

# Locus of Control: A Conceptual and Empirical Study in Sri Lanka

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**Published: 22 August 2019**

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## **Abstract**

It revealed that a contextual gap and an intellectual curiosity exist with regard to Locus of Control which is a critical phenomenon in managing behaviour in organizations. A systematic desk study was carried out to find answers for four conceptual questions and a systematic survey was carried out to find answers for two empirical questions. For the empirical part, 129 senior managers who are middle managers working in a large bank were utilized as the respondents. The instrument used for measuring the phenomenon of the study was based on an operational definition, i.e. the summated rating received on a 10-item, 5-point Likert scale content validity and internal reliability of which were ensured. The empirical findings revealed that Sri Lankan managers under study are having the right type of Locus of Control, i.e. Internal Locus of Control and degree of internality of senior managers in the selected bank is not different from that of senior managers in general.

## **Introduction**

Locus of Control is a critical phenomenon in organizational behaviour literature and is generally considered as a vital personality trait or characteristic. It is a personality trait (Dunham, 1984), and a major work-related aspect of personality and a core self-evaluation (Greenberg and Baron, 2008). Little research has been done with regard to Locus of Control in Sri Lanka, perhaps in Asia. In particular it reveals a gap in the empirical knowledge of existence of Locus of Control within senior managers working in banking sector in Sri Lanka indicating a contextual gap in research too. In addition, there is an intellectual curiosity to know the Locus of Control of Sri Lankan managers, particularly senior managers working in banking sector that is a key sector for socio-economic development of Sri Lanka.

## **Research Questions and Objectives**

A systematic attempt was made to find answers for the following research questions:

1. What is Locus of Control?
2. What are its types?
3. Why is it important?
4. What is the type of Locus of Control that needs to be possessed by a manager who wants to be successful?
5. Are Sri Lankan managers under study having the right type of Locus of Control?
6. What is the degree of internality of senior managers or middle managers working in the bank selected for the empirical study?

This study has a conceptual part and an empirical part as well. The first, second, third, and fourth questions mentioned above deal with the conceptual part of this study while the rest of the questions (numbered 5 and 6) deal with the empirical part of the study. The four questions of the conceptual part are explorative elementarily. As far as the empirical part is concerned the study is explorative and descriptive. The objectives of the study which are consistent with the above mentioned research questions are:

1. To explore the definitions given by main authors in the available organizational behaviour literature for the concept of Locus of Control and present them to create a reasonable interpretation of the concept.
2. To identify and mention types of Locus of Control as per the existent literature.
3. To explore the relevant explanations given by the main authors in the available organizational behaviour literature and present why the concept of Locus of Control is important.
4. To prescribe the type of Locus of Control for manager to be successful based on the literature.
5. To explore whether Sri Lankan managers under the study are having the right type of Locus of Control.
6. To describe the degree of internality of senior managers working in the bank selected for the empirical study.

## Method

As this is an attempt to answer the above mentioned six research questions, a desk research and an empirical survey were conducted. In order to find systematically answers for research questions numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4 the desk research was conducted and by desk research the researchers mean a methodological review of existent literature available to them. It was mainly based on well known textbooks (authorities). For the purpose of finding answers for research questions numbered 5 and 6 a systematic survey was carried out. The survey consisted of a self-administered questionnaire that included the instrument measuring the construct/variable of Locus of Control. The instrument that was utilized for this study was the instrument developed by Opatha (2015) that will be detailed in a later section of the paper.

## Conceptual Part

### Locus of Control

The first research question of the study is: *What is Locus of Control?* Umstot (1984) defines Locus of Control as the degree to which a person feels that his or her life is controlled by self or internally versus by the environment, fate, or chance, or externally. According to this definition Locus of Control is a concept with regard to whether the life of a person is controlled by himself or herself or by some external forces. An individual's generalized belief about internal (self) versus external (situation or others) control is called locus of control according to Nelson and Quick (1997). As per the definition given by these two authors Locus of Control is a generalized belief one is having about internal control (done by him or her) or external control (done by situation or other people). Sekaran (2004) defines Locus of Control as a concept that has to do with whether people believe that they are in control of events or events control them. This definition indicates that in the lives of people there are many events and these events can be controlled by people or these events can control people. Six psychologists namely Arnold, Silvester, Patterson, Robertson, Cooper and Burnes (2005) define the concept as the degree to which the individual feels that he or she has substantial control over events (internality) or little control over events (externality). According to them, Locus of Control is a feeling of an individual about the degree of his or her control over events. According to Greenberg and Baron (2008) Locus of Control is the extent to which individuals feel that they are able to control things in a manner that affects them.

Lussier (2010) defines Locus of Control as a continuum representing one's belief as to whether external or internal forces control one's destiny. Lussier considers everything that happens to a person during his or her life including what will happen in the future (destiny or fate) and the extent to which the person believes whether external or internal forces control his or her life. According to them Locus of Control involves the ability of individuals to control things in the way that affects them. Locus of Control is person's general belief about the amount of control he or she has over personal life events (McShane and Glinow, 2013). According to McShane and Glinow (2013) Locus of Control is a general belief held by a person with regard to his or her ability to control personal life events.

Thus Locus of Control is a belief of a person or a feeling of a person about his or her controllability of events of the life. To what extent does a person believe or feel that he or she can control events of the life? The answer is his or her Locus of Control. Locus of Control is the extent to which an individual believes that his or her actions determine his or her outcomes obtained in life (success, job performance, achievement of a qualification, getting promoted etc.) (Opatha, 2014; Opatha, 2015).

### Types of Locus of Control

The second research question of the study is: *What are its types?* It is possible to identify two types of Locus of Control in the literature (Umstot, 1984; Nelson and Quick, 1997; Sekaran, 2004; Arnold et al, 2005; Greenberg and Baron, 2008; Lussier, 2010; McShane and Glinow, 2013; Opatha, 2015). They are Internal Locus of Control (ILC) and External Locus of Control (ELC). Sekaran (2004, p. 107) writes:

*“Those high on internal locus of control (internals) believe that they control and shape the course of events in their lives while those high on external locus of control (externals) tend to believe that events in life occur due to factors that are beyond their own control and these are instrumental in shaping their destiny.”*

McShane and Glinow (2013, p. 71) write:

*“Individuals with an internal locus of control believe that their personal characteristics (i.e., motivation and competencies) mainly influence life’s outcomes. Those with more of an external locus of control believe that events in their life are due mainly to fate, luck, or conditions in the external environment.”*

Opatha (2015, p. 42) writes:

*“It is possible to classify individuals into two main categories, i.e., internals (individuals with internal locus of control) and externals (individuals with external locus of control). **Internal locus of control** is possessed by an individual who believes that he or she controls his or her destiny (what happens to him or her in life). **External locus of control** is possessed by an individual who believes that other factors (other people, situations, luck etc.) determine his or her destiny.”*

Thus, two types of Locus of Control, i.e. ILC and ELC exist. People can get changed in terms of these two types and one can have internality (believing that events and things of one’s life are controlled by him or her) and another can have externality (believing that events and things of one’s life are controlled by luck or other persons).

### Importance of Locus of Control

The third research question of the study is: *Why is it important?* Locus of Control is of general value in the sense that it is a highly discussed aspect or trait of personality and is a core self-evaluation. Locus of Control is perception of who controls outcomes and it has been recognized that this perception is very important in shaping behaviour at work (Harris and Hartman, 2006). Behaviour at work can have many aspects and more common behaviours include participation (timeliness/tardiness, attendance/absenteeism, retention/turnover), effort (human behaviour directed toward achieving performance), performance (the degree to which organizational objectives are met) and productivity (the output of the employee and its economic value) (Dunham, 1984). It has generally been said that Locus of Control has a significant impact on behaviour at work. What are the implications of locus of control personality trait for organizations? Opatha (2015, p.42) writes:

*“There are a number of important implications. If there is a subordinate who is an internal, he or she expects control in working. Giving more authority and responsibility to an internal most likely contributes to increase his or her job motivation, job satisfaction and then job performance. Management techniques such as Management by Objectives (MBO) and Behaviour Modification (BM) work well with internals. An external is more likely to work according to instructions from the superior; to have less or no participation in decision making; and have more reluctance to work under pay-for-performance. While internals may prefer a less structured work setting externals may prefer a more structured work setting.”*

It is possible to identify several different behaviours for internal and external individuals as a result of research performed on the Locus of Control (Harris and Hartman, 2006). Harris and Hartman (2006, p. 191) make a comparison of behaviours between internal and external individuals and the internal (I control my fate) individual is more satisfied with the results of personal efforts; would feel more satisfied in working under a participative leader and would be less satisfied with directive supervision than would externals; would see a strong relationship between personal effort and personal output; will use personal persuasion and rewards to influence others; will be more responsible to situations involving individual decisions; will be more open to input from the environment; and will be more considerate of the needs of others. According to them, the external (things in my environment control me) individual is less satisfied with the results of personal efforts; would feel less satisfied with a participative leader and would be more satisfied with a directive leader than would internals; would see a weak relationship between personal effort and personal output; will use coercive power to influence others; will be less secure in individual decisions; will be more concerned about environmental change; and will be more concerned about personal welfare than the welfare of others.

Thus it is important for a manager or supervisor to know whether a particular employee (subordinate) is an internal or an external before taking certain decisions in managing people at work. Further knowing internality and externality is useful for making right decisions in staffing which includes recruitment, selection, hiring and induction (Opatha, 2009).

### **Prescribed Type of Locus of Control for Manager**

The fourth research question of the study is: *What is the type of Locus of Control that needs to be possessed by a manager who wants to be successful?* Umstot (1984, p. 40) writes:

*“People with an internal locus of control are especially important in organizational positions that require initiative, innovation, and self-starting behaviour, such as managers, researchers, planners. If the task requires complex information analysis and processing, internalizers do the job better.”*

Umstot directly emphasized the importance of ILC for managers. Research has indicated that “Internals” are highly confident of themselves and seek out situations where they use their own wisdom and energies to direct the events and control the outcomes such as starting their own companies (Spector, 1982). Luthans (1998, p. 183) observes:

*“Employees who perceive internal control feel that they personally can influence their outcomes through their own ability, skills, or effort. Employees who perceive external control feel that their outcomes are beyond their own control; they feel that external forces control their outcomes.”*

Luthan's observation suggests that internality is essential for a manager to achieve expected outcomes such as productivity, job satisfaction of employees, profitability, and market growth by adopting his or her ability and by exerting his or her mental and physical efforts in maximum amount. Research has shown that internally oriented persons hold jobs of higher status, advance more rapidly in their careers and prefer intrinsic rewards such as feeling of achievement while externally oriented persons are more interested in job security and other extrinsic rewards (Chandan, 1999). Externals are better aware of the environment and sensitive to the factors that surround them, but experience less job satisfaction and get less involved in their jobs than internals (Sekaran, 2004). High level of job involvement is essential for a manager to be successful in managing. Furthermore, Sekaran (2004, p. 107) observes:

*“People with internal locus of control handle stress well since they feel they are in control of the situation, and are not themselves controlled by it. This makes it possible for them to manage their environmental stress without experiencing its noxious effects.”*

A special ability that is needed by any manager is his or her ability to manage his or her stress properly. Managerial jobs involve many duties and most of the duties are stressful. Also owing to severe competition managers, specially those who are working in the private sector, are supposed to be creative and innovative and they may tend to have increased stress. It reveals that internality is more important than externality to manage stress properly. In many circumstances having an internal locus of control (i.e. believing one is in control) is helpful because it encourages a person to do something about his or her stressful situation (Arnold et al, 2005).

ILC can produce higher job satisfaction and higher job performance compared with ELC. Locus of Control is positively related to job satisfaction and performance, specially, someone with a highly internal locus of control is likely to believe that he or she can do what it takes to influence any situation (Greenberg and Baron, 2008). Furthermore Greenberg and Baron (2008, p. 146-7) write:

*“He or she feels confident in being able to bring about change. As a result, individuals with a high internal locus of control tend to be satisfied with their jobs because they either make them better or seek new ones (not remaining in bad jobs because they believe their fates are sealed). And as a result of making situations better, they tend to perform at high levels as well.”*

After observing successful people Lussier (2010, p.38) writes:

*“Successful people know that they are in control of their lives, and they are happy and successful because they work at it. Successful people have lots of failures, but they have a poor memory for them and keep trying.”*

Failures are inevitable on the road of success and it is essential for a manager to be successful to keep trying. Managers will have to face various challenges and consequently some failures from which they will have to learn lessons which drive them towards success. It is absolutely significant that one embraces the message that he or she controls his or her own destiny (Lussier, 2010).

Giving behavioural implications and managerial actions, Harris and Hartman (2006, p. 191) conclude:

*“The behavioral consequences of internal individuals seem superior in several aspects to the external category. From a managerial perspective, it would seem desirable to facilitate development of an internal perception as much as possible in supervised individuals and to encourage the continuation of this philosophy in those who have already attained. Delegating tasks to be performed individually, providing feedback and reinforcement as a result of specific actions, and the clarification of job responsibilities are a few methods of enhancing development of the internal control position.”*

From an empirical study done about influence of Locus of Control on decision-making of managers in the aviation industry in Nigeria, Fagbola and Popoola (2015) imply that individuals with high ELC are less likely to be committed to their organizations and they may feel unable to influence organizational decision making. From a managerial perspective, development of ILC is desirable in supervised personnel. Having done an extensive research Angelova (2016, p.250) writes:

*“Generally said, internals have better social skills and better interpersonal relationships with colleagues and supervisors than externals (Kapoor, Ansari, & Shukla, 1986; Lefcourt, Martin, Fick, & Saleh, 1985; Phares, 1965; Ringer & Boss, 2000) and that influences the way they attribute the success or failure in workplace. A number of researchers (Erez & Judge, 2001; Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989; Yukl & Latham, 1978) pointed out that the internals were more likely than externals to set a goal, to pursue it, and to have career success. Likewise, internals have higher work satisfaction than externals and that influences the job performance and the motivational processes (Wang, Bowling, & Eshleman, 2010).”*

Thus internals seem to be better than externals in terms of job performance. The above mentioned observations, findings, arguments and suggestions reveal that the type of Locus of Control that needs to be possessed by a manager who wants to be successful is ILC.

## **Empirical Part**

### **Instrument**

The instrument developed by Opatha (2015) was used for measuring Locus of Control and the instrument was based on an operational definition, i.e. the summated rating received on a 10-item, 5-point Likert scale. The ten indicators or aspects are:

1. Hard working as a determinant of success
2. Dependency of destiny on self doing
3. Essentiality of powerful people for achieving success
4. Controlling others by being right
5. Dependency of success of life on self ability to manage it
6. Dependency of prosperity of life on luck
7. Impact of hard working and perspective on grades of qualifications
8. Role of luck and others in giving success on work life and personal life
9. Relationship between the God's help and doing good things
10. Linkage between own behaviour and things that happen

The above are indicators or aspects which were considered to measure the construct of Locus of Control. Beliefs of the respondents or views of the respondents with regard to the aspects were solicited. The interpretation was done by using the following scale:

#### Points

10 – 18	High external locus of control
19 – 26	External locus of control
27 – 34	Indifferent
35 – 42	Internal locus of control
43 – 50	High internal locus of control

An essential type of validity is content validity (Sekaran, 1992; Opatha, 2003). The instrument contained an adequate degree of content validity as one question item was developed for each of the ten aspects or indicators mentioned above. Internal reliability of the instrument was high as the split half reliability coefficient was .424 which was significant at the 0.01 level.

#### Respondents

The selected bank for the empirical study is a very large bank in Sri Lanka and an organization for which one of the authors in this research paper served as a resource person. The bank has been highly successful and is one of the largest banks and also is one of the biggest organizations in the country. All managers were not taken as the respondents for the study but one type of middle managers was considered for the principle of parsimony. There were about 130 middle managers whose official job title is Senior Manager from whom (almost all) data were collected. Senior Managers are key managerial employees for the success of the bank and they need to have the potential to assume responsibilities of higher jobs including Chief Manager, Assistant General Manager, Deputy General Manager, and General Manager. Senior Manager is a middle manager in the management hierarchy of the bank and jobs which are lower than Senior Manager include Management Trainee, Junior Executive, Executive, Senior Executive, Assistant Manager and Manager. The actual number of respondents was 129.

#### Unit of Analysis and Time Horizon

Unit of analysis was individual level: Senior Manager. Time horizon was cross sectional. The data for the empirical part of the study were collected only at one point of time.

#### Hypothesis

A descriptive hypothesis was formulated for the study to make it scientific. Generally it is assumed that bank managers, particularly middle managers are internals as they have to achieve given targets and also they got promoted to work as middle managers owing to past successful job performance. Based on the above literature (in conceptual part of the study) successful managers are assumed to be internals rather than externals. The selected respondents were middle managers by holding Senior Manager Job Title. They were managerial employees who were successful in terms of past job performance and job satisfaction. Majority of them got promoted several times from Management Trainee to Senior Manager. Few managers got promoted many times from Bank Teller (they started their banking career as a non-managerial employee). Furthermore they work as middle managers in a bank that is one of the largest and highly successful banks in Sri Lanka. Hence it is assumed that they

should possess a higher internality or a higher level of ILC. Thus the following hypothesis was formulated for the empirical part of the study.

Alternative Hypothesis: *Degree of internality of senior managers in the selected bank is different from that of senior managers in general.*

Null Hypothesis: *There is no significant difference in locus of control between senior managers in the selected bank and senior managers in general.*

### **Locus of Control of Sri Lankan Managers under Study**

The fifth research question of the study is: *Are Sri Lankan managers under study having the right type of Locus of Control?* It was possible to collect data from 129 senior managers in the selected bank. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics.

**Table: 1 Descriptive Statistics**

Mean	3.9147
Standard Deviation	.58672
Minimum	2
Maximum	5
Range	3

As per the Table, the mean of the Locus of Control of managers under the study was 3.9147. It is almost 4 resulting in a finding that majority of senior managers in the bank under the study are individuals with high ILC. Because of the fact that the standard deviation is less than 1 (.58672) the dispersion is not much and most of the managers are centered around the mean. Table 2 provides frequencies.

**Table: 2 Frequencies of Locus of Control**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 2	1	.8	.8	.8
3	25	19.4	19.4	20.2
4	87	67.4	67.4	87.6
5	16	12.4	12.4	100.0
Total	129	100.0	100.0	

As per the above table, the first row is for the composite response *external locus of control* (coded in the data with the value 2). The second row is for the composite response *indifferent* (coded in the data with the value 3). Third row is for the composite response *internal locus of control* (coded with the value 4) while fourth row is for the composite response *high internal locus of control* (coded with the value 5). 87 senior managers are having ILC and the percentage of such managers is 67.4. 16 senior managers are having high ILC and it is 12.4 as a percentage. 'Being indifferent' type includes 25 senior managers and only one senior manager has ELC. Almost 80 percent of senior managers have ILC. Thus, Sri Lankan managers under study are having the right type of Locus of Control, i.e. ILC.

### Degree of Internality of Senior Managers under Study

The sixth research question of the study is: *What is the degree of internality of senior managers or middle managers working in the bank selected for the empirical study?* Based on the assumption that senior managers working in the bank selected for the study should possess a higher internality or a high level of ILC an alternative hypothesis was formulated and it was: *Degree of internality of senior managers in the selected bank is different from that of senior managers in general.* In order to test the validity of the alternative hypothesis the One-Sample T Test was applied as it was the appropriate technique (the hypothesis is about a single mean) (Norusis, 1997). The test value was taken as 4. Table 3 presents the results of the One-Sample T test.

**Table: 3 Results of the One-Sample T Test**

Degree of Internality	Test Value =					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	-1.651	128	.101	-.08527	Lower	Upper
					-.1875	.0169

According to the table the difference between the observed mean and the hypothetical population mean of 4 (labeled *Test Value*) is -.08527. For the sample (the bank under the study), the average degree of internality was 3.9147 which is lower than the hypothesized 4. The observed T-statistic is -1.651 which is lower than the appropriate table value that is 1.960. This means that the mean difference is insignificant. The observed significance level (.101) is higher than .05 level. Thus the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Therefore, there is no significance difference in internality between senior managers in the bank under study and senior managers in general. One reason for this finding may be that managers' religiosity is at a level of significance. Religiosity is defined as the extent to which a particular employee believes and venerates the founder, gods and goddesses of the relevant religion, practices the relevant teaching and participates in relevant activities (Iddhagoda and Opatha, 2017). Another reason may be that there is no difference between senior managers in the bank under study and senior managers in general with regard to banking qualifications and general education.

### Conclusion

Locus of Control was studied in Sri Lankan setting through a systematic attempt which was both conceptual and empirical. The systematic attempt done to find out answers for the six research questions resulted in that Locus of Control is the extent to which an individual believes that his or her actions determine his or her outcomes obtained in life or the extent to which an individual believes that he or she can control events of the life; two types of Locus of Control were identified and they were ILC (this is possessed by an individual who believes that he or she controls his or her destiny) and ELC (this is possessed by an individual who believes that other factors (other people, situations, luck etc.) determine his or her destiny); Locus of Control is important as it is a highly discussed trait of personality, a core self-evaluation, and makes the difference between being successful and being unsuccessful in terms of many aspects (which were discussed above); the type of Locus of Control that needs to be possessed by a manager who wants to be successful is ILC; Sri Lankan managers under study are having the right type of Locus of Control, i.e. ILC; and finally it is quite likely that senior

managers of the bank under study have similar degree of internality on average, and they seem to be much more similar to those in general in terms of degree of internality.

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