Responsibility

A person who occupies a position of responsibility in coordinating the activities of the group members in their task of attaining a common goal is a leader [5]. This can also be called the leader-follower situation. Moreover, as a leader, she or he must guide their followers to do something and encourage them to do it. Besides that, the leader must give credibility to their words through their actions. This means that the leader must fulfil their promises and be true to their word: for example when an employer promises to give a bonus to his employees, he must keep that promise. The followers also play a role in leadership. This is because they are the mechanism through which common goals are achieved. According to [6],
the leader’s roles are to define the direction and organize the team to maximize progress, which can contribute significantly to team effectiveness. However, [7] has stated that in organizational structure, members are expected to fulfil a set of expected behaviours in a social unit, known as roles. Meanwhile, according to [8], roles are the typical behaviours expected that characterize a person in a social context. According to [9], leaders in either formal or informal leadership roles operate from some understanding of what they are expected or encouraged to do. Whenever these expectations prioritize learning improvement in relation to other aspects of their roles, they are more likely to make this aspect of their work more central. However, for many, doing so represents a substantial role shift. For example, school leaders’ roles have long been wide-ranging, embracing everything from facilities management and community relations to personnel management and strategic planning. This shows that leadership roles are likely to embrace a wide range of responsibilities, more than can be comfortably managed by a single individual.

A corresponding distribution of responsibilities can occur at the district central office level. [5] Refers to participative leadership as democratic leadership. The priority in democratic leadership is to preserve a good relationship between leader and subordinates and maintain a pleasant atmosphere in the organization. Clergymen are also concerned with teamwork in achieving goals and care about other people too. Thus, employees often rely on this type of leader for help. Both school leaders and clergymen strive for consensus in their decision-making.

Transformational leadership motivates employees and enhances productivity and efficiency through communication and high visibility. Next, according to [5], the autocratic leadership style involves making decisions alone, without the input of others. Managers or leaders possess total authority and impose their will on their employees. This leadership style benefits employees who require close supervision.

Leadership Behaviour

There are several recognised types of leadership behavior, such as laissez-faire, autocratic, participative or democratic, transactional and transformational leadership. However, according to [10], Laissez-faire leadership is non-leadership. It involves behaviours that imply the indifference of the leader towards the followers’ actions and organizational outcomes, as well as demonstrating an attitude of abdicating responsibility either to make decisions or to address important issues. This means that a laissez-faire leader lacks direct supervision of employees and fails to provide regular feedback to those under his supervision. This leader should have highly experienced and trained subordinates because they require little supervision. Employees under this leadership style get less supervision. This kind of leadership can lead to poor production, lack of control and increasing costs. Meanwhile, according to [5], the situation also plays an important role in leadership, creating conditions under which leader behaviours are effective. For example, the situation examined in this study is a crisis that happened in Malaysia.

Method

The research design that the researcher uses for this study is exploratory and descriptive [11]. According to [12], a descriptive study is undertaken in order to ascertain and be able to describe the characteristics of the variables of interest in a situation, while exploratory research is defined as the initial research into a hypothetical or theoretical idea. This is where a researcher has an idea or has observed something and seeks to understand more about it. An exploratory research project is an attempt to lay the groundwork that will lead to future studies, or to determine if what is being observed might be explained by a currently existing theory. Meanwhile, a descriptive study may need the collection of qualitative information. Qualitative data may be gathered in order to describe how consumers go through a decision-making process or to examine how managers resolve conflicts in an organization.
This study uses interview and focus group discussions to gather all the qualitative data needed.

The population, according to [12], is the entire group of people, events or things of interest that the researcher wishes to investigate. It also refers to the group of people, events or things of interest for which the researcher wants to make inferences based on the sample statistics. Meanwhile, the unit of analysis refers to the analysis conducted in the study, which determines what the unit is [13]. A sample is a subset of the population. In other words, it includes some, but not all, of the elements of the population. The researcher should be able to draw conclusions from the sample that is generalizable to the population of interest. Meanwhile, the sampling unit is the element or set of elements that is available for selection in some stage of the sampling process. The reason for using a sample rather than using data from the entire population is self-evident. Thus, the population for this study is local community leaders and the sample consists of twenty-five community leaders. The Chairman and Board Committees at two mosques in the residential area were also included, as these respondents were led by the different political ideologies of every mosque. Researchers also paid attention to the social leadership group of women (Women’s Institution: WI), based in a residential area, which is said to be active in social work/welfare.

Research ethics provide guidelines for the responsible conduct of biomedical research. In addition, research ethics educate and monitor scientists conducting research to ensure that it is of a high ethical standard. Researchers must follow certain ethical principles, which include respecting the rights of participants, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity of participants, protecting participants from risk of harm, honouring research sites and reporting research fully and honestly. The present study adheres to these ethical standards. All information gathered from individual and focus group discussions was categorized according to the terms identified and analyzed using content analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Leadership Support

During the flood, the situation was complicated and tiring for local community leaders, as the flood victims were reluctant to move to the evacuation centres provided. The victims could only be moved when the situation became severe. Thus, the local community leaders provided moral support to the community, remained alert and stayed on the site to facilitate the coordination of aid essentials. Besides that, the leaders also coordinated with other agencies and NGOs for assistance to help in the evacuation, particularly for the disabled, the elderly, women and children. There were many benefactors and volunteers from various agencies, higher education institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) helping to clean up residential areas affected by disasters. Frequent motivation talks by the local community leaders towards the community were also provided. The state government has annual plans and preparation for flood victims, such as providing counselling and motivation to victims who are traumatized or have suffered from loss and depression, as the insurance companies refuse to accept applications from this housing area because it is an area of ‘extreme floods' and some of the houses have been built using wood in traditional designs. Other than that, disaster training and awareness for the community provided by the leaders helps the community to prepare for future disaster. In addition, the financial assistance granted by the Federal Government and the State Government, which amounts to RM500.00 and RM300.00 respectively, will be paid early, before the next year’s flood season. Furthermore, philanthropy and the volunteer spirit are quite remarkable, with relief donations and services being provided to all affected victims without distinction of party political ideology. The researcher recommends that a disaster committee be established to enable the rapid
communication of information during disasters.

Leadership Behaviour

Due to the different political ideologies that are evident in this area, extremism, favouritism, cronyism, self-interest, individualism, discrimination and bureaucracy are prevalent and make the situation worse. This situation is particularly complicated due to the appearance of cronyism, wherein some local leaders choose not to provide assistance to flood victims, and there are also people who are not victims but who ‘take a chance’ to receive aid. Besides that, mistrust and prejudice among the victims of different ideologies and understandings are also more complicated when leaders of like-minded beliefs and ideology prioritise victims whose views are aligned with their own. Victims’ refusal to go to relief centres is caused by their different ideology, which is also a known issue in dealing with local community leaders.

Community Perception on Leadership

Due to the behaviours mentioned above, the community distrusts the leaders in the committee. The community perceives the leaders as possessing somewhat weak and poor leadership traits despite their strength in religious beliefs and practices. Thus, due to the community’s distrust of the leaders, the committees no longer obey the orders given by the leaders. The committee has lost respect for those irresponsible leaders. Moreover, the local community perceives their leaders as lacking the skill to organize tasks and responsibilities systematically during the flood. This led to chaos and assistance to flood victims was not given in time. The community reported that their community leaders could not provide assistance to flood victims and most of the victims did not receive any of the food supplies and aid that were delivered by the state agencies and NGOs. In addition, the community reported that their leaders were dishonest, as there were cases where they kept food supplies instead of distributing them to the victims. Only a selected group of people received these supplies. Cases of cronyism and discrimination were highlighted. Finally, it was reported that the leaders were chosen based on a political agenda.

Conclusion

Leaders are important players in a community and should be the selfless in managing disaster and flood victims. However, without the respect and cooperation from the community, effective disaster management can be jeopardized. Indeed, it is important that both the leaders and the community have respect and cooperation with each other, but this scenario was not seen in this community. This study has contributed towards understanding the importance and critical role of the leaders in managing disaster and how their behaviours can affect the perception of the community. Hence, a policy should be in place in selecting a value-based leader in any community rather than just electing a leader based on political ideologies. This has been noted by the findings in this study in which political ideologies by the leaders other than religious extremism and ideologies can have a detrimental impact on disaster management. This is proved by the situation where leaders with certain beliefs and ideology gave priority to victims whose views were aligned with their own. Moreover, community leaders’ behaviours and attitudes also play a critical role in effective and successful disaster management.

References


