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Leadership in Project Management: The disjoint between theory and practice

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study investigating the leadership styles of project managers within knowledge-based organisations. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question of how corporate strategy influences the leadership style of project managers. Current thinking suggests that person-focused leadership may foster greater contribution to an organisation. However, the short duration of projects and the task-focus nature of temporary organisations deter person-focused leadership from evolving. Despite this, the study finds that there is evidence of person-based leadership in projects. The implication is that current thinking about project leadership is developing slower than practice.

Keywords: Projects; Leadership; Strategy

Introduction

There has been an extensive body of literature on leadership within permanent organisations and the transfer routes from theory to practice are well established. In contrast leadership styles within the temporary setting of a project remains under investigated (Tyssen, Wald and Spieth, 2014). Of the studies that have been conducted, attention has been on task-focused leadership styles adopted to achieve success in the short-term project management objectives of time, cost and quality. However, contemporary project management literature views projects as components of organisational strategy and project management as a suitable vehicle by which strategy is implemented (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006, Cleland and Ireland, 2006, Shenhar and Dvir, 2007). Central to this perspective is the concept of strategic alignment. This ensures that projects accurately reflect and contribute to the long-term aspirations articulated in the corporate strategy. Despite this, the majority of studies investigating strategic alignment have tended to focus on the higher-level activities of the strategic hierarchy, such as project portfolio management (Archer and Ghasemzadeh, 1999) and programme management (Thiry, 2004), with only few studies on strategic leadership at the project level (Shenhar, 2004).

To maintain alignment of a project with an organisation's corporate strategy, the temporary organisation needs to have full knowledge of how the project contributes to the long-term objectives and make tactical manoeuvres accordingly. Yet, this has not been adequately discussed within the literature. Similarly, current thinking about strategic leadership, particularly in knowledge-based organisations, suggests person-based styles may foster greater contribution and value, but there is little scope for person-based leadership, theoretically at least, within a temporary project assignment that is typically task focused.

The aim of this paper is to address a current gap in project management research by reporting a research study that explores the leadership styles of project managers within knowledge-based organisations. More specifically, it investigates the alignment of projects with corporate strategy, particularly the questions of how, or indeed if, the strategy of an organisation influences the leadership style of project managers. Secondly, the research investigates if person-focused leadership is observable amongst the project leaders included in the study, or alternatively, if the task-focused nature of temporary organisations deter person-focused leadership?

Using a qualitative methodology, the paper reports data collated from 41 project managers across Northern Europe on leadership styles and experience of strategic alignment in corporate organisations. The paper begins with a review of current thinking on leadership styles. This is followed by identification of the theoretical tensions when seeking to implement organisational strategy through projects. Finally, the challenges of leadership in the temporary settings project of a project are discussed, leading to three broad research questions. A description of the methodology employed to address the findings are then presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings and the contribution this makes to our current understanding of strategic project management and the role of leadership in this.

Leadership styles

It has been established that no single leadership style suitable for every situation (Kangis and Lee-Kelley, 2000). Effective leadership is understood widely to be contingent on '*the leader, his followers, the organization and the social milieu*' (Mcgregor, 1966: 76). In projects, success and effectiveness are no less contingent on these factors, and as such, leadership is as important in the project context as in any other organisational context (Cleland, 1995). Despite this, most studies of leadership focus on non-project based organisations. Current thinking on leadership comprises styles associated with person-based leadership, and particularly the transactional-to-transformational range of leadership styles (Avolio, Bass and Jung, 1999, Judge and Piccolo, 2004). Transactional leadership involves rules and exchange of behaviours for reward. Transformational leadership involves leading by example and by aligning organisational goals with follower goals through communication of vision, acknowledgement of individual's development ambitions and support (Bass, 1990). Authors such as George, *et al* (2007) extend the person-focused elements of this to describe '*authentic leadership*'. Authentic leadership is associated with the genuineness of the leader. It is based on the premise that if followers believe a leader to have the qualities and skills advocated or required in others, then trust and commitment are better fostered, leading to optimal outcomes (Norhouse, 2013).

In business studies specifically, there is much evidence supporting the utility of person-focused leadership. Person-focused leadership, relies on an emotional intelligence to foster communication and individualised consideration of followers (Goleman, 2000). In the wider context, transformational leadership in particular, with its

principles of communication of vision, affordance of autonomy via the extension of trust, and the idealised influence of the leader, has been found to be effective in terms of fostering value-adding activity such as innovation, or greater engagement amongst followers (Avolio and Bass, 2002). Authentic leadership, through its qualities of individualised treatment of followers, matching their goals to the leader's or the organisation's mutual benefit is a further extension of this (Avolio and Gardner, 2005).

Projects to implement strategy

The continued growth of interest into the strategic stream of project management research has seen focus shift from quantitative project control mechanisms to the application of project management principals to accomplish the strategic objectives of the organisation (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006, Gareis, 1991, Hauc and Kovac, 2000). By employing project management principles to the delivery of organisational strategy, firms are able to partially eradicate the conventional bureaucratic, mechanistic structures, which according to Burns & Stalker (1994) are inherently resistant to change.

However, implementing corporate strategy through projects is more complex than literature assumes. In the first instance, strategic management discourse tends to focus on the formation of strategies. Disproportionately, the issue of strategy implementation receives relatively little attention within the literature (Grundy, 1998, Pellegrinelli and Bowman, 1994). More often strategy is seen as a deliberate process, where organisations articulate their vision in the form of a strategic plan, once the strategy has been developed, implementation appears to be a matter of operational detail and tactical adjustment (Pellegrinelli and Bowman, 1994). Moreover, the dominant strand in project management literature is the rational deterministic model that assumes all projects are fundamentally similar, in that they can be managed by a universal set of activities (Shenhar and Dvir, 1996). This model focuses purely on individual project implementation, bounded by the constraints of time, cost and quality, with little reflection to strategy formation. Since most project leaders have little involvement in strategic development and may not even be aware of the strategic rationale of the project (Heines, 2011), it is inevitable that efforts will be directed on completing the project with little consideration as to whether the project aligns to the business strategy or not (Aalto, 2000, Crawford, 2005).

A second challenge to the implementation of strategy is the nature of the temporary organisation created to realise the permanent organisations strategic aspirations. By definition, temporary organisations are limited in duration (Lundin and Soderholm, 1995). As such, focus within a temporary organisation is on task and function and there exists a pressure of urgency to deliver the desired outcomes within the specific timescale (Turner and Muller, 2003). In contrast, strategic projects are implemented to deliver the long-term vision of the organisation. Project in this context will be highly complex (Shenhar and Dvir, 2007) involve change within the organisation (Whittington *et al.*, 1999) and often require integration of temporary organisational members to achieve project success. Despite evidence of a positive relationship between transformational leadership and organisational performance (Degroot, Kiker and Cross, 2000, Lowe, Kroeck and Sivasubramaniam, 1996), the temporal nature of projects simply does not allow adequate time for the necessary complex interactions and relations between leaders and followers to take place (Tyssen, Wald and Spieth, 2014).

Project Leadership

The significant challenge for leaders of projects is that they actually have little de facto authority (Tyssen, Wald and Spieth, 2014). Due to the limited duration of the temporary organisation, responsibility is only over a defined period. Once the project is complete, members of the temporary organisation will either return to their function department progress to other projects. Moreover, in the context of matrix organisations, authority is split between the functional manager and the project leader (Arvidsson, 2009). Inevitably, it is the line manager within the permanent organisation that has the most influence, as project leaders have no influence over promotions, career prospects or rewards of employees (Kangis and Lee-Kelley, 2000, Keegan and Den Hartog, 2004).

Identification of these challenges creates tensions within the discourse of leadership styles within the context of the project environment. Project leaders may have little power over rewards, yet there is the notion that transformational leadership is most effective only where buy-in can reap tangible results for followers. The suggestion is that transformational leadership can be effective only in so far as an emotional, personal response to it has the potential to manifest actual return, and this by definition is transactional. This tension does not negate the importance and utility of transformational leadership, rather it confirms the contention that transactional and transformational leadership are not mutually exclusive, and in fact represent ideal points in the contingency-based leadership paradigm (Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino, 1991, Bass, 1985, Burns, 1978).

From a theoretical perspective there exists a paradigmatic mismatch between knowledge about projects and knowledge about effective leadership in organisations. Theoretical approaches to project management have traditionally focused on measurable performance criteria. Leadership in temporary organisations is therefore task oriented. But the achievement of project objectives, in particular those relating to the realisation of organisational strategy, is predicated on human performance, and performance has been shown innumerable times to be enhanced by person-focused leadership, based on the pillars of vision, communication, individual consideration and buy-in.

Despite the growth of interest within the strategic stream of project management research, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the proposition that project managers actually lead projects strategically (Young and Grant, 2015). Also, as discussed, there is little scope for the development of person-based leadership within temporary organisations, yet the literature suggests that authentic leadership would be the most valuable in the temporary setting of a project. Moreover, as temporary organisations are time bound, we enquire as to the benefit of project leaders pursuing person-based approaches to realise project success. Thus the following research questions are generated:

RQ1: Does corporate strategy have an influence on project management and leadership in practice?

RQ2: Is person-focused leadership observable amongst project leaders?

RQ3: Do project leaders perceive leadership style as contributory to project success?

Methodology

The methodology employed to address the research questions comprises two stages of qualitative investigation. Data was collected over a period of four months. In the first stage of study 41 project managers from knowledge-based industries across Northern Europe responded to a questionnaire designed to illicit qualitative data on leadership styles and experiences in strategically aligning projects with organisational strategy. Representative industries included IT, education and logistics from UK, Switzerland,

Austria and Germany. Amongst the questions were those that requested qualitative statements be ranked on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and questions that requested ‘free’ narrative responses.

The second stage of the research involved in-depth interviews with eight participants, from various industries in the UK and Germany who had participated in Stage 1 of the study. These interviews were semi-structured, designed to validate survey data and develop emerging themes. Table 1 below provides summary details of the interviewees.

Table 1- Summary of Interview Participant

Interviewee	Industry	Location
IR1	Education	Germany
IR2	IT	Germany
IR3	Facilities Management	UK
IR4	IT	UK
IR5	Construction	UK
IR6	Architecture	UK
IR7	Civil Engineering	UK
IR8	Construction	UK

Findings

RQ1: Does corporate strategy have an influence on project management and leadership?

Results from the survey data include those that show a lack of connection between strategy and project leadership. Eight of the 41 project manager respondents were not aware of their company’s strategy and 16 claimed that they do not communicate corporate strategy to project subordinates. These negative responses are supplemented by comments provided in response to some of the survey’s ‘open’ questions. In some cases, it appears that corporate strategy does not feature in project leadership because the greater organisation does not share it with the project manager. For example, Survey Respondent (SR) 4 stated that *“strategic objectives are not always clearly formulated”*, and SR 27 claimed *“it is not communicated by the organisation”*. SR10 explains that projects are *“mostly measured by TCQ”* (ie. time, cost, quality - the traditional project management model). According to SR 36 this is a reason why *“strategic issues often get lost in the everyday business”*. This opinion is also shared by SR 16 in that during projects *“operational aspects have a higher priority in day-to-day business and strategic objectives are not the task of a project manager”*. Interview data supports this also. Interviewee Respondent (IR) 3 claimed that the strategic objectives should influence leadership style, but he also noted:

“it is difficult to take strategic objectives into consideration as a project manager is more concerned about hitting the deadlines”.

In the case of IR 3 the strategic objective was to provide *“best customer service”*, whereas he had to deliver project specific objectives that were not clearly or directly linked to that. The mismatch between organisational strategy and project strategy was summarised by SR37 as *“strategy is strategy and project management is project management”*.

On the other hand, the majority of survey respondents (25) claimed they do communicate corporate strategy to project teams, and 23 respondents claimed they are

encouraged to lead projects strategically by senior managers. SR 18 states simply “*good project managers must know the business that their project contributes to*”.

Nearly half of the respondents claimed that corporate strategy has an effect on their style of project leadership. This is explained as being associated with the effect of the organisational culture and operation as a whole, including the projects in it. As SR18 put it, the corporate strategy is a “*roadmap for the entire organisation*”. Similarly, SR 34 claims that strategic objectives “*determine the context within which a project manager operates - the value system must be represented*”, while SR 26 claims it sets “*priorities for the project*”. SR 5 expands on this by reflecting on how projects must continue even in times of strategic change, and that without communication and alignment of strategy and change, problems would arise in terms of project success and utility to the organisation. This can have a bearing on leadership insofar as “*a project manager has to change or adapt his leadership style to provide direction to achieve these changed objectives (SR5)*”. SR 31 agrees with this: a project leader must be informed about strategy and strategic change so that “*they can adjust the project*”.

On a more general level, project leaders require knowledge of the corporate strategy so that they can “*deliver what is most important in relation to the strategy*” (SR7). However, there is not always scope in some organisations for project managers (who are often relatively low in an organisation’s hierarchy) to be directly involved in strategic decision-making and the communication of these. As a result, in some organisations contingency is put in place to ensure that project managers at all hierarchical levels are informed about the greater organisational strategy and how the project fits with it. Certainly this is the case in the organisations in which SR3, SR16, SR24, SR25 and SR34 lead projects, whereupon ‘benefits mapping’ (SR34) or ‘portfolio plans’ (SR25 and SR25) are drawn up that provide the links with strategy. As SR 16 put it, this “*makes decisions easier as I’m looking more at the bigger picture and what the organisation wants to reach and not at the problem that lies ahead*”. This type of technique can be used effectively within the project team also. Particularly at the beginning of a project, several respondents identified the need to make clear “*the strategic goals and discuss with the project team how they could reach these goals*” (SR31). SR35 discusses similarly using strategy “*to sell the project to the team*” and SR 1 and SR 3 both mentioned that they arrange workshops or specific sessions for the project team “*in which the strategic linkage between strategy and project is shown*” (SR3).

Interview data lends further support to the idea that leadership in projects can involve corporate strategy. For example, IR 5 describes his firm’s ongoing strategic priority as “*to make good buildings*”. From there other commercial strategic goals follow. He goes on to say that this primary strategic philosophy is part of the organisational culture and built into every section and every project within. IR 1 claims that when his company asks for a project, “*even something small*”, that it is explained to him as a project manager how it “*is aligned with the corporate strategy [so that] I have good justifications for the project to pass on to the team*”. Similarly, IR 7 identifies that people need to see the point in what they are doing so they can understand how they contribute to the goals of the organisation. IR7 claims therefore that the communication of the corporate strategy can motivate and develop people by affording understanding of the role they play, within their project, towards achieving corporate goals. Thus, IR 7 suggests that the direct linking of corporate strategy to the operation of projects facilitates person-focused qualities in project work. It is to the use of person-focused leadership in projects that we now turn.

RQ2: Is person-focused leadership observable amongst project leaders?

Supporting Lloyd-Walker and Walker's (2011) hypothesis, the data contained much evidence of person-focused leadership in projects, including transformational and authentic leadership. Statements such as SR26's are common and show that communication and direct relation of how the project and the tasks therein relate to the greater organisation are important:

"team members need to understand the importance and impact of the project so that they can support the goal or even be motivated through this" (SR26).

In fact, many respondents identified communication, as one of the main tenets of transformational leadership. SR9 added that the importance of this is not restricted to the project team but should include *"also the communication with the organisational levels above"*. Several interview respondents specifically mentioned communication of how the project aligns with the organisation's strategy. Examples include:

"team members need to get to know what the project is about, and how it fits into the context of the corporate strategy or the strategic business unit" (IR2).

"the little steps can be boring if someone does not know to what the work contributes to"(IR3)

"especially in cross functional teams the members want to know the background of the project, as they all have different fields of expertise and have to know how to synergise to achieve the best results for the company" (IR4).

Other principles of transformational and authentic leadership were evident also. For example, both SR41 and SR22 mentioned the importance of *"the personality of the project manager himself"* (SR41), suggesting some evidence of the charisma of a project leader having a bearing on performance and outcomes. Similarly, SR 32 claimed that project leaders *"should lead by example"*, and SR33 claimed they should *"walk-the-talk"*, evoking notions of leaders being role models and influencers of follower behaviour as a consequence of their own conduct.

One of the features of, particularly, transformational leadership identified most often by the data in this research is buy-in from followers, where project members are encouraged to invest themselves personally in project activities by expressing some shared value for all parties. This, again, was most often connected to communication and appreciation of how the project contributes to corporate strategy. For example, SR 18 wrote:

"the project team will tend to take a proactive approach to its implementation, given that they buy into the reasoning behind that strategy development".

Similarly, as a project leader, SR5 *"ensures that the strategic vision is shared for engagement and motivation"*, sentiments that are shared by SR6 and SR1 and by interview data.

There is evidence also of mutuality of value and benefits, defining components of transformational and authentic leadership. For example, SR21 claims to *"align the strategy objectives of the company with the personal objectives of the team members"*. Similarly, in the interview data, IR7 claims project staff must be motivated and able to develop *"technical ability and desires, ambitions to move on and keep progressing"*. Thus, there is evidence in the data of value being afforded reciprocally to an organisation and members of a project team as a result of the leadership style employed.

RQ3: Do project leaders perceive leadership style as contributory to project success?

Answers given by respondents and reported already suggest that leadership style is perceived by project leaders to be contributory to project success. Leadership style

appears to be dependent on the extent to which leaders perceive their projects to be traditional and task focused or strategic.

Of the former, there is evidence that leadership style needs to be task oriented and aligned with traditional project management proprieties of time, cost and quality. For example, SR 8 claimed *“the project objectives have an effect on my leadership style but not the strategic objectives”*, adding that the strategic objectives of an organisation may be in opposition to the immediate requirements of the project and as such act as a distraction.

Conversely, and more frequently in the data as already reported, project managers identified that successful leadership required a style that does embrace strategic concerns and aligns project work with organisational strategy. Notably, IR 3 in particular mentions:

“strategic leadership should be used in project management, as it is very important that the strategy objectives are known throughout the team. People tend to achieve to get the job done and need to see the big picture. A team should be on board from the start to inspire and motivate them”.

The inference is that the data more often supports Shenhar’s (2004) conceptualisation of ‘strategic project leadership’ than it does leadership of projects as discrete and separate from the greater organisation.

Discussion

The study finds some adherence to the rationale model of project management in the sense that projects are task-based and discrete from organisational strategy. To a greater extent, however, the study finds evidence of Shenhar’s (2004) proposition that projects are informed by strategy and there is explicit communication of strategic purpose to the temporary organisation. In turn, there is much evidence that this informs the leadership style of those leading projects. Specifically, the study supports Lloyd-Walker and Walker’s (2011) claim that transformational and authentic leadership techniques can be appropriate in projects and do contribute to project success.

From a theoretical perspective, the implications include that the traditional lens through which project management has been viewed is limiting and does not bear much resemblance to practice. Therefore, the utility of project management theory to practitioners in terms of leading projects is subsequently limited. There is much support in the current paper for the idea that project management needs to be understood as involving strategy and is not discrete or otherwise ‘outside’ the greater business of an organisation.

Further, if person-focused leadership is observably useful to project managers then acknowledgement of this allows more appropriate personal and professional development opportunities. Similarly, if both the strategic management and project management functions in organisations are better informed about each-other, there is some logic to expecting each to be better equipped to operate in competitive, commercial environments. Since the strategic alignment of projects has been shown to contribute to value (Velcu, 2010; Hong, et al., 2011), it seems logical that strategic project leadership, as conceptualised by Shenhar (2004) will be a necessary, or at least valuable component of that. The current study suggests that this conceptualisation is indeed a reality in some organisations, and the associated value is inferred.

Conclusions

Results show that there is some disconnect between project leadership style and organisational strategy evident in the data. But, there is more evidence to suggest

strategy can be used by project leaders to ‘sell’ vision and motivate temporary organizations, and that person-based leadership is as valuable to project management as it is to corporate management. There is a wealth of evidence of transformational and authentic leadership in projects in a variety of industries. This raises serious questions about the validity to theory and the usefulness to practice of the traditional project management ‘iron-triangle’ paradigm and suggests that development in the project management field is required that better links the advocated principles to actual practice. Projects, and specifically project leadership, are not as separate and different from the greater organisation as the traditional paradigm suggests.

The current study is limited in the sense that it is based on qualitative responses from relatively few participants. It also focuses on a specific broad European region. Notwithstanding this, the indicative findings do demonstrate that strategic alignment and person-based leadership can indeed benefit projects. It would be interesting to explore with a larger sample and in other locations in the world the consistency of this. A further opportunity for research includes the extent to which project managers in other industries, not included in the current study, or in organisational contexts other than the commercial, corporate sector, make use of strategic and transformational techniques in their projects.

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