



The Essence of Project Leadership is Significant to Project Management

Riaz Ahmed^{1*}, Noor Azmi² and Muhammad Tahir Masood³

¹*COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad, PAKISTAN

²Faculty of Management (FM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Johor Bahru, MALAYSIA

³Department of Leadership and Management Studies, National Defense University, Islamabad, PAKISTAN

Available online at: www.isca.in

Received 9th December 2012, revised 1st January 2013, accepted 21st February 2013

Abstract

The objective of this research is to explore the significance of project leadership from literature which has been emerged as a child of leadership and management in last ten years. The motivation factor to conduct this study rise through fascinating observation revealed in literature that still there is limited research on project leadership in the field of project management even though calls have been made for more research on project leadership for more than one decade. To determine the effect of project leadership performance on success or failure of project, understanding the differences between project leadership and project management becomes important. It perceived through literature review that the role of project leadership in coming years will be more fascinating, demanding and critical. The role of professionals working on projects as manager, coordinator, and director is rapidly evolving from managing or directing to leading the projects who must possess essential skills and competencies of project leadership concept. Further research is suggested to consider project leadership in future.

Keywords: Project leadership, essence, project management, leadership, project manager.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the significance of project leadership in the area of project management. The issue of project leadership needs more attention in project management literature, even though calls have been made for more research on project leadership¹. It is apprehended on the basis of literature that there is a vital need of effective role which must be able to lead and manage simultaneously in complex and challenging working environment. Project leadership is critical to overcome this challenge, which has been cultivated as a brainchild of leadership and management in last decade. Therefore, it becomes important to understand the differences between project leadership and project management, to determine the effect of project leadership performance on success or failure of project².

The role of project manager's leadership on the project outcome and success is vital which is often discussed in literature³, in context of leadership and management which are dissimilar to certain extent from each other but complementary and cannot function without each other in the competitive and challenging environment⁴. There is very limited research to address the issue of project manager's leadership and its contribution to project success⁵. It has generally been recognized in management literature that performance of functional manager's leadership contributes to project success in organization but the performance of project manager is ignored while identifying the project success factors^{2,6}. The performance of leadership is reported as most explored part of human behavior which is fundamental for the project team to work together⁷. This article

is an attempt to address phenomenon of project leadership that is emerging leadership and management.

The leadership competencies may play various role during different activities of organizational change implementation which has largely been ignored by the leadership literature⁸. It is becoming difficult to differentiate between the roles of project manager and leader in context of leadership and management as well as project management. Therefore, it becomes important to understand the differences between project leadership and project management, to determine the effect of project leadership performance on success or failure of project². The essential leadership and managerial knowledge, skills, competencies and characteristics ensure successful completion of projects through right decisions at right time and employing right people at right places⁹. Leadership is a process which creates change and uncertainty in organization involving: developing vision for organization, supporting and communicating with the people for achievement of vision, and motivating people for action through fulfillment of basic necessities and empowerment¹⁰.

A large number of studies have been explored to identify leadership traits and characteristics, including personality, abilities, physical factors, knowledge, dominance, and self confidence, as the list goes on¹, but there are no common traits, behavior or processes which can identify the qualities of an effective leader¹¹. The leadership fundamental function is to produce change and set direction to cope with change which is not similar to planning or long-term planning, but perplexity between both often take place among people¹⁰. Leadership style and personal traits have been determined as critical success

factor for failure or success of a project, in most of research^{2,12-15}. Two perspectives exist in literature on broader context about what managers do in which first stipulates what managers do¹⁶, in recognized role-based approach^{17,18}, and other entail to portray the work of manager¹⁹.

Leadership is about “the process of creating an environment in which people become empowered”²⁰. Leadership is the ability to inspire others to achieve objectives actively which binds the human factor together into a group and motivate towards goal. Though, leadership is a part of management but not all of it¹. The prominent definition of leadership is “an influence relationship among leaders and their collaborators, who intend real change that reflects their shared purpose”²¹. Management is “the ability to work through others” and most of today’s management definitions are similar to Courtland Bouee who offered in his book *Management*: “...it is a process of attaining organizational goals through effective and efficient planning, organizing, leading and controlling the organization’s human, physical, financial and informational resources”²¹.

Linking Leadership and Management with project management

It is commonly assumed that everyone in management position is a leader and leaders are not concerned to manage but leadership is performed by the people even though not in management positions²². In contrast to leadership, management is a process which diminishes uncertainty and stabilizes the organization involving: planning and budgeting, organizing and staffing, and controlling and problem solving¹⁰. Though, management is a function comprises on implementing the direction and vision provided by the leaders, handling day-to-day problems, and coordinating and staffing the organization²³. In latter part of the last century, management’s two “children” evolved into leadership and project management fields²¹. Management practices are considered for many centuries as planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Management skills were required for all mega events including building Great Wall of China, preparing armies for battle, and running the Roman Empire. Traditionally, management was viewed as an art that transferred from generation to generation until late nineteen centuries and science of management has also developed in last hundred years²¹.

The definition and functions of management are substantially agreed while there is a little agreement on definition and functions of leadership, or whether it is a discipline or not but mostly scholars agree that it is a discipline²¹. Kotter⁴, a professor of leadership at Harvard Business School argued that both leadership and management are distinct but still complementary systems of action in organizations. The management is about dealing with complexity in projects while leadership is about coping with the change through projects¹⁰. Leadership is not different from management just due to like and dislike of people and leadership is not numinous and inexplicable⁴. The difference between roles of leadership and

management in any organization is that a project manager act as a problem solver by finding the best options to achieve defined project objectives and ensure to perform assigned responsibilities efficiently by the project team. On the contrary, leaders create vision and wisdom, and build up strategic guidelines for long-term problems²⁴.

There is a significant aim for research on project leadership due to field of project management which include leadership theories and models. It is essential that project management field must take the responsibility for development of apt theories of project leadership either using deductive approach or inductive approach²⁵. In project management literature, there has been written little about more common question of “what project managers do”^{19,26}. In fact, literature focused much about what project managers should do but less noticed about what they actually do and how can teach, improve and help through project management²⁶. The new approach in project management is strategic project leadership which is focusing to create competitive advantage through projects and providing opportunities for winning in the market place²⁴.

In project management perspective, project managers are basically planning agents as they are the architects of project plan²⁷. Accordingly, it is fair argument in project management theory that ‘plan your work’ and then ‘work your plan’¹⁹. An accepted proverb among researchers and project manager is that “failing to plan is planning to fail”²⁷. Effective planning play key role for project managers to deliver project successfully including customer satisfaction and successful implementation¹⁹. For every successful project, planning and scheduling are seen cornerstone as well as key predictor and contributor of project success²⁸. The prediction about functions of the project managers in future to become key players in organizational world²⁶, has been come to reality¹⁹. The project managers are required to be focused towards achieving the success and winning the market place by expanding the role from just getting the jobs done²⁴. Firstly, the project manager essentially plan to ensure project success and secondly perform the task of “getting things done” in standard project management¹⁹.

The project managers perform similar functions like other managers in narrow terms which include planning, motivation, scheduling and controlling²⁹. It is the project manager’s responsibility to ensure properly planning, implementation, and completion of the project³⁰. Project managers mostly do planning irrespective of project type as “planning is the first step a project manager should take in beginning of a project”³¹. The project managers must efficiently handle all aspects of project leadership including strategic, operational and human, in order to grow and become a real leader²⁴. The fundamental question of “what managers do”¹⁶ has obtained constructive debate among researcher and practitioners¹⁷ and the role of project managers is similar to other managers¹⁹. There are some key differences between roles of managers and project managers, while projects are not permanent and their temporality might impact on work performance of project

managers¹⁹. The 'project-as-practice' school of thought strives to address performance of projects in general and practices of project managers in particular³².

There is a real difference exist between leadership and project manager in complex working environment but yet a complementary relationship between these two roles are supposed to be performed by the project manager¹. An intrigue distinction between leader and project manager roles identified by Bennis³³ is that 'a leader does the right things (effectiveness); a manager does things right (efficiency), while project leader create vision for project, bring together the resources, and provide motivation and inspiration to project stakeholders in doing the right things to achieve the project objectives¹. Leaders focus on what needs to be done while managers focus on how things get done, namely 'leaders do the right things and managers do things right'²⁴.

Leaders and managers are very different as leaders develop entrepreneurial culture while managers create managerial culture in organization³⁴. Warren Bennis³⁵ highlighted the difference between leaders and manager through the statement "To survive in the twenty-first century, we are going to need a new generation of leaders – leaders, not managers. Successful project managers and successful leaders are not complement of each other in exceptional successful projects²⁴. The distinction is an important one. Leaders conquer the context – the volatile, turbulent, ambiguous surroundings that sometimes seem to conspire against us and will surely suffocate us if we let them – while managers surrender to it". Bennis³⁶ most recently summarized his quotations as "Managers do things right, while leaders do the right things". Leaders focuses on people and looks outward while managers focuses on things and looks inward²².

Significance of Project leadership

Research on Leadership progressed in last century while research on project management evolved in latter part of the last century²¹, and as a result, project leadership evolved in 21st century to cope with competitive challenges. Project leadership is about knowledge and creation of learning³⁷, which occurs during project execution and across the projects in organization²⁴. Project leadership is the ability to lead in most powerful manner while leading the others in project work³⁸. Project leadership impact on improving project management practices in order to reduce uncertainty and complexity associated with project pursuit³⁹. A strong project leadership is required to deal with administrative or bureaucratic projects but it does not mean that strong leader is always a more successful leader⁴⁰. Any strong leadership with weak management and vice versa is always not better for good results but actual challenge to use combination of strong management and strong leadership for balancing each other. Though some people have the ability to be a strong manager but cannot be an excellent leader, in contrast, some people have great leadership

capabilities but find difficult to become a strong manager due to certain reasons²⁹.

Project leadership is about leading others in project which is different and additive to project management but there may some overlap. Project management focused on managing the project work whereas leading others is focused more towards individuals on their ways of working to perform best work on projects³⁸. All project leaders must face any of the three issues related to variety of task, personnel and commitment situations which are more complex in projects than in on-going operations due projects exceptional demands of their temporary nature and unique outcomes²¹. To understand that project leaders must make timely decision is the science of project leadership due to its perspective – that decision must be made²¹.

The project management will be totally different in coming years than last five decade as it is evolving rapidly²⁴. Project leaders must be able to facilitate subordinates for making sense of changes and provide guidance and support for ambiguous changes⁴¹.

The organizations initiate projects for business success and 'getting the job done' is not sufficient²⁴. Today, there is a need to find out new ways of vibrant and competitive business environment to make the projects more competitive and powerful tools⁴². Project leaders try to improve development process in decision making as required by the art of project leadership²¹. There is also a need of new leader, or leaders at expense of managers which is need of people who can be both⁴³. A move have been made from task perspective to a leadership perspective within project context in recent project management literature review⁴⁴. The ability of project leader is essential for successful management of projects⁴⁰. The duties of project leader's include gathering and distributing information, leading, planning, coordinating, moderating, and controlling the project team⁴³. Project leadership is becoming important due to increase of project-based organizations in industrial importance as well as due to lack of studies within project management literature²². Obviously, it is not possible for everyone to be effective for both leading and managing²⁹.

Essence of Project Leadership

It is mandatory for the project leadership during planning and execution of project to apply sound project management practices³⁸. Project leadership rather than just focusing on time and budget, they consider customer needs on day-to-day basis, future market and competitive advantage to manage project strategically²⁴. In project leadership, the essence of leading others focus on empowering the individuals in order to create the situations and environment for effective and efficient performance³⁸. Project leadership is supposed to access needs of project team and help them for best project performance by meeting the team members frequently and by providing more empowering environment³⁸. To achieve outstanding results and

overcome gigantic obstacles, peoples are transformed and inspired by the visionary project leaders²⁴. The first principle of strategic project leadership is to develop the project managers of yesterday to learn the power of leadership for motivating, inspiring and coaching right intelligence²⁴.

Effective project leaders are capable to articulate an inspiring project vision and build an appropriate project spirit or spark aligned with project strategy which create energy, excitement, and commitment²⁴ among the project team to perform efficiently to ensure project success. Project leadership assert own wisdom to make difficult decisions by using leadership techniques and give directions to the project team according to the situations³⁸. The project leadership strategically focus on projects for creating competitive advantage as well as winning the market place rather than focusing on "getting the job done" and the strategic project leadership approach provide step-by-step guidelines for projects turning into successful competitive weapons, to project managers and business organizations.

Often project leadership is concerned to perform following three common types of responsibilities performed by project leaders. First, project leaders need to continuously make decisions according to changing situations and aware of project details. Second, project leaders must identify project priorities and continue to insist that these priorities must be adhered. Finally, project leaders must see and communicate with key stakeholders to integrate the project into grander scheme of things which benefited to both within the performing organization as well as customer organization²¹. Now time has come to move truly toward strategic project leadership to lead and manage the projects effectively and efficiently. The project leadership must address project spirit properly and must know how to define and cultivate vision for energizing and bringing out the best people²⁴.

Conclusion

The essence of project leadership is significant to project management while professionals must acquire fundamental skills and competencies of both leadership and management to ensure accomplishment of project and organizational objectives. An effective project leadership always have right competencies and skills for right jobs at right time which necessitates for an ample need of research on project leadership. Therefore more comprehensive research is desired to appraise benefits generally related to project leadership and especially project manager's leadership associations with project performance and teamwork through different empirical studies at industry, sector and country level to address the emerging challenges of the 21st century.

References

1. Cleland D.I., Leadership and the Project Management Body of Knowledge, *International Journal of Project Management*, **13**, 83-88 (1995)
2. Nixon P., Harrington M. and Parker D., Leadership performance is significant to project success or failure: a critical analysis, *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, **61**, 204-216 (2012)
3. Pinto J.K. and Slevin D.P., Project success: definition and measurement techniques, *Project Management Journal*, **19**, 67-71 (1988)
4. Kotter J.P., What Leaders Really Do, *Harvard Bus Rev*, **68**, 103-111 (1990a)
5. Yang L.R., Huang C.F. and Wu K.S., The association among project manager's leadership style, teamwork and project success, *International Journal of Project Management*, **29**, 258-267 (2011)
6. Turner J.R. and Muller R., The Project Manager's Leadership Style as a Success Factor on Projects: A Literature Review, *Project Management Journal*, **36**, 49-61 (2005)
7. Dulewicz V. and Higgs M., Assessing leadership styles and organisational context, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, **20**, 105-123, (2005)
8. Higgs M. and Rowland D., All changes great and small: Exploring approaches to change and its leadership, *Journal of Change Management*, **5**, 121-151 (2005)
9. Ahmed R., Azmi N., Masood M.T., Tahir M. and Ahmad M.S., What Does Project Leadership Really Do?, *International Journal of Scientific and Engineering Research*, **4** (2013)
10. Kotter J.P., *The leadership factor*, (NY: Free Press, (1987)
11. Bass B.M. and Stogdill R.M., *Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of the Theory and Research*, (Free Press, (1981)
12. Geoghegan L. and Dulewicz V., Do Project Managers' Leadership Competencies Contribute to Project Success, *Project Management Journal*, **39**, 58-67, (2008)
13. Kerzner H., In search of excellence in project management, *Journal of Systems Management*, **38**, 30-39 (1987)
14. Anantatmula V.S., Project Manager Leadership Role in Improving Project Performance, *Engineering Management Journal*, **22**, 13-22 (2010)
15. Keller R., Transformational leadership and the performance of research and development project groups, *Journal of Management*, **18**, 489-501 (1992)
16. Fayol H., *Administration Industrielle et Générale; Prévoyance, Organisation, Commandement, Coordination, Contrôle*, (Paris, (1916)
17. Mintzberg H., The manager's job: Folklore and fact, *Harvard Bus Rev*, **53**, 100-110 (1975)
18. Mintzberg H., Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, (2009)

19. Ika L. and Saint-Macary J., The Project Planning Myth in International Development, *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, **5**, 1-34 (2012)
20. Weinberg G.M., Dorset House Publishing, New York, (1986)
21. Kloppenborg T.J., Shriberg A. and Venkatraman J., *Project Leadership*, 1-137 Management Concepts, (2003)
22. Lunenburg F.C., Leadership versus Management: A Key Distinction — At Least in Theory, *International journal of management, business and administration*, **14**, 1-4 (2011)
23. House R.J. and Aditya R.N., The social scientific study of leadership: Quo vadis?, *Journal of Management*, **23**, 445-456 (1997)
24. Shenhar A.J., Strategic Project Leadership Toward a strategic approach to project management, *R and D Management*, **34**, 569-578 (2004)
25. Kaulio M., Project leadership in multi-project settings: Findings from a critical incident study, *International Journal of Project Management*, **26**, 338-347 (2008)
26. Gaddis P.O., The Project Manager, *Harvard Bus Rev*, 89-97 (1959)
27. Kerzner H., *Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling, and Controlling*, Hoboken, John Wiley and Sons (2006)
28. Dvir D. and Lechler T., Plans are nothing, changing plans is everything: the impact of changes on project success, *Research Policy*, **33**, 1-15 (2004)
29. Gray C. and Larson E.W., *Project Management – The Managerial Process* McGraw-Hill, (2006)
30. Mantel S.J.J., Meredith J.R., Shafer S.M. and Sutton M.M., *Project Management in Practice*, (Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley and Sons (2011)
31. Adams J.R. and Campbell B.W., Roles and responsibilities of the project manager, *Principles of Project Management*, 69-88 (1996)
32. Blomquist T., Hällgren M., Nilsson A. and Söderholm A., Project-as-practice: in search of project management research that matters, *Project Management Journal*, **41**, 5-16 (2010)
33. Bennis W.G., Good managers and good leaders, *Across the Board*, **21**, 7-11 (1984)
34. Zaleznik A., Managers and leaders are different? *Harvard Bus Rev.*, 74-81 (1977)
35. Bennis W.G., Managing the dream: Leadership in the 21st century, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, **2** (1989)
36. Bennis W.G. and Nanus B., *Leaders: The strategies for taking charge*, (HarperCollins, (2007)
37. Senge P.M., The Leaders New Work - Building Learning Organizations, *Sloan Manage Rev*, **32**, 7-23 (1990)
38. Strider W., *Powerful Project Leadership*, 1-238, Management Concepts (2002)
39. Birkinshaw J., Hamel G. and Mol M.J., Management Innovation, *Acad Manage Rev*, **33**, 825-845 (2008)
40. Curran C.S., Niedergassel B., Picker S. and Leker J., Project leadership skills in cooperative projects, *Management Research News*, **32**, 458-468 (2009)
41. Vaccaro I.G., Jansen J.J.P., Van Den Bosch F.A.J. and Volberda H.W., Management Innovation and Leadership: The Moderating Role of Organizational Size, *J Manage Stud*, **49**, 28-51 (2012)
42. Brown S.L. and Eisenhardt K.M., *Competing on the Edge*, Boston MA, (1998)
43. Burghardt M., Projektmanagement, Publicis Kommunikationsagentur, (2002)
44. Kolltveit B.J., Karlsen J.T. and Gonhaug K., Perspectives on project management, *International journal of project management*, **25**, 3-9 (2007)