

An investigation of leadership characteristics of project and construction managers in the South African construction industry

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Abstract

The construction industry is different from other industries due to its unique characteristics. Moreover, construction projects involve different individuals and organizations which are all gathered to achieve a specific task at a specific time. However, South African construction projects sometimes face challenges relating to quality and cost overruns. These challenges can also be attributed to ineffective leadership in the South African construction industry. Therefore, it is important to evaluate leadership in the South African construction industry. Effective leadership can improve construction productivity, where its outcomes include effectiveness, satisfaction, and project success. The main objective of the study is to identify leading characteristics of construction and project managers in the South African construction industry which influence the success of construction projects. The data used in this research were derived from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary data was collected via a detailed review of related literature. The primary data was collected through a well structured questionnaire aimed at 150 projects and construction managers in the South African construction industry, 110 questionnaires were received (73% response rate). Data was analysed using SPSS software, whereby frequencies and descriptive statistics were attained. Findings from the study indicate that the main leading characteristics which influence the success of construction projects include monitoring for results, problem solving and informed judgment, team building, initiative, influencing, communication, visioning, planning and goal setting, time management, sense of responsibility, empowerment, discipline, ethics, positive expectations, conceptualization, and conflict resolution. Based on the outcomes of this study it is clear that leadership characteristics of a project and construction manager are important, to establish success from a construction project.

Keywords

Construction industry, construction managers, leadership, management, project managers, success.

1. Introduction

Leadership is one of the most important and essential factors in good project and construction management, and leadership can be seen as the art of influencing others to achieve desired results. According to Walker (1996:33), leadership is defined as the manner in which the project managers and construction managers conduct themselves in their role, in order to obtain the best performance from the people they are managing. Leaders guide behaviours by setting the vision, direction and the key processes; in other words, leadership has a large influence on the whole project process, including the actions of others. It is important to note that South African construction companies do face problems, and can often be traced to the project leadership. Some of them may have insufficient competencies or their traits may not fit with the nature of their work. Besides, they may be using inappropriate leadership styles in dealing with subordinates on construction projects. These leadership problems can lead to cost overruns and bad construction quality.

Leaders should have unique characteristics for them to be successful. According to Jarad (2012) leadership characteristic is a distinguishing feature or quality that a leader possess. Nowadays, construction companies search for professionals who have better management and leadership skills rather than technical skills since these companies focus on project management systems (Toor and Ofori, 2008). Although experience and technical skills are important in engineering and construction, the critical skills that a successful project manager need are not technical. Leadership and management skills can help the project manager to achieve the objectives of the project (Benator and Thumann, 2003). Moreover leadership skills are considered as a very important key to the success of a company and very important condition for the success of project management. Ogunlana (2008:27) states that, the success of a construction project depends on several factors, one of which is the competencies of the project leaders, their personalities, characteristics, skills and leadership styles. Herbert et al (1991:22) even stated that cost saving of as much as 10% through a well-qualified manager or leader is possible. However, little attention has been given with regard to what characterizes an effective leader in the construction industry. Goodwin (1993:27) stresses the importance of effective leadership, he further points out the skills and characteristics required by project and construction managers. This paper contains discussions on the theory of leadership and leadership characteristics of project and construction managers in the construction industry. Moreover, the aim of the paper is to investigate the leadership characteristics of project leaders in the South African construction industry. The paper starts with an overview of leadership and leadership traits in the construction industry, followed by the presentation of the methodology and the findings from literature before conclusion and recommendations are drawn.

2. Leadership and construction – Overview

The construction industry has a greater need for leadership than arguably any other industry. Many reasons support this notion and it is evident in the nature of the construction projects, and constructed products (Hillebrandt, 2000). Undoubtedly, construction projects are large and technically complex and they involve a combination of specialized skills. Thus, the teams are not only large but are also multi-disciplinary and the members are from several different construction disciplines and this makes leadership important in this industry. Project management and Construction management was developed in the construction and engineering fields in order to improve planning and cost controls (Arendse, 2013). Moreover history shows that the construction industry mainly operated in a context of management being managers instead of leaders and there is a continuing controversy about the difference between leadership and management. It is obvious that a person can be a leader without being a manager and a person can be a manager without being a leader. Price (2009) stated that, when we are studying the leadership styles of managers in the construction industry, it may become relevant to distinguish between leadership and management. Moreover construction professionals or managers 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 (2006:12) distinguishes 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. Moreover construction and project managers in the construction industry are responsible for the productivity of the project members, they should maintain cohesion in the project. Hence, they should be leaders who can motivate and inspire construction workers within the given projects. This is because leadership is considered to be good if it is designed to accomplish the goal or mission of an organization which is done through project team leading and project time managing, within budget conclusion and to a high quality, and with a satisfied customer (Jarad, 2012:9).

3. Leadership traits in the construction industry

Jarad (2012) stated that, the true task of leadership involves the ability to make change happen. Although multitudes of research have been done on what makes an effective leader, there appears to be no guaranteed consensus. Essentially outstanding leaders become a fine balance between traits, abilities, behaviours, sources of power, and aspects of the situation. The term trait has been the source of considerable ambiguity and confusion in the literature, referring sometimes and variously to personality, temperaments, dispositions, and abilities, as well as to any enduring qualities of the individual, including physical and demographic attributes (Bass, 1990). Leadership traits of the project leader are important to push team members to pass their own self-interests then their performance will be enhanced. According to Jarad (2012), leadership characteristics build on the basic management skills by adding motivation and advanced problem solving skills. Researchers further suggested that different leadership traits would be appropriate for different types of project (Jarad, 2012). However, to understand the behaviour and traits of a leader, one needs to look at their innate characteristics. Most significant are energy level, physical stamina and stress tolerance. High energy and stress tolerance help to deal with the fast pace and often chaotic events of today's business. Humility, courage, integrity, humour, passion, compassion; and wisdom are the leadership traits that were suggested by Barker and Coy's (2003) as important. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) suggested that the elements of leadership trait are drive; desire to lead; honesty and integrity; self-confidence and knowledge of the business (Ogunlana, 2008). To this end, the different traits are discussed in detail below. Traits that have been identified include:

3.1 Communication

Communication is the ability of a project leader to listen, persuade, and understand what others mean by their behaviour. Jarad (2012) noted that it is important for project leaders to have the communication trait.

3.2 Dominance

Successful leaders want to be managers and to take charge. However, they are not overly bossy and they do not use a bullying style (Lussier and Achua, 2004).

3.3 Self-confidence

Leaders with self-confidence display assurance about their abilities and foster confidence among followers. Self-confidence influences individual goals, efforts and task persistence. Without strong self-confidence, leaders are less likely to attempt to influence followers to take on difficult tasks and to set challenging objectives for themselves and followers (Price, 2009).

3.4 Sensitivity to others

According Lussier & Achua (2004) being sensitive towards others, refers to understanding group members as individuals, what their position on issues is and how best to communicate with them and also influence them. To be sensitive to others requires empathy and the ability to place oneself in another person's position, to see things from others' point of view.

3.5 Problem solving and informed judgment

Problem solving is the ability to analyse adverse conditions or conflict, differentiate root causes, and the capability to find out a practical solution, and then implement it. Elements of problem solving include problem definition, and decision making for problems that have already occurred. To be an effective problem solver, it is important to differentiate between causes and symptoms (Jarad, 2012). According to Bass (1990) successful leaders come in a wide variety of personal characteristics such as their ability to relate to people in groups or individually. Strong leadership is necessary to be able to establish construction performance, direction and to cope with change. A construction and project manager should internalize different facets of character in order to handle different people in different situations. Moreover an effective manager has to modify, change or adapt his natural character to suit different purposes and conditions.

3.6 Planning

One of the critical abilities that contributes to effective leadership is planning skills. Abilities of planning include judgment, perceptual foresight, conceptual foresight, ordering, elaboration, and adaptive flexibility (Marta et al., 2005:13).

3.7 Flexibility

Flexibility refers to the ability to adjust to different situations. Leaders need to stay ahead of the immense changes in the world and the pace of change. Without flexibility, leaders would be successful only in limited situations that fit their style of leadership. (Lussier & Achua, 2004:41).

3.8 Integrity

Integrity refers to behaviour that is honest and ethical, making a person trustworthy. Trustworthiness is an important part of business success. Followers must trust the leader. Unless one is perceived to be trustworthy, it would be difficult to retain the loyalty of followers or to obtain cooperation and support from peers and superiors. (Emad, 2014:11)

3.9 Visioning

According to Jarad (2012:19), visioning is a process which has a number of phases that includes creation, improvement, and renewal of a vision. Jarad (2012) further states that visioning is a continuous process and it must be integrated in an on-going process of strategic planning. Researchers suggest that the goals of visioning include giving a sense of future to the organisation, guiding to decision making and connecting to the values (Shelbourn et al., 2003:33).

4. Research Methodology

Research methodology considers the context of the research and the desired results in order to achieve meaningful research outcomes. Moreover, the selection of an appropriate research design involves several steps, beginning with identifying the problem, purpose of the study and in depth literature review. This research adopted a quantitative approach which involved the use of a questionnaire. Moreover, the data used in this paper were derived from both primary and secondary sources. Burns and Grove (1993:777) describes quantitative research as a formal, systematic process that describes and test relationships and examines causes among variables. In addition, Polit and Hungler (1993:148) were of the view that quantitative research is a survey to obtain information from a sample of people by means of self-report, whereby people respond to a sequence of questions posed to them by the researcher. The primary data was obtained through the survey method which used purposive sampling, while the secondary data was derived from the review of literature and archival records. The primary data was obtained through the use of a structured questionnaire survey. The questionnaire survey led to the compilation of the primary data. However, questionnaires were decided upon for this study for the following reasons: they require less

time and energy to administer and they offer the possibility of anonymity because the respondent's names are not required on the completed questionnaires. The format of the questionnaire had a section that identifies effective leadership characteristics in the South African construction industry. Respondents had to select important leadership traits in the construction industry, the selection was translated into frequencies and percentages and then ranked. This was distributed to a collective total of 150 projects and construction managers in the South African construction industry, Gauteng. Out of the 150 questionnaires sent out, 111 were received back representing a 74% response rate. This was considered adequate for the analysis based on the assertion by Moser and Kalton (1971) that the result of a survey could be considered as biased and of little value if the return rate was lower than 30–40%. However any research based on measurement must be concerned with the accuracy and dependability. A reliability coefficient demonstrates whether the test designer was correct in expecting a certain collection of items to yield interpretable statements about individual differences (Cronbach, 1951:297). George and Shamas (2012:21) notes that the value of the Cronbach's Alpha above 0.7 is acceptable for reliable analysis. Description of reliabilities of all scales used in the study indicated a Cronbach Alpha of above 0.7. The data presentation and analysis made use of frequency distributions and percentages of all the respondents.

5. Findings and Discussion

Findings from the 111 usable questionnaires revealed that 52% of the respondents were project managers and 48% of the respondents were construction managers. Furthermore, 69.5% of the respondents are currently involved in projects in the range 0-5 projects, 16.2% of the respondents are involved in projects in the range of 6-10.

5.1 Leadership traits in the South African construction industry

It is evident from table 1 that 77% of the respondents said communication skills was the first ranked leadership characteristic in the South African construction industry. Of the respondents 67.3% revealed that having vision was the second ranked leadership characteristic; 64.5% selected passion (R=3); 62.7% selected confidence as an important leadership characteristic (R=4); 58.2% selected creativity (R=5); 53.6% chose honest and reliability (R=6). Being knowledgeable, organized and objective oriented was selected by 52% of the respondents (R=7). Having construction experience was ranked fourteenth (% =44). Followed by decisiveness (42.7%; R=15), self-discipline (41.8%, R=16), Firm minded and foresight were ranked twentieth (%=36.4), however being a risk taker was ranked last (30%; R=22).

Findings supports literature reviewed by Jarad (2012) were it is indicated that leadership traits of a construction project leaders are important to push team members to pass their own self-interests, therefore their performance will be enhanced. Furthermore, Jarad (2012) stated that leadership characteristics should build on the basic management skills by adding motivation and advanced problem solving skills. Jarad (2012) further noted that communication skills, time management and self-confidence are important leadership traits in the construction industry. According to Bass (1990) successful leaders come in a wide variety of personal characteristics such as their ability to relate to people in groups or individually. Strong leadership is necessary to be able to establish performance direction and to cope with change. A manager should internalize different facets of character in order to handle different people in different situations.

Table 1. Importance of Performance Parameter in Construction

Leadership Characteristic	Frequency/ Percentage	Rank
Communication skills	N=85 (77.3%)	1
Vision	N=74 (67.3%)	2
Passion	N=71 (64.5%)	3
Confidence	N=69 (62.7%)	4
Creativity	N=64 (58.2%)	5
Honesty and Reliability	N=59 (53.6%)	6

Knowledge	N=57 (52%)	7
Organized	N=57 (52%)	7
Objective	N=57 (52%)	7
Influence	N=55 (50%)	8
Strategic vision	N=55 (50%)	8
Integrity	N=54 (49.1%)	10
Self-control	N=52 (47.3%)	11
Sense of direction	N=51 (46.4%)	12
Inspiration	N=50 (45%)	13
Open to change	N=50 (45%)	13
Experienced	N=49 (44%)	14
Decisiveness	N=47 (42.7%)	15
Self-discipline	N=46 (41.8%)	16
Action-Oriented	N=45 (40.9%)	17
Efficient	N=42 (38.2%)	18
Not biased	N=41 (37.3%)	19
Firmness	N=41 (37.3%)	19
Foresight	N=40 (36.4%)	20
Fair-minded	N=40 (36.4%)	20
Charismatic	N=37 (33.6%)	21
Risk Taker	N=33 (30%)	22

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has explored leadership characteristics of construction and project managers. The reviewed literature revealed that there are various important leadership traits that project leaders have in the construction industry which includes: self-confidence, high energy, stability, planning, integrity and time management. However, in the present research, it was found that the dominant leadership characteristics possessed by construction and project managers in the South Africa construction industry are: good communication skills which was considered a very important trait in the construction industry followed by vision, passion, self-discipline, confidence, creativity, honesty and reliability, knowledgeable, integrity, inspiration and decisiveness. It should be known that the construction industry is different from other industries due to its unique characteristics. Moreover a construction project is consisted of a diversity of individuals and organizations which are all gathered to achieve specific task at a specific time. Therefore, it is necessary for the project or construction managers to be effective leaders and to lead the project for success.

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