

Matching the project manager's leadership style to project type

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Abstract

We look into the interaction of the project manager's leadership style with project type, and their combined impact on project success. We aim to show that different leadership styles are more likely to lead to a successful outcome on different types of project. A recently developed integrated model of intellectual, emotional and managerial competence (IQ, EQ, MQ, respectively) is used to identify project managers leadership styles. A web-based questionnaire was used to determine the leadership style of project managers and relate that to the success of their most recent projects. These are related to project types, using a recently developed categorization system for projects. These quantitative results are validated against qualitative results obtained using semi-structured interviews of managers responsible for assigning project manager to projects.

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1. Introduction

Building on the behavioural, contingency and visionary schools of leadership, the emotional intelligence school [19] and the competency school (see for instance: [28,41,24,16]) have shown in a general management context that the manager's leadership style influences the performance of their organization, and that different leadership styles are appropriate in different contexts. On the other hand, the project management literature has almost studiously ignored the contribution of the project manager, and his or her competence to the success of their project [39]. Over the past twenty years, there has been a changing understanding of what constitutes project success [22]. In the 1980s, researchers focused on the application of tools and techniques [29,32]. More recently they have focused on risk manage-

ment and governance support the project receives from the parent organization [10,5]. Historically, research into project management has emphasized efficiency rather than behavioural or interpersonal factors, [31]. A recent research study suggested different project management approaches are appropriate for different types of project [14]. This would suggest that different project management styles, and thus different competency profiles and leadership styles for the project manager would be appropriate for different types of project. This would be consistent with findings in the general management literature. We have therefore undertaken a research project with the aim of determining whether:

1. the project manager's leadership style influences project success;
2. different leadership styles are appropriate for different types of project.

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We conducted a web-based questionnaire in which we used a recently developed instrument for determining leadership dimensions and styles [16] to determine the leadership styles of 400 project managers. We also asked

the respondents questions about their most recent project to determine its success and to be able to categorize it according to the model of Crawford et al. [14]. We were then able to determine which leadership competencies were more likely to be correlated with success on different types of project. We compared the results to results from semi-structured interviews, where we interviewed people responsible for appointing project managers, to determine what factors they took into account when choosing projects managers to manage different types of project.

2. Leadership style and context

Over the last 75 years six schools of leadership have evolved, Table 1, five of which have suggested that different leadership styles are appropriate in different circumstances. (Also shown in Table 1 are three historical schools going back 2500 years.) These schools have been reflected in the Project Management literature, although by and large that literature has ignored the contribution of the project manager to project success [39].

2.1. Four early schools

The trait school suggests good leaders exhibit certain traits which they are born with. The behavioural school assumes effective leaders display given behaviours or styles, which can be developed. Most authors from the behavioural school assume different behaviours or styles are appropriate in different circumstances, but that was formalized by the contingency school. Turner [36], from work he did at Henley Management College, identified seven

traits of effective project managers: problem solving ability; results orientation; energy and initiative; self-confidence; perspective; communication; negotiating ability. However, he did not consider whether different traits would be appropriate on different types of project. Based on the work of Frame [18], he also took the four leadership styles, laissez-faire, democratic, autocratic and bureaucratic, and suggested how each style was appropriate at a different stage of the project life-cycle: feasibility, design, execution and close-out, respectively.

The visionary school identifies two types of leaders, those who focus on relationships and communicate their values, and those who focus on process, called transformational and transactional leaders, respectively [2]. Confucius and Aristotle had similar views on leadership. Keegan and Den Hartog [23] predicted that transformational leadership would be more appropriate for project managers. However, in their study, even though they found a preference for transformational leadership, they could find no significant link. Thus across all projects, that one dimension was not a significant determinant of success as a project manager. However, based on the work of Dulewicz and Higgs [16] and our results from our interviews, we would predict that they would find a transformational leadership style preferred on complex change projects and a transactional style preferred on simple, engineering projects.

2.2. Emotional intelligence school

This school assumes all managers have a reasonable level of intelligence. What differentiates leaders is not their intelligence, but their emotional response to situations.

Table 1
Six modern and three historical schools of leadership

School	Period	Main idea	Example authors
Confucius	500BC	Relationships (<i>jen</i>), values (<i>xiao</i>) process (<i>li</i>), moderation (<i>zhang rong</i>)	Chen [8]
Aristotle	300BC	Relationships (<i>pathos</i>) values (<i>ethos</i>), process (<i>logos</i>)	Collinson [9] Covey [11]
Barnard	1938	Relationships versus process	Barnard [1]
Trait	1930s–1940s	Effective leaders show common traits, leaders born not made	Kirkpatrick and Locke [25]
Behaviour or style	1940s–1950s	Effective leaders adopt certain styles or behaviours Leadership skills can be developed	Blake and Mouton [4] Tannenbaum and Schmidt [35]
Contingency	1960s–1970s	What makes an effective leader depends on the situation	Fiedler [17], House [21], Robbins [34]
Visionary or charismatic	1980s–1990s	Two styles: Transformational: concern for relationships Transactional: concern for process	Bass [2]
Emotional intelligence	2000s	Emotional intelligence has a greater impact on performance than intellect	Goleman et al. [19]
Competency	2000s	Effective leaders exhibit certain competencies, including traits, behaviours and styles Emotions, process, intellect Different profiles of competence better in different situations	Dulewicz and Higgs [16]

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