

Research Article

Leadership Development through the 'My Decisions' Program: A Cross-Sectional Study in the Kurdistan Region

Vanya Ibrahim Jwamer¹ , Zana Ahmad Qasab² , Jaafar Omer Ahmed^{3, 4,*} 

¹ College of Medicine, University of Sulaimani, Sulaymaniyah, 46001, Iraq

² Rwad international center for Leadership Preparation Centers, Istanbul, 34295, Turkey

³ Department of Psychology, Faculty of Art, Soran University, Soran, 44008, Iraq

⁴ Kscien Organization, Azadi Mall, Hamdi Street, Sulaimaniyah, 46001, Iraq

*Corresponding Author Jaafar Omer Ahmed, E-mail: Jaafaromer.ahmed@gmail.com

Article Info	Abstract
Article History	Leadership is a changing process of affecting and directing individuals or group of people to reach common goals. The "My Decisions Course" (MDC) is a structured-academic program that explains essential life and work skills like planning, time management, communication, and leadership. This research explores that how MDC affects the skills that participants learn and how they use those skills in their personal and professional lives. Descriptive cross-sectional study was utilized with graduates of the MDC program in Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The participants of this research were chosen based on convenience sampling method. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers and distributed electronically. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were used to analyze the data, with significance set at $p \leq 0.05$. Among the 67 participants, 73.1% considered having followers as a key leadership requirement, and 91% emphasized the importance of communication for effective leadership. Regarding planning, 56.7% reported they always try to overcome obstacles, and 49.3% agreed that planning plays a significant role in decision-making. Furthermore, 64% stated that planning skills support them in organizing their lives and managing their time effectively. The MDC program has a positive impact on developing participants' leadership, planning, and time management skills. These findings underscore the importance of structured leadership development courses in cultivating essential life competencies.
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1. Introduction

Leadership is the process of influencing, motivating, and guiding individuals or groups toward achieving shared goals or objectives (Northouse, 2021). Effective leaders are expected to adapt to situational demands, make decisions, provide vision and direction, motivate others, and foster collaboration within teams (Hall, 2007; DiGirolamo, 2010). Depending on the context, leadership may take various forms

such as autocratic, democratic, transformational, or servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Leadership plays a crucial role in various domains of life, as it provides strategic direction, improves team performance, and links individual motivation to collective achievement (Elrehail, 2018; Schaffer, 2008). Ethical leadership also entails responsibility, empathy, and accountability, particularly in times of uncertainty (Ciulla & Forsyth, 2011; Ricketts & Ricketts, 2010).

Over time, several theories have been proposed to explain the nature and development of leadership. The Great Man Theory, one of the earliest, posits that leadership is innate and genetically determined, suggesting that leaders are born, not made (Russell, 2011). In contrast, Contingency Theory argues that effective leadership depends on contextual factors and that different situations require different leadership styles (Northouse, 2021). Trait Theory emphasizes the influence of personal and physical characteristics on leadership potential, echoing the notion that leadership traits may be biologically rooted (Fleenor, 2006). Participative Theory examines how making decisions as a group and a leader's ability to involve others impact a team's effectiveness and performance (Somech, 2006). Furthermore, Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory says that leaders should change their approach depending on how mature and ready their followers are to get the best results (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

The "My Decision Course" (MDC) was launched in 2016 as a structured academic training program designed for helping individuals develop their leadership skills in both personal and professional contexts. There are modules on planning, time management, communication, and developing leadership skills. Every year, numerous numbers of candidates finish the program and get certified (MyDecisions, n.d.). The goal of this study is to determine the effectiveness of the MDC in enhancing leadership skills among individuals in Sulaimaniyah, Kurdistan Region, Iraq. The study examines how participants apply the skills they learned in real-life situations. Contexts, contribute to societal development, and work toward meaningful personal and professional goals.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Setting

The current research utilized a descriptive cross-sectional method for exploring at how the "My Decision Course" (MDC) influenced individuals who participated in this program in Sulaimaniyah, which is located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The duration of this research was 16 months, from May 4, 2023, to August 29, 2024. The study population consisted of individuals who had completed the MDC program. These individuals acquired valuable skills, including time management, planning, communication, and

leadership. The study's goal was to determine what people perceived as the benefits of the course and how they could apply what they learned in real-life situations.

2.2. Data Collection and Sampling Procedure

The only individuals who could participate in the study were those who had completed and graduated from the My Decision Course (MDC). To participate, individuals had to be at least 18 years old and hold a certificate of completion from the MDC program.

The researchers utilised a convenience sampling method because the participants were accessible and easy to get. The research team distributed the Google Form questionnaire electronically through digital channels, including email and a private Facebook group for MDC graduates in the Sulaimaniyah area. Google form was used because it was user-friendly and participants were familiar with the platform.

The total participants who took part in this study and met the criteria was 67 college students. These individuals are a small group of MDC graduates who were selected because they were available and willing to volunteer for participation. While convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings, it was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the accessibility of the target group. The majority of participants (81%) were in the 23–32 age group, and more than half were female. Additionally, approximately 95% of the participants were residents of Sulaimaniyah. Further details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data of the participants:

	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-22	7	10%
	23-32	54	81%
	33-43	6	9%
Gender:	Female	38	56.7%
	Male	29	43.3%
Residency	Halabja	3	4.5%
	Sulaimanyah	64	95.50%
Occupation	Employer	23	34.30%
	Independence Owner	13	19.50%
	Jobless	5	7.50%
	Student	26	38.80%

2.2. Questionnaire

A structured, self-administered questionnaire was developed by the researchers to assess the impact of the MDC on participants' skill development and perceptions of course effectiveness. The tool had two parts: the first assessed core leadership, planning, and time management skills; the second measured the perceived overall effectiveness of the course.

Part I comprised 11 items covering three domains:

1. **Leadership skills** – Items explored beliefs about the necessity of leadership traits, the value of having followers, the role of leadership in the workplace, and the value of communication skills.
2. **Planning skills** – Questions focused on overcoming obstacles, the role of planning in decision-making, time management, and achieving goals.
3. **Time management skills** – Items addressed task prioritization, preference for challenging versus easy tasks, and seeking expert advice.

Part II consisted of 4 items rated on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 10 = very much), assessing the MDC's impact on leadership, planning, time management, and overall skill development.

Before the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of participants to test the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the questionnaire. Based on the feedback received, necessary modifications were made to improve content accuracy and coherence. The final version was then used for the main survey.

2.3. Data Analysis

The dataset collected through Google Forms was transferred into Microsoft Excel and then imported into IBM SPSS Statistics, version 24.0, for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to summarize the data and were presented in both tabular and graphical formats. To examine associations between categorical variables, the chi-square test was applied. The p-value was used to determine the statistical significance of these associations, with $p \leq 0.05$ considered statistically significant.

2.4. Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted following ethical research standards. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality of participant information were maintained throughout the study. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the relevant institutional review board.

3. Results

3.1. Leadership, Planning, and Time Management Skills

In terms of leadership, most participants believed it was often necessary for a leader to possess all essential qualities and that having followers is a key requirement for leadership (73.1%). Over half emphasized the importance of focusing on leadership in the workplace, and a significant majority (91%) viewed communication skills as essential for effective leadership. Regarding planning skills, 56.7% reported that

they always strive to overcome obstacles, and 49.3% stated that planning consistently aids decision-making.

Table 2. Distribution of the participants according to leadership, planning, and time management skills

Variables	Scales	No	%
Is it important for a leader to possess all essential leadership traits?	Always	9	13.4
	No	7	10.4
	Often	48	71.6
	Sometimes	3	4.5
Is having followers essential to becoming a leader?	No, it is a secondary need	18	26.9
	Yes, it's the main need	49	73.1
Is emphasizing leadership in the workplace important?	Always	50	74.6
	Often	16	23.9
	Sometimes	1	1.5
Are communication skills essential for effective leadership?	Always	61	91
	Often	5	7.5
	Sometimes	1	1.5
Do you plan to overcome obstacles?	Always	38	56.7
	Often	28	41.8
	Sometimes	1	1.5
Does planning assist you in making decisions?	Always	33	49.3
	No	1	1.5
	Often	32	47.8
	Sometimes	1	1.5
Does planning help you manage your time and organize your life?	Always	43	64.2
	No	1	1.5
	Often	22	32.8
	Sometimes	1	1.5
Does planning contribute to increasing your achievements?	Always	35	52.2
	No	1	1.5
	Often	24	35.8
	Sometimes	7	10.4
How do you prioritize and schedule your daily tasks?	Bad	2	3
	Good	28	41.8
	Medium	10	14.9
	very good	27	40.3
Do you prioritize difficult tasks or easier ones?	easy work	14	20.9
	hard work	51	76.1
	I didn't organize	2	3
Do you consult experts for advice on time management skills?	a little	19	28.4
	Always	7	10.4
	I don't ask experts	7	10.4
	Sometimes	34	50.7

Additionally, about half of the participants reported that planning skills regularly contribute to increased achievements. Concerning time management, 41.8% rated their daily task scheduling and prioritization as good. A large proportion (76.1%) preferred to complete difficult tasks first, and many indicated that they occasionally consulted experts for time management advice. All findings are summarized in Table 2.

3.2. Effect of MDC on Skill Development:

As shown in Table 3, most participants reported that the My Decision Course positively impacted their skills. 85% of participants gave the leadership development course a rating of seven or higher on a ten-point scale. Similarly, 70% rated the course 7 or above for improving planning skills. Nearly 60% reported an improvement in time management skills with the same rating. Overall, 77.6% of participants rated the course 7 or above for its general contribution to skill development.

Table 3. Effect of MDC on the development of leadership, planning, and time management skills

The course enhanced participants' leadership skills based on self-ratings										
Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Frequency	1	1	2	0	0	6	14	17	11	15
Percentage	1.5	1.5	3	0	0	9	20.9	25.4	16.4	22.4
The course enhanced participants' planning skills based on self-ratings										
Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Frequency	0	2	0	2	9	7	10	16	12	9
Percentage	0	3	0	3	13.4	10.4	14.9	23.9	17.9	13.4
The course enhanced participants' Time management skills based on self-ratings										
Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Frequency	0	1	2	4	8	12	14	12	10	4
Percentage	0	1.5	3	6	11.9	17.9	20.9	17.9	14.9	6
The course enhanced participants' overall skills based on self-ratings										
Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Frequency	0	1	1	1	5	7	14	19	12	7
Percentage	0	1.5	1.5	1.5	7.5	10.4	20.9	28.4	17.9	10.4

4. Discussions

One of the vital responsibilities of a leader is to monitor performance and evaluate external factors that influence outcomes (Northouse, 2021; Bachiochi et al., 2000). Effective leadership is typically associated with traits such as empathy, communication, motivation, sound decision-making, cultural awareness, and dependability (Olanrewaju & Okorie, 2019; Hofmann & Morgeson, 2004). The My Decision Course

(MDC) incorporates these principles through structured modules on leadership, communication, planning, and time management. Since its inception in 2018, MDC has attracted hundreds of participants, many of whom completed the course and received certification (MyDecisions, n.d.).

In alignment with these leadership qualities, participants in the current study emphasized the importance of communication, decision-making, and the presence of followers as indicators of effective leadership. Notably, 91% agreed that communication is essential for effective leadership, and 73.1% considered having followers a primary requirement—both of which reflect MDC's emphasis on interpersonal leadership skills. These responses support theoretical models that view leadership as a relational and adaptive process (Bell, 2011; Bell & Martin, 2012). Participants' recognition of the need to possess essential leadership traits also reflects the program's core training objectives and indicates that MDC has successfully transferred key concepts into participants' understanding and practice of leadership. As highlighted by Bastardo and Van Vugt (2019), effective leaders must be active listeners and conflict-resolvers—skills that the MDC curriculum actively promotes through interactive sessions and real-world scenarios (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019).

The importance of communication skills was strongly supported by 91% of the participants, who agreed that effective communication is essential for leaders to engage followers (Khan & Wajidi, 2019). Given that leadership is inherently relational, participants acknowledged the key role of followers, with 73.1% confirming that leadership cannot exist without them. Moreover, 74.6% of respondents emphasized the importance of leadership in workplace settings. Qualities such as motivation, direction, and communication were recognized by participants as key contributors to workplace improvement and organizational progress (Steiner, 2010). Those who felt the MDC contributed to their leadership development reported high satisfaction, with the majority rating the course between 7 and 10 on a 10-point scale.

Effective planning involves recognizing both goals and potential obstacles, selecting appropriate strategies to address these challenges, and identifying practical solutions to facilitate progress (Lessard, 1998). In this study, 56.7% of participants reported consistently using planning as a tool to navigate and overcome difficulties. This aligns with previous findings that described planning as a structured procedure meant to achieve specific goals through prioritization and obstacle management (Lessard, 1998). Decision-making is fundamentally linked to the planning process. When planning and organization are applied effectively, they enhance one's ability to make sound decisions (Cohen, Bronson & Casey, 1995). In our

findings, 49.3% of participants agreed that planning plays a key role in decision-making, supporting the view that planning, organization, and decision-making are interrelated and represent conscious, deliberate actions. Planning has also been shown to contribute to greater achievement and improve time and life organization (Yukl, & Gardner, 2020). These insights are reflected in our participants' responses, with 64.2% indicating that planning helps them better establish their time and daily life, and 52.2% supporting that it contributes to increased personal achievements.

Participants demonstrated a relatively strong sense of daily task prioritization and scheduling, with 41.8% reporting good organization in managing their time. This reflects an initial understanding of time management, including awareness of current structures that classify tasks by importance and urgency, such as differentiating between important versus non-important and urgent versus non-urgent activities (Macan, 1994). A significant majority (76.1%) indicated a preference for completing difficult tasks before easier ones, recognizing that tackling challenging work first enhances focus, promotes deep engagement, and utilizes peak energy levels available at the start of the day. This approach is thought to raise personal growth, especially when combined with strategic planning tailored to individual goals (Williams & Ericsson, 2008). Moreover, 50.7% of participants reported that they occasionally seek advice from experts to improve their time management abilities. This reflects openness to learning from professionals, acknowledging the value of gaining insights from others' experiences and knowledge to enhance personal effectiveness (Mandin et al., 1997).

Overall, participants evaluated the My Decision Course positively. Specifically, 28% rated the course 8 out of 10, 20% rated it 7, and 18% rated it 9. These ratings underscore the course's constructive impact, demonstrating its perceived effectiveness in enhancing participants' skills and contributing expressively to their personal and professional development.

This study has numerous strengths and limitations worth noting. One of its main strengths is that a pilot study was conducted before the main data collection, allowing improvements to the questionnaire and enrichment of data reliability. Additionally, there is a notable lack of published literature examining the importance of leadership skills among participants of the leadership development courses, including My Decision Course and others, making this study a valuable contribution to an underexplored area. However, the study also has several limitations. First, the time frame for collecting data was limited, resulting in a relatively small sample size, which could make it more challenging to apply the results to other situations.

Second, using non-random (convenience) sampling makes it possible for selection bias to happen. Third, the study only examined graduates of the My Decision Course, which may mean that the results don't apply to other groups of people or individuals in similar programs in different locations.

5. Conclusion

The My Decision Course (MDC) is an academic program designed for helping individuals enhance essential life and work skills, including leadership, planning, and time management. Meaningful individuals enhance essential life and work skills, such as leadership, planning, and time management. The study's results indicate that the course had a positive impact on the participants who took it, especially in fostering leadership awareness, decision-making skills, and the ability to structure time effectively. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of how short-term structured training programs could impact young adults' self-efficacy and performance in both personal and professional contexts. In the Kurdish context—where such programs are limited—this study highlights the novelty and relevance of MDC as a localized educational intervention that fills a gap in leadership and personal development research. Future research should include larger sample sizes in different locations in the Kurdistan regional government. Nevertheless, the practical implications are significant. The MDC model could be helpful and used as a guide for educators, policymakers, professional trainers, public speakers, and youth development organizations aiming to integrate structured leadership and time management components into their curricula. By investing in similar programs, stakeholders could foster more engaged, organized, and leadership-oriented youth.

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Declaration of Competing Interest: The authors declare they have no known competing interests.

Research Involving Human Participants: This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and National Laws. The study approved by Ethical Committee of Training Academy Organization in Sulaymaniyah, Azady Mall Building, Floor number 2 (Reference number 10). Participants were informed about the research regulations. Written Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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