

# **The Role of Democratic Leadership Communication towards Organizational Performance: The Case Study of a Sri Lankan Public Hospital**

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## **Background, Issue, and Purpose**

Renewed calls for understanding the nature of democratic leadership and its role in democratic movements in organizations are made by Gastil (1994). For the author, the existing definitions of democratic leadership are inconsistent and inadequate. As defined by the author, democratic leadership is “conceptually distinct from positions of authority; rather, it is defined as the performance of three functions: distributing responsibility among the membership, empowering group members, and aiding the group’s decision-making process” (p.953). For Gastil, many, most, or all members of a group are served by these functions in order to exchange the roles of leader and follower. Moreover, a limited number of practical and moral considerations are identified by the author in assessing the appropriateness of the democratic leadership model for different groups.

Since leadership plays a pivotal role in democratic movements in organizations, understanding the nature of democratic leadership is essential. Also, little research, so far, has defined democratic leadership within the context of democratic movements in organizations. The leadership literature has paid no or little attention to democratic leadership in such movements, focusing on democratic leadership within small groups and organizations (Choi, 2007). Choi emphasizes that although the available literature on leadership has underlined some characteristics of democratic leadership, it has ignored other demonstrated characteristics of democratic leadership for achieving democratic values on behalf of democratic movements in organizations. Moreover, Gastil (1994) argues that “the absence of a clear definition may have also contributed to the decreased amount of research on democratic leadership” (p. 956).

The limited number of empirical studies on democratic leadership to examine the aspect of democratic leadership and its role in democratic movements in organizations provides the opportunity to do fresh research on the topic, in particular to study the aspect of democratic organizational leadership’s role in the enhancement of organizational performance. When it comes to the Sri Lankan context, no or few past empirical studies have used the aspect of democratic organizational leadership to investigate its backing up of democratic movements such as the enhancement of organizational performance of Sri Lankan organizations. Therefore, this research was motivated to study the aspect of democratic leadership and its contribution to the enhancement of organizational performance in the Sri Lankan context. In particular, the intended aim or purpose of the research was further specified: to study how the enhancement of organizational performance of a Sri Lankan public hospital has been accomplished due to its democratic leadership communication over time. The investigation was theorized using the “ideal type communication principle” of Habermas (1984, 1987).

## **Methodology**

The case method (Yin, 2003) was used as the strategy for conducting and presenting the research reported in this paper. A famous public maternal hospital in Sri Lanka, which has been performing well in its service over time mainly through its successful leadership, was selected as the case in which the researcher performed his empirical work. The democratic leadership communication of the hospital was considered as the democratic communication of its Director/CEO, which has been operationalized using the four types of communication variables: communication comprehensibility, communication objectivity, communication subjectivity, and communication validity. These communication variables have been originally developed by Habermas (1984, 1987) to describe the ideal type speech situations of societies.

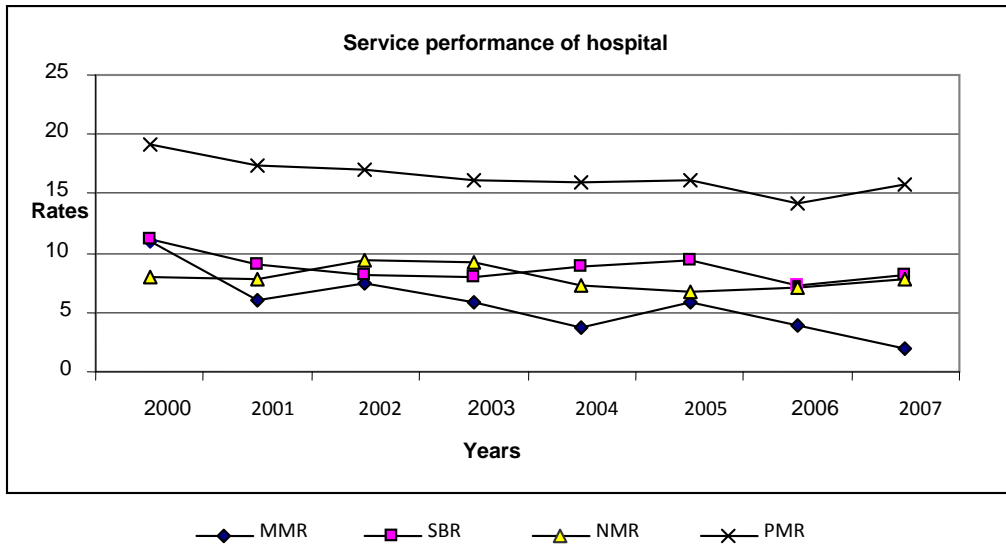
The primary data of the present study were gathered through direct observations, short-time interviews, documentary evidence, participative observations, and in-depth interviews (Yin, 2003) which allowed the understanding of democratic leadership communication within the hospital and its role in enhancing the service performance of the hospital over time. The above data gathering techniques were employed in the director's office, nursing sisters' rooms, divisional heads' rooms, doctors' rooms, patients' wards, waiting rooms, and the quality management unit. Some data gathering schedules were used as the guidelines to gather qualitative data for the study. The annual report prepared by the hospital for the particular period was used to gather quantitative data on its service performance. More importantly, the interviews to gather qualitative data were carried out by focusing on different employee categories of the hospital (i.e. Director/CEO, divisional heads, doctors, nursing sisters and nurses, paramedical staff, midwifery staff, clerical staff, and support staff).

The qualitative data analysis (Yin, 2003) mainly aimed to examine how the Director/CEO of the hospital has created and maintained the ideal type communication (Habermas, 1984, 1987) with different categories of employees in order to enhance the service performance of the hospital over time.

### **Outcome/Result**

The democratic leadership communication of the CEO was evidenced with his democratic leadership values (i.e. teamwork, openness, responsiveness, forgiveness, practical orientation, and continuation) which have contributed to create and maintain the ideal type communication with different categories of employees (i.e. divisional heads, doctors, nursing sisters and nurses, paramedical staff, midwifery staff, clerical staff, and support staff) for a long period. Ultimately, this has led to improve the service performance of the hospital over time (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Review of service performance of the hospital**



Source: Hospital C (2008)

According to the data exhibited in Figure 1 the hospital has improved its service outcomes/performance gradually over time (i.e. reduction of Maternal Mortality Rate, Still Birth Rate, Neonatal Mortality Rate and Perinatal Mortality Rate). For example, during the period considered for analysis (i.e. 2000-2007), MMR reduced from 11.0 to 2.0 which is approximately an 82% improvement in the service performance. During the same period, it was able to reduce the Still Birth Rate from 11.2 to 8.1 which is approximately a 28% improvement in the service performance. Moreover, the Neonatal and Perinatal Mortality Rates have reduced from 7.9 to 7.7 and from 19.2 to 15.8 which are approximately 3% and 18% improvements in the service performance respectively.

### Conclusion and Implications

According to the Habermasian ideal type communication principle (Habermas, 1984, 1987) adopted to identify the role of democratic leadership of the hospital towards the enhancement of its organizational performance, the CEO's personal values: teamwork, openness, responsiveness, forgiveness, practical orientation, and continuation as a whole have created and maintained the ideal type/democratic type communication with different categories of employees (i.e. divisional heads, doctors, nursing sisters and nurses, paramedical staff, midwifery staff, clerical staff, and support staff) over a long period. This has mainly contributed to improve the service performance of hospital over time (Figure 1).

The findings of the paper help to understand the nature of democratic leadership and its role in democratic movements (Gastil, 1994; Choi, 2007) such as the enhancement of organizational performance, in particular to understand the issue empirically pertaining to public hospitals and other organizations in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Democratic leadership communication, Organizational performance, Sri Lankan public hospital

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