

Facilitating Leadership Skills and Behavioural Values in Workplace: A Case of Equine Assisted Leadership Development Programs

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to evaluate the direct effects of stress management and mental health on leadership skills and behavioural values. Additionally, the study assessed the direct influence of leadership skills on behavioural values and examined the mediating role of leadership skills in the relationship between stress management, mental health, and behavioural values. Data was collected from a sample of 260 leaders participating in the Horseback Therapeutic and Leadership Development Program in Malaysia. Statistical analysis was performed using the JASP software. The findings revealed that stress management and mental health are significant predictors of both leadership skills and behavioural values. Furthermore, leadership skills were found to mediate the relationship between stress management, mental health, and behavioural values. These results provide theoretical insights and make a significant contribution to the field. The study advocates for the implementation of equine-assisted leadership development programs to enhance leadership performance in Malaysia.

Keywords: Behavioural Values, Leadership Skills, Stress Management, Mental Health, Equine Therapy.

Introduction

The role of leadership is crucial to the productivity of any department. Highly motivated leaders who are deeply engaged with their work are more effective in steering the organization towards its goals (Xiong et al., 2023). Conversely, a lack of passion in leadership can negatively impact organizational outcomes. Thus, the importance of leadership skills cannot be overlooked (Baheer et al., 2023). Leadership skills, grounded in an individual's organizational capabilities, are essential for guiding employees to achieve the organization's vision and mission. However, the continuous assessment of leadership skills and their performance presents a significant challenge. Effective training for top management and leaders is vital for achieving organizational objectives. Training plays a crucial role in enhancing overall leadership performance across various organizational aspects. Furthermore, effective coordination between top management and leadership serves as a valuable tool for improving learning and performance.

In Malaysia, the leadership across various departments plays a critical role in enhancing organizational performance. This role is pivotal for improving operational effectiveness. However, top management frequently encounters various crises that adversely affect organizational performance (Kyron et al., 2022). Challenges related to achieving economic goals contribute to stress and mental health issues among management. Persistent strain and working in demanding environments negatively impact overall employee performance (van den Broek et al., 2022). These mental health and emotional management issues are also evident in the daily functioning of management. Furthermore, mental health and emotional instability can lead to

unethical and poor behaviour by leaders towards staff (Severin et al., 2022). This negatively affects work performance and requires substantial intervention. Consequently, there is a growing need for additional training and therapeutic activities to enhance leadership performance within Malaysian organizations.

The existing body of knowledge highlights various factors influencing leadership skills and employees' behavioural values. Gomes et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of strategic performance in enhancing leadership behaviour. Similarly, Maria Khan et al. (2022) demonstrated that modern skill training is crucial for improving leadership performance. Raza et al. (2022) argued that leadership training is valuable for equipping leaders to tackle significant challenges. Furthermore, Subijana et al. (2021) noted that training and workshops focused on organizational behaviour are essential for enhancing leadership behavioural values. While these studies offer insights into improving leadership skills and behavioural values, they do not explore stress management and mental health as antecedent factors. Addressing this gap in literature is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing leadership effectiveness.

This research aimed to assess the direct impact of stress management and mental health on leadership skills and behavioural values, as well as the effect of leadership skills on behavioural values. It also examined the mediating role of leadership skills in the relationship between stress management, mental health, and behavioural values. Data from 260 leaders in Malaysia's Horseback Therapeutic and Leadership Development Program were analysed using JASP. The findings indicate that stress management and mental health significantly predict leadership skills and behavioural values, with leadership skills mediating these relationships. The study highlights the theoretical significance of these findings and recommends equine-assisted leadership development programs to enhance leadership performance in Malaysia. The research is structured into sections: review of literature, methodology, findings, discussion, theoretical implications, practical implications, and future directions.

Review of Literature

Stress management involves addressing organizational stress encountered by employees during their work routines (Joo et al., 2023). Effective stress management is crucial, as it directly impacts leadership skills. Leaders who employ effective strategies to manage stress are better equipped to handle challenges and enhance their effectiveness (Maria Khan et al., 2022; Ngo & Ngo, 2023). Conversely, insufficient focus on stress management can hinder employees' ability to cope effectively. Stress management is a key attribute of quality leadership, influencing their ability to navigate challenges (Rasham et al., 2023; Subijana et al., 2021). Leaders who excel in managing stress are more likely to make rational decisions and improve their overall performance (Ali, 2022; Hight et al., 2019). The quality of decision-making and work

performance is also affected by stress management. Effective stress management enhances leadership behaviour, thereby improving overall leadership effectiveness (Gomes et al., 2020; Muthuswamy, 2023). Consequently, stress management is a critical factor influencing leadership values and positive performance (Mitchell et al., 2022; Wisittigars & Siengthai, 2019).

H1: There is a relationship between stress management and leadership skills.

H2: There is a relationship between stress management and behavioural values.

Mental health is a crucial factor in enhancing leadership behaviour (Wang, 2024; Yu et al., 2021). The mental well-being of leaders significantly influences their decision-making capabilities, as mentally fit leaders are more likely to make rational and effective decisions. In the daily operations of employees, mental fitness plays a vital role in developing their overall value. Motivated and psychologically resilient employees are better equipped to make sound decisions (Zito et al., 2021). Psychological health is critical for effective decision-making, which in turn affects overall leadership performance. Additionally, participation in leadership development programs enhances leadership skills by improving mental capabilities (Aslan, 2023; Hamouche, 2020). These programs provide training that bolsters mental fitness and, consequently, decision-making effectiveness (Sarfraz et al., 2023). Mentally fit leaders exhibit improved decision-making quality, which is reflected in their overall performance. Addressing significant leadership challenges requires timely and effective responses, highlighting the importance of mental health in enhancing leadership programs. Thus, the mental health of leaders has a substantial impact on their performance.

H3: There is a relationship between mental health and leadership skills.

H4: There is a relationship between mental health and behavioural values.

Leadership skills are crucial for enhancing overall performance (Janssen et al., 2018). Effective leadership involves timely decision-making and a proactive approach to challenges (Song et al., 2023). These skills are also evident in leaders' behaviour and strategic performance. Supportive leadership improves business performance, while creativity and logical problem-solving are key skills (Park et al., 2022; Raza & Khan, 2022). Thus, leadership skills significantly influence behaviour and management effectiveness.

H5: There is a relationship between leadership skills and behavioural values.

Leadership behaviour is a crucial determinant of overall performance (Suliman et al., 2023). Effective leadership behaviour not only enhances leaders' own performance but also positively impacts employee performance. Motivated leaders who collaborate effectively with their teams tend to drive better team outcomes (Song et al., 2023). However, management practices often involve significant stress and anxiety, which can

adversely affect leaders' mental health (Xiong et al., 2023). Despite this, a positive behavioural attitude and awareness can significantly help leaders address challenges. To mitigate stress and enhance performance, leaders should engage in stress management and participate in development programs (Laspita et al., 2023). Such participation is essential for improving leadership skills and strategic team performance (Alkayed & Omar, 2023). Consequently, leadership skills and mental fitness are vital for effective team performance and business success (Sarfraz et al., 2023). Thus, prioritizing stress management and mental health is crucial for leadership effectiveness.

H6: There is a mediating role of leadership skills between stress management and behavioural values.

H7: There is a mediating role of leadership skills between mental health and behavioural values.

Methodology

This study utilised a purposive sampling method to collect and analyse data, focusing on participants from the Horseback Therapeutic and Leadership Development Program in Malaysia, specifically leaders from various departments. A Likert scale questionnaire, adapted from previous studies and revised based on expert feedback, was employed to ensure clarity and relevance. Verbal consent was obtained from participants, who provided data at a single point in time due to the cross-sectional nature of the research. Out of 300 distributed questionnaires, 260 valid responses were retained after preliminary analysis. The data was analysed using JASP software (version 0.19.0.0), known for its capability to handle complex datasets, to perform descriptive statistics, reliability tests, factor loadings, path coefficients, and indirect effects, thereby addressing the study's hypotheses.

Findings

The data for this study were analysed using the JASP statistical tool, which is known for its user-friendly interface for numerical data analysis. The dataset comprised 260 responses, all of which were complete, with no missing values. The mean of the data fell within the range of +3 to -3 (Royston, 1992), indicating that the dataset was suitable for further analysis. The Likert scale responses ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5. Descriptive statistics for the findings are detailed in Table 1. In the second stage, the reliability of the adapted scale items was assessed. According to Sekaran (2003), a scale is deemed valid if the Cronbach's alpha (reliability coefficient) exceeds 0.70. Cronbach's alpha was computed for the data to evaluate the validity of each scale item. The results indicated that all scale items had a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.70, thereby confirming their reliability. The detailed statistics are presented in Table 2. In the third stage, the reliability of individual items was evaluated. According to Hair et al. (2012), factor loadings exceeding 0.70 confirm the reliability of scale items when using reflective scales. As this study employs reflective scale items, factor

loadings were calculated accordingly. The results, detailed in [Table 3](#), indicate that the minimum factor loadings were 0.804 for behavioural values, 0.795 for leadership skills, and 0.742 for mental health. Additionally, the scale items for stress management had a minimum factor loading of 0.770. Thus, the reliability of individual items was confirmed.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics.

	Valid	Missing	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Stress Management	260	0	3.330	1.160	1.000	5.000
Mental Health	260	0	3.332	1.169	1.000	5.000
Leadership Skills	260	0	3.334	1.162	1.000	5.000
Behavioural Values	260	0	3.354	1.181	1.000	5.000

Table 2: Frequentist Individual Item Reliability Statistics.

	If item dropped
Item	Cronbach's α
Stress Management	0.824
Mental Health	0.764
Leadership Skills	0.746
Behavioural Values	0.740

Table 3: Factor Loadings.

	Factor Loadings
Behavioural Values	0.804
Leadership Skills	0.795
Mental Health	0.743
Stress Management	0.770
<i>Note.</i> Applied Rotation Method is ProMax.	

Path analysis was conducted to assess both direct and mediating relationships (see [Figure 1](#)), with a significance threshold set at $p < 0.05$ for hypothesis acceptance. The results supported Hypothesis 1 (H1), indicating a significant relationship between stress management and leadership skills. Hypothesis 2 (H2) confirmed a significant relationship between stress management and behavioural values. Hypothesis 3 (H3) revealed a significant relationship between mental health and leadership skills. Additionally, Hypothesis 4 (H4) demonstrated a significant relationship between mental health and behavioural values. Lastly, Hypothesis 5 (H5) confirmed a significant relationship between leadership skills and behavioural values. The detailed results are presented in [Table 4](#). Similarly, mediation analysis was conducted. The results supported Hypothesis 6 (H6), demonstrating a significant mediating role of leadership skills between stress management and behavioural values. Additionally, Hypothesis 7 (H7) was confirmed, indicating a significant mediating role of leadership

skills between mental health and behavioural values.

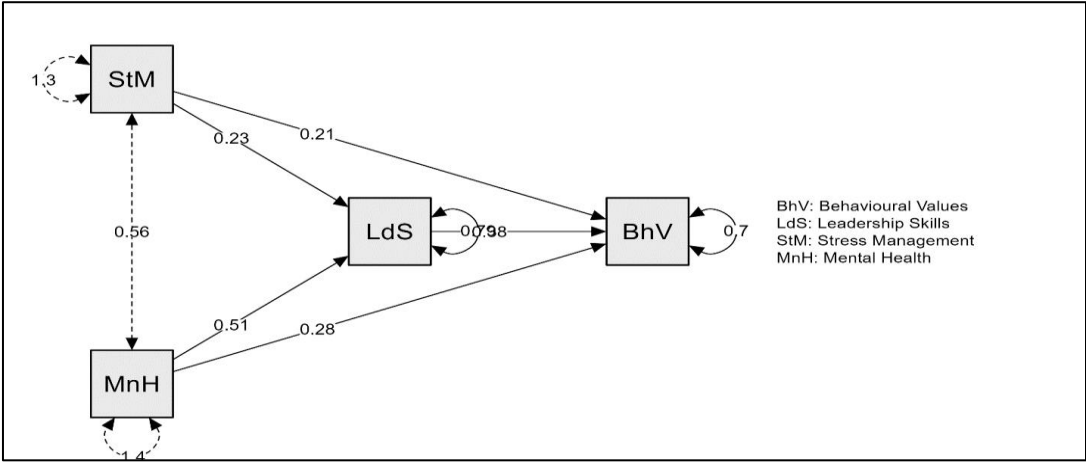


Figure 1: Path Plot.

Table 4: Path Coefficients.

							95% Confidence Interval	
			Estimate	Std. Error	Z-Value	P	Lower	Upper
Leadership Skills	→	Behavioural Values	0.380	0.040	9.562	< .001	0.303	0.458
Stress Management	→	Behavioural Values	0.206	0.035	5.918	< .001	0.137	0.274
Mental Health	→	Behavioural Values	0.280	0.039	7.197	< .001	0.204	0.357
Stress Management	→	Leadership Skills	0.230	0.036	6.454	< .001	0.160	0.299
Mental Health	→	Leadership Skills	0.510	0.035	14.463	< .001	0.441	0.580
Note. Delta Method Standard Errors, Normal Theory Confidence Intervals, ML Estimator.								

Table 5: Indirect effects.

					95% Confidence Interval					
					Estimate	Std. Error	Z-Value	p	Lower	Upper
Stress Management	→	Leadership Skills	→	Behavioural Values	0.087	0.016	5.349	< .001	0.055	0.119
Mental Health	→	Leadership Skills	→	Behavioural Values	0.194	0.024	7.976	< .001	0.147	0.242

Discussion and Conclusion

The statistical analysis of this research confirmed that all hypotheses were significantly supported. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 (H1) verified a significant relationship between stress management and leadership skills, while Hypothesis 2 (H2) established a significant relationship between stress management and behavioural values. These findings align with existing literature. [Rathnasekara et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight that organizations face unique stressors that need to be managed effectively. [Raza et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasize that stress management is a crucial aspect of leadership capabilities. [Zonghua et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that effective stress management enhances job efficiency and problem-solving in leadership roles. Similarly, [Song et al. \(2023\)](#) note that inadequate focus on stress management may contribute to poor leadership performance. [Zonghua et al. \(2023\)](#) identify effective stress management as a key trait of quality leadership. These findings resonate with previous research, such as [Khan and Ghayas \(2022\)](#), which found a link between stress management and leadership behaviour, ultimately impacting organizational performance ([Xiong et al., 2023](#)). [Gip et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that leaders who manage stress well are better equipped to make sound decisions, while [Bashir et al. \(2023\)](#) indicate that stress management influences overall decision-making and work quality. [Purwanto \(2022\)](#) demonstrates that effective stress management improves leadership conduct. In summary, stress management is a critical factor influencing leadership value and creating a positive working environment ([Gomes et al., 2020](#); [Subijana et al., 2021](#)).

Hypothesis 3 (H3) established a significant relationship between mental health and leadership skills, while Hypothesis 4 (H4) confirmed a significant link between mental health and behavioural values. These findings are consistent with existing research. [Baheer et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that mental health is crucial for enhancing leadership conduct. [Park et al. \(2022\)](#) highlight that good mental health aids leaders in making effective decisions, and [Gip et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasize that mentally fit leaders can critically evaluate options. Mental fitness also contributes to employee performance and overall value ([Laspita et al., 2023](#); [Zonghua et al., 2023](#)). [Purwanto \(2022\)](#) stresses that mental and psychological strength drive productive decision-making. [Malik Muhammad Sheheryar Khan et al. \(2022\)](#) underscores the importance of psychological health in key decisions affecting leadership performance. Additionally, [Zonghua et al. \(2023\)](#) discusses how leadership programs enhance mental capabilities and decision-making skills, improving overall performance. [Laspita et al. \(2023\)](#) also emphasize that effective decision-making reflects the quality of leadership performance. Thus, mental health is a significant factor influencing overall leadership effectiveness.

Hypothesis 5 (H5) established a significant relationship between leadership skills and behavioural values. This finding corroborates existing literature. [Laspita et al. \(2023\)](#) emphasize that possessing essential leadership skills is crucial for enhancing overall performance. Effective decision-making and performance are closely tied to leadership

abilities (Severin et al., 2022). Galanti et al. (2021) highlight that leaders can foster a positive performance perspective when they effectively address potential challenges. Alkayed et al. (2023) further support this by noting that leadership abilities significantly influence individual behaviour and strategic performance. Chouchane et al. (2023) observe that supportive leadership improves organizational performance, while Bashir et al. (2023) identify problem-solving and creativity as key leadership skills. Consequently, effective leadership skills are reflected in how leaders manage and conduct themselves. Findings from H6 and H7 indicate that leadership skills significantly mediate the relationships between stress management and behavioural values, and mental health and behavioural values. This is consistent with existing research, which highlights the crucial role of leadership behaviour in overall performance (Chouchane et al., 2023; Obeidat et al., 2023). Effective leadership positively impacts team performance and requires good stress management and mental fitness (Fitouri, 2023; Rathnasekara et al., 2023). Additionally, involvement in various leadership programs enhances skills and performance (Bashir et al., 2023; Hamouche, 2020). Thus, stress management and mental health are essential for leadership effectiveness and overall performance (Maria Khan et al., 2022).

Theoretical Implications

This research makes a novel theoretical contribution by exploring relationships that have been underreported in prior studies. It provides new insights by demonstrating that stress management is positively and significantly associated with both leadership skills and behavioural values. While previous studies have touched on this relationship, their findings were inconsistent. This study establishes stress management as a critical factor for enhancing leadership skills and behavioural values. Additionally, it addresses the previously inconclusive discussion on the impact of mental health on leadership skills and behavioural values, confirming that mental health is a significant influence on both. The study also clarifies that leadership skills are directly correlated with the behavioural values of management-level employees. Furthermore, it highlights that leadership skills act as a significant mediator between both stress management and behavioural values, as well as mental health and behavioural values. In summary, this research enriches academic literature by elucidating these newly explored relationships.

Practical Implications

The study offers substantial practical implications for enhancing leadership development in Malaysia. It advocates for the implementation of equine-assisted leadership development programs, emphasizing that participation in these programs can significantly enhance stress management skills among leaders. Improved stress management is expected to lead to better work performance and contribute to the development of leadership skills and overall behavioural values. Additionally, the study highlights the long-term benefits of such programs in strengthening leadership

and refining management practices. It also suggests that focusing on leadership skills, particularly in conjunction with effective stress management and mental health, can positively influence the behavioural values of management. Thus, the study underscores the critical role of equine-assisted leadership development programs in supporting and advancing management skills.

Future Directions

Although this study makes significant contributions to the field, several recommendations for future research are proposed. First, future studies should consider collecting data from populations outside Malaysia, such as Thailand, Singapore, or Indonesia, to gain new insights and a more comprehensive understanding of leadership development and behavioural values in diverse workplace contexts. Second, incorporating qualitative data through interviews is recommended, as it can enrich theory development and provide deeper subjective insights. Third, conducting bibliographic studies could offer valuable thematic analysis and identify trends in contemporary research, providing scholars with essential details for future investigations. Addressing these recommendations could enhance scholarly contributions and advance the literature in this area.

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