

Leadership Styles of Effective Project Managers: Techniques and Traits to Lead High Performance Teams

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Abstract

Project management is a growing practice and is being utilized in an increasing number of facilities. The project manager is at the head of this project process, and has an important role of overseeing the project and project team, and ultimately ensuring the project ends in success. Analyzing critical qualities of leadership and determining their positive impact can benefit project managers in any industry and therefore promote project success. A few of these leadership styles include: team building, establishing clear relations and roles between project members, openness, self-confidence, organization, and clearly defining project successes, reevaluating when necessary. These leadership styles and traits were researched and analyzed to determine the extent they contribute to the construction, execution, and closure of the project. By adopting these qualities, the project's stakeholders such as investors, clients, or patients are more likely to feel the positive impact of a successful project. Projects can also move more smoothly and efficiently, receiving positive results in less time. This is beneficial not only to the stakeholders, but to all members involved: the organization, the project manager, executive staff, team members, and outsourced facilities. It is not enough to possess one of these crucial traits. As seen in literature and historical examples, a combination is necessary to create balance and develop into a leader that can produce an efficient team and satisfactory end results.

Introduction

In today's increasingly complex global economy and shrinking geography, corporations, governments, and other organizations are turning to a project management model to facilitate successful endeavors that enhance their products, services, policies, and procedures. Project management has proven to be a vehicle to oversee these short-term but strategic ventures. More than ever, these organizations are recognizing that these projects require not just a project manager, but a project leader. According to Pandya (2014), project leaders are accountable for the day-to-day oversight of the project, the triple constraint of time, budget, and quality as any manager is. However, they also need to manage change, assure resource availability, address behavioral and emotional flares with internal and external stakeholders, and build relationships that help create a high performance team. Leaders have vision, honesty and integrity. Leaders also capably move, motivate and inspire their team and stakeholders to embrace change and the strategies, tactics and tasks necessary to accomplish the goals at hand (Prabhakar, 2005).

But are these the leadership traits that ensure project management success? Are there leadership styles and traits that ensure that a leader is effective? Do successful project managers exhibit these certain styles and traits? In the following paper, current literature was reviewed and synthesized. The relationship of leadership styles and traits to project success was identified. Desirable leadership styles and specific traits may enhance project success regardless of the industry, budget, culture, or geography (Prabhakar, 2005). This is knowledge that will be beneficial for organizations and sponsors as they identify project leaders to move their strategic endeavors forward.

Literature Review

Acquiring a leadership position and becoming a leader are quite different. Time, experience, mentorship, mistakes and successes all equally contribute to the process of developing great leaders. Leadership is not measured by titles, roles, or authority. Management is about processes and systems. Leadership is about providing guidance and direction for a group. In leadership, it is important to not only achieve good business results, but to also create a culture where people are empowered and inspired by a common purpose.

Leaders play a key role in building effective teams, creating a framework to steer their activities and motivating them to stay focused. Team-building is an ongoing activity that is one of the manager's primary responsibilities and should be incorporated into day-to-day activities. The leader is the instrumental link to the organizational mission and goals and frontline teamwork.

Situational leadership emphasizes that a leader must adapt his/her style according to the situation of the leader's team or organization. An analysis of the team or organization's competence, motivation and skills is completed to determine the "situation" the leader will need to work with in order to provide effective leadership. Based on the analysis of the situation, the leader determines the style that must be adopted to be congruent with the developmental level of the team or organization. This approach is different than other leadership styles because it stresses that a leader has to change his/her style as opposed to having a fixed, dominant style. The motive of a situational leader is not self-serving, but rather, the development and effectiveness of the team and organization (Riaz & Haider, 2010).

There are three key concepts of situational leadership- task behavior, the amount of direction and guidance the leader provides the group; and relationship behavior, the amount of

emotional and social support provided; and follower development, the maturity and skill level of followers (Waller, Smith, & Warnock, 1989). The situational leadership style enables a leader to identify tasks, set goals, determine the skill level and maturity of the individual or group, select an appropriate leadership approach, and modify the approach as change evolves (Hersey, et. al., 2008). A potential benefit of situational leadership is the capability of the leader to deal with a broad range of situations and people, and in turn create a more individualized and innovative approach.

Transactional leadership views the relationship between the leader and subordinate as one based upon exchanges, or “transactions”. The focus is on tactics such as rewards and punishments conditional on the performance of the subordinate. Followers receive praise and recognition if they comply with the directions of the leader and meet objectives; they receive negative, punitive when performance does not meet expectations (Boseman, 2008).

The theory assumes that the performance of followers is optimized when the chain of command is clearly defined (Waller et al., 1989). The primary goal of the follower is to follow the instructions and directions of the leader. Decisions are derived from hard data and focus on the short term. Policies, and defined rules and standards are all emphasized in the leader-follower relationship. The drawback to this style is the stifling of creativity and innovation; individuality is frowned upon and conformity is expected. Results, efficiency, short term profitability and the bottom-line are the priority. Studies have demonstrated that transactional leadership can have a positive impact on the ability to attain goals and “get the job done”, but may negatively impact employee morale and motivation (Boseman, 2008). Some critics of this leadership style attribute the notable decrease in morale to the preoccupation with power, position and politics (Boseman, 2008).

While some styles are concerned with stability and control through systems and procedures, transformational leadership thrives on change, exercises “control” through a worthy and inspiring vision of what might be and understand the value of staff empowerment (Kouzes and Posner, p. 12). A transformational leader is one that "transforms" the workplace by inspiring and developing others, and motivating teams and individuals to achieve high levels of performance. In order to gain the respect and trust of followers, a leader must always be a role model and "walk the walk", even in the most testing of circumstances. Transformational leaders display integrity and high values.

The ability to clearly communicate a vision and create a common sense of purpose among teams is another characteristic of this leadership style. There is a focus on long-term goals without compromising individuality, values and principles. The transformational leader also values intellectual stimulation, creativity and innovation (Grossman & Valiga, 2009). This type of leader is able to design jobs and projects that are meaningful and challenging for followers. Followers are encouraged to critically think and be involved in problem-solving.

Transformational leaders are able to engage and positively influence colleagues at all levels, and build high-performing and satisfied teams. Vision and common purpose will foster a spirit of teamwork and cooperation that will be enablers for meeting goals, and ultimately benefit the organization (Garfield & Stanton, 2009).

Not only can the type of leadership provide influence, but also the personality traits a project manager possesses impacts the project. In the study by Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh (2008) the project managers’ personalities which directly influenced their leadership and decisions of projects was examined. For this paper, the personality traits were viewed as leadership styles, which ranged from: secure/self-confidence, entrepreneurial/enterprising,

managerial, intuition/investigative, openness to experience, extroversion, and avoidant. Muller, Geraldi, & Turner (2012) use a framework of managerial and leadership qualities that are recognized as important to project management. This framework includes competencies of intellect, managerial, and emotional. The competencies are explained as follows: Project managers critically evaluate plans and actions, and provide direction the competency of intellect, at the same time they build and maintain relationships with those being led which are managerial competencies, and the competency of emotion is the demand for emotional resilience to respond to unexpected events and stress often present in projects (Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012).

Typically project success is defined as meeting the triple constraints of time, cost and scope (Meredith, & Mantel, 2012), whereas Malach-Pines and Muller define project success on much broader terms. Success must include multiple criteria because of the complex nature of projects and the various parties involved in projects. Muller, Geraldi, and Turner (2012) include the triple constraint in their criteria, they also include the various stakeholders and end user perspectives: end-user satisfaction, supplier satisfaction, team satisfaction, customer satisfaction, meeting user requirements, project achieves its purpose, and business success. A four dimensional model is used (Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh, 2008) to define project success including: Efficiency (did the project meet schedule and budget); Impact on customers (benefit to the customers in terms of end products); Business success (benefit, and organizational goals obtained); and preparing for the future (creating new technology and operational infrastructure as well as new markets).

In relation to project management, leadership is important through all phases of the project life cycle. Various theories defining leadership styles have been discussed, and these leadership styles should be used for each situation and with different teams to inspire them for

project success (PMI, 2013). This suggests that the situational leadership style is best for project management, in order to choose the most appropriate action based on the circumstances. Previously mentioned, this paper will examine various leadership traits reflected in leadership styles and the impact they have on project success.

Methodology

The methods for locating and identifying resources, for this project, involved accessing electronic databases provided by the libraries at Drexel University. Each team member conducted a literature search individually with the goal of identifying two contemporary peer reviewed articles or studies. The following databases were utilized: Google Scholar, ProQuest, and CINAHL. Several keyword descriptors were used, including leadership, leader, team, success, style, project, performance, and project management. The basic Boolean search operator “AND” was utilized to narrow the search. The search was limited to those articles in the English language and was further limited by a restriction on date of publication. It was decided that articles older than 10 years would be disregarded. In addition, several applicable resources were identified from previous coursework. Each team member selected two resources for the project based on the applicability as described in the abstract.

Description and Analysis of Project

Organized leadership is a very powerful trait for a project manager to possess. For a company to operate at optimal levels concerning speed, quality, and quantity, an organized leader is a requirement (Dickerson, 2010). Imagine the chaos that stems from disorganization, and how detrimental those barriers can be to the success of the project. The project plan begins with a detailed scope, work breakdown, budget, and a timeline of critical milestones. Without that initial organization - the project would be doomed.

Organization is not just crucial for the project plan and the beginning of project execution. It must be maintained through the entire duration of the project. With organization and proper leadership traits in power, other members of the team are given confidence, creating a sense of purpose and credibility (Dickerson, 2010). “A strong leader does not build an organization upon his shoulders. It is crafted in the hearts and through the hands of his dedicated team” (Dickerson, 2010). The team members chosen to carry-out the project are more productive when a consistently organized leader is present.

A great example of an organized leader who sought success is Harold S. Geneen. As CEO of International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation (ITT), he increased sales profits from \$760 million dollars to over \$17 billion in a mere seventeen years (ITT, 2010). He did this by acquiring over 350 companies, several of which were large and renowned, Sheraton and Continental Baking being a few (ITT, 2010). Geneen attributed his accomplishments to a few qualities, writing, “The five entrepreneurial skills for success (are): Concentration, Discrimination, Organization, Innovation, and Communication” (Brainy Quote, 2014). This is evidence of how being an organized leader, with the combination of other proactive qualities, can significantly impact the outcome of an endeavor.

Other studies have examined the relationships of leaders’ personality traits as applied to project management (Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh, 2008; Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012). Both of these studies examined various traits of project managers, and the association of these traits toward the success of projects that ranged in various levels of complexity. Data was collected through surveys from several hundred project managers creating a robust sample for analysis.

Muller, Geraldi, and Turner (2012) have applied a framework of leadership competencies such as intellectual, managerial, and emotional to analyze project managers, and how competency in this framework affects project outcomes. The study also examined the effects of project complexity and its relationship to the leadership framework and project outcomes. The researchers define complexity as a “multidimensional construct, stemming from the trust in the ability to produce the projects outcome, the amount of information to be processed, dynamic and uncertainty engrained in projects, and the interaction of the actors involved, including both personal and political layers” (Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012).”

The results from Muller, Geraldi, and Turner (2012) indicate that emotional and managerial competencies are potential predictors for project success. Both seem to have an impact on the complexity of projects that have the greatest uncertainty and subject to frequent change. These types of projects also involve a high level of interaction and information transparency. Projects with these characteristics are best suited for leaders with strong emotional and managerial competencies to improve on project success (Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012). The quality of intellect did not show any significant impact on project success. The researchers point out that the competencies of intellect are essential in decision making that involve vision, critical analysis, and understanding the broader implications of decisions (Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012). The results were unexpected where it was believed that intellect would have played a larger role in dealing with highly complex projects.

In summary project managers that are able to build and maintain a good relationship with the team members; and those who can emotionally support the team to help guide them through times of stress and uncertainty; make the greatest impact on project success. Some of the data implies that project managers are not playing a strategic role in projects because vision,

judgment, and understanding the implications of decisions do not appear relevant. Project managers are reporting “narrow-minded self-defined success criteria,” such as time, budget and quality, organizational skills and compliance with legislation (Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012).

Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh (2008) researched the project manager personalities, the project managers fit to the project type and how it related to project success. The study hypothesized that project managers will be more successful managing projects that fit their personality, and certain personality traits are better suited for certain projects leading to project success. The study extended the Person-Organization fit theory to projects, where it viewed projects as temporary organizations.

Projects are classified into varying degrees of intricacy. Malach-Pines, Dvir, and Sadeh (2008) use four dimensions for classification: complexity, pace, technology and novelty. Within these dimensions are varying levels of sophistication. The study analyzed how personality traits would match with the different classifications of projects, and how this association affects the project's outcome at meeting the success criteria.

The study did support the theory that projects managed by project managers whose personalities matched their project's type were more successful (Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh, 2008). This was particularly evident with respect to the impact on customers and business success. The project managers whose traits closely represented openness to experiences, risk taking, investigative and enterprising were more successful toward impact on customers and business success especially in highly complex and novel technological projects.

In smaller less complex projects, the project managers that possess the traits of openness to experiences, risk taking, investigative and enterprising had a much smaller effect on success. As well these managers were worse at meeting planning goals when compared to the

managers that were not strong with these traits (Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh, 2008). These types of managers probably took more risks, made more changes to the project, and tried new ideas to satisfy the customer, which was detrimental to the projects efficiency.

According to the researchers the entrepreneurial personality was the trait that contributed positively to success in almost all types of projects especially those of high innovation and complexity (Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh (2008). This trait did not demonstrate any success with smaller less complex projects. In fact these managers may even hurt the performance of smaller more routine type projects by overextending the scope, creating changes, and introducing too much complexity.

Techniques for Project Success

The increasing pressure for project managers to manage individuals and teams to produce high performance project outcomes and positive business results is more evident now than before. With the stakes raised high, due to the economic downturn, more projects managers are expected to effectively manage resources, deliver on time and produce the expected deliverables (Rezark, 2009). Projects that are deemed to potentially fail in meeting their anticipated objectives are at a greater risk for getting postponed or cancelled altogether. Project managers can employ a number of techniques to manage individuals and teams to not only meet the project objectives but also supersede them. The two techniques that will be discussed further are having establishing effective communication methods, and inspiring individuals and teams to meet project objectives.

One method project managers can successfully manage individuals and a team is by having effective communication methods. In project management, communication involves the exchange of information among key stakeholders including the project manager, the project

sponsor, the project team, and the end user. During the planning phase of the project, it is immensely essential for the project manager to detail the means for communication, when information will be exchanged, and who will be responsible for communicating key information. The crucial importance of effective communication methods cannot be overstated. The research study conducted by the Project Management Institute reveals that the use of effective communication methods resulted in 80% project success rate, with regard to delivering the project on time, within budget and meeting the initial goals (Project Management Institute, 2013). Imperatively, using advance communication methods is necessitated to increase the odds of having a successful project.

Another method the project manager can utilize to manage individuals and a team to achieve expected outcomes is by using strategic inspirational methods. The project manager's role is not limited to managing the project, but also leading people to get the work done. As noted by Kouzes and Posner (2007), to be able to inspire people, leaders need to be buoyantly passionate about their work. They need to be able to influence others to act individually and collectively as a team to achieve the project goals. Furthermore, inspiring individuals and teams is not only necessary when the project is going according to plan, but also when the project experiences some challenges and setbacks. Considering that most projects require some level of teamwork, it is highly essential for project managers to inquire skills on ways to inspire others. After all, having the skills to inspire people may mean the difference between a successful and a failed project.

Summary

The literature indicates that certain leadership traits are more positively associated with project success. The traits of organization, managerial competence, emotional competence, openness to experiences, communication, inspiration, investigative, enterprising and entrepreneurialism, demonstrated the highest correlation with project success, and this was most evident in projects of high complexity (Dickerson, 2010; Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh 2008; Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012; & Project Management Institute, 2013). Dickerson (2010) claims that competent, organized leadership builds great teams by instilling confidence and a greater sense of purpose within team members. The continued presence of this trait elevates the productivity of the team leading to successful outcomes. As evidenced by Harold S. Geneen CEO of International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation who brought great success to ITT with his continued organizational traits.

The ability to be open minded to new ideas, innovative, and entrepreneurial proved very successful for managers in complex novel type projects (Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh 2008). The researchers claim these leaders were willing to take risks and change the project scope to please the customer and meet the end user needs, which consequently impacted customer satisfaction. Interestingly different then what is a normally accepted practice of keeping scope creep to a minimum (PMI, 2013).

Identified by PMI (2013) effective communication is an attribute that has led to 80% of project success. Clear, concise, and frequent communication with all the stakeholders especially customers and end-users is essential through the project life cycle. The transformational leader communicates the vision and creates a common sense of purpose for the project stakeholders promoting project success (Grossman & Valiga, 2009).

Managerial competency meaning the ability to build and maintain good relationships, and provide direction for the team was associated good project outcomes (Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012). Kwak and Anbari (2009), who have researched the impact of the allied managerial disciplines on project management, claim that today project management is more about leading individuals than task orientation. This is why managerial competence is essential for successful leadership. Situational leaders adapt their style depending upon the teams' dynamics and the organizational goals this is where strong managerial competence has an advantage. Situational leadership style appears to relate very well with project management where the leader develops and enhances the effectiveness of the team by using keen managerial skills (Riaz & Haider, 2010) in order to adapt to different type projects.

The emotionality to support the team through times of stress and uncertainty (Muller, Geraldi, & Turner, 2012) along with the capability to inspire the team to work at top performance (Kouzes & Posner, 2007) appear to be more stable indicators for project success. These three characteristics along with entrepreneurialism and organization resonate with transformational leadership (Garfield & Stanton, 2009; Grossman & Valiga, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 1987), which appears to be the most competent style in respect to impact on project success. The transformational leader is innovative thriving on change and inspiring through vision (Garfield & Stanton, 2009). They have the entrepreneurial spirit and strategy planning enterprise to satisfy the stakeholders by taking risks and leading platform projects. It is conceived that these types of complex projects have a larger impact on organizations because they produce more innovative products (Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh, 2008) potentially leading to future sustainability by meeting strategic goals and creating new markets.

Conclusion

While there are many different styles and traits of leadership identified in the literature, the ideal style is elusive, at least in the literature that has been reviewed for this study. Yet it is clear that in this day and age, the project leader needs not only in depth technical knowledge, but also should possess “positive values, highest levels of ethics, morality, lead from the heart, personal capabilities, out-of-the-box thinking, and interpersonal skills” (Pandya, 2014, p. 40). According to Walker (2011), a new style of leadership is necessary for the 21st century, one that enjoys success against the expected delivery triangle of time, budget, and quality, but also positions the organization to be able to share and retain knowledge, and contributes to organizational sustainability. To be an effective project leader requires a combination of technical skills, and an ability to invoke the behavioral competencies described by Muller (2012). It also requires vision, ethics and morality and the ability to lead change. Future projects will be well served to select project managers who exhibit the leadership skills and traits necessary for project success and sustainability of the organization.

A combination of leadership skills and styles are desired to be a fitting project manager. Organization provides a sense of community and establishes purpose for the project team.

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