

## Exploring Employees' Followership and Cognitive Style

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**Abstract** This paper reviews the relationship between followership style and cognitive style. It reviews Kelley's (1992) model of followership styles which are "the-sheep", "pragmatist", "the yes-people", "the star follower", and "alienated". Meanwhile for cognitive styles, this paper reviews Allinson and Hayes's (1996) model which consists of "analytical" and "intuitive" style.

**Keywords:** Followership, followers, "the-sheep", "the yes-people", "the star-follower", "pragmatist", "alienated", "cognitive style", "analyst", "intuitive"

### 1. Introduction

Followership research is a very interesting topic, however there is less research conducted on it (Hairuddin & Mohammed, 2008). One of the reason on why there is little research done on followership is because most of researchers believe that leadership and followership are coined together, however the truth is followership is an independent subject (Carsten et.al, 2010). Meanwhile according to the research done by Bjugstad et. al (2006) and Kellerman (2008), most researchers do not prefer to study followership because of the bad perception that people have on the terms of followers, as it is often defined as weak and passive. Focused by researchers, research and books are more on leaders, which lead people to undervalue followers (Kelley, 1992). Most of us misunderstood the concept of leaders are more important than followers, when the inalienable truth is "Leaders exist only with followers", (Dixon, 2003).

There are several researches on followership in Malaysia, amongst them are by Ismail et.al (2009), Hairuddin & Mohammed (2008) and Dania (1998), each of these researchers studied on followership in various organization. Research done by Ismail et.al (2009), studied on the relationship between transformational leadership, empowerment and followers' performance. The other research conducted in Malaysia is by Hairuddin & Mohammed (2008), which they did research on factors influencing faculty followership's perception of institutional leader in Malaysian Institutions of higher learning. And then there is a study done by Dania (1998), understanding the concept of followership in organization. These researchers had their research done on the topic followership; however majority of the researcher still studies the relation between followers and leaders.

Followers are the people who received and act according to their leaders' instruction because they shared the same goals as their leaders and at the same time they act according to the knowledge, skills and abilities that they possess to accomplish the organization goals (Kelley, 1992). However, followers are always been categorized as low ranks workers which makes

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the followership aspect to be less targeted and had been neglected in most of the organizations. Nevertheless, followers are actually the one who implements the organization activities like planning, implementing and evaluating (Kelley, 1992).

Identifying the followership styles of the employees is very importance as organization would prefer to have an effective and productive worker, not just a worker that is completely dependent on their leaders for every single decision. When we can identify employees' followership styles, we can see what kind of plan and strategies to produce the best followers in the organization (Kelley, 1992).

Cognitive styles have been used in various researches especially in the organizational psychology and organizational behavior (Cools et. al, 2006; Cools & Broeck, 2008). However, there is still less research on cognitive styles for the organizational setting (Allinson & Hayes, 1996; Cools et. al, 2006). Identifying cognitive style is important as it is how individuals process information, and it provides useful information on how one does solve a problem (Grivas, 1996). Armstrong & Priola (2001), mentioned that cognitive styles are an essential factor in contributing to effective decision making, thus by identifying the employee's cognitive style, this will help organizations to understand their employees more.

The studies on cognitive style are commonly found on leadership research like researches done by Williamson (2007) and Stum (2009) where their studies focused on how cognitive style affected leadership effectiveness. As most of the researches focus on the importance of identifying leadership styles, there are fewer researches focusing on the importance of follower, the same goes with the follower's cognitive style (Zhang, 2008).

### **Relationship between cognitive styles and followership styles**

Study from Kim (2011) suggests that there are some linkage between cognitive style and followership style.

#### **Cognitive Style**

Cognitive style may be defined as an individual's consistent approach to organizing and processing information during learning (Messick, 1984). Barbosa (2007) mentioned that an individual's cognitive style may influence their preference for different types of learning, knowledge gathering, information processing, and decision making, many of the critical intentions and actions an entrepreneur is confronted with on a daily basis.

According to Broeck and Cools (2003), there are a few terms used in defining cognitive styles, like, learning styles, thinking styles, and style of thought. Despite all of those definitions, Riding & Sadler-Smith (1997) stated that cognitive styles are often viewed as a part of learning styles just like the definitions by various researchers, however it is more deeply rooted and firmly established, and it can stand by its own just like learning styles. Cognitive styles are usually used in management (Allinson and Hayes, 1996).

Every individual has consistent individual differences in preferred ways of organizing and processing information (Messick, 1976; Allinson & Hayes, 1998). Cognitive styles are related with any individual mental behaviors, where they habitually applied while trying to solve a problem (Messick, 1984), they too are used to handle conflict, developing framework and structure (Broeck & Cools, 2003). According to Witkin, et. al (1977), cognitive styles are

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individuals' differences when they try to perceived, think, solve problem and learn. It is expected that individuals' cognitive styles are vary because there are different sensing to some aspects of decisions (Messick, 1976). Therefore an individual's cognitive style can be marked as part of his or hers personal characteristic (Raffaldi et. al 2012).

Cognitive style model by Allinson and Hayes, had been used by many researches in their research as they provide a very detailed explanation and discussion regarding the cognitive style concept (Armstrong & Cools, 2009; Hayes & Allinson, 1998). Allinson and Hayes, (2004) labels cognitive style into two different dimensions, which are, 'analyst' and 'intuitive'.

Analytic are rationale person, a logical thinker. According to Allinson et. al (2001), 'analyst' are individuals that their left hemisphere of the brain more. The left side hemispheres are used for logical, complex and critical thinking, like mathematics (Allinson et.al, 2001). Allinson and Hayes (1996), states that the left hemispheres of the brain ('analyst') emphasize on primarily linear mode of operation where information gained are processed sequentially Analytical thinker are less likely to be a daredevil, they are more to focusing and achieving the goals kind of person (Nygren & White, 2002). Kickul et.al (2009), mentioned that 'analyst', are individuals that go through things in details and precisions. Usually people who are left brain dominant are usually compliant, used systematic methods for investigation, and they are comfortable with ideas that need step-by-step analysis (Allinson & Hayes, 1996). Analytical individuals are suitable for the implementation stage, where this people will be the one who put the ideas into practice (Armstrong & Cools, 2009).

'Intuitive' is a recognized patterns that individual obtained through their experienced (La Pira, 2010). 'Intuitive' are linked to our right hemisphere of the brain, as 'intuitive' are considered as nonlinear thinker (Allinson et.al). The right hemisphere, specialize in processing simultaneous inputs at once, it's also responsible for spatial orientation and have the ability to understand visual images. Intuitivist, are comfortable with open- ended approach for solving problem, they easily remembers spatial images, and are best when they work with ideas that need overall assessment. Commonly, 'intuitive' are known as the "gut feelings or "vibes" that one's feels during certain moments like when they are trying to some situations or problems (Eugene,2010). Intuitive are also known as 'direct knowing', as when we make some decisions we seems to know about it, however we are unaware of the reasons, we just seems to be sure about it (Hodgkinson et al, 2009), they too are considered as someone who makes an instant judgments based on what they felt and the adoptions of global perspective (Allinson and Hayes, 1996).

## **Followership Styles**

Followership is still an understudied discipline (Mushonga & Torrance, 2008) because it is usually related with negative connotations (Bjugstad et. al, 2006).Kelley (1992) claimed that followers are those individuals who are courageous and honest, and who cooperate to accomplish goals without competing for leadership or power. Kelley further conceptualized followership using two behavioral dimensions which are critical thinking and active engagement upon the definition of followership. If the followers willing to be creative and innovative, and willing to offer criticism regardless of the consequences, it is highly they are independent and critical thinkers which have high levels of critical thinking (Mushonga& Torrance, 2008).

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There are five basic followership styles based on both dimensions mentioned earlier. The five basic styles are “The yes-people”, “The sheep”, “the pragmatist”, “the alienated” and “the star follower”.

The ‘yes-people’, according to Brown & Thornborrow (1996), they are aggressively differential and possibly servile and widely known as the “Conformist”. They are extremely the opposite of the ‘alienated’ followers. Comparing both styles, conformist and ‘alienated’, conformist have more positive energy than ‘alienated’. Sadly, even though this type of followers is more positive, they are also some bad points of it which are, always seeks for their leaders especially to do the thinking, directions and providing them the visions. The ‘yes-people’ believe that their leader’s power entitle them, followers, to be obedience towards their leader’s order. They are also known as “good child”, as they are eager to please their superior (Kelley, 1992).

Contrasts from the ‘yes-people’, ‘alienated’ are known as mavericks, as they only think for themselves and does not think of the effects of their actions on others. Leader’s view them as cynical, troublesome and not a team player. ‘Alienated’ followers felt that leaders and organizations do not really recognize their talents and idea. They also view them as the party who exploited them for their own gain. This type of followers have a lot of negative energy which make it, to be the opposite of conformist as ‘alienated’ followers are not happy with their work situations. Eventually their negativity caused resentment in leaders and other followers, as they are trying to make it difficult for others (Kelley, 1992).

Meanwhile, ‘pragmatist’s gives you another story, it is seen to be quiet interesting as they stay on top of the fence and observe where the wind will head to. Once they know where it headed, they’ll get on board (Kellerman, 2008). Followers fall under this type does not have fix target or support as they only choose to be in a safe grounds. To be safe they need to choose and follows leaders that can provide them with security. They wouldn’t ask much on their leaders decision as they are just an observer who will went to the path that can provide them with the most benefits (Kelley, 1992). ‘Pragmatist’ always play safe in their game as they can change who they are at the very moment if it is necessary (Brown & Thornborrow, 1996). These followers have low risk of tolerance as they could do a good job but choose not to because they are afraid to fail. Surviving is a necessity for ‘pragmatist’.

‘The sheep’ followers are also commonly known as “passive”. These followers do represent their name as they are extremely passive, do not have the ability to do critical thinking, less initiative and are not responsible. These followers always seek and are too dependent on their leaders especially for doing the thinking, as they do not think by themselves and are not active in the organizations (Kelley, 1992). They do have the ability to do an excellent job, but at a certain stage they will suddenly halt as they do not know what shall they do next.

Just like their name, ‘the star’/‘exemplary’ followers are an example to others (followers/ co-workers). Opposite from followers that have negative energy and are passive, they are followers who think critically and involve themselves actively in the organizations activities. They are willing to work with others instead of competing; they work to get the tasks done and not for the power or reward. They stick to their own stand when they think it is right to do so (Kelley, 1992). ‘The star’ followers simply choose to play the role of followers and not the role of leaders. They are just comfortable and satisfied with their positions as they believe that they are best at being who they really are, the followers (Kellerman, 2008).

## 2. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework for this research. The independent variable shows two types of cognitive style by Allinson and Hayes (1996) which are “analyst” and “intuitive”. Meanwhile the dependent variables are the five styles of followership introduced by Kelley, (2008), which are “the yes-people”, “pragmatist”, “the sheep”, “the star follower” and “alienated”.

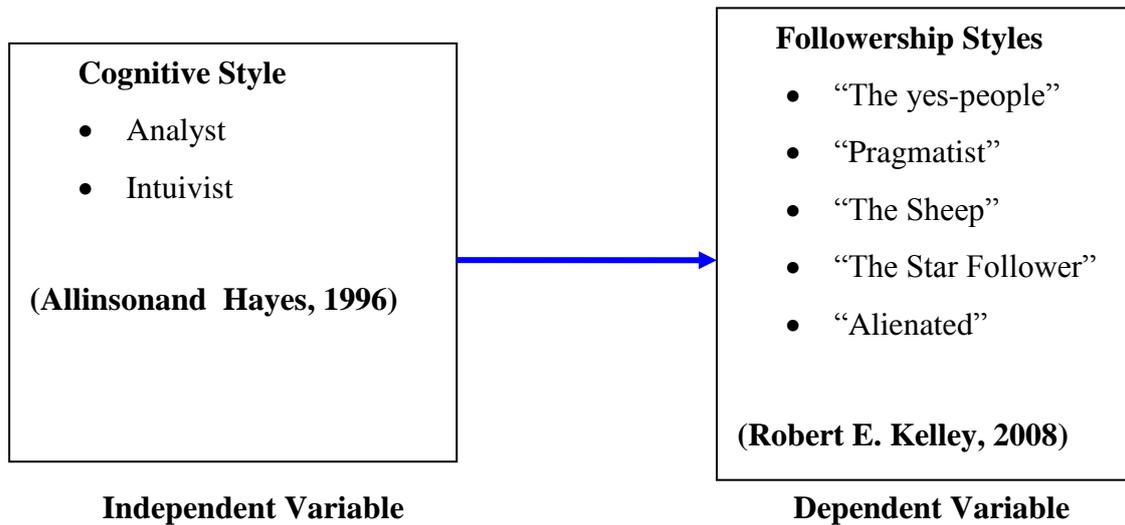


Figure1 – Conceptual Framework

## 3. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the concept of cognitive style and its effect on the followership styles. Followers are the back bone of any organization, identifying their followership styles and cognitive style is important as we can help to develop and nurture them to be more productive and efficient.

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