

# Best Practices in the Integration of Leadership Competencies into Hospitality Education

Asst. Prof. Myla Medrano Loreto, PhD  
Director, Pathway Program, Dusit Thani College  
myla.loreto@dtc.ac.th

Simon Lloyd  
Executive Dean, Faculty of Hospitality Management, Dusit Thani College  
simon.lloyd@dtc.ac.th

## Abstract:

This study intended to address the scarce integration of leadership in hospitality classrooms by identifying best practices in integrating leadership competencies in the classroom instruction level. In Dusit Thani College (DTC) in Bangkok, Thailand, a pioneering approach to leadership training, the Inspiring Hospitality Leadership (IHL), is launched in 2022. This study explored the best practices of integration of IHL Module 1, Leading the Self, in the teaching of first-year subjects in the academic year 2022. Forty-five students, nine facilitators, and four administrators participated in the study conducted through surveys and focus group discussions (FGD). Overall, leadership competencies are moderately integrated in theoretical, practical, and work-integrated learning (WIL) classes. The most frequently used teaching practices reinforcing leadership are instructor and student-led discussions, group projects, and peer evaluation and feedback. Results showed the strongest integration was in support, resilience, and reflective practice. The best teaching practices participatorily identified were use of structured feedback, guided reflection, and peer and instructor-support in a high-challenge learning environment. The instructor's facilitative teaching style and the attitude of students were identified as key factors for successful integration. Implementation of IHL and the best practices in integration of leadership in the classroom can be a springboard for future studies to determine their comparability, applicability, transferability, or replicability to tourism and hospitality institutions.

Keywords: student leadership development, inspiring hospitality leadership, best practices, leadership integration

## Introduction

Leadership plays an integral part in fulfilling 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, specifically in career development and life skills. Adapting to changing circumstances and cultivating talent requires a purposive leadership program designed for students (Li & Kim, 2021). To produce future leaders and change agents in the hospitality industry, the quality of teaching and learning leadership competencies should be enhanced. Sisson (2020) ascertained that at the classroom instruction level, there is a need to fill in the gap in teaching leadership, highlighting that the leadership development of future hospitality leaders should begin in the classroom. On this premise, Tesone (2012) asserted that expansive research is needed for leadership integration in hospitality classrooms.

In the hospitality education sector, researchers and practitioners contend that the curricula of hospitality programs tend to focus on teaching students hard or technical skills and fail to emphasize the teaching of soft skills including leadership (Saunders, 2004). Higher education institutions acknowledge leadership as one of the most important competencies and leadership is ranked to be extremely important for graduates of hospitality programs beyond 2000 (Nelson & Dopson, 2001). However, it is the skill for which graduates are least formally prepared (Scheule and Sneed, 2001).

In response to the research gaps and recommendations from the industry, Dusit Thani College in Bangkok, Thailand designed a leadership development program that is responsive and purposive to address the gaps. With the implementation of the revised curriculum in 2022 for DTC's international programs comes the pioneering approach to delivering a leadership program for hospitality students – the Inspiring Hospitality Leadership (IHL). Instead of offering a three-credit course on leadership in the senior year, the leadership program was spread throughout the four-year program of the students. IHL is divided into four modules: leading the self, leading others, leading in dynamic organizations, and leading into the future. Each of the IHL modules are five days in duration. All modules take place at the beginning of the student's academic year. The learning content of each year is integrated into the instruction and assessment in all subjects. It is a learning journey that is an integral and pivotal part of the Bachelor of Business Administration curriculum and the student's learning experience at DTC.

This study explored the integration of IHL 1 competencies in the delivery of WIL, practical, and theoretical classes in the first-year subjects, during the academic year 2022-2023, from the perspective of students, instructors, and administrators. Anchored on the IHL model of DTC and guided by the principles of best practice research, the main objective is to identify and propose a set of best teaching practices in the integration of specific leadership competencies at the classroom instruction level. The study's scope covers teaching specific leadership competencies from IHL 1, namely self-awareness, emotional intelligence, active listening, feedback, questioning, support, resilience, and reflective practice.

Specifically, this study aimed to:

- Collect the teaching practices used by instructors on the integration of leadership competencies in their classroom instruction;
- Analyze reflections and stories of instructors and students on the integration of leadership competencies in their teaching and learning environments;
- Define indicators and select the best practices in the integration of leadership competencies in classroom instruction, and
- Identify and propose a set of best instructional practices for integrating leadership competencies of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, teamwork, active listening and feedback, resilience, and reflective practice into hospitality education

## **Methodology**

Using a case study design, expert-validated focus group discussion (FGD) guides and pretested survey questionnaires were the main research instruments. Survey results were analyzed through descriptive statistics and the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Guided by the exploratory mixed-methods approach, the survey results were used to navigate the flow of the focus group discussions. Survey results were duly validated in the series of FGDs with students, facilitators, and administrators.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Profile of Participants**

The participants belong to the first batch of IHL 1 completers and instructors who served as IHL facilitators. Out of 63 currently enrolled, 45 (71.43%) students completed the survey. Five students representing Culinary Arts and Hospitality Management programs participated in FGD. Figure 1 details the nationality of the student participants.

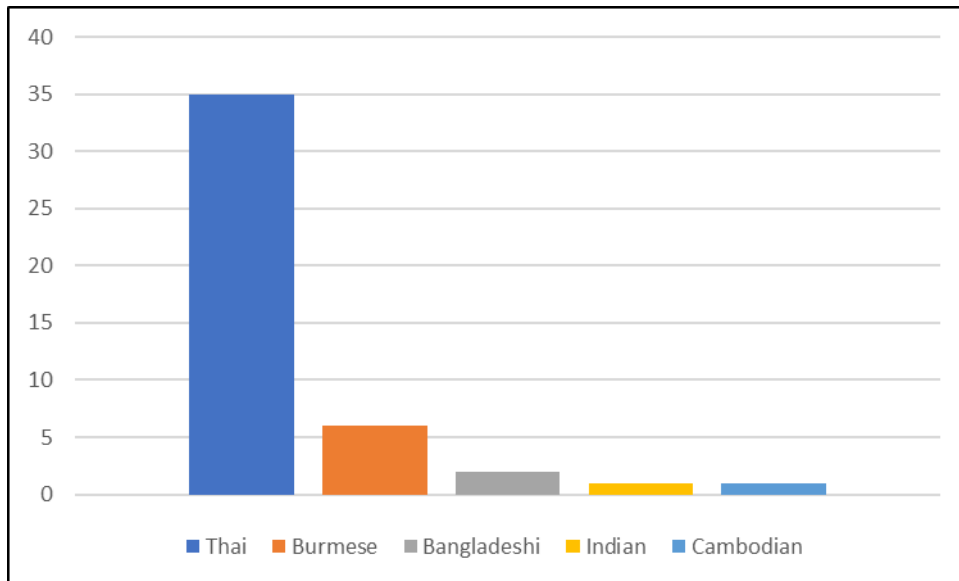


Figure 1. Nationality of the student participants

Nine (81.82%) out of 11 instructors participated in the survey and the two sessions of FGDs. The majority have more than six years of teaching experience. Six are Thai, two are from the Philippines and one is British. In addition, four administrators participated in the study: two program directors, associate dean, and dean of Faculty of International Hospitality.

#### Teaching Practices

Figure 2 shows the survey results on the utilization of the instructional methods that integrate teaching of leadership (Sisson, 2020). From the students' perspective, the top three methods used are group projects, instructor-led discussions, and peer feedback or evaluation. Instructor-led discussions and group projects also capped the result from the instructors, along with student-led discussions. These prompted the discussion on how instructor-led discussions, which were commonly viewed as one-way, traditional method can also reinforce leadership in the classroom if the instructor used facilitative teaching styles. Studies of Loreto (2020) and Liasidou (2016) also highlighted lecture as the most effective method in teaching theories, however, participants in the study of Aynalem et al. (2015) perceived lecture as the least interesting method. However, Deale et al (2013) considered lectures a practical method to address increasing class size and scarcity in resources. They claimed that lecture or instructor-led discussions can be effective for both theory and practice if combined with activities like experiential learning and demonstration.

In the FGD, the administrators registered their appreciation on the variety of methods used to integrate teaching of leadership while students and facilitators exchanged insights on the need to better understand what each method entails and the advantages of combining a variety of methods.

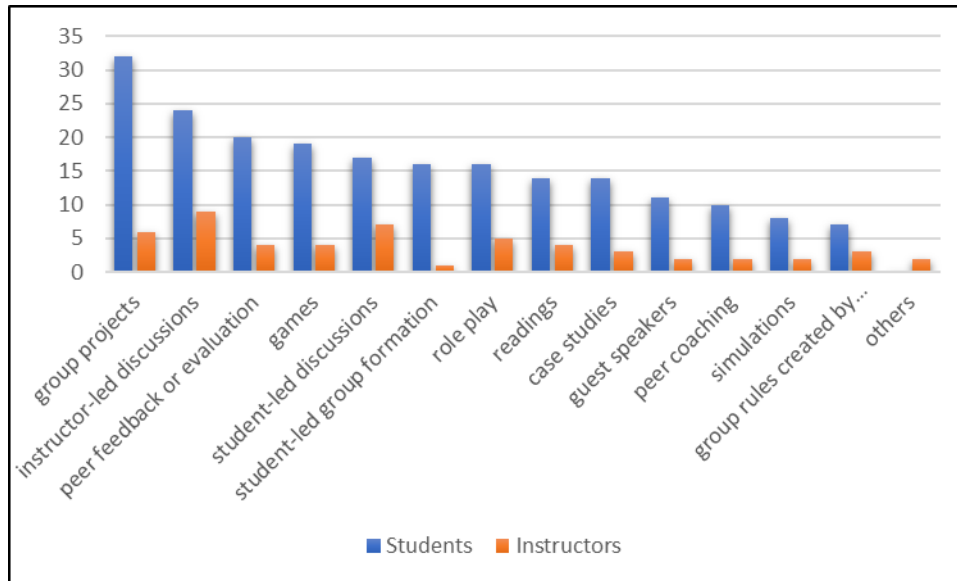


Figure 2. Teaching methods reinforcing teaching of leadership

Table 1 shows the list of subjects that moderately and highly integrate leadership. Among these, the top four subjects presented in the table were specifically cited by the student participants during the FGD. Business English is not part of the survey results; however, it came as one of the subjects also integrating teaching of leadership during the FGD with students. Discussion with both students and instructors revealed the strongly integrated competencies are feedback and reflective practice. Integration of support and resilience was particularly mentioned in WIL and practical classes where students worked in groups and are immersed in a workplace like hotels, kitchens, and restaurants.

Table 1. Subjects with moderate to high integration of leadership

Subjects	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Culinary Essentials & Introduction to Culinary	WIL	13	35.90
Principles of Communication	Theoretical	10	25.64
All WIL subjects	WIL	4	12.82
Meat, Poultry, Seafood	WIL	3	7.69
All Practical subjects	Practical	2	5.13
Wine Knowledge and Bar Operations	Practical	1	2.56
F&B	WIL	1	2.56
Basic Pastry	Practical	1	2.56
Theory subjects with group projects	Theoretical	1	2.56
All subject	All	1	2.56

To determine the extent of integration of each competency, students were also asked to rate the extent of integration of leadership among the three subject clusters. Figures 3 to 5 illustrate this information. Results yielded high integration in support and reflection among all subject clusters. Overall, the leadership competencies are moderately integrated in the first-year subjects. It is also worth noting that self-awareness and questioning need to be reinforced further.

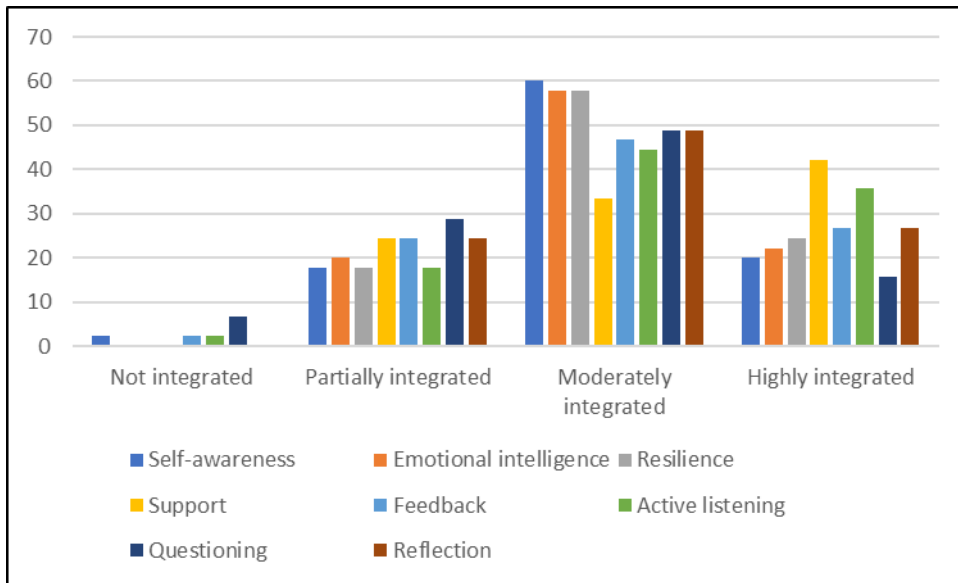


Figure 3. Integration in WIL subjects

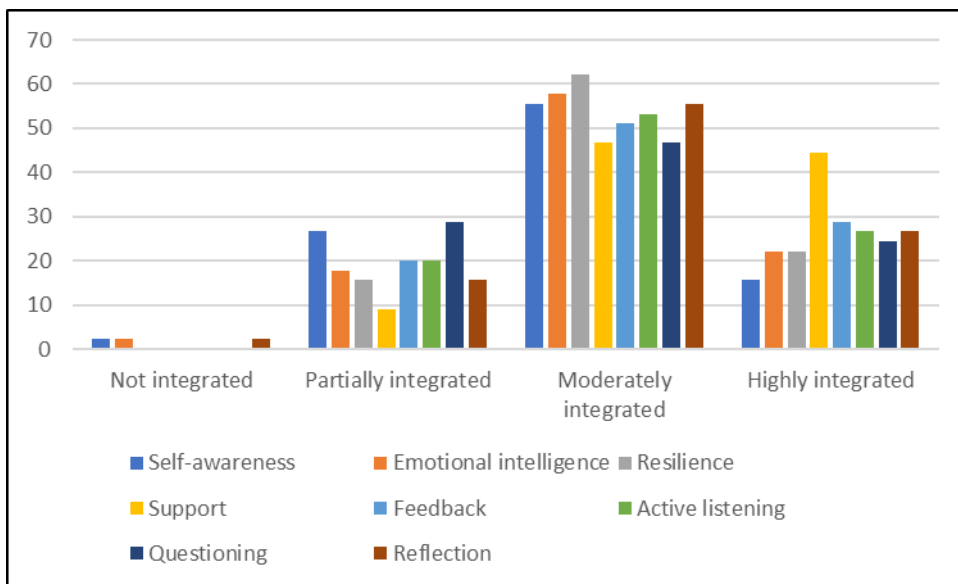


Figure 4. Integration in practical subjects

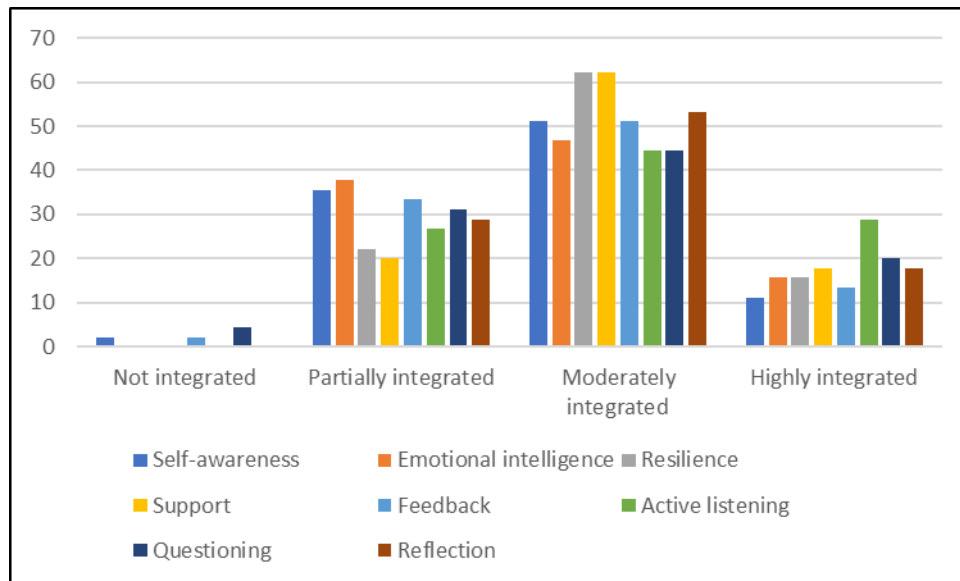


Figure 5. Integration in theoretical subjects

### Best Teaching Practices

The principles of best practices in education were defined and analyzed by Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998). These integrated principles are described as learner-centered, experiential, holistic, authentic, expressive, reflective, collaborative, democratic, cognitive, developmental, challenging, and constructivist.

Best practice is generally defined as the most efficient way of doing something. Literature pertains to best practice as good practice or smart practice. Overman and Boyd (1994) defined best practice research as a selective observation of a set of exemplars across contexts to derive more generalizable principles and theories. Researchers concurred that best practice research is oriented on constant learning, feedback, and reflection on what works and why, or even what does not work (Strenstrom and Laine, 2006). Best, good, or smart practices are described as functional, process-based, innovative, and transformable. These are parallel with the survey results and FGD discussions, describing best practices in DTC to be student-centered, experiential, immersive, impactful, reflective, memorable, consistent, and allows for self or independent learning.

In the FGD, students highlighted the strong integration of support coming from both instructors and peers. Students viewed support two-way: one coming from peers, described as having their back, and the other from the instructor as encouragement. Students also linked support to developing their resilience which is highly reinforced in working within their groups in practical and WIL classes.

The use of student-led structured feedback is another area identified as a best practice specifically in the WIL and practical subjects. Congruently, peer feedback was identified as one of the most frequently used teaching methods that reinforce leadership. Hospitality students view positive peer feedback as motivating, useful, and reflective. However, there is a need to balance it off with teacher feedback to address issues on reliability, time management, and attitude of students (Loreto, 2022). Kunwongse (2013) enumerated that the benefits of peer feedback, if properly implemented, are boosting confidence, allowing students to be more independent and active learners, creating cooperative and collaborative learning, and enhancing critical thinking. Peer feedback also develops students' critical reflection, listening to and acting on feedback, assessing, and providing feedback on the work of others (Liu & Carless, 2006). IHL-guided reflective practice facilitated in various methods is also chosen as a best practice. Following the IHL reflection model, instructors use different methods

to engage their students in reflection through online platforms like Moodle and Facebook vlogs while others use writing templates and open class discussions usually conducted after a class activity. Crawford, et al. (2014) confirmed the relevance of providing reflection assignments about the students' experiences inside and outside the classroom. In a related preliminary study of Loreto and Lloyd (2023), IHL 1 completers perceive that self-reflection and reflection on the activities and the challenges encountered, are beneficial in improving themselves.

Another best practice included in the portfolio is encouraging academic freedom among instructor-facilitators to creatively integrate leadership in their classes, giving room for flexibility to customize their approaches, without overlooking the IHL model. Knowledge and awareness of the students' learning styles from IHL 1 is instrumental in implementing this practice.

## **Challenges**

One of the themes that also emerged from the FGDs were the challenges encountered by both students and instructors in teaching leadership at the classroom level. Time management, student engagement and level of participation, and language barrier were the top responses. In preliminary research conducted by Loreto and Lloyd (2023), some of the related challenges that came out of students' reflections were communication, working with a team, and application of leadership topics learned. The attitude and mindset of the students also emerged as a crucial factor in the success of leadership integration.

The participants concurred that the instructors' facilitative teaching style appears as a challenge and a best practice. One of the outstanding observations raised by the students in the FGD was the difference between the teaching styles of instructors who are IHL facilitators and those who are not. IHL facilitators are viewed to be more open, participatory, engaging, and better at building rapport with the students. This prompted the discussion on the need for more intensive and inclusive facilitator workshops for all instructors delivering subjects in the international program. Moreover, a more customized facilitator workshop tailored to each subject cluster was also strongly recommended. Participation of the administrators in the study allowed for a more open discussion and collaboration in addressing these challenges.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

IHL serves both as a response to previous research recommendations and an innovation to provide a model for effective implementation of a leadership program, particularly for hospitality students. Internally, this preliminary study allows for review and improvement of delivery of classroom instruction and evaluation of the succeeding modules. Generally, it also contributes to the literature and narrows the existing gap in terms of designing and evaluating leadership programs for students. The IHL program as a whole, is highlighted as the best practice, with its ability to ensure that leadership skills are not only practiced in the leadership course but are also applied in other courses throughout the program, thereby ensuring that learners can use the relevant skills in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, the course gives instructors/facilitators the opportunity to develop their facilitative teaching practices.

The IHL model also provides the framework for feedback, support, and reflective practice which are strongly integrated in the classroom instruction level and perceived as the best teaching practices. The emphasis on these skills contributes to the creation of a high-challenge, high-support learning environment.

In addition, IHL provides foundation knowledge on leadership for students before they attend their first-year classes. In a way, it also sets the expectations of the students as to how their classes will

be facilitated. Empowering and retooling instructors in their teaching styles are also pivotal in successful leadership integration in the hospitality classrooms.

An additional best practice that was identified was the importance of an aligned approach to providing students with feedback on the IHL skills. Where instructors had similar feedback approaches in different subject clusters, students were able to integrate the IHL skills more effectively.

The results of this study have significant and practical implications on lesson planning, delivery of instruction, assessment, quality assurance, faculty development, and IHL program enhancement. Subjects identified to integrate leadership moderately and highly will be followed up through in-depth case analysis as part of the succeeding studies. Implementation of IHL and the identified best practices in the integration of leadership in the classroom can be springboards for future studies to determine their comparability, applicability, transferability, or replicability to other tourism and hospitality institutions.

### Limitations

This study is restricted to a sample from one hospitality school involving only one cohort of participants who completed the first IHL module. Further study needs to be done on future cohorts and later modules to identify additional best practices in the implementation of leadership programs.

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