

An Investigation of the Leadership Style of Construction Managers in South Florida

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One of the most important facets of managing a construction company is leadership. Although the issue of leadership has been widely covered in management or business school, little attention has been given to the study of managerial behavior or styles of leaders in construction projects (Bresnen et al., 1986). Few of the researches done in this area point out that construction managers are not perceived as leaders essentially due to the fact that these managers are involved only with the day-to-day execution of site work. This mindset of managers, as Toor and Ofori point out, makes them more product-oriented than relationship-oriented (Toor and Ofori, 2008). This paper looks at the different leadership styles in construction. The paper further investigates if there is any difference in the way the more experienced managers exhibit their leadership style as compared to the less experienced managers. From the data collected through selected project managers and construction professionals working in managerial capacity in South Florida, it was found that the leadership style exhibited is both high task and high employee relationship; which is the selling type. The research also found that there is no significant difference in the leadership orientation of well experienced managers and less experienced managers.

Key Words: Construction Industry, Leadership, Project Management, Behavior

Introduction

Construction companies must utilize planning, organizing, leading and controlling, known as the four basic management functions. Project managers should possess these functions in order to successfully manage projects. Researchers in construction management have unequivocally reiterated the fact that project manager is one of the most important success factors of projects. Herbert et al. have gone to an extent of quantifying cost saving of as much as 10% through a well qualified manager (Herbert et al., 1970). Little attention has been given in the leadership issues in construction (Bresnen et al., 1986) despite the fact that there is so much literature and research in other industries. Langford et al. believe that the low volume of leadership related studies in construction is due to the lack of understanding of knowledge of the industry on the part of social scientists and lack of understanding of the social sciences by those in the industry (Langford, 1995). Researchers have stressed on the importance of leadership styles and have given a lot of suggestion on the characteristics, attributes and skills that can be effective in the construction industry. Goodwin stresses the importance of effective leadership and points out the skills required of effective project managers (Goodwin, 1993).

Study of leadership style and their effectiveness in managing projects is quite relevant to construction industry because construction managers have to wear different hats at different circumstances. Rowlinson et al. (1993) found that construction managers displayed supportive style in feasibility study and pre-contract stages of works eventually transforming to directive styles as construction progressed. Although it is extremely difficult to prove the cause-effect relationship of particular leadership style to the effectiveness of the project, however there are many studies that have been undertaken in the past that provide correlation between the styles of leadership exhibited to the performance of the project. Monaghan (1981) observed that project managers who were high in task and low in people consideration produced an acceptable level of commercial performance. In a similar study by Fraser (2000) project managers who scored high on the effectiveness scale favored team-style leadership where as those who followed a production style leadership scored the lowest of all. Those using a compromise leadership style had middle range effectiveness score.

According to Walker, leadership is defined as the manner in which the project managers conduct themselves in their role in order to obtain the best performance from the people they are managing (Walker, 1996). Leadership is an art and there is no definite answer as to which type of leadership style is best suited to construction and

which one is the most effective. It is difficult to evaluate the leadership but there are several models that study the leaders' behavior through several research instruments some of which will be further discussed in the literature review.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the manager's approach to leadership in construction industry. This is done by focusing on the actual leadership styles of managers in the construction industry. By utilizing the existing Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership model, leadership behavior of the managers is categorized (Hersey et al., 2008). Differences (if any) on the leadership behavior that may come with experience in the industry and length of service in the company they are working with will also be investigated separately.

Literature Review

Since the focus of this study is on the leadership style and not on the personal traits or characteristics of a leader, studies and models related to leadership styles are discussed. Leadership styles have to do with how people interact with those they seek to lead. Some of the leadership styles categorized are 1) autocratic leadership 2) democratic leadership 3) participative leadership 4) goal-oriented leadership and 5) situational leadership (Goetsch and Davis, 2006). Autocratic leaders tell others what to do and expect them to comply obediently. Although it may work in certain circumstances and in the short run but this is not effective in the long run. Democratic leaders are those who make their decisions final only after consulting with the people they are leading based on the consensus. Critics of this style say that popular decisions are not always the best decision to be taken and therefore may fail to produce the desired result. Participative leaders on the other hand empower their team members to develop their own decisions based on the information provided to them and exert little control over the decision making process. This may be a time consuming process but works well when the team members are very committed to the best interest of the organization. Goal oriented leaders are result based leaders who ask their team members to focus solely on the goals at hand. Opponents of this leadership style say that this is too narrowly focused and often centered on the wrong concerns. Situation leaders, also called the contingency leaders select one of the above mentioned styles based on the situation existing at a given time. Again this style is based on short term concerns and may not be the best solution for long term.

When we are studying the leadership styles of managers, it may become relevant to distinguish between leadership and management. Construction professionals are of the opinion that their focus should be on the completion of tasks. They are oriented towards achieving this goal of finishing their tasks on time and within budget. Leaders, on the other hand are more concerned towards how they can accomplish the task. Goetsch and Davis by quoting the statements of Bennis, distinguish the leaders from the managers by saying that managers focus on systems whereas the leaders focus on people. Even more distinctive feature is that managers take the short view whereas the leaders take the long view. (Goetsch and Davis, 2006). Is it success in short term, for instance the project success or the success in long term, for instance achieving the long term vision of the company for which the construction professional's success is bench marked against? This is where the majority of the construction professionals have contrasting views and this belief ultimately shapes their leadership style.

There are three major approaches to the theory of leadership according to Schermerhorn (Schermerhorn, 1986). They are trait, behavioral and contingency approach. In addition to the three theories mentioned recent publications have included some contemporary leadership theories. However, these three approaches to the leadership theory are discussed first.

It is sometimes assumed that leader's personal trait can determine their leadership qualities or style and this in turn will determine success. With this approach, the belief is that the leaders are born with the qualities that they possess. These qualities of personal traits give them an upper hand in their workplace. Although there are certain traits that help us differentiate leaders from non-leaders, it is often difficult to substantiate which sets of personal traits fare better than the other. Moreover, it is equally difficult to agree on such a predefined, universal set of personal traits. This is why this theory is heavily criticized.

Traditional and behavioral approaches intertwine and compare behavior of the ineffective leader to those of the effective leader. The proponent of this theory believe that successful leadership depends more on appropriate behavior, skills, and actions, and less on personal traits. The distinction between this approach and the previous one is significant, because more than often traits are constant while skills can be learned and changed. For the managers to be effective they must be able to identify and apply the necessary leadership style apropos to the situation rather than based on the predefined sets of successful traits. Moreover they should be able to

adapt to changing and sometimes contradictory circumstances in which they need to show versatility and flexibility.

With the contingency approach, emphasis is on the external events and it is that this determines whether a person is a leader or not. External factors have a bigger control than the personal traits or the behaviors. The contingency approach is very popular and two contingency approaches namely, Fiedler's Contingency Model and Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Model are discussed in detail in the paper. The Hersey and Blanchard model is used to analyze the leadership style of the managers of construction industry in this paper.

Fiedler's Contingency Model

The first person to develop contingency model of leadership style was Fiedler. He emphasized the effectiveness of leadership style and group performance in terms of the control a leader has over situations. Fiedler concludes that the key factor in leadership effectiveness is the individual's basic leadership style. Hence, the Least Preferred Co-worker (LPC) questionnaire was created to analyze this style of leadership.

The questionnaire comprise of 18 comparison adjectives, using words like jovial-solemn, kind-unkind, easy to get along -shielded, and obnoxious-pleasant. This questionnaire was designed to get response from employees of their managers and their leadership. This survey was done on a scale of 1-8. If the LPC is 73 or above this means that the respondents are enjoying a good relationship with their co-worker and this worker is more relationship oriented. If the LPC is below 64 this may indicate that the person is more interested in task and productivity. Workers at this core level may think that their primary goal is to get work done, rather than personal association. A person with a score of between 65 and 72 is termed as socio-independent by Fiedler. These people are not easily defined. Hence, managers must be flexible in their leadership style and be able to use different leadership style to achieve success. People in this category are more open to suggestion and depend very much on their knowledge and experience to get things done.

Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model

The Hersey-Blanchard's situational leadership model is applied to measure the actual leadership style employed by managers. The Hersey-Blanchard Model of Situational Leadership, shown in Figure 1, is based on the amount of direction (task behavior) and amount of socio emotional support (relationship behavior) a leader must provide given the situation and the level of maturity of the followers. Hersey and Blanchard define readiness as "the extent to which a follower demonstrates the ability (knowledge, experience, and skill) and willingness (confident, commitment, and motivation) to accomplish a specific task." Therefore, individuals are not influenced by any one way. Four leadership styles are defined in the model. They are:

1. Telling. This style reflects high task/low relationship behavior (S1). The leader provides clear instructions and specific direction. Telling style is best matched with a low follower readiness level.
2. Selling. This style reflects high task/high relationship behavior (S2). The leader encourages two-way communication and helps build confidence and motivation on the part of the employee, although the leader still has responsibility and controls decision making. Selling style is best matched with a moderate follower readiness level.
3. Participating. This style reflects high relationship/low task behavior (S3). With this style, the leader and followers share decision making and no longer need or expect the relationship to be directive. Participating style is best matched with a moderate follower readiness level.
4. Delegating. This style reflects low relationship/low task behavior (S4). Delegating style is appropriate for leaders whose followers are ready to accomplish a particular task and are both competent and motivated to take full responsibility.

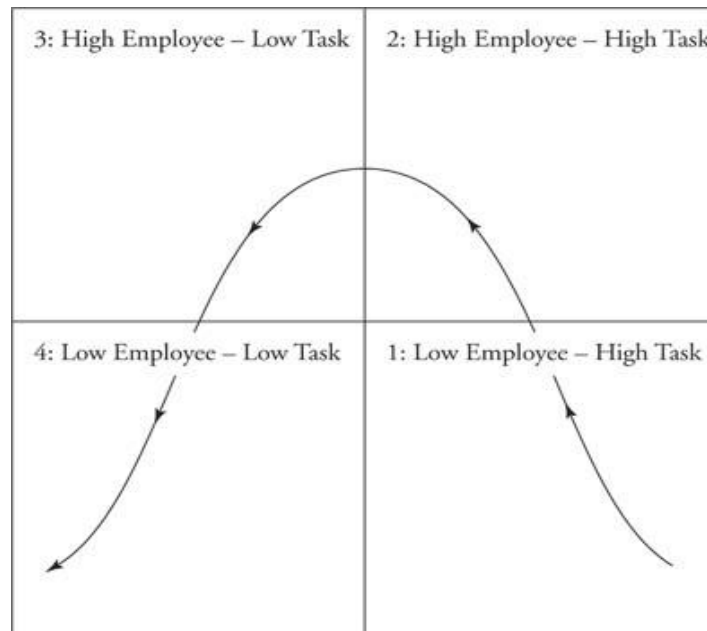


Figure 1: Four Leadership Styles from Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model

Purpose

The purposes of this study were: (1) To investigate the leadership style of selected construction managers/project managers/superintendents in South Florida using Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model; and (2) To investigate the differences in the leadership style of well experienced managers and less experienced managers, if there are any.

It is hypothesized that there would not be a significant difference between the leadership style of well experienced managers and less experienced managers.

Research Methodology

Subjects

The questionnaire was distributed to employees of South Florida construction firms, ranging in size from small, local companies to large, multinational corporations. The group consisted of supervisors, which included owners, executives, project managers, superintendents, and anyone else acting in a supervisory capacity. A total of 65 surveys were distributed, but only 26 were completed and returned.

Instrumentation

The managers working for construction companies were given the questionnaire sheet that consisted of: (1) Demographic data, and (2) Direct questionnaire measuring the leadership style. The manager's leadership styles were assessed by their inclination towards different leadership behavior.

Results

From the first part of the survey, .i.e. the demographic section, it was found that people having the supervisory capacity or holding managerial position had a much greater time of service in the industry. Over 50% of the supervisors surveyed had over 10 years experience in the industry. While this is to be expected, as many if not the most of those serving in supervisory capacity would have worked their way up through the industry.

The other notable finding from this part of the survey is the transient nature of the industry. About 71% of the supervisors surveyed had been with their companies for less than two years. This high turnover rate of the people even in the supervisory level indicates that there is very little room to establish oneself as a leader with a long term vision. These people in this supervisory capacity instead execute short term goals rather than establishing themselves as a leader with a long term vision.

The survey's second and major part dealt with the manager's viewpoint of what they consider in the success of their project. More than 90% of the managers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that completion of task was the most important aspect of their project success. The same people perceived that relationship with their subordinates was also very important for them while executing the project, however this time they were less adamant.

To investigate the relationships among the items, a five point scale was used to represent the five allowable choices, with 1= strongly agree (SA), 2= agree (A), 3= neither agree nor disagree (N), 4=disagree(D), and 5= strongly disagree(SD).

Table 1 summarizes the responses from the construction professionals in managerial positions regarding their propensity towards different leadership styles, i.e. whether they perceived completion of task more important than the relationship with their subordinates while completing the task. Of the total 26 professionals in managerial capacity surveyed (construction managers, supervisors, superintendents and project managers) which represents 100%, the percentage of these professionals agreeing or disagreeing to the statements is shown in Table 1. The second objective of the research is fulfilled by carrying out inferential statistics from the responses of these constructional professionals. The results of these inferential statistics, namely the t-test are presented in Table 2, Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5. Table 2 gives a comparison of mean and variance of experienced versus less experienced manager's agreement or disagreement on the statement that they perceive task completion as the most important measure of their success. Note that the higher number indicated by means in Table 2, 3, 4 and 5 reveal that they agree strongly to the statement made in Table 1. In this research, experienced managers are considered to be those who have had more than five years of construction industry experience. Table 3 on the other hand presents a comparison of mean and variance of experienced and less experienced managers agreement or disagreement on the statement that they view their relationship with their subordinates as the most important measure of their success. Table 4 and Table 5 also present statistical data similar to those of Table 2 and Table 3 but this time the respondents are categorized based on the number of years they have worked for their present company. Those managers who have worked for less than two years for the present company are compared with those who have served their company for more than two years.

Table 1
Distribution of Responses

Statements and Questions		Distribution of Responses				
		(Strongly Agree) SA	(Agree) A	(Neither) N	(Disagree) D	(Strongly Disagree) SD
1	I consider completion of task as the most important measure of my project success.	53.8%	38.5%	7.7%	0.0%	0.0%
2	I consider my relationship with the subordinates as the most important factor for my project success.	42.3%	53.8%	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%
3	Tasks and roles for workers should be defined only by CM.	26.9%	34.6%	7.7%	26.9%	3.8%
4	CM should consider the ideas and suggestions of workers.	30.8%	65.4%	0.0%	3.8%	0.0%
5	All decisions should be made by CM.	19.2%	26.9%	11.5%	42.3%	0.0%
6	The communication between CM and workers should be only one way.	0.0%	11.5%	7.7%	53.8%	26.9%
		CM	Worker	Both	None	
7	Who should have the decision over the realization of tasks?	52.0%	0.0%	48.0%	0.0%	

Table 2
Results of t-Test for Importance on Task Completion (Less Experienced vs. Well Experienced Managers)

	Less Experienced Managers	More Experienced Managers
Mean	4.5	4.45
Variance	0.3	0.46
Observations	6	20
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df (degrees of freedom)	24	
t Stat	0.185	
t Critical one-tail	2.064	

Table 3
Results of t-Test for Importance on Relationship (Less Experienced vs Well Experienced Managers)

	Less Experienced Managers	More Experienced Managers
Mean	4.167	4.45
Variance	0.3	0.355
Observations	6	20
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df (degrees of freedom)	24	
t Stat	1.089	
t Critical one-tail	2.064	

Table 4
Results of t-Test for Importance on Task Completion (Less No. of Years in a Company vs More No. of Years in a Company)

	Less Years	More Years
Mean	4.31	4.7
Variance	0.495	0.233
Observations	16	10
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df (degrees of freedom)	24	
t Stat	1.662	
t Critical one-tail	2.064	

Table 5
Results of t-Test for Importance on Relationship (Less No. of Years in a Company vs. More No. of Years in a Company)

	Less Years	Less Years
Mean	4.312	4.5

Variance	0.229	0.544
Observations	16	10
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df (degrees of freedom)	24	
t Stat	0.715	
t Critical one-tail	2.064	

Conclusion and Recommendation

Basic purpose of this research study was to investigate the leadership style of selected people holding managerial position in the construction industry within a certain geographical location which in this case was South Florida. Managers agreed that the focus on tasks and the focus on relationships between worker and supervisor are important, with over 90% of respondents replying that the focus on these should be high or very high. A similar study conducted in Indonesia found that the most of the project managers in the construction industry adopted the task-oriented style and this was more so with experienced managers who had worked in the industry for over 10 years (Andi et al., 2004). When the Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Model on Leadership was used to categorize the leadership style, they found out that the primary actual leadership employed was selling. The result obtained with this research was also very similar. More than 90% of the people in managerial capacity in South Florida Construction Industry revealed that they strongly agreed that completing task was the most important achievement for them. When the same managers were asked how important they felt was the relationship between them and their subordinates, their response had less strong assertion towards relationship than with the completion of task.

As discussed in the literature review, in high task/high relationship behavior, a leader encourages two-way communication and helps build confidence and motivation on the part of the employee, although the leader still has responsibility and controls decision making. This is supported by the fact that majority of the construction managers felt that they should consider suggestion and ideas from the workers but when it came to the issue of decision making, they controlled the decision making process. Selling style is best matched with a moderate follower readiness level. However, this research did not study the readiness level of the workers and no conclusion could therefore be made regarding the appropriateness of the selling behavior of the project managers. It is the intention of this study to extend this research to the worker level so that this conclusion can be made.

Another aspect of the leadership behavior analyzed was regarding the difference between the leadership style of less experienced manager and more experienced manager. Although the mean value of the less experienced manager as shown in Table 2 suggests that they are more task-oriented than the more experienced managers, this was found to be insignificant at the alpha level of 0.05. Similarly, mean value in Table 3 suggests that the more experienced managers have a stronger assertion to the relationship type of leadership than the less experienced managers. However, this is not found to be significant at the alpha level of 0.05. Therefore, there is no significant difference in the leadership style of the well experienced managers and less experienced managers. Similarly, a newly hired manager (less than 2 years in the company) had no significant difference in the leadership style of the manager who had been with the company for relatively longer period which is depicted by Table 4 and Table 5.

Some of the other notable results from this study are that the majority of the construction professionals in the managerial position are of the view that although they control the decision making process the decision making should be made only after taking suggestions and ideas from the workers. These professionals vehemently disagreed to the opinion that communication should be top-down thereby challenging the authoritarian type of leadership. It is quite interesting to see that these professionals in the managerial position viewed that all the decisions need not always come from the construction managers or from people in managerial positions.

Another important aspect of this kind of study would be to study the behavior of workers and their viewpoint. If the behavior of the workers as determined from their 'follower's readiness level' matched that with the leadership style exhibited by the managers, the leadership would be more effective. Although this part of the research was not included in this paper, it is the intention of the authors to carry out such research in the future to determine the effectiveness of the leadership style practiced.

Future researches may explore the situational variables not specifically investigated here. If the project is in fast track, the leadership style of the project manager may be different from those involved in a non-fast track project. Similarly, project managers executing complex projects may have a different leading style when compared to those managing simple projects. These are some of the many situational variables that can be studied in the future.

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