

Transformational Leadership by Department Heads in Enhancing the Digital Competencies of Civil Servants

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Abstract. Digital transformation in the field of public administration needs high digital competences in civil servants, where leadership becomes a key in this process. This research tries to build up analysis of transformational leadership of the department head in enhancing the digital competences of civil servants, the barriers found, and how the barriers have been overcome. The research was conducted through qualitative research with semi-structured interviews on three informants, namely department head, structural officers, and civil servants of the Cirebon City Department of Cooperatives, SMEs, Trade and Industry. The results of this research prove that the transformational leadership of the Department Head can be seen from the exemplary use of digital technology, consistent vision and motivation communication, innovation, and differences in digital competence of civil servants. Nevertheless, there are some barriers for enhancing digital competencies, which consist of the gaps in digital literacy between employees, a lack of internal training programs, and technological barriers. According to the findings of this study, it is possible to say that transformational leadership plays an important role in promoting the enhancement of digital competencies of civil servants; however, for increasing the effectiveness of this strategy, it should be supported by a continuous training program and technological infrastructure.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Digital Competencies, Civil Servants, Digitalization of the Bureaucracy, Local Government

1 Introduction

The digital transformation and incorporation of national digital services in Indonesia is due to the evolution of information and communication technology (ICT), which has become an important influence in many areas of life, such as providing public services. [1] Developments in information technology have led to the emergence of digital government, which focuses on providing speed, transparency, and efficiency in the provision of public services; hence, the two levels of government, namely the central and local governments, continue to create different forms of electronic service systems. The government of Indonesia sees digitalization as one of its strategies towards improving the efficiency of governance and improving the quality of public services, making them fast and integrated. This commitment is supported by Presidential Regulation No. 82 of 2023 that aims to accelerate the integration of national digital services to overcome the fragmentation of the system in various government institutions. The implementation is done through the development of the Electronic-Based Government System (SPBE), improved cybersecurity and data protection, and improving the competence of civil servants in operating digital systems. In this case, digital competencies become one of the important aspects of civil servants since it includes information literacy, digital communication, content creation, digital security, and problem-solving skills. [2]

These shifts are also occurring in the Cirebon City Government, especially in the Department of Small and Medium-Sized Cooperatives, Trade, and Industry that acts strategically to develop MSMEs, increase competitiveness for the business actors, and improve the trade and industry sectors. The application of digital technologies in the department is one of the important processes to make service management become more modern and adaptive. Nevertheless, the application still suffers from some problems such as poor digital literacy skills, limited chances to join training, and no motivation to adapt to new technologies. This situation proves that the success of digital transformation cannot only be achieved by having the adequate infrastructures and policies but also by improving the digital capabilities of the civil servants. According to Jack Welch, as cited in [3] A leader is an individual who can inspire others by presenting a clear vision for improving work processes. Furthermore, the essence of leadership lies in the role of driving the organization toward more constructive change, so that the leader serves as the primary guide in the organization's development [4]

Numerous studies that have been conducted earlier have in fact explored the relationship between leadership and performance of employees in the government sector. Nevertheless, all these studies still pay attention to

areas like motivation, discipline, and productivity of employees. Numerous studies related to transformational leadership have been carried out too, yet they do not pay special attention to its effect on the development of digital skills of employees. On the contrary, all these studies pay special attention to technical training, infrastructures, and policies that should help improve human resource management capabilities. This role embodies the characteristics of transformational leadership, which emphasizes the empowerment and inspiration of subordinates [5] This study adopts the Transformational Leadership theory proposed by Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio (1994), which includes Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration—concepts that can explain how a leader is able to drive behavioral change, innovation, and improvements in employees' digital competencies. According to Zainal [6] Competence is the ability to exert a positive influence on others through specific strategies. The urgency of this research is heightened by the fact that many civil servants still lack the digital literacy needed to optimally support the implementation of the SPBE, thereby requiring leaders who can serve as catalysts for change and instill adaptive, collaborative, and innovative values in the workplace. Based on this, this study aims to describe and examine the role of transformational leadership by the head of the agency in enhancing the digital competencies of civil servants at the Cirebon City Agency for Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises, Trade, and Industry as part of efforts to support the digital transformation of local governments in Indonesia.

2 Literature Review

The conceptual and theoretical foundations of this study are supported by various sources in the literature and the findings of previous research related to the topic under discussion. The leadership of the village head is considered capable of improving the discipline and communication of village officials, although some obstacles to its implementation have been identified [7] Other studies show that participatory, consultative, and delegative leadership styles can boost employee motivation and professionalism through appropriate task allocation and the use of rewards and sanctions [8] In addition, transformational leadership has a positive impact on civil servants' job satisfaction [9] and contribute to improving employee performance through motivation and work discipline [10] In the field of economic empowerment, the relevant authorities are considered to play a strategic role in enhancing the digital competencies of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) through training and mentoring [11]

These various studies indicate that most research to date has focused on administrative, motivational, and performance aspects. On the other hand, research on the relationship between transformational leadership and the improvement of civil servants' digital competencies remains relatively limited, particularly in local government organizations. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining the role of transformational leadership by department heads in enhancing civil servants' digital competencies, as part of efforts to support the digital transformation of local government administration.

3 Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology with a descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the application of transformational leadership by the Head of the Cirebon City Department of Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises, Trade, and Industry in efforts to enhance the digital competencies of civil servants. A descriptive study aims to present the characteristics of a variable on its own, without comparing or relating it to other variables [12] This study focuses on transformational leadership, the obstacles encountered, and the efforts made to strengthen employees' digital competencies based on transformational leadership theory, whose parameters include: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration [13] Data was collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation with informants selected using purposive sampling. Data analysis followed an interactive approach through the phases of data reduction, data presentation, and the formulation of conclusions and validation [14] To ensure that the findings are reliable and scientifically valid, the researchers applied triangulation of sources, methods, and time.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Transformational Leadership by Department Heads in Enhancing the Digital Competencies of Civil Servants

Based on research findings and interviews with the Head of the Agency, the Head of the General and Personnel Subdivision, and civil servants, it appears that the leadership style implemented by the leadership of the Cirebon City Agency for Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises, Trade, and Industry reflects the characteristics of transformational leadership as defined by Bass and Avolio (1994). This leadership style

focuses on efforts to change the values, attitudes, and behaviors of subordinates so that they are more adaptive to changes in the environment, including in responding to the demands of work digitization.

4.1.1 Dimensions of Ideal Influence

The Head of the Agency acts as an exemplar in terms of using digital technology. The exemplarity of leadership in this respect is seen through the utilization of electronic communication systems, e-performance, and social media in the process of managing their activities and serving the public. Exemplification of leadership is in conformity with the opinion held by Bass & Avolio (1994), according to which transformational leaders motivate staff members through exemplary behaviors. In the context of this research, leadership of this kind influences the attitude of civil servants in a way that makes them more willing to develop digital competence.

4.1.2 Dimensions of Inspirational Motivation

This is where the Head of the Agency can communicate his/her vision and generate enthusiasm within civil servants concerning the relevance of digital transformation. The vision of civil servants who are flexible, competent, and proficient in digital technology is continuously communicated through morning assembly sessions, briefings, and even informal discussions.



Figure 1. The Head of the Agency Shared His Vision and Motivation with Civil Servants During the Morning Assembly

Source: Researcher's Observations

Not only does the motivation offered by supervisors have an instructional purpose, but also an inspirational one, which leads the civil servants to realize that digitalization is necessary from a strategic point of view for better results. This finding is consistent with the research [15] which states that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in the process of enhancing individuals' digital competencies by strengthening their internal drive and awareness of technological change.

4.1.3 The Dimension of Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation can be captured from the level of freedom granted to the civil servants to think creatively and come up with innovations based on digital technology. The Agency's CEO motivates its workers to suggest ideas, handle digital content, and use social media for communication purposes.

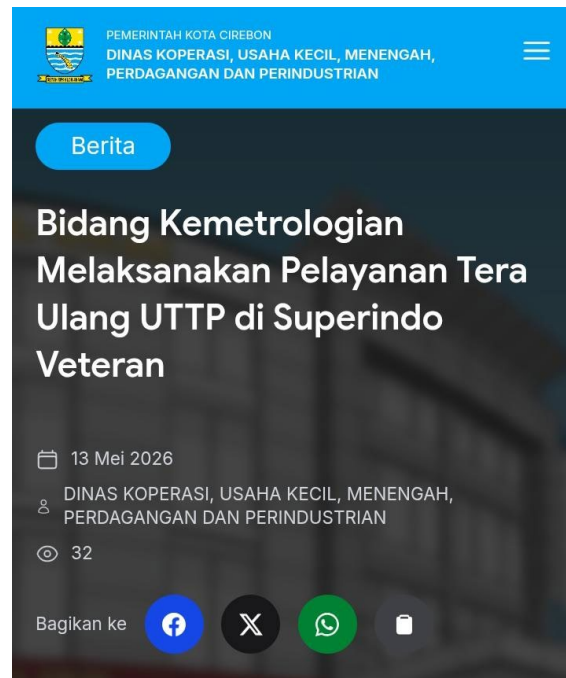


Figure 2. The Agency's Website as a Platform for Publicizing the Agency's Activities
 Source: <https://dkukmpp.cirebonkota.go.id>



Figure 3. Instagram as a Platform for Disseminating Information About Government Services.
 Source: @dkukmppkotacirebon Instagram Account

A leadership style that is open to new ideas fosters a professional environment that encourages digital education and experimentation. This is in line with the conclusion [16], who state that transformational leadership can foster the development of digital competencies through intellectual stimulation and by providing subordinates with opportunities for innovation.

4.1.4 Dimensions of Individual Attention

The Head of the Agency has highlighted the issue of inequality in digital literacy among civil servants. The strategy adopted is very flexible in the sense that civil servants with better digital literacy can train the less skilled ones.



Figure 4. Supporting Employees in the use of Digital Technology

Source: The researcher's Observations

Additionally, development programs have been offered after analyzing the needs and priorities of individuals. The strategy is consistent with the importance of transformational leadership in developing collaboration and inclusiveness within the professional workplace environment, as advocated by Bass & Avolio (1994).

4.2 Barriers to Improving the Digital Competencies of Civil Servants

Despite the presence of transformational leadership in the workplace, studies have shown that there are numerous challenges to the endeavors aimed at improving the digital skills of civil servants. The challenges can be divided into employee-based challenges, organizational challenges, and technological challenges.

The challenges that occur due to employees involve digital literacy disparities, education, and age of the civil servants. Every employee possesses his or her own readiness to use the digital technology, which leads to the difference in adaptation to it. This is in accordance with the conclusion [17] which explains that the digital competencies of government employees are still influenced by individual readiness and the work culture established within the organization.

It is clear that organizational barriers lie in the fact that there is no developed structure and sustainable internal training process in place. It is necessary to admit that there is no fully optimized training of civil servants using IT technologies since its delivery depends on external parties and has not been distributed among all civil servants yet. Furthermore, there are still some policies and work processes that are not adapted to the process of digitalization; thus, the constant revision of organizational governance is needed.

There are some technical and infrastructure barriers to the effective implementation of digital systems, which include unstable internet connection and device quality limitations in some work units. This information proves the fact that not only leadership plays a role in the process of digital literacy improvement.

4.3 Efforts by the Head of the Agency to Overcome Obstacles Through Transformational Leadership

The solutions to the aforementioned challenges are based on the strategic actions of the Head of the Agency which correspond to the principles of transformational leadership. The first solution includes fostering collaboration inside the organization by creating a digital team consisting of civil servants possessing technological skills and serving as role models and mentors for others. Such an approach stimulates knowledge sharing in informal way.

Furthermore, the Head of the Agency engages in collaboration with external entities like universities, technical agencies and information technology community. Such collaboration is used for training and mentoring of civil servants in terms of their digital literacy. Such an approach corresponds to the perspective [15] that stresses the need for systemic and collaborative effort to enhance digital skills using transformational leadership.

Others are being done through motivation and inspiration. The Head of the Agency stressed that digitization is an inevitable phenomenon for the civil service to embrace, since it is a way of enhancing their performance, accountability, and quality of public service. This method has helped the civil servants not just adhere to the digital policies, but to know how important digital skill mastery is in the work environment. Hence, transformational leadership acts as a mediator in the shift to an accommodating performance-oriented digital professionalism culture.

5 Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that the transformational leadership practiced by the Head of the Cirebon City Department of Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises, Trade, and Industry has a significant impact on the development of digital competencies of civil servants through setting an example through use of technology, motivating continuously, innovating, and overcoming gaps in digital competencies of employees. This kind of leadership can help change the attitude of civil servants to be more professional towards the use of digital technology and improve their performance and public service delivery. Nevertheless, the enhancement process of digital skills encounters certain limitations, which include deficiency in the degree of digital literacy of the staff, inefficiency in optimizing structured training programs, and limitations related to technology and its aspects such as infrastructure and networking. The results of the study suggest that digitalization in public organizations is not just about the availability of technological equipment but rather depends on the presence of leaders who would be able to effectively mobilize, direct and empower human resources in a sustainable way. Consequently, it is important to increase transformational leadership through the means of implementing the system of constant training and improvement of infrastructure and conducting follow-up studies of broader scope.

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