How did they become successful leaders? 
A qualitative study on the elements of leadership success in vocational and technical education

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Abstract Successful educational institutions are often referred to as the product of successful leaders who lead these institutions with efficiency and the ability to achieve the institution's goals. Despite many published studies on leadership and leaders, few studies address the elements of leaders' success as they are reported by themselves. The goal of this research was to identify the elements of the success of leaders that led them to be leaders. To achieve this goal, a qualitative research method was employed in which 42 in-depth interviews were conducted with educational leaders who worked or were still working in their institutions. The collected data were analyzed via conceptual analysis by coding and recoding to identify general concepts and themes related to the success of leaders. The results revealed that employability skills, personal characteristics, and committed values are the axes of these elements. The study recommended establishing courses, workshops, and conferences related to leadership and focusing on the elements of success to benefit future leaders from the experiences of educational leaders who served in the field and to improve leadership skills.

Keywords: leadership, successful elements, educational institutions

1. Introduction

Leadership skills are needed for all individuals at all levels. It is not limited to persons in senior positions in military or civil life. Companies, banks, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations need leaders who acquire leadership skills at the practical and functional levels. The teacher in his class, the principal at his school, and the administrator in his job need to possess and exercise leadership skills to get the school to the highest levels of effectiveness. In that context, Aal Talaa and Aal Azzam (2023) indicate that morale, achievement, accuracy, mastery, and speed at work are the result of positive reciprocal relationships between the leader and followers; this is evident and appears more clearly when the organization goes through crises as the leader seeks the help of followers and leans on them to make efficient decisions and achieve the urgent and nonurgent goals of the organization.

Educational leadership is one of the basic processes of any educational institution, as it leads to the cohesion of the group (Saadeh & Rushdie, 2011), increases the level of motivation and achievement (Omar, 2019), and helps institutions achieve high-quality education (Aweys, 2021). Leadership in various educational institutions has become vital for principals and all staff, as it is important for them to have the leadership skills to translate the objectives of the educational institution into reality, each of whom can carry out leadership tasks while contributing to a sophisticated school environment that affects young people and enhances their motivation to work (Al-Khader, 2016).

Vocational and technical education (VTE) plays a vital role in the educational system by providing a skilled and qualified workforce. There is an urgent need for leaders with leadership skills who carry stories of success, through which we can provide a model of leadership that can be guided and may be seen as an added value to teachers' and managerial professional development. Leadership skills are important in this type of education, which is the cornerstone of the national economy, and vocational education institutions are responsible for promoting the country's economy through highly skilled workers. The National Human Resources Development Strategy 2016-2025 considers the development of an efficient and skilled workforce as one of the priorities to achieve economic and social ambitions.

Speaking of leadership, it can be argued that it is all the skills, attributes, and abilities a person needs to successfully guide and influence others to achieve common goals. Welte (2014) noted that leadership is "capable personally of building relationships between people who influence them to do desirable work." Rauch and Behling (1984) suggested that leadership is the process of influencing an organizing group to achieve goals. Bennis (2003) said "to lead a group, the leader must have a clear vision, a capacity for guidance, a steadfast say and act. He added that each leader needs four necessary resources. First,
to engage others in the organization by finding a common factor between them and to make them believe that the organization’s vision is their own. Second, all true leaders are authentic leaders with a distinctive voice, meaning that they have a set of advantages (purpose goal, self-confidence, emotional intelligence). Third, all true leaders are honest. Fourth, they can adapt and act quickly in all situations. With today’s digital acceleration and the need for rapid response to events, leaders are required to act, make decisions, and evaluate results and feedback. Leadership does not require supernatural people; rather, there is a near-unanimity among researchers that leaders are ordinary people who do not generate leaders but that leadership is a skill that may be acquired through continuous self-development and building relationships with others to gain trust without external interference.

2. Conceptual Framework

To understand, in depth, how leaders describe themselves and what elements of success they see as major reasons for their success in leading educational institutions, Bennis considers that there are three fundamental aspects that everyone needs to know about leadership: having the desire to lead and having a vision. Third, to do what he says and act as others, expect him to do.

Concerning the respective roles of the leader and the manager, Bennis (2003) points out that “not every manager is a leader but every leader may be a manager.” Bennis further asserts that “if the manager is aware of problem-solving skills, the leader is known in building the future of institutions.” The leader can integrate the team into the organizational structure, aligning his or her efforts toward achieving common goals. The manager shall have the necessary skills to manage available sources for the execution of tasks in production and service delivery. Bennis referred to a set of qualities of both the leader and the manager. These qualities can be summarized by saying that the leader leads the renovation with authenticity, establishes trust in others, engages in long-term thinking, thinks strategically, asks why, and what? focuses on human humanity, establishes success through team building, and exercises power through reason. Conversely, Bennis adds that the manager watches others carefully, thinks in the short term, thinks in a technical (tactical) way and asks how and when, and focuses on production and how to increase it.

The roles of leaders and leaders differ from those of management and manager, but this does not mean that the functions do not intersect. The leader may sometimes be a manager, and the manager may exercise leadership roles. Managers can be seen from the practical aspect of the nature of their work, as when a manager is in his business “wearing a management hat.” Most of the emphasis is on how to complete tasks to complete the work, always trying to get people around them to think about the exact time needed to complete the work. However, when the leader exercises a leadership role, he begins by influencing his team and encouraging them to do their work, rather than encroaching on the issue of time and exceeding expectations (Bennis, 2003). Bardwell (2011) added that the leadership task includes planning goals, policies, and long-term strategies.

The importance of leadership stems from the importance of a human society. Society cannot develop and prosper without wise leadership, which works to formulate plans and goals, follow up on their implementation, evaluate and develop them. Several researchers suggest that leadership must be flexible and resilient (Hoare, 2002). Leadership is the engine of an organization’s effectiveness (Villut, 2000). The educational institution’s success in achieving its goals includes a leader with qualities who can employ competencies to build positive human relationships (Rafah, 2010). Al-Agrani (2013) asserts that educational institutions need leaders who possess leadership skills and work to meet their administrative and technical needs.

Several studies have been conducted on leaders’ characteristics, attributes, and different leadership patterns, but the elements of success that help leaders reach an advanced stage of achievement and lead their institutions at a high level of professionalism have rarely been addressed. How these elements have contributed to increasing the enterprise’s productivity, strengthening the clear relationships between workers, improving the working environment, and consolidating its identity among other competing institutions are all elements that need to be taken into consideration. These leaders’ views on these elements are considered to be the basis for their success in their work. In addition, today’s world is set for another revolution in the tech world that will certainly extend to remote driving, becoming one of the driving patterns that will greatly contribute to improving the working environment and increasing production (Alam, 2013).

In terms of leadership patterns, there are many leadership patterns, but one of the most effective is democratic (Aweiss; 2020). Mammary and Shamli (2021) also indicate that the most practiced pattern is democratic; we refer to the bullying pattern with a higher ranking between these patterns. Therefore, the democratic pattern is considered one of the most acceptable patterns for individuals where this pattern interacts with the leader and his subordinates, and the leader is a member of the team. This pattern takes the group’s view of planning and sets goals for planning (Taha, 2001). It also raises the morale of the group and increases their self-confidence.

Leadership characteristics include endurance, complementarity, and interdependence (Tailoring, 2007). Sada’a (2011) added that they respect individuals' needs, motivate their followers, work to strengthen their relationships with them, and increase their self-confidence. Hariri (2002) added that leadership in educational institutions requires that the leader possess
a range of skills, including employability skills, creativity, problem solving, initiative, specialized technical skills, and human and social skills.

It is important to point out that leaders are normal people. It is not necessary for a leader to have a job title such as a doctor or engineer, a person who wears a suit and tie, a person who is making good money, or a person who is socially prestigious. All these attributes may mean nothing to lead others. Rather, the leader may be that the person who works in public service is loyal to his work, keeps his or her place of responsibility at best, seeks and thinks the most about how to improve his or her performance and encourage others to assume their responsibilities, and keeps the institution culture and worker relationships at the top of his or her priorities.

Despite the importance of leadership patterns and leadership characteristics, this study not only is concerned with leadership patterns and types but is also more concerned about leaders themselves, how they see themselves as leaders, the reasons that participated in leading their institutions toward planned goals, and how they describe and what elements of success have made them great leaders.

After more than 20 years of experience in the field of education, the researcher noticed that there are educational leaders who are well known in terms of their professionalism, characteristics, and abilities to lead. This made individuals who worked with them emphasize their success. To build a role model for these leaders and to indicate what has made them distinct in their professional societies, the researcher considered that these phenomena should be studied, documented, and analyzed to form a model of success for those leaders.

The researcher believes that leadership skills are essential for everyone who works in education in general. The daily questions include who is the leader, who is the manager, what are the qualities of each, and what are the elements of their success? We rarely obtain answers, or we obtain answers from people who are not involved. The questions are as follows: who is the person who can tell us about leadership, and how has they succeeded in their career? Even though the literature abounds with many definitions and descriptions of both the leader and the manager, there are no studies that address the reasons and the distinctive elements of success that made these leaders. Moreover, through the researcher's experiences in teaching postgraduate students' courses in educational planning, leadership, and economic education, he noted that there is an interest in leadership as a skill and a greater interest in the leader as a person, but few people were aware of the leaders' perspectives on the elements of success that made them lead in their institutions (Do, Nguyen, Dinh, 2018).

3. Research Question

This qualitative study explored leaders' perspectives on the elements of success that make them great leaders by answering the following question, which guides this study:

What are the elements of success that are seen by educational leaders in VTE institutions?

Various questions stemmed from the main questions that were asked during the interviews of the target leaders of this study. The purpose of this series of questions is to reach the aim of this study by finding a thematic module for elements that assist leaders in their missions.

4. Methodology and Procedures

To conduct this study, the researcher wanted to reach out to a large number of leaders who believed that they had the credibility and reputation that made them an example or role model for others. Therefore, to interview each of them separately, the interviews were transcribed, and the documents were analyzed to achieve the purpose of the study and compare the results of the analysis with the aforementioned theory (Bennis, 2009).

This study is significant because it is the first qualitative study to explore leaders' self-descriptions and the elements of success that have contributed to their institutions' achievements. The study may highlight some attributes that have enabled these leaders to function, sustain, and reach the organization's goals. This study may add value to the literature regarding the elements a leader needs to succeed. The study may also provide information from its sources through educational leaders to achieve a model of success, as well as a vision that enables individuals to represent certain leadership qualities.

5. Study Design

The current study employs qualitative phenomenological research through the interview method. The researcher prepared a list of semistructured questions to be asked of the target interviewees. The data were collected from several educational leaders who have worked or continue to work in the fields of general education and vocational and technical education. This method has been used because it gives a person the freedom to speak for himself or herself and his or her experiences and because of how he or she became a successful educational leader. Moreover, the interview method also allows for the identification of opportunities for leaders who have been considered influential in their educational institutions.

6. Data collection
The researcher has contacted many people with long experience in VTE, have reached leadership positions in the field, have a reputation within educational institutions, have been known as influencers, and have accomplished this by receiving prizes or awards at the local or regional level. It can be said that a successful person in the field of VTE continues to be remembered by colleagues and students as well as members of society even after leaving the position. The researcher takes into consideration the following criteria during his attempts to attract participants for this study. First, the leader was nominated by at least three people who were influenced by his leadership style. Second, the leader has at least 10 years of experience. Third, the leader received appreciative awards either locally or globally. Finally, leaders have had an impact on educational policies.

The method of data collection was based on the "important case" technique or Critical Incident Technique, defined by Woosley (1969) as "containing a set of simple interviews conducted to gather information from persons with direct information about an event or situation." This method was first carried out as a research method in 1954 by Flanagan (1954); Flanagan can gather certain and truthful information about a real phenomenon or behavior from participants about events they see as important by asking participants and obtaining in-depth answers on the research topic.

7. Validity and reliability

The researcher followed a systematic method to select the study participants. The snowball method was employed to recruit participants for this study, taking into consideration the criteria mentioned above. There was considerable diversity among the participants in terms of the nature of their work, gender, and years of experience. This variety increases the credibility of the selected group. Moreover, the researcher and his assistants ensured that each of the participants provided the same information each time to the same question. In addition, all participants were interviewed at places and times according to their desires, and no pressure was used to answer or leave any questions.

In terms of interview questions, the researcher, in cooperation with his assistants, shared these questions with managers, supervisors, teachers, and university professors in the fields of administration, pedagogy, curricula, counseling psychology, and postgraduate students. Each of whom expressed their views on these questions and their relevance to the subject matter, accuracy, and clarity. Most of the arbitrators’ feedback was considered, and some questions that were superfluous or inexplicable were changed, modified, or deleted until they were settled on what they were in the final form to be used in actual interviews.

8. Research ethics

All potential participants were contacted and informed of the purpose of the study. The researcher and his assistants explained the process of completing this research through the interview method. At each stage of this qualitative study, the researcher ensured that individuals were not subjected to psychological, physical, or social harm with or without intent. Examples of questions were provided to give them an idea about the nature of this research. There was no single question that addressed any personal information or broke the participants' privacy. The participants' names were not disclosed at any stage of the research to ensure confidentiality.

9. Participants

All 48 potential participants from North Jordan Province agreed to participate in this research. However, during the research proceedings and preparation for the interviews, six participants withdrew from the study for personal reasons. Some of them said that they could not complete the interview because of matters beyond their control or because they requested that the interview be postponed to another time that was not available to the researcher. The final list of participants in this study included 42 individuals who agreed to be interviewed—19 of whom were females. The participants were required to meet the following criteria: (22) hold a baccalaureate degree, (13) hold a master's degree, and (7) hold a doctoral degree. In terms of their educational experience, the participants ranged between 10 and 30 years. It should be noted that everyone who stated that he had "long experience" in education and administrative work meant that this experience was more than (10) years.

10. Interview Procedure

Before conducting this study, oral consent was obtained from all of the participants individually after they were informed of the objectives of this study and were assured that this interview and its results would be useful only for scientific research. The following actions were taken:
- Contact anticipated participants from vocational and technical education institutions. Preparation of the main question and the subquestions for the interviews.
- The process of validity and reliability were taken into consideration.
- Some of the participants were asked to be provided with questions in advance for the interview, and the researcher provided them with the questions in advance.
The interviews took place based on the desire of the participants to ensure comfort and a sense of security and to provide more freedom to express ideas and thoughts in the way he deemed appropriate.

The interviews started at the beginning of January 2023 and ended at the end of March 2023.

The interviewees gave their permission to record the interviews. However, some of them preferred to write or type the answers down on the computer or the iPad. The names and affiliations of the participants were provided at the beginning of the interview.

Participants had the opportunity to hear or read what they said during the interviews without making any adjustments or corrections to the transcripts.

As mentioned earlier, these interviews were conducted through structured questions; however, follow-up questions were asked to the participants to clarify some of the unclear answers.

Overall, 27 questions were answered to obtain the necessary information. All the questions addressed to the participants were related to their work in the field of education to clarify the elements of their leadership success in the field.

The interview questions included one background question, principles and values, difficulties, daily work, managing distance learning, success, institutional activities, perspectives on leaders and managers, work under pressure, interpersonal relationships, criteria of success, strategic planning, human resources, leadership and its indicators, teamwork skills, technology, community roles, vision and mission, a module of leadership, professional development, excellency, job satisfaction, professional development, and perspectives on dealing with crisis and natural disasters.

Notably, key questions were asked by all the interviewees, but the follow-up questions varied from one participant to another depending on the context of the interview.

To achieve the study’s goal of identifying the elements of success of the educational leader, the researcher felt that the results of these pivotal questions should focus on a common theme among the interviewees that contributed to their successes as educational leaders. After each interview, the recordings and written answers statements made by each participant were transcribed, and the researcher and his assistants made sure that the participants had forgotten something or wanted to add or clarify anything else.

11. Data analysis

There is more than one model for analyzing the data. For instance, Miles and Huberman's (1994) model combines three stages of analyzing data: clean, display, and subtract. Alston and Bowles (2003) suggested a model that combines cleaning, organizing, and explaining data. However, Creswell's (2007) model combines five stages: Questions fit research to collect data, determine who participants have stories to tell, collect information about the context of these stories, analyze the participants' stories, and negotiate with participants the meaning of their stories. The researcher decided to adopt the latter approach. Therefore, the process of analyzing the data involves defining the proper questions, determining the participants, collecting information and reading it carefully, analyzing the information, and extracting themes and meanings. After all the interviews were completed and recorded, the researcher started the process of cleaning the data. The information was coded based on the open coding method. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Arabic and subsequently translated to English by forward and backward methods of translation by two bilingual translators. The research team involved in the coding included master's degree students. Each team member has the opportunity to review at least three interview responses (Steed, Strain, Rausch, and Bold, 2023). The participants took notes on each response and accumulated these notes to form the coding method. Another researcher then separately evaluated the coding to determine the Cohen's kappa and the degree of internal compatibility between the research team, which were approved by the first and second researchers. To further ascertain the validity of the interview questions and results, another researcher was asked to take a sample of 15% of the answers deemed significant and redefined. This method can overcome these differences by coding among researchers. For illustration, coding is the way of giving a character to each of the themes contained in the context of the talk that has been converted into writing to facilitate its analysis and thus the organization of results in the form of numbers or another form. The initial step in qualitative analysis is reading the interview transcripts, observational notes, or documents to be analyzed (Emerson et al. 1995, pp 142-143). In this part, the inductive method is used in the search for themes without prejudging any concept, and this method may be more appropriate in such research for the issue that the researcher may want to reach. The analysis included all the answers obtained from the participants so that consistency in the coding process was emphasized for greater accuracy in the results. Based on the results of this analysis, the key elements uncovered by participants contributed to their success in leading. More than 183 different codes were reviewed by the research team. After that, they engaged in thematic analysis to identify commonalities across codes and group codes (Croswell, 2003).

12. Interview Results
This study aimed to identify elements of successful leadership in vocational and technical education institutions. To that end, the researcher conducted this qualitative study to better understand the elements of success enjoyed by educational leaders. To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher contacted a large number of educational experts and leaders. The final number of participants in this study was 42. Educational leaders were interviewed, followed by an overview of their answers, in-depth reading of the data, cleaning of the data, and classification to detect the main themes. The size of the transcript interviews exceeded 450 pages.

The following are some of the interview questions and responses of the participants and the process of defining keywords:

What is the daily basis task that you do in your institution?
"One of the most important tasks that I do is controlling students' behaviors and discipline, evaluating teachers' performance, and providing instructions".

The keywords that were deducted from this answer were discipline, evaluation, and instructions.

What are the characteristics of successful educational leaders (teachers, principals, and educational supervisors)?
"Developing teachers professionally, improving the implementation of the curriculum, continuous planning, engaged teachers in making decisions, self-confidence, communication skills, problem-solving skills"

Another participant said, "I think it is possible to say that possession of a leader to the communication skills, does not discriminate against, and the ability to organize the work, and the desire toss, vision and mission to achieve planned goals".

Keywords for this question: professional development, curriculum improvement, decision-making, problem-solving, organization, change, teamwork, collaborative and cooperative.

The analysis began with a coding of keywords repeated by participants in the interviews, bearing in mind which category this theme belongs to. As mentioned earlier, (183) keywords found deducted from the interviews were distributed into three main groups (themes). Employability skills (E), values (V), and personal characteristics (P). This step was repeated twice to ensure that the analysis was complete the first time and that the second time.

In terms of the first category, which came under employability skills (E), participants mentioned (104) keywords regarding the elements of success as they are perceived by participants’ leaders. These keywords started from planning, strategic planning, communication skills (listening), teamwork skills, and making decisions at the highest elements and ended up familiarizing oneself with laws and instruction.

The second category included personal characteristics (P). Participants revealed 54 keywords related to the elements of success from their point of view. These keywords started from human resources [encouraging others, justice and nondiscriminate, merciful, human, humble, professional development, flexible, role model, and ended up influencing others and being easygoing.

The third category included the values (V). Participants in this study ranked this category in third place among other categories as an element of success for the leaders in VTE. It carries keywords such as honesty, loyalty, trustworthiness, integrity, and belonging to the work.

The analysis of the results of interviews with educational leaders showed that the success of a leader is based on three pillars: employability, personal characteristics, and values.

12.1. Employability skills

Employability skills came at the top of the elements of success for the leader. This component of success received the largest percentage—as much as 65%—of all components. A set of 16 different types of skills was identified, all of which were important, but the researcher considered focusing on the most important skills that participated in their leading process.

Leaders believe that strategic planning skills are considered to be one of the most significant elements of success, followed by effective communication skills. Additionally, they believe that cooperation and collaboration are two components of success. Then, they were assured that organizing skills were the top skills that contributed to their success. Some other skills, such as giving instruction or orientation, making decisions, human resource development, evaluating, managing time, enabling, ensuring accuracy, solving problems, respecting others, and committing to regulation, came in the second half of the set.

12.2. Personal Characteristics

Many statements are related to personal characteristics. The researcher deduced a set of 20 characteristics that are considered elements of a successful leader. Participants described the successful leader as one who supports, encourages, is human and merciful, is self-controlled, is humble, and is skilled in technology. However, in the other half of this set, participants explained with their statements some of these skills, such as professional development; the desire to change, flexibility, democracy, role model, self-confidence, innovation, and high ability to do things; obtaining data and information; consulting others; employing a different type of leadership style; courage; being influenced by others; and easy-going. These characteristics distinguish leaders from others.
12.3. Values

Values have been an important element of leaders’ success. Integrity and transparency were considered to be among the most important elements, followed by sincerity, honesty and honesty, and nuance from other skills (Figure 1).

Perhaps it can be said that all the leaders interviewed had ordinary personalities, treating everyone equally, following through on their promises, working hard, and viewing themselves as role models for others in saying and working. They also maintain staff secrets, do not diminish the team’s effort, and do not complain about their performance. A number of them have stated that they work for the business, not their interests.

![Figure 1](https://www.malque.pub/ojs/index.php/mr)

**Figure 1** Model for successful leaders in vocational and technical institutions (3x4).

13. Findings and Discussion

The results of this study revealed many concepts and themes that were related to many other studies. For example, Falk and Smith (2001) noted that leadership is the function of providing vision, open communication, and bringing staff to one’s side. According to the results of this study, which aimed to identify elements of successful leaders in VET, communication skills are among the employability skills vital to leaders’ role and function. Moreover, Falk and Smith added that leadership is the encouragement of each employee, self-motivation, vision, passion, and the ability to communicate effectively. On the personal characteristics side, leadership requires a look at the present and the future from the small to the big picture. Leadership is about accepting responsibility and accountability. It is about developing a climate of trust (p. 47). This finding matches the results of this study, in terms of employability and generic skills, when the participants revealed that those skills are some of their elements of success.

According to Zakaria, Jizat, and Zakaria (2015), leadership can be divided into six dimensions: collegiality followed by autonomy, a positive environment, open communication, recognition, participation, and, last, developmental focus. This means that the main core of leadership effectiveness in technical and vocational educators is collegial, which means that there is a cooperative relationship between collagenous individuals and all the educators. In the present study, the participants’ responses were similar when they talked about the organizational culture and the nature of the relationship between the staff and the upper level: “The communication between the leader and the employees in the organization is the main factor of success.” Here, we may say that communication is included in collaboration and cooperation.


Essentially, leadership in the circumstances of this study is about people processing ongoing change. That is, effective VET leadership can be seen broadly as a process of enabling interactions between internal, external, and individual domains of activity (Falk and Smith 2003). In response to the line of inquiry for the study about the generalizability of ‘leadership skills’, it can be said with confidence that certain components of ‘leadership’ are ‘generic’ to the extent that they are perceived to be generally applicable across different situations. These components include interpersonal (including communication) skills; risk-taking; team building; envisioning; analytic; and decision-making skills.

**Ethical considerations**
This is a qualitative research study, based on interviews with 42 individuals. All factors of protecting participants were taken into consideration and all of the collected information were confidential.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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