

Achieving Radical Leadership in Institutions of Higher Learning through Effective Student's Participation in Decision making Process.

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ABSTRACT

Effective management of institutions of higher learning include a successful participation of students in decision making process. The full participation of the majority students in the day to day decision making process in institution of higher learning tends to bring about harmony, builds capacity in student's leadership skills and it is one of the most effective marketing strategies for student's enrolments. There has always been a gap between management and students in terms of participation in institutional decision making process. This gap which has often been created partly by management and has often led to perpetual conflicts that have often resulted in disruptions to the smooth running of institutions of higher learning thereby affecting quality of education, creating inequity and inequalities. The main objective of this study therefore was to investigate factors that affect student's participation in decision making process in the running of institutions of higher learning in Zambia. The significance of the study was to establish the role of radical leadership in realising effective student's participation in decision making process. This study used a qualitative research methods involving both qualitative and quantitative methods. The sampling techniques involved purposively and random sampling techniques. Data were collected using interviews and focused group discussions. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Keywords: radical leadership, higher institutions of learning, student's participation, decision making, management

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning are believed to be well positioned to synthesize viable solutions in solving societal problems both in the short and long term basis. Research, however, indicates that there is still a wide gap between the institutions of higher learning and the community (Aiken et al, 2016). It is further argued that for institutions of higher learning to provide comprehensive and effective decisions there is need to make effective collaboration with students who are a key stakeholder in decision making at that level.

In every institution of higher learning students are the majority and most of the decisions made by management affect students both in the direct and indirect manner (Barker-shelly, 2017). The main issue here is not just about making students available when one or two students are around but ensuring that students fully participate in the decisions that are being made that would eventually affect them both in the short and long term basis.

Most institutions use a few students as just a matter of fulfilling their fixtures. Students would be called to a meeting that has already decided and student's attendance are minuted as having been represented when in the actual sense the opposite is the case.

Furthermore, students once incorporated adequately into the process of decision making, they provide great objectivity on check and balances. They can further contribute to the effective decision making process if their needs and interests are embraced in the process of decision making (Antal 2013).

Students are a critical aspect of the institutions of higher learning. The success of every institution of higher learning partly lies with successful recruitment and maintenance of students in the whole life-line of the university. Students play a vital role in shaping and influencing health and sound policy formulation, implementations and appraisals (Barker-Shelley, 2017). However, research shows that there are less studies that have been conducted to deal with student's participatory force in the governance of institutions of higher learning.

Further, studies also show that student's participations and representations in decision making has also been understudied for a long time now (Bratman et al, 2016). This gap of lack of empirical studies in such a delicate and critical area also suggests that students have been underestimated when it comes to the reality of their importance in strategic decision making process in higher institutions of learning (Bieler & Mckenzie, 2017).

This study shall endeavour to highlight the critical role of student's participation in decision making process. Radical decision making process entails taking a modern approach to problem solving and breaking the ice. This concept looks at the reality of the fact that contrary to the primitive school of thought that distances students from all the institutional and corporate decision making processes, it is now a mandatory requirement that all students must be mobilized together towards mutual and conventional decision and participatory frameworks and mainstreaming dialogue, participation, inclusivity and collaborative efforts.

Background

The Guild of Students is the official body which represents the interests of learners in all universities in Zambia. There are different structures in universities.

The university Vice Chancellor is the administrative chief of the university. Student leaders work closely with the office of the Dean of student affairs.

The university management uses participative leadership style in decision making process. Studying and reporting upon the concept of 'student participation' differs from one university to another simply because of the presence of different cultures and education policies.

Engaging with the students' guild is often seen as an effective means of gauging the views of the student body as a whole.

Students' guild are often seen as important partners in the delivery of these wider aspects of university life.

While some higher education institutions have paid attention to the voices of students, many others still consider students of less value to the quality of the institution's administration.

Student participation enhances the planning of academic policies that target the transformation of university culture and improving students' learning outcomes. Student participate in academic and non-academic activities.

Many higher education institutions have stable guidelines regarding student participation in university administration. Management, through the branches of the guild encourages and support students to participate in the effective decision-making process. It is important because it holds the capacity to develop

students into better individuals.

Statement of the Problem

There has been strong debate circulating around the effectiveness of students participation in decision making in institution of higher learning In practice, it has been observed that students participation in decision making is weak and leaves a lot of gaps between students governance structures and management formal structures. This has resulted in increased levels of dissatisfaction on both sides between management and students Few studies have investigated radical leadership and equity roles in students participation in decision making process in higher learning institutions

Objectives

1. To identify weaknesses in the current student participatory system in decision making.
2. To establish factors which lead to radical leadership in decision making.
3. To suggest appropriate strategies used in effective students' participation in decision making.

Questions of the Study

1. What are the weaknesses in the current students' participatory in decision making?
2. What factors lead to radical leadership in decision making?
3. What strategies are used in effective students' participation in decision making?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Murray(2018) conducted a study on institutions of higher learning to see the effectiveness of quality policy formulation to be made in partnership with students efforts for solving societal problems. Using the systematic review of literature as the research methodological approach, it was found that student's initiative approach in sustainable higher education was understudied but there was still high evidence showing that there is growing appreciation of the understanding the critical roles that students play in improvement of society and higher learning institutions.

Further, studies also revealed that students are working to increase the uptake of SHE through multi-stakeholder collaborations, collective action and interdisciplinary. This review identifies a lack of engagement with intersectionality (interrelated environmental and social issues) and highlights the need to redirect future SHE research, calling for increased comparative research studies and research syntheses to provide greater depth to our understanding of student-led initiatives.

From this study it can be seen that student's efforts have always been hindered by lack of appreciations from management and often they have been kept at the distance from most of the activities happening at the centre of decision making in the institution of higher learning.

There are basically critical barriers that arise when students participatory front is being discussed at every levels.

Research has continued to show that some of the critical barriers to student's participation include the issue of student's involvements (DeYoung et al. 2016). When it comes to student's involvements, it calls for challenges since students are more less like volunteers and most of the time they have competitive compromises to make with time and studies. Balancing the two is often very difficult. As they make choices between what to do for personal gain compared to that for the common good of the institution and the others becomes very difficult to operate on purely voluntarism basis.

Besides, the tenure of office is mostly one year and as such so as they try to settle down and learn the art of involvement and negotiation as well lobbying, it becomes too late to practice as their tenure of office would end just as they have settled in their job successfully.

Further, studies show that students have faced more resistance with institutions of higher learning in terms of bureaucracy and traditional mechanism of the way these institutions have been running for year (Duram and Williams, 2015). They have found it easier to modify individual behaviour than institutional changes. This study reveal further, that what brings more contention in the institutions of higher learning is the fact that despite commit up with brilliant solutions that could affect positive change to favour the students populous and the institution in general, the rigidity and the mechanical beauracratic tendencies often cause the aggressive conflict between students and management. This inertia has proved to be consistent and dynamic.

Another study that was conducted by Bratman et al. (2016) show that funding is yet another barrier that inhibit effective student's participation in decision making process. This study posits that despite all the brilliant initiatives that could trigger change and improve the standards in the institutions of higher learning, lack of finances and a struggle for operational costs puts all the ideas of taking the processes to zero despite all the efforts invested into the productivity and viability of the systems. Universities now are turning out to begin to capitalise the processes for commercial benefits so as to survive. All universities are striving to go commercial as they deem themselves to be business entities in order to generate their own income for long term survival. They begin to see students as customers and their institutions as businesses as far as they can manage.

In yet another study it has been discovered that one of the barriers to effective student's participation in decision making involves the limitation with regards to preconceived mind-sets of the managers towards students (Staggenborg and Ramos, 2016,). A lot of higher authorities in the institutions of higher learning are not willing to talk or dialogue. They take students as trouble makers. This study clearly shows that some managers are a big obstacle to effective students' decision making process. An average student on the other hand is non-violent, cooperative and harmless. Once students are given the fare platform to be heard and to express themselves freely, they can bring out the best that can add value to the health running of the institutions.

Students' participation in the governance of their school is an educational process that can be used in different spaces and at different stages of school life as a primary component of students' education and professionalization (Planas *et al.* (2013). Participation by students can positively impact their general attainment, self-esteem, feeling of belonging, self-efficacy and a sense of responsibility (Schulz *et al.*, 2009). Their participation is also positively related to improving school discipline, teacher-student relationships, attitudes towards school and making the school more competitive (Bäckman & Trafford, 2006; Dürr, 2004). Through participation, students' sense of belonging and identity, civic virtues and disposition and competences would be enhanced. It is not surprising to find that student participation in a School Council or parliament is related to civic knowledge in about one-third of countries (Torney-Purta, 2001).

A study conducted in Hong Kong shows that student participations in school governance will create positive impacts on students' academic and social development, including the opportunity to learn the following: responsibility, trust, mutual respect, fairness, willingness to listen, openness to change, readiness to voice their opinions and take part in discussions, as well as a desire to engage in various kinds of school activities (Yuen & Leung, 2010). This positive education impacts call for treating students as "here-and-now citizens" in the school communities, and endorsing their rights and responsibilities in influencing the matters that affect them (Leung & Yuen, 2009). Engaging student participation in school governance is crucial if school

leaders genuinely believe in the value of citizenship education. Such engagement provides an authentic learning environment in which to nurture students’ democratic and civic competencies.

Despite the importance of students’ participation in school governance, civic education is a matter of knowledge transmission in the majority of the countries that participated in the study, whereas critical thinking and political engagement receive less attention (Torney-Purta, 2001). School organization, ethos, the curriculum and students’ activities are incongruent with the actual structure of school governance as students experience it (Tse, 2000). Leung *et al.*(2016) findings revealed that schools are more inclined to inform students and consult them rather than offer real participation and powers to them. There is a need to identify a model for school leaders to nurture students.

Conceptual Framework

A Conceptual framework is a useful tool that can be used to show relationships and linkages in order to give more understanding to the phenomenon under investigation (Baxton & Jack 2008). There are interconnected relationships that exist in relation to students participation in decision making in higher institutions of learning as depicted in figure 1 below. It can be seen that there positive benefits that accrue both to the institution and the individual students whenever they are engaged in institutional business.

Conceptual Framework: Students Participation in Radical decision-making Process

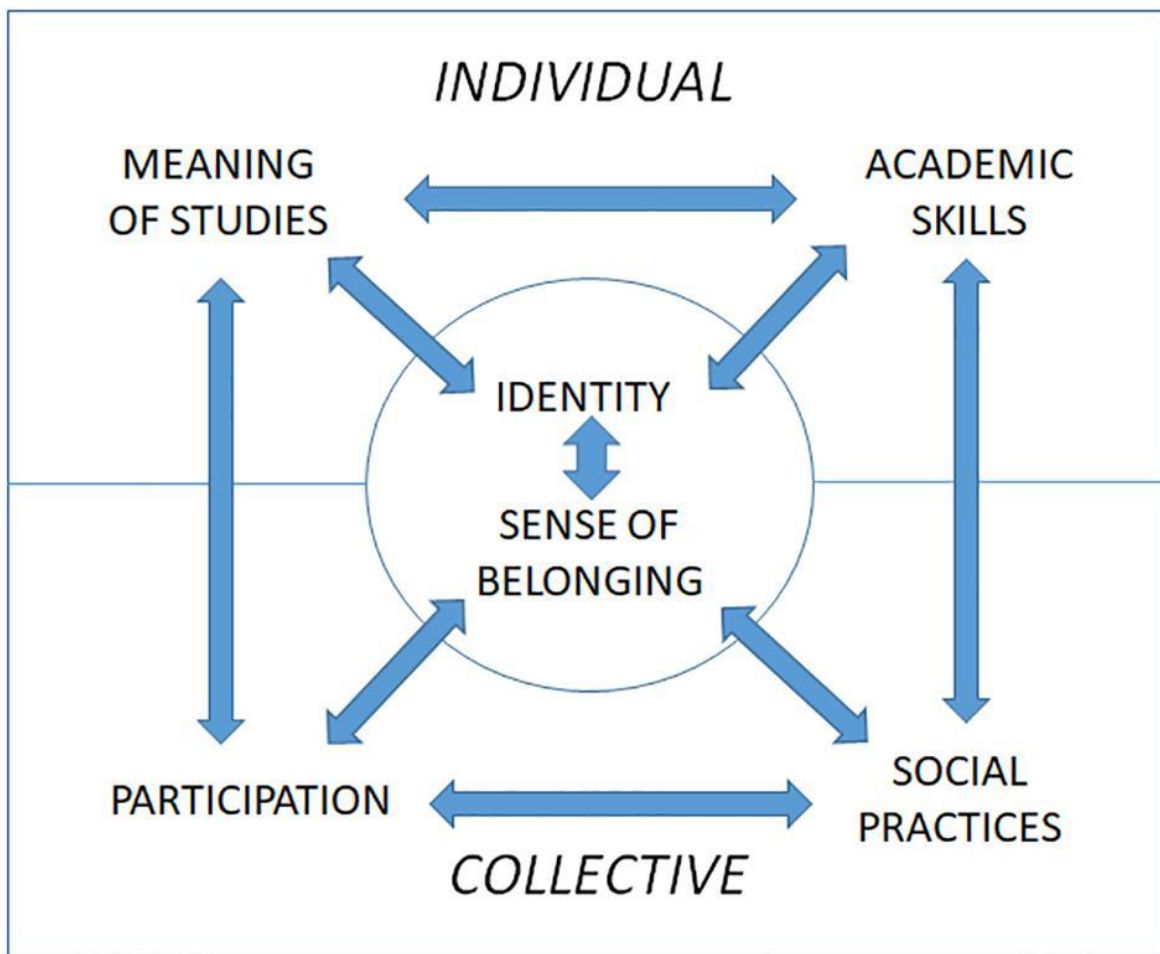


Figure 1:

Source : Korhonen 2019

As can be observed in figure 1 above, students are a critical component of the successful institution of higher learning. There is a strong correlation between students participation and their overall social behavior. Students participation in decision making at the levels of higher institution of learning often yield many positive results that include leadership skills, positive civic responsibility, a sense of belonging, and identity, improvement of self esteem and generally pro-social behavioral tendencies. They are less likely to revolt or engage in any forms of deviant behavior. This collectively could possibly lead to improvements in academic progressions, success and self actualisation. This is partly because the process of participation often ensures that a sense of ownership, mutual trust and cooperation. The opposite is equally true. Once there is no participation or low levels of participation from students in the formal decision-making process in running the institutions of higher learning, it tends to breed mistrust and could possibly lead to student's anti-social behavior. Management must therefore take extra care with regards to the process of students participation more especially at institutional decision-making process.

METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative research methods. This research employed a constructivist research paradigm. According to Cresswell (2013), constructivism is a world view where individuals seek to understand their known world in a manner that is of their own experience. The paradigm was used because the researcher sought to understand a phenomenon under study from the experience of the participants using different data collection methods. This paradigm therefore was suitable for the study.

Further, the study used a descriptive research design. Essentially, the descriptive design is used when researcher's goal is to explore phenomenon that tends to seek the participants' opinion. The researcher's goal was to explore the phenomenon that tends to seek the participants opinion without attaching the researcher's value (Siedlecki, 2020). It is a method of collecting information by interviewing respondents. This design is suitable for a study as the researcher aims at seeking the opinions of respondents on the research topic.

The total students population for this study at Kwame Nkrumah University was 6000. This population was made of both full-time and part time students who were registered under the University. The sample size was 30; and it included 24 students who were randomly selected, 2 university academic staff, 2 dean of students affairs officers, and 2 student union leaders who were purposively selected because of the nature of their job.

Data were collected using interviews and focus group discussions. It were analysed using thematic analysis and presented using themes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study established that there were limited structures created within the student's governance systems and this acted as a huge barrier to students participatory intentions. It was discovered that the students organizational body constituted the cabinet which was made up of the president, vice-president, prime minister, finance minister and the rest of cabinet ministers. Besides that structure there was a student's representative council that was made up of the speaker, clerk and the mayors. It was established that between the majority students and the mayors and also between the ministers and the majority students, there was no viable linkages due to lack of the structures where the majority students could be given a platform to air out their voices.

Furthermore, there was a misconceived perceptions both on the side of management and students union

body. If management for instance spoke to a few union leaders, it was assumed that they had spoken to the entire students population. It was established however that a mere interaction of management with students union leaders did not in itself translate into having involved the whole student body due to the disconnection that existed between the students leadership and the majority common students on campus. This could be seen many times in instances whereby while management would be in an enclosed indoor meeting with union leaders, a riot, a demonstration or protest could have already been staged somewhere within the university premises.

In this view therefore, we can argue that there is need to realign, restructure and reorganise the students governance structures both the formal and the informal ones in order to close this operational and organisational gap. Many students have shown that effective management of students should incorporate democratic values that embrace the majoritarian rule as opposed to the minority rule that tend to cause discordant behavior that tends to disrupt the peaceful running of the university affairs. There is further need to empower students through creation of platforms and informal structures at all levels that can ensure that the majority students are integrated into institutional governance systems. Students want to have a say in everything that concern them and the general activities of the university life. Additionally, they need a platform where they can speak out and be heard. They want to be recognized, to be consulted and engaged altogether in every decision-making process that affect them while studying.

Communication issues: meetings were held in the evenings. On campus there were only one thousand students from 6000 students. The majority of the students stayed outside campus. Peter and Ebimobowei (2015), stated that if many students stayed outside campus more than those who were inside, it brought communication problems.

On the centrally, however, it was established that the reality that is currently obtaining on the ground looks misplaced and incoherent. For instance, the current guild constitution does not accommodate the distance learning students and the postgraduate students. It give much more attention only to full time students. This was observed to be a critical component that further weakened the students organisation systems owing to the fact that the population of the distance learning students and post graduate is high and ever growing with potential to surpass the numbers that currently exist on the full time students listings. Already, this has been causing tension between the full time students and the distance learning students. Both the post-graduate students and the distance learning students feel unrepresented and abandoned in the cold. Further, they feel the majority of their problems have been outstanding due to lack of representation in form of the union leadership that fully understand their problems. It is further argued that not until a separate union is formed with executives under the distance learning and post graduate students, there shall be no time where students under this category will ever have their problems resolved effectively and holistically.

The distance learning and postgraduate students are not included in the guild. One of the students of 2022 interviewed had this to say:

There is Distance education. Students under this programme are not included in the guild arrangement. It was only for full time students (interview, 2022)

Moreover, in the main structure of decision-making process, students with disabilities are not represented particularly those who physically sit with management as well as those in the university senate. A minister with disabilities will only be required to give a report at students representative council levels or cabinet and not necessarily beyond that stage. This was reviewed in the interview that students with disabilities were not represented in the main decision body. One participant said:

Disabled students are not represented in the main body which took problems to Management. It is only the

President and the Academic minister who represent students in the management meetings. Sometimes certain issues are not presented the way they should be presented by the owners the disabled students.

The study further highlighted a total lack of knowledge of the student guild constitution amongst the majority students. This was attributed partly to poor reading culture amongst most students as well as lack of platforms that gives room for imparting constitutional knowledge and information to students. However, much more than that, it was observed that the main cause could be the lack of both formal and informal structures in the guild to naturally act as conduits communication channels to the majority of students. Every student is affected by the constitution and whatever it aspires for. It is therefore within this conceptualisation that it is belived that the knowledge and familiarisation of the students on the constitutional matter are critically important to all students. When some students were asked about the guild constitution, many said they did not know the contents. This meant they could not even defend themselves because of lack of knowleged. One responded interviewed had this to say:

There is a guild constitution for students but I don't even know what is in that constitution because I have never read it.

The study further established that one of the critical factors that rendered students participatory intentions weak and ineffective was closely associated with both power imbalance and the leadership incapability amongst students union leaders. Firstly, there is power imbalances between union leaders and management. What this means is that whenever there was a discussion between students leadership and the management, it became vividly clear that union leaders proved always to has very little bargaing power to convince managenet even in matters that affected their wellbeing. This was attributed partly to perceived management intimidation nature and also due to low influence on the basis of lower numbers on the part of students. Whenever students union leaders would be required to meet management there are always two or three who are allowed to attend and represent their fellow students. Since the guild constitutions is silent about the maximum numbers that could be allowed to appear and represent their fellow students, it remains purely at the discretion of management to dictate how many students could be allowed to attend the discussion table with management. In view of this development, it has in many instances be potrayed that it is deliberate on the part of management to use such occasions as just a rubber stamp to implement and pass the already decided resolutions and therefore qualify to deem them as having being imposed on students. It has further been observed that the attitudes of most of the management towards students during these meetings are often described as prejudicial. It has been observed apart from the discussion environment not being balanced, most management members are not open minded to allow divergient views or allow innovations and creativity in decion- making process. It is critically important to notice further that lack of skills on the part of students greatly disadvantage them a lot on the quality of negotiations. Union leaders are merely students with little skills in leadership, decision -making, negotiations, problem solving, financial administration or even conflict resolution. Bringing such a profile to the experienced, highly qualified and the indifferent management cannot promise much to students. Additionally students could not also be very much familiar with systems and dynamics of how higher institutions operate. This more reason why there is need to conduct effective training and orientations to students union leaders before they assume offices of responsibilities. Training in leadership should be done to all guild leaders if they are ever expected to make a difference. However, in reality such trainings do not take place perhaps due to a number of reasons most of which are best known by management. Students who are trained make better leaders. Muammar (2021) supports that student leaders need workshops in leadership training in order to be effective.

The study further highlighted a big challenge of serous financial setbacks on the part of students union leaders. Union leadership require proper funding and support from management for them to be able deliver effectively. Most of the things student leadership did during their tenure required money (Peterson &

Peterson, 2012). It was observed that the management needed to budget for student leadership so that they could do their work smoothly.

In addition, it was discovered that partnership and collaborations with key stakeholders and other universities within and outside the institution was cardinal in student leadership. Student collaboration brings new ideas which would bring quality in participation and decision making (Scriver, 2021).

Good social relationship must be fostered to improve rapport with management and community. They needed to work on improving the student image building. Avoiding riotous behavior, harmony, peace and academic studies was important for student well being. These behaviours would not disturb the academic calendar (Kabwe, 2018). There should be inclusion of all categories of students that exists among students. Distance students and Postgraduate students must be members of the guild and should contribute to decisions made in the guild. Student participation was looked as the most important factor a democratic institution.

Motivation for students representatives should be planned by management. We need to understand that they miss a lot when they go for meetings during classes representing other students. One student interviewed suggested:

allowances for guild members should be handsome. Recognition and award should be given to us guild members.

Suggesting appropriate strategies in effective students' participation in decision making

The study found out that there was a new guild students' structure. The structure was too formal and elitist. The structure that existed could be modified so that informal platforms were created. One participant interviewed had this to say:

There is need for more informal structures where the majority of diverse students can engage in a dialogue.

There were problems with Communication. All students regardless of the program they were doing needed to attend meetings so that they were not left behind in the institution. Gasman *et al.* (2014) observed that all students should be in the guild for communication to be effective.

Students with disabilities were not represented on the main decision making body of university structures. Representation is on the lowest level. They should be represented on the highest body where key decision are made. One respondent had this to say:

We are not represented on the main decision making body of the university. This makes some of the problems not be sorted out

The study found out that there were limited skills in union leadership such as soft leadership skills, finances and audits. The guild executive needed to be trained in order to carry out their duties effectively. The training needed to be specific in nature. In auditing, the leadership could hire someone from outside the institution or from among the postgraduate students who were already accountants or a lecturer from school of business could be hired. Kabwe (2018) states that sometimes, the executive can Group some students to audit the accounts in situations where there is no audit.

The other factors that the study reviewed were time, continuity and experiences. The tenure of office was too short to be in the executive. One participants, observed:

we are in office for only one year and the time is too short to gain leadership skill and experience. In order

to be effective, we need to be in office for at least two years..

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to achieve radical decisions and effective students participatory systems in decision making in higher institutions of learning. There is need to restructure, modify and redesign mechanisms on the students government structures that aim at closing the existing gaps. There must be new formal and informal structures the promote the majority of students to participate in the governance structures. There is need to link the guild executives to the lowest tiers of the majority common students. This could take the ordinary local governance systems of constituencies and wards whereby decision making process could begin from the lowest levels and reach the top management structures.

It is important to effectively and adequately train the union leaders on systems and procedures of the university including a full induction on leadership and communication channels. This would help to impart soft skills that would enable union leaders to be able to perform effectively as they stand to represent the majority of their members.

Students are such an important factor in the success of the institutions of higher learning. They help provide checks and balances in the governance and decision making process. Once the majority of students begin to participate, it helps them a lot. Effective participation in decision making helps students to build leadership skills, reduce on the antisocial behavior and tend to support the efforts of management both in the long and short term basis.

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