A theory framework for balancing vertical and horizontal leadership in projects

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Abstract

This paper develops a framework for understanding the interaction between person-centered leadership by project managers (a.k.a. vertical leadership (VLS)) and team-centered leadership by individuals in the project team (a.k.a. horizontal leadership (HSL)). It builds on Archer's Realist Social Theory and its morphogenetic cycle, which describes the interaction of structure with agency for task fulfillment and the resulting reshaping (morphogenesis) or continuation (morphostasis) of structure for subsequent iterations of the cycle. Data were collected globally in 33 case studies with 166 interviews and analyzed using Alvesson's Constructing Mystery technique. A theory about the cycles and events that shape the interaction between VLS and HLS is developed, which includes events such as nomination, identification, selection, execution and governance, as well as transitioning. Managerial and theoretical implications are discussed.
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1. Executive summary

Leadership in projects has traditionally been investigated as either the vertical leadership from a formally appointed project manager, or the horizontal leadership emerging from the project team and its members. Recent studies have shown a contingency between project situation and the choice of vertical or horizontal leadership applied in projects. Thus, the two types of leadership alternate across the project life-cycle, depending on the circumstances of and within the project.

To investigate the nature and the dynamics of the transition between vertical and horizontal leadership, the authors have launched a series of empirical studies. The present paper develops the theoretical perspective and framework for these studies, using Archer's (1995, 2000) Social Realist Theory as theoretical lens towards the phenomenon.

We conducted 33 case studies in nine countries. Data were collected through 166 interviews and corporate publications, like policies and reports. Analysis was done using a non-traditional technique, known as Constructing Mystery (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007), which uses reflexive and abductive

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"sensemaking" of the data in light of the a) the theoretical lens, b) the inductive interpretation of the data, and c) the researchers' own experiences. Aim is to identify one possible explanation of the phenomenon, while other explanations might also be possible.

The analysis identified five events that characterize the transition between vertical and horizontal leadership. Within these events the vertical and horizontal leader performs a series of actions. This is shown in Fig. 2. They are:

- *Nomination*: this is the event of appointing project team members to a project. Here the vertical leader aims for influencing the choice of team members in order to build a pool of most suitable resources and potential horizontal leaders for the project.
- *Identification*: This is the identification of possible horizontal leaders. Here vertical leaders evaluate team members, while team members try to identify a role for themselves in the team.
- *Selection*: This refers to the empowerment of one or several team members as a horizontal leader. It marks the vertical leader's transition of leadership authority to the horizontal leader, and the receiver's acceptance of this authority and its related responsibility.
- *Horizontal leadership and governance*: This describes the execution of horizontal leadership by a team member, and its governance through the vertical leader.
- *Transition*: This event marks the end of the horizontal leadership and the elaboration of possible changes to the conditions for future appointments of horizontal leaders.

These five events collectively serve as a scheme for setting up future studies on balanced leadership and linking together their individual results. Hence, the framework serves as a central repository for studies on balanced leadership which allows for the development of a coherent theory in terms of the nature, context conditions, and situational contingencies for balanced leadership to happen.

A first study derived from this framework is published on the identification event and shows the context variables, processes, and evaluation criteria that take place during this event, that is, prior to empowerment by a vertical leader (Müller et al., 2017). Studies on the other events are ongoing.

To that end, the present paper contributes to the ongoing debate on more theory in project management (Jugdev, 2004) by providing a structured approach and framework that allows for developing robust theories about project reality.

2. Introduction

Studies on leadership in projects have traditionally either focused on the personality and leadership style of the project manager or the leadership processes emerging from the team (Müller et al., 2017). The former is known as vertical or person-centered leadership (VLS), *which is the interpersonal process through which the project manager influences the team and other stakeholders to carry the project forward*. The latter is known as horizontal or team-centered leadership (HLS), which is *the social process through which one or several members of the project team influence the project manager and the rest of the team (and potentially other stakeholders) to carry the project forward in a particular way* (Müller et al., 2017).

Individually, the different VLS and HLS approaches to leadership are well described in the existing literature. Examples include the wide body of knowledge on leadership styles, leaders personalities, relationships of leadership with performance (for an overview see Avolio and Yammarino, 2013; Tyssen et al., 2013). As well as the literature on shared, distributed or relational leadership for HLS (e.g. Bolden, 2011; Pearce and Conger, 2003). However, little has been published on the interface between the two main streams of leadership (VLS and HLS) and the contingencies and processes which make them interact. Recent studies in the realm of project management questioned this divide and started to investigate the interaction between the leadership exercised by the project manager (VLS) and the leadership exercised by the project team or some of its members (HLS). This led to the notion of "balanced leadership", which describes the dynamics for temporary back and forth transitions between VLS and HLS for the accomplishment of desired states in, for example, a task, outcome or the entire project (Müller et al., 2016). Publications in this space have focused so far on the shared cognitive processes between project managers and team members (Müller et al., 2015) and the criteria that trigger transitions from VLS to HLS (Müller et al., 2016). Thus, studies on balanced leadership in projects are rare and not linked into an overall framework which would allow academics to theorize and practitioners to deliberately use it for the benefits of their projects. This is addressed in the present paper through the question:

What is an appropriate framework for conducting studies on balanced leadership in projects?

We take a timely-flow perspective, with the interaction of VLS and HLS as the Unit of Analysis. This allows developing an understanding of the cyclical nature of this interaction, which means, the flow, the events that mark transition points, and the related context contingencies. For that we take a Critical Realist perspective in the sense of Archer et al. (1998) to develop one possible, but not necessarily fully generalizable, explanation of this social phenomenon (Bhaskar, 2016). The study is grounded in Archer's (1995) Realist Social Theory and its morphogenetic approach of structural conditioning, social interaction, and structural elaboration. This allows to view the interaction of VLS and HLS as a continuous flow of human's exposure to structures, their agency (i.e. the action of the agent) executed in social interaction, and the possible change of existing structures as a result of this agency, which provides the new structure for the next iteration in the cyclic flow of the morphogenetic sequence. Hence, the way actors and structures *emerge, intertwine and redefine one another* (Archer, 2010b p275). Moreover, we continue by describing the nature of the interaction between vertical leaders and horizontal leaders as a tangling in terms of the approximation of their individual