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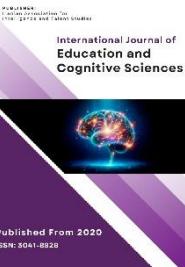
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Identifying and Ranking the Influential Factors in Developing Thoughtful Managers in Universities (Case Study: Farhangian University)

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ABSTRACT

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Purpose: The present study aims to identify and rank the influential factors in developing thoughtful managers in universities, with a focus on Farhangian University.

Methods and Materials: This research is applied in terms of purpose and employs a mixed-method approach for data collection. The sampling method in both the qualitative and quantitative sections was purposive. The statistical population consisted of faculty members of Farhangian University. In the qualitative section, data were collected using semi-structured interviews, while in the interpretive structural modeling section, the primary data collection tool was a researcher-developed questionnaire.

Findings: The qualitative findings indicated that the development of thoughtful managers is influenced by ten factors: educational factors, development-oriented approaches, personality traits, managerial skills, access to information technology infrastructure, the university's cultural environment, support from higher-level organizations, critical thinking among university managers, managerial knowledge, and self-awareness among managers. According to the results of interpretive structural modeling, the variables with the highest dependency were support from higher-level organizations, critical thinking among university managers, managerial knowledge, and self-awareness among managers. In contrast, development-oriented approaches, personality traits, and managerial skills had the least dependency but played the most significant roles.

Conclusion: This study identified and ranked key factors influencing the development of thoughtful managers, emphasizing the role of organizational support, critical thinking, and self-awareness. Practical recommendations were proposed to enhance reflective leadership in universities.

Keywords: Managerial development, thoughtful manager, thoughtful thinking, Farhangian University, interpretive structural modeling.

1. Introduction

Thoughtful leaders provide appropriate solutions to problems and accelerate organizations' efforts to better understand the cultures, values, and markets they serve (Ghaderi Sheykh Abadi et al., 2023; Sheikhabadi et al., 2024). Reflective leadership is a systematic practice of reflection that involves a conscious awareness of behaviors, situations, and consequences to enhance organizational performance. Reflective practice helps leaders comprehend uncertain, unique, or contradictory situations (De Déa Roglio & Light, 2009). Reflection also enhances the clarity of values, identity, emotions, motivations, and goals of managers, leading to improved thinking, information gathering, goal setting, and envisioning success by refining leadership behaviors and outcomes (McDaniel & DiBella-McCarthy, 2012). Thus, the practice of reflection and thoughtful leadership enables an organization to determine the best course of action before implementing a potentially flawed program (Castelli, 2016).

Universities have long nurtured thinkers and leaders who have had significant influence worldwide (Ali Ghorbani et al., 2024; Bezi et al., 2024; Esmaili et al., 2024). A major shortcoming of many leadership development efforts in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors is the failure to instill values in the development process. Insufficient attention has been given to the individual and organizational values that influence managers (Faramarzi Babadi et al., 2024; Golabchi et al., 2024). Individual values exist inherently and must be identified and recognized, as they consciously or unconsciously impact mental models and decision-making. Similarly, organizational values must be examined to clarify and strengthen them. In both contexts—individual and organizational ethical standards—leadership and managerial development can be greatly enhanced by focusing on values (Smikle, 2019).

One of the primary reasons for the ineffectiveness of educational activities is the lack of attention to the cultivation of thoughtful managers. This neglect results in various undesirable outcomes, including confusion in organizational education planning, the absence of clear strategies and educational orientations, the provision of irrelevant training, the misalignment of training with organizational issues, arbitrary and unstructured decision-making, disorder and contradictions in educational regulations, and, ultimately, a decline in the effectiveness of educational activities (Ahmadi & Elhamiyan, 2020; Bavar & Sabzekohi, 2021).

Some researchers define reflection as stepping back from the immediate environment and intuitively examining situational factors. A leader must engage in an exchange of thoughts with oneself and others. They must adopt a double-loop process, meaning an approach that considers both individual and collective perspectives regarding viewpoints, values, experiences, beliefs, and the future to gain clarity for action-oriented change. Reflection is rooted in an inquisitive mindset and represents a cognitive process (Kumar, 2020). Thoughtful thinking is not only a personal process but also a participatory one, encompassing uncertainty along with experience. It involves identifying essential questions and components that appear significant and later engaging in dialogue with oneself and others. Individuals assess the insights gained from this process concerning perspectives, values, experiences, beliefs, and the broader context in which these questions arise. Through reflection, newly acquired clarity facilitates fundamental changes in practice or attitude. Naturally, new questions emerge, and the process moves forward. In this regard, it has been argued that reflection is an integral part of a leader's daily life rather than a detached action. Instead, reflection is a process cultivated by an organization's culture and structures, influencing choices, policies, and decisions alongside emotions and politics. Thoughtfulness should not be treated as an occasional acquired method but as an intrinsic component of management and leadership (Göker & Bozkuş, 2017).

The significance of thoughtful reflection in learning has long been recognized. Some of the most critical learning experiences in adulthood involve self-critical reflection, reassessing how problems have been framed, and re-evaluating one's orientation toward understanding, knowing, believing, and acting. Reflection is a crucial dimension of transformative learning because it creates space and opportunity for individuals to understand their way of making sense of complex realities. Self-reflection entails a thorough examination of one's assumptions, values, and beliefs. Reflection requires the "examination of personal and professional belief systems as well as the intentional consideration of the ethical implications and impact of actions," which plays a key role in nurturing managers (Wu & Crocco, 2019).

Leadership is defined in the literature through various theories that attempt to explain it from different perspectives. However, the real world is far too complex to be confined within predefined models. This is the first reality leaders encounter when entering professional practice. It is at this point that they realize prescribed theories do not

always meet practical requirements. How can leaders be effective in an environment that differs greatly from what is portrayed in theory? The answer is the challenge that many, if not all, leaders strive to address (Göker & Bozkus, 2017).

Management and leadership are fundamental pillars of every organization and society. Among various types of management, educational management holds a special position. If education is at the core of societal issues, educational management is equally crucial for societal development and enhancement. If educational managers possess adequate knowledge and skills, the educational system will undoubtedly achieve higher effectiveness, efficiency, and credibility (Bavar & Sabzekohi, 2021; Kharoushi & Rahimi, 2022).

In top global organizations, the development of managers is considered a non-delegable duty of senior executives, particularly CEOs and board members, who dedicate substantial time to educational programs. This underscores the necessity and importance of such programs. Senior executives must leverage all available positive reinforcements to promote learning and managerial training (Gobena, 2017). With the expansion of educational organizations due to factors such as population growth and increasing demand for scientific education, the significance of educational management and managerial training has received greater attention. In educational institutions, management plays a critical role in achieving educational goals, and it is not an overstatement to say that the success of educational programs depends on the competence, organization, and management skills of educational administrators. Scholars today consider innovation one of the key functions of management. Throughout history, humans have engaged in innovation and creativity across all activities. Managers must continuously evolve and redefine their identities. They must swiftly adapt to new conditions and establish new roles and relationships for themselves (Ahmadi & Elhamiyan, 2020).

With reflection being a key competency required for effective leadership, the concept of the thoughtful leader is gaining prominence in business environments. The need for developing thoughtful leaders for the future has significant implications for higher education, particularly in business education and university leadership training. If universities play a key role in producing thoughtful leaders, curricula should incorporate strategies for fostering reflective capabilities in students and managers (Rubens et al., 2018). Managers must not only consider how to design interventions that integrate ethical approaches suited to real-

life needs but also how to implement these interventions over time with a recurring rhythm, keeping reflective practice at the core. Given the shortage of literature and theoretical guidance on teaching thoughtful thinking in universities, along with the presence of positive findings but a substantial body of inconclusive evidence regarding its value, there is both a need and demand for further research. Shay and Wickes (2017) argued that higher education institutions and universities should make substantial educational investments to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning, which can be achieved through the cultivation of thoughtful managers and the development of leadership from a reflective thinking perspective (Shay & Wickes, 2017).

Leadership development is a critical necessity in higher education environments, as universities contribute to building societies and addressing social equity issues (Marginson, 2018). Leaders are expected to engage and mobilize followers to act upon new ideas and challenge conventional thinking. As a result, leadership studies have gained increasing popularity in undergraduate, graduate, and executive education programs. Leadership development addresses self-perception as a leader and leader behavior while providing opportunities to cultivate leadership attributes. Characteristics such as self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-regulation play fundamental roles in effective leadership, encouraging students to gain deeper self-awareness through interventions that enable reflective thinking. Reflective learning holds particular significance in business education. Students expect leaders to manage based on competence, necessitating authentic, ethical, and genuine leadership in universities to navigate today's uncertain and turbulent environment. The ability to reflect is regarded as a critical element for effective management and leadership decision-making, particularly in environments lacking predefined solutions and characterized by unique, ever-changing elements. If universities and higher education aim to cultivate effective leaders, curricula should include strategies for developing leadership skills, including fostering thoughtful and reflective thinking abilities (Rubens et al., 2018).

Accordingly, the present study aims to identify and rank the influential factors in developing thoughtful managers in universities, with a specific focus on Farhangian University.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and employs a mixed-methods approach (qualitative-quantitative) for data collection. The sample in the qualitative section consisted of 15 participants, while in the quantitative section, 20 faculty members of Farhangian University participated. Experts in both the qualitative and quantitative sections were selected through purposive sampling.

In the first phase, a qualitative approach was used to identify the influential factors in developing thoughtful managers. For the analysis of the collected data, open, axial, and selective coding methods were applied to the conducted interviews, identifying the main factors and their respective components. To ensure the validity of the research, the identified factors were presented to five experts from the statistical population, and all factors were confirmed. Reliability was assessed using the percentage agreement method between two coders, which resulted in a coefficient of 80, indicating the reliability of the data collection instrument in the qualitative section.

Table 1*Open and Axial Coding*

Component	Concept
Educational Factors	Facilitation and exploratory roles of managers in providing information to students, adopting a cooperative and reciprocal participation approach in interactions with students, maintaining a precise perspective on students, having a holistic view of educational issues at Farhangian University, incorporating students' perspectives into education at Farhangian University, providing an open perspective to students in classroom management, fostering a positive spirit, promoting research and investigative activities related to educational issues, encouraging the teaching and learning of professional competencies among students and managers within the university, continuously revising the university curriculum to enhance students' confidence and initiative, and encouraging discussions and dialogues on student-related issues.
Development-Oriented Approaches	Self-learning, studying and focusing on personal development, striving for research achievements, creating opportunities for interaction with students, being responsive without bias, developing teams within the university, utilizing reflective and thoughtful methods in a collective and participatory manner, creating an environment for self-expression within the university, adopting voluntary approaches to defining students' strengths, engaging in reflective learning, and facilitating interactions with other managers.
Personality Traits	Managerial flexibility, innovativeness, confidence, courage, allowing university managers to test various propositions and inquire about strengths in each decision-making situation, fostering a questioning mindset among managers, creativity, collaboration with students, and open-mindedness.
Managerial Skills	Belief in the efficiency and necessity of incorporating reflective thinking in interactions with students and university staff, attentiveness to others, self-awareness, openness to others' experiences in decision-making, consideration of verbal and non-verbal communication in interactions with students, self-directed learning, receptivity to feedback, cultural intelligence among university managers, empathy with students and staff, structuring issues based on situational contexts, being independent learners, high self-efficacy, confidence, adopting an external perspective in assessing university challenges, finding innovative solutions, describing experiences and interactions, having a research-oriented approach, evaluating personal experiences, utilizing experiences from different university departments, and engaging with both internal and external stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Science and other universities.
Access to Information Technology Infrastructure	Availability of educational resources and environmental facilities for managers and staff, adequate access to information technology, development of information technology within the university, and the application of information technology in managerial interactions.
University Cultural Environment	Promoting a risk-taking culture outside managers' comfort zones, reflecting on personal experiences with humility, gathering information from others, active listening and openness to new ideas, adopting an open attitude toward alternative viewpoints, taking responsibility through active truth-seeking, personal commitment to learning processes within the university, questioning the consequences of one's actions, curiosity about job-related tasks, challenging one's own favorable perceptions, considering different perspectives and a willingness to think critically, embracing new ideas at Farhangian University, fostering an innovative culture within the university, and a strong belief in the university's core mission among managers.
Support from Higher-Level Organizations	Support from the Ministry of Science for Farhangian University and the possibility of collaboration with other universities.

Critical Thinking Among University Managers	Developing a critical perspective in learning, intellectual discipline in presenting opinions, awareness of personal thoughts in logical decision-making, consideration of students' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in decision-making, reliance on collective intelligence within the university, incorporating students' opinions in major decisions, and examining diverse insights and past experiences in the decision-making process.
Managerial Knowledge	Knowledge of thought exchange with others, understanding reflective thinking practices through the action cycle, reassessing actions, awareness of essential dimensions, creating and testing alternative actions, knowledge of employing thoughtful reflection tools such as peer reflection, intuitive decision-making and interpersonal interactions, pedagogical knowledge, leadership and management process knowledge, and situational knowledge (understanding contingencies that shape the university and influence its future potential).
Managerial Self-Awareness	Recognition of personal emotions and awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses.

The research variables are introduced below:

Table 2

Research Variables

Factors	Factor Symbol
Educational Factors	C-1
Development-Oriented Approaches	C-2
Personality Traits	C-3
Managerial Skills	C-4
Access to Information Technology Infrastructure	C-5
University Cultural Environment	C-6
Support from Higher-Level Organizations	C-7
Critical Thinking Among University Managers	C-8
Managerial Knowledge	C-9
Managerial Self-Awareness	C-10

Before applying this method, it was necessary to determine the types of relationships among the examined components. Generally, the following logical relationships form the basis of experts' theories regarding the interconnections among components. This step represents an initial agreement, and larger numerical values or different symbols can also be used.

- 1: One-way relationship from i to j
- -1: One-way relationship from j to i
- 2: Two-way relationship between i and j
- 0: No relationship between i and j

Table 3

Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSMT Matrix)

Variable	C-1	C-2	C-3	C-4	C-5	C-6	C-7	C-8	C-9	C-10
Educational Factors	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
Development-Oriented Approaches	-1		1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2
Personality Traits	-1	-1		1	1	1	1	2	2	2
Managerial Skills	-1	2	-1		1	1	1	2	2	2
Access to IT Infrastructure	-1	-1	-1	-1		1	1	0	0	0
University Cultural Environment	2	-1	-1	-1	-1		1	1	1	1
Support from Higher Organizations	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1		1	1	1
Critical Thinking Among Managers	-1	2	2	2	0	-1	-1		1	1
Managerial Knowledge	-1	2	2	2	0	-1	-1	-1		1
Managerial Self-Awareness	-1	2	2	2	0	-1	-1	-1	-1	

The initial reachability matrix is obtained by converting the Structural Self-Interaction Matrix into a binary matrix of zeros and ones. To extract the reachability matrix, each row in the original matrix was transformed as follows: replacing

values 1 and 2 with 1, and replacing values -1 and 0 with 0. After converting all rows, the resulting matrix is referred to as the initial reachability matrix.

Table 4
Initial Matrix

Variable	C-1	C-2	C-3	C-4	C-5	C-6	C-7	C-8	C-9	C-10
Educational Factors		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Development-Oriented Approaches	0		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Personality Traits	0	0		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Managerial Skills	0	1	0		1	1	1	1	1	1
Access to IT Infrastructure	0	0	0	0		1	1	0	0	0
University Cultural Environment	1	0	0	0	0		1	1	1	1
Support from Higher Organizations	0	0	0	0	0	0		1	1	1
Critical Thinking Among Managers	0	1	1	1	0	0	0		1	1
Managerial Knowledge	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0		1
Managerial Self-Awareness	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	

Table 5
Final Matrix

Variable	C-1	C-2	C-3	C-4	C-5	C-6	C-7	C-8	C-9	C-10	Influence
C-1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
C-2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
C-3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
C-4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
C-5	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
C-6	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10

This final matrix shows the influence and dependency levels of the research variables.

To establish relationships and rank the criteria in the interpretive structural model, the output set and input set for each criterion were extracted from the reachability matrix.

- Reachability Set (Influence or Outputs):** Includes the criterion itself and the criteria it influences.

- Antecedent Set (Dependence or Inputs):** Includes the criterion itself and the criteria that influence it.

After determining the reachability and antecedent sets, their intersection was calculated. The first variable for which the intersection of the two sets equaled the reachability set was assigned to the first level. Consequently, the first-level elements had the highest dependence in the model.

Table 6
Factor Ranking

Levels	Variables
First	Support from Higher-Level Organizations, Critical Thinking Among University Managers, Managerial Knowledge, Managerial Self-Awareness
Second	Educational Factors, Access to Information Technology Infrastructure, University Cultural Environment
Third	Development-Oriented Approaches, Personality Traits, Managerial Skills

Table 7
Degree of Influence and Dependence of Factors

Variable	Dependence	Influence
Educational Factors	6	10
Development-Oriented Approaches	9	10
Personality Traits	9	10
Managerial Skills	9	10
Access to Information Technology Infrastructure	9	7
University Cultural Environment	9	10
Support from Higher-Level Organizations	10	7

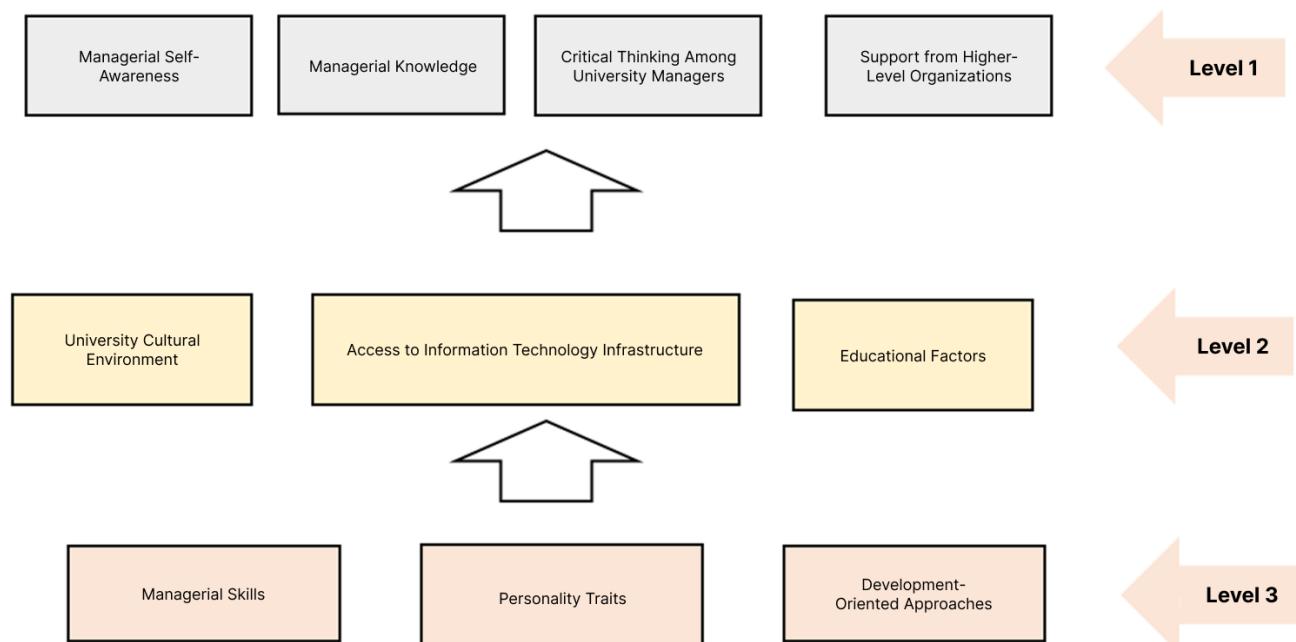
Critical Thinking Among University Managers	10	9
Managerial Knowledge	10	9
Managerial Self-Awareness	10	9

Table 8
Factor Ranking Based on Intersection Sets

Level	Factors	Reachability Set	Antecedent Set	Intersection Set
Second	1	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6
Third	2	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10
Third	3	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10
Third	4	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10
Second	5	C-1, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-5, C-6, C-8, C-9, C-10
Second	6	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-8, C-9, C-10
First	7	C-2, C-3, C-4, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-2, C-3, C-4, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10
First	8	C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10
First	9	C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10
First	10	C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10	C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, C-9, C-10

Based on the results of interpretive structural modeling, the dependent variables included Support from Higher-Level Organizations, Critical Thinking Among University Managers, Managerial Knowledge, and Managerial Self-

Awareness. The independent variables were Development-Oriented Approaches, Personality Traits, and Managerial Skills. The following diagram presents the variable ranking based on interpretive structural modeling.

Figure 1
Ranking of Variables Based on Interpretive Structural Modeling


4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to identify and rank the influential factors in developing thoughtful managers. Based on the qualitative findings, ten influential factors were identified. In the next phase, interpretive structural modeling was used to rank these factors. The results of this section demonstrated that these factors influence the development of thoughtful managers across three distinct levels. The first-level variables included Support from Higher-Level Organizations, Critical Thinking Among University Managers, Managerial Knowledge, and Managerial Self-Awareness, which exhibited the highest dependency. This means that variables from the other levels had a significant impact on these variables. According to the MICMAC analysis results, the influence coefficient of these variables was at its lowest level, while their dependency coefficient was at its highest.

The findings of this study align with previous research (Ahmadi & Elhamiyan, 2020; Gobena, 2017; Göker & Bozkuş, 2017; Harry-Nana & Bosch, 2020), thoughtful thinking is influenced by a process that must be learned and practiced, which highlights the importance of the context in which reflective practice occurs. Additionally, Harry-Nana and Bosch (2020) emphasized the role of efforts from higher-level organizations in developing reflective and thoughtful leaders. They suggested that universities should incorporate interventions aimed at fostering reflective and thoughtful leadership in their educational processes (Harry-Nana & Bosch, 2020).

The results also indicated that the variables Development-Oriented Approaches, Personality Traits, and Managerial Skills had the highest influence coefficient and the lowest dependency. These findings align with previous studies (Ahmadi & Elhamiyan, 2020; Bavar & Sabzekohi, 2021; Kharoushi & Rahimi, 2022). Various studies have highlighted significant differences between leader development and leadership development. Leader development involves actions focused on enhancing individual leaders, whereas leadership development concentrates on the overall process, which necessarily involves more than one individual (De Dáa Roglio & Light, 2009).

In this study, leader development was considered in the context of thoughtful and reflective leaders, as reflective thinking is explored in the literature through intrapersonal and interpersonal lenses. Thoughtful thinking is crucial for

effective leadership, particularly in organizations recognized as learning communities (Woods & Woods, 2010).

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to foster thoughtful managers and promote thoughtful thinking among managers at Farhangian University:

- Strengthening the culture of value clarification within the university to support thoughtful thinking among managers.
- Promoting the values of reflective learning in the university's social media platforms.
- Organizing seminars to cultivate a culture of reflective thinking among university managers.
- Inviting mentors and coaches to facilitate the spread of interactive and thoughtful learning among university managers.
- Utilizing the power of media to establish communication channels with managers.
- Implementing a thoughtful approach in media and local publications to enhance self-awareness among managers.
- Shifting the university's perspective on the importance of developing thoughtful managers to nurture thoughtful teachers for society.
- Creating interactive learning opportunities for university managers through formal and informal educational experiences.
- Encouraging bilateral participation of managers in the design of university programs.
- Supporting research activities related to educational issues in online university platforms.

To systematically develop self-regulation and reflective skills among managers at Farhangian University, the following initiatives should be undertaken:

- Training programs for managers to incorporate reflective thinking in their interactions with students and university staff.
- Conducting training and development courses to enhance the cultural intelligence of university managers.
- Designing courses to teach and strengthen self-regulation and self-efficacy skills among university managers.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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