

Study links good leaders to successful projects

While good leadership must have something to do with successful projects, it's surprising how few studies have examined this correlation.

A new study from the United Kingdom however, finds that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two, and pinpoints the leadership dimensions that most influence a project's success.

Researchers Linda Geoghegan of Electronic Data Systems and Professor Victor Dulewicz of the Henley Business School at the University of Reading hope that organizations can exploit this knowledge to improve project outcomes.

Using a project-success questionnaire and a leadership-dimensions questionnaire, the researchers set out to examine leadership in a large U.K. company. In all, 52 respondents (81 percent of the company's project managers) completed both questionnaires.

The researchers divided their study into two groups. They administered leadership dimensions questionnaire (LDQ) to project managers who had worked on projects with budgets greater than £350,000 and gave a project-success questionnaire (PSQ) to project sponsors for projects of a similar size.

The PSQ comprised two key themes: the project and the client, covering 12 common measures of success, such as whether the project was completed on time and on budget, project performance, client satisfaction and the project's impact on organizational effectiveness.

Leadership traits on the LDQ included seven emotional competencies, five managerial competencies, and three intellectual competencies. Of these 15 possible leadership factors, the researchers found that eight had an impact on project management success:

- Critical analysis
- Self-awareness
- Sensitivity
- Influencing
- Motivation
- Manage resources
- Empowering
- Developing

The researchers compared the results of both questionnaires, looking for correlations between satisfactory project outcomes and good leadership.

Interestingly, they discovered that project managers scored higher than the norm for leadership traits related to conscientiousness, sensitivity and self-awareness. The researchers suggest that these high scores may result from the project managers' exposure to leadership activities such as influencing

difficult stakeholders and their need to obtain commitment from senior management in order to move their projects forward.

The project managers scored relatively lower on vision, strategic perspective and achieving, with the vision score being statistically significantly lower than the norm. The researchers suggest that the project managers scored poorly in this area because they are never involved in setting an organization's vision but instead focus on implementing projects that fulfill a pre-defined vision.

Overall, the research reveals several leadership dimensions that contribute to successful projects. The most significant dimensions were managing resources, empowering, developing and motivating. For example, project managers who rated highly for 'solving problems' on the PSQ also demonstrated leadership strengths in empowering and developing their colleagues, were able to manage resources efficiently and effectively and were also highly motivated. Surprisingly, these project managers did not score highly on critical analysis, although the overall survey group did score well in this area when compared to the norm.

There was also a significant correlation between the leadership dimensions that measured the ability to manage resources, empower and bring a project in on budget. "This is not surprising considering the relationship between managing resources and managing the budget," says Geoghegan.

She and Dulewicz say their research clearly demonstrates that leadership dimensions that are directly linked to successful projects should be the focus of project manager training.

"It's important that senior management are aware that leadership competencies do have an impact on the personnel with whom they work and ultimately, on the success of their change programs," says Dulewicz. He suggests that project leaders could be selected based on their leadership profile as measured by a proven questionnaire such as the Leadership Dimensions Questionnaire (LDQ).

Because the research study involved relatively few respondents and just one company, the researchers say further and broader studies must be undertaken before transferring any relationships between leadership dimensions and project success to other industries.

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