Empowerment: The key to horizontal leadership in projects

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Abstract

Leadership in projects can shift between the project manager (a.k.a. vertical leadership) and one or more team members (a.k.a. horizontal leadership). Our study examines the processes, dimensions, and conditions for empowerment of project team members to temporarily assume leadership of project processes. Twenty interviews were conducted in 10 organizations in China. Results show that empowerment for horizontal leadership is a 3-stage process, wherein the project manager takes justification perception and demand factors as essential conditions for his/her empowerment orientation, which in turn frames the announcement, acceptance, control, autonomy and future of horizontal leaders. Four categories of horizontal leaders were revealed, namely Deputies, Future Stars, Bench Players and Oysters. Managerial and theoretical implications are discussed.
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1. Introduction

Bill Gates famous quote "As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others'' (cited in Kruse (2013)) anticipated the developments that the community of project management is facing now. That is, the growing awareness that leadership in projects is a dynamic interaction between project managers and those being empowered by project managers to temporarily lead the project.

Historically, research on leadership in projects either investigated vertical leadership in form of formally appointed leaders (such as project managers) and their personality (e.g. Turner and Müller, 2003), or horizontal leadership, as a collective activity of people, emerging from people's interaction within processes and practices (Crevani et al., 2010). Both streams build on a long heritage of research in management and

organizational behavior, such as leadership styles for vertical leadership (e.g. Northouse, 2007) or shared/distributed leadership for horizontal leadership (e.g. Pearce and Conger, 2003). Recently these two streams converged into a new stream, which aims to understand leadership in projects as being carried out by the project manager (as vertical leader) and members of the project team (as horizontal leaders) in a dynamic alteration over the course of the project life-cycle (Hsu et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2017). This new approach leverages the capabilities of all team members, including the project manager, by assigning leadership authority to the best suitable person at any given situation in a project. Examples include the leadership by an expert in the team to solve a particular technical issue. Granting this leadership requires empowerment in the sense of Bill Gates' quotation above, which can be paraphrased into: as good leaders, project managers need to empower those who have the most suitable leadership capability at any situation, to solve issues at hand in order to efficiently accomplish the project objectives. For that to happen, empowerment is used by the vertical leader to enable the horizontal leader to share power and decision making authority with the vertical leader (Leach et

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al., 2003), and take on extended responsibilities (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Hence, horizontal leadership is enabled and controlled by the vertical leader through empowerment (Cox et al., 2003).

Literature on horizontal leaders and their empowerment in projects is sparse. Most of the literature addresses the empowerment of the project manager, which is not the topic of this article. Packendorff (1995) was among the first to mention the need for different degrees of empowerment for different types of projects. Nauman et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of an empowerment culture for effective virtual project management. However, no study addressed the empowerment of team members into leader roles in projects. The general management literature typically distinguishes between structural empowerment, which describes the situational indicators for empowerment in terms of organizational structures (cf. Kanter, 1977) and psychological empowerment, which addresses the perspective of the empowered employees, i.e. their perception about their situation (cf. Kirkman et al., 2006). Moreover, general management literature has placed emphasis on the conditions enabling and disabling empowerment in organizations (see for example Maynard et al., 2012; Sharma and Kirkman, 2015). We take the notion of empowerment in to the realm of projects, assuming that projects are temporary organizations (in the sense of Turner and Müller, 2003), which differ from permanent organizations in their requirements for leadership (Turner et al., 2009) and therefore we ask:

RQ1. How are team members empowered into horizontal leader roles in projects?

RQ2. What are the characteristics of the situation and the processes that condition the empowerment of horizontal leaders in projects?

The Unit of Analysis is the interaction between project managers as vertical leaders and project team members as empowered horizontal leaders. The study takes the ontological stance of Critical Realism, which combines objectivity at the level of mechanisms underlying the phenomenon with the subjectivity of situational experiences by the actors. Through that we aim for a relatively robust, but not necessarily the only explanation of the phenomenon of empowerment of horizontal leaders (Bhaskar, 2016). Data were collected through 20 interviews in ten organizations in China, and analyzed using an abductive approach, following Miles et al. (2014) in order to develop a model for empowerment of horizontal leaders that addresses both research questions.

Practitioners will benefit from this study through the insights in the situational specifics, and interaction processes that lead to empowering of project team members. Further benefits are in better insights into the role-understanding of individuals in the context of empowerment, which allows for better preparation of individuals for and their improved consciousness in horizontal leadership.

Academics benefit from the study's results through the contribution to theory development, especially the contribution of further levels of detail on the particular process and

conditions of empowerment for the theory on balanced leadership, which is elaborated later in this paper.

The next section will briefly review relevant literature on leadership and empowerment in projects. This is followed by the methodology, analysis, and discussion sections. The last section answers the research questions and concludes on the study results.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

Based on observations of projects being driven forward through combinations of vertical and horizontal leadership processes, the concept of balanced leadership (Müller et al., 2015, 2018a) emerged, which describes this shifting of leadership authority between project managers and team members. Empowerment is key to this shift (Müller et al., 2015, 2018a), as horizontal leadership requires, at the outset, a level of empowerment that must be supported by the vertical leader, that is, the project manager (Cox et al., 2003). As indicated in the introduction, we have not been able to locate research on the nature of the empowerment process in projects. This section first looks into the concept of balanced leadership as this is the context for the empowerment process, then explores the concept of empowerment as well as the role empowerment plays in leveraging horizontal leadership.

2.1. Balanced leadership in projects

A recent development that overcomes the dichotomy of vertical and horizontal leadership, described in the introduction, is the concept of balanced leadership. It is defined as the leadership stemming from the dynamics of temporary back and forth transitions of leadership authority between vertical and horizontal leaders for the accomplishment of desired states in projects (Müller et al., 2018a). Balance is reached by having the best possible leader appointed at any point in time in the project. Balanced leadership builds on the notion that vertical leadership can be supplemented by horizontal leadership, which is "is executed by a team member upon nomination by the project manager (vertical leader), and governed by the vertical leader for the time of the nomination (Pretorius et al., 2017, p.96; Müller et al., 2015, 2018a). This distinguishes it from existing team-based concepts such as shared or distributed leadership, which emphasize the emergence of leadership from and within the team, and not through the vertical leader, as in horizontal leadership (Cox et al., 2003; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009).

Projects often rely on a mix of vertical and horizontal leadership (O'Toole et al., 2003). However, the horizontal leadership does not emerge automatically, it must be enabled by vertical leadership (O'Toole et al., 2003; Cox et al., 2003; Burke et al., 2003). Horizontal leadership (as well as other team-centered concepts of leadership) implies problem solving and decision-making by team member(s).

The phenomenon of balancing leadership has been the focal interest in a global research program that, based on 166 interviews, developed a theoretical framework that describes