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Leadership in Construction Project Management: Ignorance and Challenges

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ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

Purpose of this paper

The purpose of the study is to determine and to illustrate the importance of leadership and people skills in the industry. The importance of people and leadership skills in respect of project management in the building industry is suspect and is perhaps not seen as vital and therefore receives less attention than technical skills. The perceived ignorance thereof may lead to consequences such as losses and insufficiency. The project manager's role in utilising positive people skills and leadership ability is important, and the development of these skills is significant in respect of improved management performance.

Design/methodology/approach

A structured questionnaire on skills was sent to a convenient group of Architects, Quantity Surveyors, Engineers, Construction/Project Managers, Contractors and Clients. A literature review was done prior to requesting people involved in the building industry to respond to questionnaires on project management leadership.

Findings

The results showed the current situation, related to leadership skills. The perceived lack of leadership and the lack of effective people skills that may lead to losses, problems and insufficiency in the industry are the project manager's responsibility to address during project management.

Value

The value of this provisional study, in respect of understanding elements of the current leadership status in the construction industry, may form the basis of a comprehensive study on leadership ability and skills. It may also show development areas reflected as people skills inadequacies. It may also be seen that project managers should place emphasis on leadership skills to ensure improvement in communication towards successful outcomes of projects. Leadership should be seen as an important skill of the project manager.

Keywords

Leadership, Project Management, Effectiveness

1. INTRODUCTION

Present day project management has evolved from its engineering scientific management origin into a horizontal, cross-disciplinary approach as it takes a wider operational role for better overall control, improved customer relations and increased returns (Lee-Kelly & Loong, 2003: 584).

According to Burke and Barron (2007), leadership and management are two distinctive and complementary systems of action. In reality this means that to be an effective manager of projects one will actually need both project leadership skills and project management skills. The real challenge is to combine these two skills and use each one to reinforce and balance the other.

What does 'management' mean? Usually it is associated with words like organising, planning, controlling and monitoring. In contrast, the term leadership brings to mind ideas of motivating people, influencing people and working with them. These distinctions might illuminate the difference between a manager and a leader (Burke & Barron, 2007: 260).

Since leadership concerns the ability to influence the behaviour of others to closely accord with the desires of the leader it is inevitable that leadership concerns interpersonal relationship in the pursuit of organisational and individual goals and therefore involves power exercising by the leaders (Liu & Fang, 2006: 497).

This study will contribute to the fact the leadership and people skills are important, not only the successful application but also the development thereof.

2. PROJECT MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP

2.1 The Project Manager as Leader

Leaders can be defined as persons who recognise the need for and implement change, establish direction, align people, motivate and inspire, communicate a vision of where the organisation is headed, build teams and share decision making, mentor and coach subordinates, and demonstrate a high degree of integrity in their professional interactions (Zenger & Folkman, 2002; Bass, 1990; Tichy & Devanna, 1990; Kouzes & Posner, 2002 as cited in Skipper & Bell, 2006b: 68).

Gharehbaghi and McManus (2003) emphasised the fact that leaders must know themselves and seek self-improvement. Seeking self-improvement means continually strengthening one's attributes. They suggested that this can be accomplished through such activities as reading, self-study, and program classes.

Good leaders develop through a never-ending process of self analysis and the utilisation of education, training and experience to improve. The best leaders are continually working and studying to improve their leadership skills (Gharehbaghi & McManus, 2003: 56).

According to Culp & Smith (cited in Burger & Verster, 2009) leaders need to be competent. Leaders need technical knowledge, interpersonal skills and project management skills.

A leader can make a difference in terms of the end-result factors such as performance and goal attainment (Ivancevich, 1996 cited in Burger & Verster, 2009).

It seems clear that a person would lead people in accordance with his or her personality characteristics (Lewis, 2003: 3). Lee-Kelly and Loong, (2003) indicated that the leader's personality and motivation are affected by the degree of perceived control and the degree of uncertainty surrounding the situation.

Posner (cited in Burger and Verster, 2009) indicated the importance for project managers to improve their ability to communicate, organise, build teams and provide leadership they also need to have a unique and authentic leadership style that is coherent with their personality and is consistent with their personal values and motivations (Toor & Ofori, 2008a: 624).

Ideal project leaders are able to engage the team members at a personal level and encourage them, empower them and inspire them to participate in the project (Burke & Barron, 2007: 263). Leaders are able to gain commitment from people (Lewis, 2003: 3).

A leader should influence people toward the attainment of organisational goals and should be able to manage conflicts whenever disputes or crises arise (Mintzberg, 1980 cited in Sunindijo, Hadikusumo & Ogunlana, 2007).

Toor and Ofori (2008 a), identified the need for a shift in the way project manager's function and lead projects. The construction industry is in a new period of a challenging socio-economic, cultural, political, and business environment. They stressed the urgency for:

- A fresh perspective of implicit leadership drives;
- Suitable leadership behaviours for construction projects;
- Practical and authentic performance standards;
- Effective leadership interventions that can help to accelerate leadership development;
- Influence of leadership on project outcomes, and
- Influence of leadership on followers and organisational outcomes in the long-term.

They also suggested that project managers need to develop as authentic leaders to successfully operate in the increasingly complex working environment. Moreover there is a need to promote a positive culture in the construction industry and to develop leaders who possess positive values and practice high levels of moral and ethical standards. These leaders should be capable of changing the conventional paradigm of management in the industry and set exemplary standards for others to follow (Toor & Ofori, 2008a: 621).

According to Toor and Ofori (2008a: 621), authentic project leaders are not only good managers of projects, but they are also leaders of people and visionaries of the future by demonstrating commitment, devotion and dedication they become the role models.

Authentic leaders are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, ethical and future oriented (Garden et al., 2005 & May et al., 2003 cited in Toor & Ofori, 2008a: 625).

Leaders have good comprehension of cultural sensitivities and are highly motivated and self-aware. They possess high levels of integrity, deep sense of purpose, courage to move forward, passion and skill of leadership (George, 2003 cited in Toor & Ofori, 2008a: 625).

Authentic leaders are influential in enhancing others' ability to perform better by providing support and creating conditions that stimulate the individuals to work hard even extraordinarily hard to perform at one's very best (Gardner, 2004 cited in Toor & Ofori, 2008a: 625).

According to Lewis (2003: 171), no one will follow a person who is not trusted, and to be trusted the leader must be credible in the eyes of a follower. When the designated leader lacks credibility, people may turn for guidance to someone else in the group whom they trust and respect.

To sum up Lewis's point of view, the leader must be viewed as having the right to lead, the qualification to lead and to be going in a direction that followers want to move in themselves.

According to Gharehbaghi and McManus (2003: 56-57) a good leader must:

- Know and understand his/her people and look out for their well-being;

- Keep her/his people informed and know how to communicate with them;
- Help others exert their influence and must share leadership;
- Have good communication skills;
- Have good judgement;
- Be persuasive, patient and persistent;
- Be a professional who possesses good character traits such as honesty, trustworthiness, competence, commitment, integrity, courage, straightforwardness, imagination, and
- Be loyal to the organisation, perform selfless service and take personal responsibility.

2.2 Leadership of the Project Manager

According to Burke and Barron (2007), trust and respect are the foundation of leadership. To this can be added honesty, integrity, moral courage, justice, fairness, ethics and dependability.

Lewis (2003: 133), argued that leadership is essentially an influence process, so the more the manager knows about how to persuade people to do something, the more likely he will be to get results. Furthermore since good communication skills are required to be able to influence effectively, all communication methods can be thought of as a way of influencing others.

According to Toor and Ofori (2008a: 628), the people side of project management or what many would call leadership, is paramount to the successful delivery of desired results.

According to Gharehbaghi & McManus (2003) leadership is vision, motivation, organisation and action. Leadership is a complex process by which a person influences others to accomplish a mission, task, or objective and directs the organisation in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent. Effective leadership is based on inference experience and instinct. Fellows, Lui and Fong (2003:56), indicate that leadership concerns the ability to influence the behaviour of others to accord with the desires of the leader.

Toor and Ofori (2006), stated that the construction industry has been facing an undersupply of project leaders (cited in Toor & Ofori, 2008b: 280). The construction industry faces major leadership challenges such as those relating to the workforce (Toor & Ofori, 2008a: 622). Since construction work requires team efforts, leadership should have great impact on the performance of construction work (Odusami, Iyagba & Omirin, 2003: 519).

According to Kotter (1990), leadership is about establishing direction, aligning people, and motivating and inspiring others (cited in Skipper & Bell, 2006a: 75).

The Five Basic Leadership Practices include:

- Modelling the way;

- Inspiring a shared vision;
- Challenging the process;
- Enabling others to act, and
- Encouraging the heart.

(Kouzes & Posner, 2002a cited in Skipper & Bell, 2006a: 77).

Many projects fail to reach their optimum level of performance, not because of any lack of resources, equipment or systems, but purely because the human factors were not adequately addressed (Burke & Barron, 2007: 223).

The main weakness in leadership has been found to be failing to focus the team on the project's objectives. If the goals are unclear, chaos will follow, because who wants to follow a leader who does not know where he/she is going. People will perform better if they are inspired, motivated, directed and supported by good leadership (Burke & Barron, 2007: 229).

3. SKILLS

3.1 Leadership and People Skills

“Construction is a people business. In this business you are hired for your technical skills, fired for your lack of people skills, and promoted for management skills” (Skipper & Bell, 2006a: 75).

The changing nature of modern organisations has required leaders to develop a different set of leadership skills in order to achieve maximum effectiveness (Burke & Barron, 2007: 223).

Management is the ‘hard’ skills – planning, directing, organising, and keeping score. Leadership is the ‘soft’ skills – vision, working together, motivation, building trust among the players, ethics (Skipper & Bell, 2006a: 75).

According to Ingason and Jonasson (2009), the project management profession has in the past strongly emphasised technically supported methods of planning and execution as a core competence, and continues to do so today. However, while project management today remains firmly focused on this traditional objective or hard perspective, there now seems to be an increasing focus on the more subjective and soft factors – leadership, motivation, group dynamics, interpersonal communication, culture and ethics – that could be regarded as essential to all professional endeavours.

With increased emphasis on project management systems, construction firms are now seeking professionals with better management skills rather than technical skills (Dulaimi, 2005 cited in Toor & Ofori, 2008a:260).

Most employers today expect workers to demonstrate and excel in many softer skills such as teamwork and group development (Rothwell, 1998 cited in Pant & Baroudi, 2008: 124).

Managing projects successfully therefore requires a mixture of skills including interpersonal ability, technical competencies and cognitive aptitude, along with the capability to understand the situation and people and then dynamically integrate appropriate leadership behaviours (Strang, 2003a cited in Pant & Baroudi, 2008: 124).

El-Sabaa (2001, cited in Pant & Baroudi, 2008: 125) stated that the human skills of project managers have the greatest influence on project management practices and technical skills the least.

Burke and Barron (2007) adds that it is essential that project managers are competent in all four areas which include technical skills, project management skills, project leadership skills and project entrepreneurial skills to make the project a success. Right from the start it should be recognised that project management skills and project leadership skills go hand in hand – you can not have one without the other – they are like links in a chain. It may be argued that one skill is more important than another at certain times during the project, but for a project to be successfully managed from start to finish, the project manager must be proficient in all these skills.

Project manager's leadership skills are inter-related with all the other management skills. This has shown that project management is not an end in itself, but rather its whole purpose is to make other managerial skills happen (Burke & Barron, 2007: 222).

The need for improved leadership skills in the building industry is gaining recognition as an important issue and has attracted much recent attention (Skipper & Bell, 2006b: 68).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A literature review was done prior to a survey with convenient group of architects, quantity surveyors, engineers, contractors and clients. The literature review included both international and local authors on project management skills, especially people skills, and leadership of the project manager in the building industry.

The content of these sources was thoroughly processed. After the literature review was done, a structured questionnaire was sent to a convenient group of respondents. The questionnaire included questions on leadership of a project manager in the building industry, as well as various skills of the project manager.

4.1 Questionnaire Construction

The first part of the questionnaire consists of biographical questions to which the respondent is requested to respond. In the second part, the respondents are requested to rate the importance of project management

leadership in the building industry and rate the problem areas related to current project management leadership functions.

They were requested to rate the importance of certain qualities of a project manager to successfully manage a project. An indication of the rate of which these qualities were actually implemented by the project manager, on projects where the respondents were in a close relationship with a project manager, was also requested. These ratings were indicated on a five point Likert scale, where one is the least appropriate and five is the most appropriate. (To get a clearer indication of the result four and five on the Likert scale were combined).

4.2 Sample

The sample does not represent all consultants, clients or contractors in the Free State area. Only a selected group of 45 consultants, contractors and clients in the Free State area were identified to participate in the research.

4.3 Data Collection

Questionnaires were emailed or personally delivered to a conveniently selected group in the Free State.

4.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed and compared by using Excel spreadsheets, tables and figures.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

A total of 45 questionnaires were sent out which 34 questionnaires were completed and returned, thus a response rate of 75.5% was achieved. The majority (73.5%) of the respondents are consultants in the building industry in the Free State area and more than half (52.9%) of these consultants are in a close working relationship with a project manager. Sixty seven percent of the respondents hold a degree or an honours degree in relevant areas of the building industry.

The responses indicated an even spread of years (ranging from ten years to twelve years) experience in the building industry.

6. DISCUSSION

The questionnaire consists of biographical questions and questions on the importance of leadership qualities of the project manager, problem areas related to the current project manager's leadership functions, importance of

success related qualities of the project manager and the success rate of the implementation of these qualities.

Table 1 indicates the response of the selected group in terms of the importance of leadership qualities as part of a project manager's portfolio. Fifty two percent of the respondents rated leadership as a very important trait of a project manager. Thirty eight percent claimed that leadership traits are important and only 2.9% indicated that leadership does not form part of the important traits of a project manager.

This is an indication that the industry regards leadership as an important trait of a project manager for building projects to be completed successfully. It is important for the project manager to have leadership qualities and to develop continuously as a leader.

Table 1: The importance of leadership qualities as part of the project manager's portfolio

LEADERSHIP	Question unanswered	AVERAGE RATING OF IMPORTANCE					TOTAL
		1=LEAST			5=MOST		
RESPONSE IMPORTANCE OF	0	1	2	3	4	5	
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1	1	1	0	13	18	34
PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL	2.9%	2.9%	2.9%	0	38.2%	52.9%	100.0%
AVERAGE RATING	4.26 (85.2%)						

Results illustrates that the lack of experience (82.4%) and the lack of skills (82.4%) in the industry are significant problem areas related to the project manager's leadership functions. The second biggest problem is personality difficulties of the project manager (64.7%).

These areas might hinder successful management by the project manager. Culture indifferences (29.4%) of the project manager don't seem to be a big problem but areas such as insufficient education (52.9%) and the lack of training (58.8%) need some attention to develop project manager's leadership functions/skills.

Furthermore the results of the respondent's responses showed the following rank list can be established in terms of important qualities.

1. Communication (97.05%)
2. People skills and decision making skills (91.17%)
3. Self discipline (85.29%)
4. Influence, integrity and reputation (82.35%)
5. Attitude (76.47%)
6. Self belief (67.64%)
7. Personality (32.35%)
8. Ego (5.88%)

The respondents rated communication skills as the most important quality of a successful project manager. People skills and decision making

skills are ranked second according to the responses. Self discipline skills are ranked third. Influence, reputation and integrity are also important qualities of a project manager. Attitude and self belief are of intermediate importance to a project manager's set of skills. Personality and ego does not seem to be as important as the previously mentioned qualities.

According to the respondents, decision making skills seem to be the most successfully applied skill of project managers. People skills of project managers seem to be a problem with only a 32% success rate. The following rank list is a result of the respondent's responses in terms of successful application of required qualities by a project manager:

1. Decision making skills (52%)
2. Integrity and self belief (50%)
3. Communication and reputation (44%)
4. Self discipline (35%)
5. Attitude, influence and people skills (32%)
6. Ego (20%)
7. Personality (17%)

7. CONCLUSION

Leadership is an important skill of a project manager. It is the project manager's responsibility to develop leadership and people skills. The two biggest problems in the industry in terms of leadership seem to be the lack of skills and the lack of experience by the project manager. Communication and people skills are seen as important skills to be applied by a project manager, yet it is not very successfully applied or developed.

Project management in the building industry needs to be successful. The impact of losses and damages can be substantial; therefore it is primarily the project manager's responsibility to ensure effective and efficient management of the project.

Certainly two of the important traits of a project manager are managerial and leadership skills. When these two project management traits are successfully combined and applied, the success rate of the project will most probably increase.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Project manager's should realise their responsibility towards leadership in the building industry.

They should develop continuously as leaders and constantly improve their skills, especially people skills. The importance of leadership and people skill development and the successful application thereof answers

the problem of ignorance and the challenges faced by construction firms and the construction industry as a whole.

9. REFERENCE LIST

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