

IN QUEST OF LEADERSHIP IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY: NEW ARENAS, NEW CHALLENGES!

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ABSTRACT

Research in construction has not paid much attention to project leadership. This is due to the traditional focus of researchers on technical and managerial features of construction projects. In this paper, the authors build their arguments on the basis of the greater challenges which the construction industry faces in modern times. These include both industry-specific challenges and others within the operating environment of construction. In addition to these challenges, the rapid growth and development of the construction industry in many countries poses new leadership demands. These challenges call for a change in the perception of the importance of leadership in the effective delivery of projects. To highlight the crucial need for a new breed of construction project leaders, the authors introduce the recent construct of ‘authentic leadership’ in the specific context of construction projects. It is argued that authentic and genuine leaders are needed by the construction industry under the contemporary circumstances; and that such leaders have greater potential to perform effectively. The paper underlines the need for, and potential benefits of, authentic leadership development in construction professionals, and discusses the practical and research implications.

Keywords: Authentic Leadership, Leadership Style, Challenges, Project Management, Construction Industry

1. INTRODUCTION

With increased emphasis on project management systems, construction firms are now seeking professionals with better management and leadership skills rather than technical skills (Dulaimi, 2005). However, educational institutions and construction firms continue to produce and develop managers lacking in leadership skills. Some researchers note that the construction industry needs major changes in the way it operates today (Winch, 1998; Koskela and Vrijhoef, 2001). This is due to: promotion of individuals from lower ranks without formal education and training; traditional academic curricula which do not cover the development of individuals as leaders; and the conventional task focus of the industry. Moreover, the industry has focused on management, to the exclusion of leadership (Skipper and Bell, 2006). Thus, construction project managers are barely perceived as leaders and are mostly termed as managers (Russell and Stouffer, 2003). Their day-to-day work involves the management of activities and achievement of short-term goals of the project. They have to remind themselves that they are required to attain the traditional triangle of key performance indicators: on time, under budget, of specified quality. This conventional attitude hinders them from behaving as leaders and inspiring the project team to perform better. Bonasso (2001) suggests that this conventional system

produces engineers who frequently do not see widely or deeply enough in the designs they produce, and ignore issues such as environmental and cultural degradation caused by engineering works. The reasons cited for this include: technically focused curricula in engineering education; limitations of the standards of performance; the requirements in standards and codes; and budget and time limits (see, for example, Carrato and Haryott, 2003; Dulaimi, 2005; Arcila, 2006).

Owing to the reasons discussed above, the construction industry faces an undersupply of 'project leaders' although it has produced a large number of 'project managers'. There is a need for leadership development in conventional managers in an industry which has received enormous impact from changes in the business environment at both the national and global levels. Within the industry, the developments include the formation of collaborative alliances and partnering relationships.

The present authors argue that the construction industry is in a new arena of a challenging socio-economic, cultural, political, and business environment. In addition to this complex array of challenges, many recent corporate scandals and instances of management malfeasance in the business world also call for a different breed of project leaders. There is also the need for a fresh understanding of leadership motives, new measures to gauge the implicit drives of project leaders, and practical and authentic performance standards. Moreover, there should be a positive cultural environment in construction firms, and leaders who have positive values, morality, ethics, convictions, and aspirations. The leaders should be capable of changing the conventional paradigm of management in the industry, and setting exemplary standards for other businesses to follow. To achieve this goal, the present authors argue that the construction industry also needs to concentrate on developing a new breed of future project leaders through authentic leadership development. These leaders would not only be good managers of projects but they would also be leaders of people. The authors present a model of "Authentic Project Leadership Development", discuss the research and practical implications of the model and offer suggestions for authentic leadership development in the construction industry.

2. LEADERSHIP RESEARCH IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Research has shown that the project manager is one of the most important success factors of projects (Odusami, 2002; Toor and Ogunlana, 2005; Long *et al.*, 2004). Hynes and Love (2004) cite examples from earlier research and note that the site managers have an impact on the overall quality and cost of the project and the quality of the individual site manager may affect the project cost by up to 10% (Herbert *et al.*, 1970). Leadership is one of the most important subjects in management studies (Toor and Ogunlana, 2006). However, many authors have not been able to articulate the idea of leadership despite the large volume of research and literature on the area (Giritli and Oraz, 2004; Ket De Vries, 2003). Particularly in the construction industry, not much work has been done on leadership (Odusami *et al.*, 2003; Keegan and Hartog, 2004; Chan and Chan, 2005). Cleland (1995) mentions the limited coverage of 'leadership' in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) and notes the subject as "*terra incognita*", or "the unknown territory". Even the latest version of the PMBOK includes very little discussion of leadership. When the authors searched the

leading journals in the domain of construction and project management with the keyword “leader”, less than 30 studies could be found. The keyword “leadership” produced less than 150 results. Dulaimi and Langford (1999) argue that studies on leadership in the construction industry concentrate on investigating the motivational factors and the personal characteristics of project managers. A few studies actually focus on leadership development in construction managers.

The lack of focus on leadership is not limited to construction research. Practising construction project managers are hardly seen as leaders of project teams (see Bresnen *et al.*, 1986). A more recent poll of the American Council of Engineering Companies (cited in Russell and Stouffer, 2003) revealed that very few people view consulting engineers as community leaders while a large percentage of respondents perceived them as technical consultants. Several reasons have been given to explain why the construction industry has not undertaken a significant amount of research on leadership and its practical uses in the industry. For example, Langford *et al.* (1995) opine that the low volume of leadership studies in construction is due to the lack of understanding of knowledge on the industry on the part of social scientists and a lack of understanding of social sciences by those in the industry.

3. UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF UNIQUE INDUSTRY

The uniqueness of construction is probably the most often mentioned feature in publications on construction project management. The uniqueness comes from the distinct features of construction products (Drewer, 2001). This uniqueness of construction also makes construction project management a distinct discipline as it poses considerable challenges in various contexts, including: industry specific challenges and general, environment challenges (socio-cultural, economic, technological, legal and regulatory, environmental, and ethical). Industry specific challenges include: poor social image of construction; fluctuating construction activity (Ofori, 1993); greater private-sector participation in infrastructure projects; globalization of construction leading to increased foreign participation in domestic industries (Raftery *et al.*, 1998); growing size of projects; the need to integrate an increasingly large number of construction processes (Ofori, 2003); fast track nature of projects (Kwakye, 1997) and multi-project environments (Toor and Ogunlana, 2006); widening application of franchising in the industry; increasing vertical integration in the packaging of projects; increasing trend of strategic alliances (Ofori, 2003) such as joint ventures, consortia, mergers, acquisitions, and partnering relationships. Some other researchers note challenges such as: the gap between research and practice (Ofori, 1993; Chemillier, 1988); and the need to attain the highest client value as well as its creation, capturing, and distribution (Huovinen, 2006). Recently, Songer *et al.* (2006) note that the construction industry faces major leadership challenges including: lack of quality people owing to difficulty in attracting talent; ageing workforce; and other workforce issues such change or transition; teamwork and communication; training and education (Songer *et al.*, 2006). These challenges and the need for rapid changes in the business culture have led to the widespread adoption of flattened organizational structures and empowerment strategies. To improve the operational flexibility of organizations, several new structures have emerged such as: networks, collaborations, federalist structures, the shamrock structure, and virtual organizations (Bolman and Deal, 1997).

Socio-cultural challenges include: spreading wave of terrorism; wars; political upheavals; other security problems; increased private participation in infrastructure projects; and cross cultural issues. Economic challenges include funding difficulties; uncertain economic conditions; threats of high inflation due to increased energy prices; fluctuating stock values and exchange rates; and cash flow problems. Technological challenges include: increased use of information and communication technology (ICT) such as in e-procurement; technological gap between developed and developing countries, leading to matters of technology transfer; and technological innovation and advancement. Legal and regulatory challenges include: different legal systems, litigation procedures, and arbitration methods within and across countries. Sustainability and environmental challenges include: increasingly stricter environmental regulations; increased awareness of the need for sustainable construction, such as deconstruction of the built items. Ethical challenges include: corruption in both developing and industrialized countries; and fraudulent, unethical and unprofessional practices in professions (see Toor and Ofori, 2006).

The above discussion shows that the construction industry needs to focus on the development of project managers who possess good leadership qualities as well. Such project managers have a leadership style which best suits their inner selves as well as the teams they lead and the projects they manage. In the next section, the leadership style of construction project leaders is discussed.

4. LEADERSHIP STYLE IN CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

Discussion of leadership should include the appropriate leadership style for business and project leaders. Leadership style is a joint outcome of the leader's self-related information, personality traits and the underlying motives (Toor and Ofori, 2006a). Over the last several decades of research on leadership, a number of leadership styles have been proposed for organizational leaders such as: transactional, transformational, laissez faire, charismatic, democratic, autocratic, consultative, joint decision making, authoritative, participative, servant, tyrant, task oriented, relationship oriented, production-oriented, employee-oriented, performance or maintenance, directing, coaching, supporting, delegating, authority-compliance, impoverished management, country club management, team management, middle of the road management, and so on.

Researchers have explored leadership styles suitable for construction professionals. The least preferred coworker (LPC) measure of Fiedler's (1967) contingency model of leadership has been widely used. In one of the earliest studies, Monaghan (1981) observed that project managers, who were high in task and low in people consideration, produced an acceptable level of commercial performance. Another study described project managers as "socially independent" (see Bresnen *et al.*, 1986) although the calculated LPC scores suggested the task-oriented behavior of the subjects (cited in Dulaimi and Langford, 1999). Seymour and Elhaleem (1991) noted that the effectiveness of project managers is fairly synonymous with task-oriented leadership. Rowlinson *et al.* (1993) examined variations of leadership styles employed by the same construction managers in different circumstances. They found that project leaders tended to use a supportive style in feasibility study and pre-contract stages of

works and a directive style as construction progressed. Dulaimi and Langford (1999) also considered the project managers in their study as socially independent. They noted that the project manager's personal orientation and the situational variables were independent of one another. Their results show that the personal orientation of the project managers has no influence on their behavior.

In another study of construction site managers, Fraser (2000) found that those who scored highly on the effectiveness scale favored team-style leadership; those managers following a production style of leadership scored the lowest of all; and those using a compromise leadership style had middle-range effectiveness scores. Contrary to earlier studies, in a study of project managers in Bangkok, Thailand, Ogunlana *et al.* (2002) found that the relationship-oriented leadership style was considered to be more important than the task-oriented style for project managers. Fellows (2003), in a study of the quantity surveyors in Hong Kong, observed that they were mostly relationship orientated and tended to adopt the supportive style of leadership. They noticed that the expressed preference for relationship orientation was stronger amongst contractors than consultants. In their survey of leadership styles of construction professionals in Turkey, Giritli and Oraz (2004) observed that: (i) female and male managers were similar in terms of their transactional leadership behavior but their transformational practice was significantly different, suggesting the task-oriented style of both sexes in a gender-congruent context; and (ii) managers in higher positions were stronger in pacesetter style than those in lower management positions, indicating that senior managers led by example, yet exerted tight control over poor performance of their subordinates.

Chan and Chan (2005) found that all transformational factors (charisma—attributes and behaviors, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) and contingent reward of transactional factors (contingent reward, management-by-exception, active and passive) were highly correlated with the rated outcomes (such as leader effectiveness, extra effort by employees, and employees' satisfaction with the leaders). The study revealed that well-perceived leadership styles of the building professionals were inspirational motivation, idealized attributes, intellectual stimulation, idealized behaviors, contingent reward, and individualized consideration. Chan and Chan (2005) recommend that building professionals should promote the use of transformational leadership in their interactions with employees in the workplace for greater employee performance and satisfaction. Toor and Ogunlana (2006) observed that the attributes of transformational leaders were rated high as compared to those of transactional leaders. They also observed that the use of authority and punishment was rated among the lowest of leadership behaviors. They condensed the leadership behaviors into what they term as 'Four Rs': resolving, reverent, rewarding, and revolutionary, and argued that the 'Four Rs' were critical for the success of construction project leaders on the large construction projects.

The discussion so far reveals that there has been no general agreement on what leadership style best suits construction professionals and project managers. The reasons are clear: no one best leadership style can be considered to be the best in all circumstances and at all times (Fiedler, 1967; Vroom and Jago, 1988); context is important when it comes to measuring management knowledge (Chanlat, 1996), and effectiveness of leadership style (Fellows *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, most of the identified leadership styles are self-centered, task-centered, relationship-centered, or

change-centered. These styles do not tell if the effort behind the leadership is genuine, authentic, reliable, and truthful. Leaders can pretend, and put such styles on show for certain personal purposes. Therefore, there is need for a leadership which is selfless, altruistic, future-oriented, self-regulated, and to put it simply, authentic.

Another important question is whether characteristics such as task- and/or relationship orientation, clarity of vision, intellectual stimulation, active or passive management, and so on, are sufficient for an effective leader. Furthermore, most of the leadership styles which are offered do not consider questions such as: how the leader develops a particular style; why the leader chooses to adopt a certain style; why some styles work within some teams but fail within others under similar conditions; whether there is an ideal set of qualities to constitute a best leadership style; how a leader switches from one style to another; whether it is possible to retain credibility by switching styles frequently; how a leader can have several styles at the same time if he is working on different projects; etc. To address these questions, there is need to recognize the root construct of leadership which can provide a broader base for understanding leaders, leadership and leadership development. Inspired to answer the intricacies underlying the concept of leadership, experts such as George (2003) and Luthans and Avolio (2003) have presented the construct of 'authentic leadership' as a solution to contemporary leadership challenges and future leadership demands. In the next section, the notion of authentic leadership is discussed in detail, together with its potential application in the construction industry.

5. NEW LEADERSHIP FOR PROJECT MANAGERS

The need for effective leadership in construction projects is undeniable in the increasingly complex environment. Large and international construction ventures require individuals who have integrity, comprehension of the situation, a passion to lead, zeal to bring about change, and understanding of the demands of both projects and society. Although several forms of leadership are suggested in the literature, many mainstream leadership researchers now believe that 'authentic leaders' are the solution to the leadership crisis in the modern business world. Attributes of authentic leaders encompass: positive energy, high sense of integrity, moral character and self-discipline, clear purpose, concern for others, confidence, hope, optimism, resilience, and personal values (George, 2003; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Luthans and Avolio, 2003).

Some recent researches also propose that the construction industry needs to develop individuals who are not only good managers but who also have genuine and authentic passion to lead the projects. Such leaders are not self-centered and project stereotypes; rather, they are motivated by the wellbeing of their subordinates, other colleagues, their organization, and society at large. They have the highest sense of responsibility and while accomplishing their goals they do not forget their moral obligations towards their organizations, society, and future generations. They have a balanced way of living and futuristic style of leadership. They are strict on their moral values and do not compromise on their principles. They build an environment of mutual trust, optimism, altruism and transparency within teams. Figure 1 illustrates how of such a leader is developed.

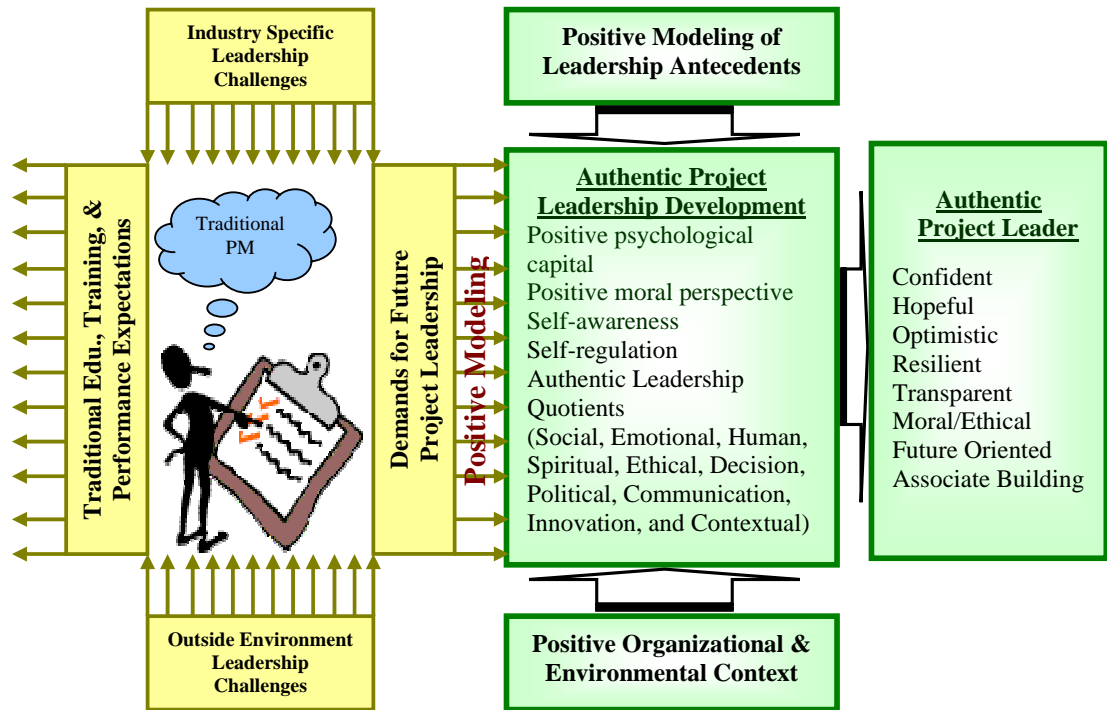


Figure 1. Authentic Project Leadership in the Construction Industry

6. AUTHENTIC PROJECT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Figure 1 depicts the traditional construction project manager who is surrounded by a set of forces. There are passive and active forces, contemporary leadership challenges, and leadership demands of future construction projects. Passive forces comprise traditional education, training, passive organizational and industry culture, and traditional performance expectations. These forces compel the project manager to remain conventional, conform to situational demands, and accept the existing circumstances. Contemporary leadership challenges include those which are specific to the industry, and those which are in its environment. These challenges have been discussed above. The active forces consist of demands and expectations of future business and project leaders. To meet these demands, project leaders should be optimistic, future-oriented, resilient, moral, creative, innovative, and transparent. Future leaders should also be able to demonstrate veritable performance and create a positive environment in their organizations. Contemporary leadership challenges and active forces together inspire the traditional project manager to develop as authentic project leader (APL) through authentic project leadership development (APLD). The model shows that APLD is dependent on positive mediation of leadership antecedents, highly developed organizational context, and positive external environment. A highly developed and positive organizational context will support the type of self-awareness and self-regulation required of leaders to develop higher levels of authentic leadership potential (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). The authors argue that positive self-development of the project leader is influenced by the external environment which

may include: other organizations, project stakeholders, socio-cultural and economic factors, political situation, and other outside influences.

Positive mediation of leadership antecedents refers to positive impact of trigger events which activate the leadership schema in individuals. Toor and Ofori (2006b) describe these antecedents as: biological, physiological, psychological, socio-cultural, spiritual, economic, educational, occupational, and contextual. Combined positive mediation of leadership antecedents under positive organizational and environmental context is central to the development of positive leadership characteristics. These attributes include: positive psychological capital, positive moral perspective, positive self-development (self-awareness and self-regulation), and authentic leadership quotients (social, emotional, spiritual, ethical, decision, flexibility, communication, technical, and innovation).

7. ATTRIBUTES AND IMPACT OF AUTHENTIC PROJECT LEADERS

APLD model suggests that positive influence of various social enjoinings with positive psychological characteristics to generate positive organizational behaviors in individuals who eventually develop as authentic project leaders. These leaders are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, and moral/ethical and futuristic (Avolio et al., 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; May et al., 2004) and having all these characteristics they turn their associates into leaders themselves (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). They have strong comprehension of cultural sensitivities, and are highly motivated and self-aware. They understand the demands of project from the client's as well as user's perspective and give their best input to make the project a success for all stakeholders. They possess the highest level of integrity, deep sense of purpose, courage to move forward, passion and skill of leadership (George, 2003). Authentic project leaders understand that "the profession of engineering calls for men with honor, integrity, technical ability, business capacity, and pleasing personalities" (Schaub and Pavlovic, 1983). They demonstrate professionalism and have the attributes of professional ideals which Lawson (2004) considers as: knowledge, organization and the ethics of service. They also practice high standards ethics and morality. They attend to the development of their followers, and act as their role models to turn them into future leaders (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). They engage in monitoring follower performance and correct followers' mistakes by teaching and coaching them (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999).

Authentic project leaders are not only good in human and social capital (Avolio and Luthans, 2006); they are also competent and knowledgeable about their own field. Gardner and Schermerhorn (2004) believe that the insights of authentic leaders are committed to building highest level of organizational capacity through individual performance. Their behaviors become examples for others to follow and accomplish the maximum level of performance. Authentic leaders are highly 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 and Schermerhorn, 2004). Authentic leaders challenge their followers by setting high performance standards through their own

examples. By demonstrating commitment, devotion and dedication, they become the role models of veritable performance.

Although, being human, they make mistakes; they take the responsibility for them, and learn from their errors (George, 2003). Through the wisdom they obtain from their experiences, they are able to reflect on a situation, evaluating and making choices (Kupers, 2005). They are guided by a set of transcendent values (Schwartz, 1994) which mediate their decisions about what is right and fair for all stakeholders (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; May et al., 2003). Michie and Gooty (2005) believe that authentic leaders are concerned with the interests of all stakeholders as they live with self-transcendent values such as benevolence (honesty, responsibility, and loyalty) and universalism (equality, social justice, and broadmindedness). These characteristics show some of the features of transformational, charismatic, servant, spiritual, and ethical leaderships. It is because proponents of authentic leadership call it “root construct” and believe that it underlies all forms of positive leadership though it is distinct from other leaderships in many respects (see Avolio and Gardner, 2005; George, 2003). Hence, authentic leaders can be transactional, transformational, directive, or participative, and still be defined as authentic leaders (Hughes, 2005).

Implications

The model presented here emphasizes the need for a change in the overall philosophy with which contemporary construction project managers function. The study calls attention to a more humanistic and genuine approach of project leadership and leadership development. Discussion in the paper focuses on the importance of authenticity and its relevance to professional leadership development at all levels of project organizations. It is argued that the appreciation of leadership authenticity will help to develop effective leadership for future projects, and also result in a culture which is based on positive organizational behavior, organizational scholarship, conducive culture, self-transcendent values, mutual respect and understanding, mutual welfare, and veritable performance.

Another advantage of authentic leadership is its sustainability in comparison with other forms of leadership. Since authentic leadership is a root construct and is achieved through a deep sense of self-awareness and self-regulation, there is a high likelihood that it will be sustained and nourished in individuals and organizations. Authentic leadership development of individuals will also develop a positive organizational culture which will eventually enhance the satisfaction and performance of employees. It will also build trustworthy and enduring relationships among leaders and their followers.

The authentic leadership construct also emphasizes on followers’ development and authentic followership development. Authentic leaders are not self-centered. They act as role models of their followers and focus on their development as leaders. Studies have shown that when followers are treated fairly, they are more committed and likely to display positive attitudes (Rhoades, et al., 2001 cited in Gardner et al., 2005). This positive attitude of leaders as well as trust of followers in leadership results in positive organizational outcomes (e.g., Dirks and Ferrin, 2002) such as development of positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002) and positive organizational scholarship (Cameron *et al.*, 2003). Authentic leadership development of project

leaders will also benefit the leaders by improving their performance and effectiveness; it will have a profound and long lasting positive influence on overall organizational culture and performance. Authentic leadership development will create an environment of trust and positive relationships which are keys to the success of teams working on construction projects.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is necessary to study the level of leadership authenticity in construction project leaders at various levels of organizations and across different countries. Studying different industries in terms of authenticity can help to improve leadership practices by mutual learning. A comparison of the construction industry with other industries can also help to gauge the need for professional and leadership development. An international consortium of construction leadership researchers could be formed to take up the task. This consortium can be similar to the GLOBE Project (House *et al.*, 1994). Research is required into leadership development initiatives through leadership interventions. These should be multi-level cross-sectional and longitudinal studies which can give deeper insight into leadership challenges and needs in construction projects.

Future studies on leadership can examine the impact of authentic project leaders on their fellow employees and on the success of the projects they lead. These studies can also focus on how the authenticity of leadership is perceived differently in different contexts such as: culture, religion, ethnicity, and gender. Another dimension on which project leadership research can focus is the organizational context, with categorization by type of organization (contractors, architects, designers, quantity surveyors and so on), size of organization (small, medium, large; local, multinational, and so on), and focus of organizational activity (building, roads, and so on). This multi-level and multi-dimensional analysis will help in the effort to comprehend specific leadership needs and demands of organizations belonging to different contexts; and what influences the tactics leaders use to be more effective and successful in different contexts. It is proposed that the model presented in this paper should be the subject of discussion and research in the construction industry. The concept authentic project leaders and how such leaders should be further developed, with specific regard to the construction industry, should also be subjects of extensive research.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper laments the dearth of research on leadership in construction. It is suggested that the traditional behavior of construction project managers is due to several factors which are inherent to the construction industry. It is argued that there is the need for a major shift in the way the project managers function and lead the projects. They need to develop as effective leaders rather than managers. Contemporary challenges and future leadership demands ask for a change in the way that project leadership has been perceived so far. The paper presents a proposal for authentic project leadership development at all levels of construction organizations. It is necessary to develop this concept further, and undertake research to test the construct throughout the construction industry. Authentic leadership must be made part of organizational culture. Authentic leadership development in project leaders is a solution to the 'leadership crisis' the construction industry is considered to be facing.

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