

E-LEADERSHIP FOR PROJECT MANAGERS: A STUDY OF SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND VIRTUAL PROJECT SUCCESS

by

Margaret R. Lee, Ph.D., PMP

Introduction

In the 21st century business environment, nontraditional virtual project work has become necessary for companies to maintain a competitive advantage. Despite an increase in virtual projects in organizations today (Sivunen, 2006), little research has been done to discover the relationship between e-leadership (leadership of those projects with virtual or teams that are not co-located) styles and project success for virtual project managers (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Kayworth & Leidner, 2001/2002; Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004). The need for e-leadership in virtual project teams has become increasingly relevant as businesses move toward more nontraditional work (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). However, existing research generally does not specifically address e-leadership and virtual project success to provide and promote techniques to enhance project, and therefore, organizational success (Barbuto, 2005).

Methodology

This concurrent triangulation mixed methods study explores how and to what extent situational leadership style characteristics, particularly effectiveness and flexibility, affect project success for Project Management Professionals (PMPs®) leading virtual projects. In this study, an online survey measured statistical, quantitative results. At the same time, situational leadership and project success were explored using open-ended survey responses for qualitative content analysis.

The target population, or the total population of individuals with at least one common characteristic from which will be made inferences (Swanson & Holton, 2005; Cooper & Schindler, 2008), are individuals who are considered project managers (PMs) by job description. The sample

frame from which the sample was drawn was project managers who are members of the Project Management Institute (PMI), have successfully completed the PMI PMP® designation and have experience in managing virtual projects.

The Leadership Behavioral Analysis II-Self (LABII-Self) survey (Blanchard, Hambleton, Zigarmi, & Forsyth, 1991) was used to assess the PMPs® managing virtual projects. The PMPs'® virtual project was then assessed by their project management office, program or portfolio manager, project planner or project lead using the Project Implementation Profile (PIP) Project Performance Subscale survey (Pinto & Slevin, 1992) to determine the level of project success.

The main analyses of the study were conducted in three stages. The first stage tests the relationship between the control variables (PMP® designation and virtual team management experience) and the measure of project success (dependent variable). This stage uses one-factor analysis, one-way ANOVA and Equality of Variance statistical tests. The second stage employs Pearson Correlations Coefficient and Linear Regression Analysis statistical analyses to test the control variables, dependent variable and independent variables of situational leadership style, flexibility and effectiveness. The third stage addresses the investigative questions. These variables are organized in terms of level of measurement (ordinal and nominal) to focus on the appropriate statistical methods for each level (One Way ANOVA, HSD test and T-test One-Way ANOVA, HSD test; respectively). The qualitative responses to four open-ended questions were analyzed using the Atlasti.6 software. Seventy-four surveys were completed for the study.

Results

The results indicated that none of the correlation coefficients attained significance at $\alpha = .05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis that the sample was drawn from a population in which there is no association between situational leadership style and the situational leadership characteristics of flexibility and effectiveness and virtual project success was accepted. The results showed that project managers with high Effectiveness and Flexibility scores have no higher or lower virtual project success

scores than project managers with low scores. The results of the triangulation show that in the qualitative responses the majority of project managers responded that they are using or have used situational leadership techniques, but the quantitative results did not support these qualitative suppositions.

Discussion

Based on these findings, the implications of this research study are that research regarding applying situational leadership theory to virtual project management remains a gap in the body of knowledge and that more research is needed to develop e-leadership management studies that indicate what factors are effective in influencing the success of virtual projects.

As Powell, Piccoli, and Ives (2004) indicated in their literature review on virtual teams, more research needs to be done regarding virtual team management to determine effective management techniques for the virtual environment, and they warn that traditional practices should not be blindly transferred to virtual environments. Pauleen (2003) suggests that existing leadership theory does not address the virtual business environment, and Cromb (2005) states that what constitutes successful leadership for virtual project teams is not clear. E-leadership may require a different type of leadership than traditional project management leadership (Konradt & Hoch, 2007), and the focus of future research should be on e-leadership for the virtual environment (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). Enhancing current or providing new research on e-leadership styles is a recommendation evolving from the research for the study. Suggested areas for future study include enhancing current or providing new research on e-leadership styles and research on the relationship between traditional management theories (including situational leadership) and the virtual project environment, and the need for improved project success and situational leadership surveys specifically for virtual projects.

Questions for Future Research

The results of this study evoke many questions regarding the relationship between traditional management theories (including situational leadership) and the virtual project environment.

- Is it because the project is virtual that situational leadership makes no difference?
- What e-leadership style does/would make a difference to the success of the virtual project?
- If virtual project success is not driven by e-leadership style (in this case, situational leadership style), then what drives the success of the virtual project team?
- Could factors such as the virtual employee being judged by the product, having to produce to keep the virtual job and having “no excuses” affect the success of the project more than the e-leadership of the virtual project?

Additional research as to why the level of the High Supportive / Low Directive Leadership style was significantly lower in multilingual projects than in monolingual projects may add to the project management body of knowledge. Additional research as to why the level of the Low Supportive / Low Directive Leadership Style was used less frequently by more experienced project managers and managers with more years of experience with virtual project management may add to the project management body of knowledge and also the virtual project management body of knowledge.

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