

A Study on Leadership and Role Orientation Among MBA Students in Business School

Thyagarajen T^{1*}, Dhruthi S Prasad²

ABSTRACT

Leadership is often expected as a natural outcome of management education, yet MBA graduates often demonstrate stronger managerial or worker-oriented tendencies. This study explored the dominant role orientation of 77 MBA students in a business school setting, using a structured questionnaire with Likert-scale and situational items. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests. Findings revealed that managerial orientation was most common, followed by leadership orientation, while worker orientation was least frequent. Work experience significantly influenced orientation outcomes, with students having 1–3 years' experience showing stronger leadership and managerial alignment. The results suggest that leadership development in business schools is not automatic but requires intentional, structured pedagogical interventions.

Keywords: *Leadership Orientation, Managerial Orientation, Worker Orientation, MBA Students, Business Education*

Leadership has become one of the most frequently used terms in both business education and corporate environments. Business schools, in particular, position themselves as leadership incubators, promising to develop the “leaders of tomorrow.” However, the observable behavioral outcomes among students raise an important question: are MBA programs genuinely fostering leadership, or are they reinforcing managerial competence?

While managerial orientation emphasizes planning, organization, and task execution, leadership requires vision, adaptability, emotional courage, and the ability to influence others in uncertain contexts. Observations from business school environments suggest that while students excel in structured outputs, deadlines, and compliance with rubrics, they often hesitate to take initiative in ambiguous or unstructured scenarios. These behaviors align more closely with managerial or worker roles rather than leadership.

This study emerges from the need to empirically examine whether business schools cultivate leadership or merely assume it as a byproduct of academic rigor. By focusing on role

¹Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, PG Studies Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

²Assistant Professor, Research Supervisor, Department of Psychology, PG Studies Centre for Distance and Online Education, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

*Corresponding Author

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orientation such as leadership, managerial, or worker. The study sheds light on the behavioral identity students develop during their MBA journey

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Bass (1985) distinguished between transactional and transformational leadership, highlighting that while transactional leadership focuses on structured exchanges and compliance, transformational leadership inspires vision and motivates beyond self-interest. This distinction is important in understanding why MBA education may reinforce managerial behaviors.
2. Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) developed the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model, showing that students' progress from perceiving leadership as positional to internalizing it as part of their identity. Without intentional interventions, many remain at early stages, equating leadership with formal roles.
3. Bandura (1977) proposed the Social Learning Theory, emphasizing that behaviors are shaped by observation and reinforcement. In MBA programs, managerial traits such as punctuality and structured output are reinforced more strongly than visionary behaviors.
4. Kolb (1984) introduced the Experiential Learning Model, which stresses cycles of concrete experience, reflection, and experimentation. The lack of such experiential opportunities in structured MBA programs may hinder leadership identity development.
5. Leroy et al. (2022) examined the gap between business school rhetoric and student outcomes, finding that institutional practices often reward compliance and efficiency rather than initiative and vision.
6. Rubens, Schoenfeld, Schaffer, and Leah (2017) found that reflective practice, social learning, and emotional intelligence were more effective in developing leadership than case-based theoretical training.
7. Rajanala and Gopal (2015) studied Indian B-schools and concluded that students associated leadership with authority rather than influence, underscoring the need for intentional training in behavioral leadership.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a quantitative, descriptive research design to investigate the leadership, managerial, and worker orientations of MBA students in a business school setting. The design was chosen because it allows for systematic collection of data to describe behavioral tendencies and to examine relationships between orientation outcomes and demographic factors such as work experience.

Objective

The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To assess the dominant behavioral orientation among MBA students.
2. To examine the association between work experience and role orientation.

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3. To determine whether leadership is intentionally developed in business school settings.

Hypotheses

The study was guided by the following hypotheses:

1. Ho: There is no significant difference in the distribution of leadership, managerial, and worker orientations among MBA students.
2. H₁: MBA students are more likely to exhibit managerial or worker-oriented behaviors than leadership-oriented behaviors.

Sample

The study was conducted on a sample of 77 MBA students drawn from a business school in India using convenience sampling. The participants included students from various specializations such as Marketing, Operations, Finance, and Human Resources. Both first-year and second-year students were included to ensure diversity in academic exposure. Of the total, a proportion had prior professional experience ranging from one to three years, while others had entered directly after their undergraduate studies. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity of responses were assured.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in the study:

1. Socio-Demographic Data Sheet which was designed to gather basic information such as age, gender, specialization, and work experience. This also included self-reported prior exposure to leadership roles in academic or professional settings.
2. Leadership Orientation Questionnaire, a structured tool comprising 15 items that included both Likert-scale questions and situational decision-making scenarios. The items were designed to assess tendencies toward three orientations:
 - Leadership Orientation: behaviors such as vision-setting, adaptability, and motivating others.
 - Managerial Orientation: behaviors emphasizing organization, task execution, and compliance with structure.
 - Worker Orientation: behaviors reflecting task following, dependency, and preference for instruction over initiative.

Based on the scores, students were categorized into eight orientation profiles, including Strong Leadership, Strong Managerial, Strong Worker, Balanced Leader & Manager, and other mixed orientations

Procedure

The survey was administered using a structured questionnaire. Before beginning the questionnaire, participants were presented with an informed consent statement outlining the purpose of the study, confidentiality of responses, and voluntary participation. No identifying information was collected, ensuring anonymity. On average, students took 15–20 minutes to complete the survey.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Descriptive statistics of the three behavioral orientation scores

Orientation	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Leadership	4.05	0.52	3	5	-0.06	-0.57
Managerial	4.16	0.57	3	5	-0.17	-0.85
Worker	3.45	0.69	2	5	0.05	-0.56

Table 1 shows that MBA students scored highest on Managerial orientation (M=4.16), slightly above Leadership (M=4.05), while Worker orientation was lowest (M=3.45). The distributions were near-normal, with managerial behaviors most dominant, leadership moderately present, and worker tendencies least expressed but more variable

Table No. 2 Distribution of students across eight distinct role orientation

Orientation	Distribution
Balanced Leader & Manager	12
Balanced Manager & Worker	1
Evenly Distributed	7
Leadership-Oriented	7
Managerial-Oriented	9
Strong Leadership Orientation	14
Strong Managerial Orientation	22
Strong Worker Orientation	5

Table 2 shows that Strong Managerial Orientation was most common (29%), followed by Strong Leadership (18%) and Balanced Leader & Manager (16%). Worker-oriented categories were rare, indicating students lean more toward structured managerial roles than follower roles, with fewer showing strong leadership.

Table No. 3 Chi-Square Test – Relationship between Work Experience and Leadership Orientation

Test	Value
Chi-Square Value (χ^2)	48.19
Degrees of Freedom (df)	21
p-value	0.0006

The Chi-Square test ($\chi^2=48.19$, $df=21$, $p=0.0006$) shows a significant association between work experience and role orientation. Students with 1–3 years' experience leaned toward strong leadership roles, direct to MBA students toward managerial/worker roles.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that MBA students predominantly exhibit managerial orientation, with leadership traits present but less dominant. This supports the concern that business schools often reinforce structure, efficiency, and compliance rather than cultivating adaptive leadership.

A clear gap emerged between self-perception and behavior: although many students reported past leadership roles, their responses reflected stronger managerial tendencies, suggesting that institutional frameworks reward task delivery over vision and initiative.

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Work experience played a significant role, with students having 1–3 years of exposure showing stronger leadership and managerial orientations, while direct-entry students leaned more toward managerial and worker roles. The Chi-Square test confirmed a significant association, highlighting that leadership identity is shaped not only by academic training but also by practical experience.

Overall, the results suggest that while MBA programs prepare competent managers, intentional interventions, such as experiential projects, reflection-based training, and mentorship are required to nurture genuine leadership behaviors.

CONCLUSION

The study found that MBA students predominantly exhibit managerial orientation, with leadership orientation present but less dominant and worker orientation least common. This suggests that while business schools produce competent managers, leadership behaviors are not an automatic outcome of management education. The significant role of work experience indicates that real-world exposure strengthens both leadership and managerial tendencies, highlighting the need for intentional leadership development interventions within MBA programs.

Limitations and Future Directions

1. The study was limited to a single institution with a sample size (n=77).
2. Future research should use larger, multi-institutional samples and longitudinal methods to assess how leadership orientation evolves across the MBA journey.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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