

An Interpersonal Project Leadership Model

Mark Allen*, Cecilia Carpenter, Tiffany Dydak, Kyle Harkins

Drexel University, USA

mha44@drexel.edu, cc3389@drexel.edu, tld77@drexel.edu, kh656@drexel.edu

*Corresponding author

Abstract

As business management becomes more complex and exacting, its demand for effective project leadership grows. The call for personal, interpersonal, and group skills lays the foundation for a new project leadership model. The reason for the *An Interpersonal Project Leadership Model* study is to offer a model for being successful in project leadership based on academic sources and co-author professional experiences. It includes lessons learned from these sources and experiences as well as from co-author individual characteristics and the contexts in which they have led. The study takes the approach of project leaders with accompanying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It uses academic concepts and theories to explain lessons learned, the approach, and the model. The co-authors have identified an opportunity to demonstrate critical, constructive thinking that shows different points of view and guides the reader through the maze of available information. They also show the state of the art in project leadership models. The environment affecting this opportunity limits the research by the co-authors' educational background, professional experiences, and available resources as well as time available leading up to the due date and sensitivity of information specific to the co-authors' employers. The study's findings concluded that personal skills such as self-awareness, interpersonal skills such as motivating others, and group skills such as building effective teams serve as the hierarchical steps in the project leadership model. The co-authors recommend future application of the model toward project success through effective leadership that includes emotional intelligence for self-awareness; effective motivation; interpersonal relationships that resolve issues; and definitive communication for team success in tasking and relationships.

Keywords: Interpersonal model, project leadership, project management

1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to offer an interpersonal model for being successful in project leadership based on academic sources and co-author professional experiences. To do so, it considers lessons learned from these sources and experiences as well as from co-author individual characteristics and the contexts in which they have led. The study takes the approach of project leaders with accompanying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It uses academic concepts and theories to explain lessons learned, the approach, and the model. The study's scope covers project leadership in most any industry or culture.

The research was limited by the co-authors' educational background, professional experiences, and available resources as well as time available leading up to the due date and sensitivity of information specific to the co-authors' employers. The methodology of the research included secondary research in an international standard, two major textbooks, two professional journal articles, a case study, a research paper, a military guide; an academic blog, and a magazine article written on project leadership. Primary research included the co-authors' professional observations during their careers in project leadership and self-assessments during study of this topic. The ideas and conclusions presented are original. The paper is structured to include an abstract; introduction; background; literature review; leadership model development, description, analysis, and application; lessons learned; conclusions; references; and appendices.

2. Background

As business management becomes more complex and exacting, its demand for effective project leadership grows. Project leadership requires personal, interpersonal, and group skills to inspire the project team to achieve project success. "Factors such as . . . team motivation (e.g., team potency, team goals, team rewards, team feedback) . . . have been studied to determine how best to form and lead teams" (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 405-406). A project team is the essential unit of success for any project because it performs the work to achieve project success. "The project team includes the project manager and t individuals who act together in performing the work of the project to achieve its objectives" (PMI, 2013, 35). "Research shows that teams tend to develop through four separate, sequential stages. These stages were first labeled by Tuckman (1965) as forming, norming, storming, and performing" (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 408).

The forming stage involves project team members getting acquainted. Norming involves building team cohesion. In the storming stage, team members work through disagreements. Finally, in the performing stage team members achieve a collaborative rhythm and work toward project success. An effective project leader is essential to guiding the project team through these stages to perform project work toward project success. The reason for the *An Interpersonal Project Leadership Model* study is to offer a model for being successful in project leadership based on academic sources and co-author professional experiences.

3. Literature Review

Yang, Wu, and Huang (2013, 271-280) proposed and validated a model for assessing the relationship among project leadership style and teamwork, project performance, and stakeholder satisfaction (Appendix A) in the construction industry. The authors' analysis showed that "leadership is positively associated with teamwork, indicating that a project manager with transactional and transformational leadership may improve team communication, collaboration, and cohesiveness" (Yang et al., 2013, 271-280). Their results also demonstrated that teamwork "may partially mediate the relationship between transactional leadership and capital facility performance" (Yang et al., 2013, 271-280).

Toor and Arain (2012, 125-146) surveyed project management professionals on the project site for the Suvarnabhumi Airport, and found that the highest ranked leadership behavior was goal setting. They also found that most leaders "supported the team approach and participative leadership style" (Toor & Arain, 2012, 125-146). Based on the information gleaned from these surveys and interviews, the author developed the "Quadrilateral Model of Leadership" (QML). This model grouped leadership behaviors into four groups, Coaching, Connecting, Controlling, and Charismatic. The author further theorized that these four groups combine to provide a "leadership pyramid or quadrilateral," which would allow project leaders to positively impact the outcomes of major construction projects in Thailand.

Afsar, Badir, and Saeed (2014, 1270-1300) examined the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior. Innovative work behavior was defined as a "set of activities aimed at recognition, development, modification, adoption, and implementation of ideas" (Afsar et al., 2014, 1270-1300). Employees and leaders from innovative companies in China were surveyed regarding their perception of psychological empowerment, leader behavior, and self-construal. They found a positive relationship between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior; and that the employees' perception of their psychological empowerment "mediated the relationship between transformational leadership exhibited by leaders and innovative work behavior displayed by employees" (Afsar et al., 2014, 1270-1300).

Kirkbride demonstrated that the Full Range Leadership (FRL) model is "highly correlated with leadership success" (2006, 23-32). The FRL model focuses on transformational leadership styles. Kirkbride theorized that successful leaders would engage in the transformational leadership style more than transactional or non-transactional leadership styles. This study showed that transformational leadership can be developed by using a combination of a multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ), structured workshops, coaching sessions, and feedback with the leaders being trained (Appendix B).

4. Interpersonal Project Leadership Model: Development and Description

4.1 Development of the Model

When identifying the most important characteristics of a project leadership model, the co-authors of this study investigated the most impactful leadership attributes listed in Whetten and Cameron's text *Developing Management Skills* (Whetten & Cameron, 2010) in the categories of personal skills, interpersonal skills, and group skills (Figure 1). In the personal skills category, the co-authors addressed self-awareness; in the interpersonal skills category they addressed motivating others; and in group skills they addressed building effective teams and teamwork. Based on their professional experiences and academic research, they theorized that these skills, among many available for consideration, are most impactful in making an effective leader.

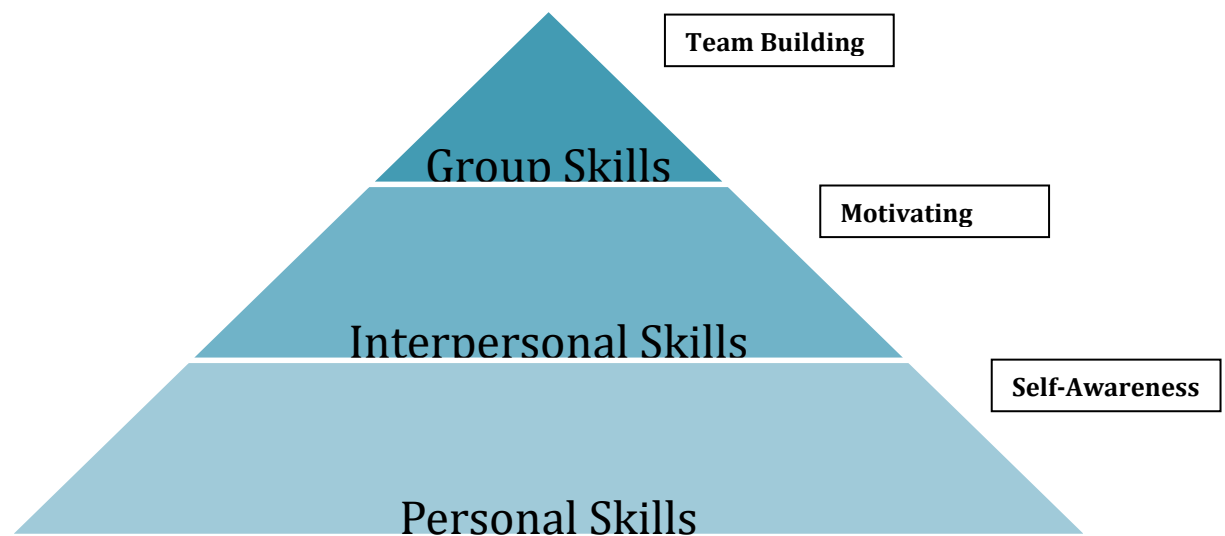


Figure 1. Project Leadership Model. (Adapted from Whetten & Cameron, 2010.)

Along with consulting Whetten and Cameron, the co-authors researched student blogs in the Drexel University M.S. in Project Management's Project Leadership and Teamwork course. Blog posts in discussion boards and self-assessments exposed student professional experiences, academic research, and personal insights. Bloggers hailed from backgrounds of varying degrees of project management experience. Included were personal insights and revelations resulting from blogger self-assessments. This unique perspective along with published documentation supported development of the project leadership model by this study's co-authors.

In the personal skills category of self-awareness, the co-authors found Whetten and Cameron well aligned with research results. The text offered credible examples and quotes about self-awareness,

its effect on oneself, and its influence on the leadership role. Researchers found that knowledge of oneself is imperative in leading others because one's personal base of perspective influences perception of others. For example, self-awareness of one's leadership style tendencies facilitates a leader's ability to adjust their approach to guiding followers.

In the interpersonal skills category, the co-authors addressed the skill of motivating others. Insights derived especially from bloggers in the Project Leadership and Teamwork course. Unit 4 discussion board posts revealed that many bloggers tended to employ the attributes of team focus and motivating others to perform their best. Bloggers have participated as members of project teams, many even as project team leaders, and have learned firsthand the capabilities, needs, and limits of both positions.

Finally, related to the group skills category of building effective teams and teamwork, the co-authors found in a Forbes.com article some skills that are key to building an effective team (Skuzza, 2013). They learned that, regardless of a single-leader structure, team building is a team effort. Input from all team members is important, even in processes typically handled by project team leaders such as hiring. The team that captures the ideas of all team members exploits a vast resource. In a team environment, every team member is valuable as are their ideas.

4.2 Description of the Model

The development outlined above resulted in a project leadership model centered on personal skills, interpersonal skills, group skills (Figure 1), as well as communication skills. These key skills highlight the specific characteristics a project leader must possess to be successful. The co-authors of this study developed this model through analysis of their professional experiences, their own self-assessments, Project Leadership and Teamwork course blogs, and concepts conveyed by Whetten and Cameron's *Developing Management Skills* (Whetten & Cameron, 2010). The base of the model involves personal skills. Self-awareness was confirmed by research as the attribute among personal skills most impactful in making an effective leader. Building one's self-awareness is key to working with and leading others.

A quote by 17th Century English dramatist Philip Massinger sums up self-awareness perfectly: "He that would govern others must first master himself" (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 44). Self-awareness is key because a person in a leadership position unaware of their strengths and weaknesses will be challenged to successfully assess and lead others. A leader must know their own capabilities to guide others in their self-awareness, professional development, and goal achievement. Whetten and Cameron also state, "The knowledge we possess about ourselves, which produces our self-concept, is central to improving our management skills" (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 45).

Bloggers in the Project Leadership and Teamwork course began on the first day of class to specifically address the subject of self-awareness. A review of much of the 10-week course's discussion boards and self-assessments revealed that many bloggers are aware of or learned during self-assessment of their leadership characteristics. Many are currently working in some aspect of leadership and have evaluated their leadership performance. Others are less experienced in leadership but have become aware of their strengths and areas for improvement. A project leader's self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses can profit the project. PMI offers a way to identify risks "from each of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) perspectives to increase the breadth of identified risks" (PMI, 2013, 326).

The second level as one rises in the project leadership model from personal skills to interpersonal skills involves the process of motivating others. Followers often look to a person in a leadership position for motivation and guidance. The leader launches the project and delegates assignments, so they must demonstrate motivation to inspire the team to feel motivated. Lack of motivation by the person assigned as the leader can lead to morale issues, the team dynamic dissolving, and ultimately a project failure. To motivate, the leader must make the vision and expectations clear and understandable. In the Project Leadership and Teamwork course, the Unit 9 discussion board assigned bloggers to describe their perception of empowerment. Empowerment definitions closely reflected tenets of motivation. Project Leadership and Teamwork course blogger Stephen Herbert, a Production Project Manager for a manufacturing and research and development facility, stated, "Empowerment to me is the practice of placing decision making for organizational activity [on] others. Usually this involves a leadership figure setting a clear vision or expectation, and they relinquish control over how to accomplish this vision to one's group" (Herbert, 2016). To motivate, a leader must also trust their team and allow team members to work without being micromanaged.

The third and highest level as one rises in the project leadership model, from interpersonal skills to group skills, focuses on building effective teams and teamwork. This skill lies in the same realm as motivating and empowering. When a project leader is building an effective team, they must recognize every team member's contributions as valuable and every member's opinion as key. No one member's contribution should be invited over another. Arek Skuza in a Forbes article lists five ways to build an effective team. He states that being true to your word, building trust and respect, organizing an employee meeting, taking advantage of conflict, and hiring as a team effort are important to building an effective team (Skuza, 2013).

Hiring may appear superficially as a concern unique to the project team leader, but it actually does concern the entire team and can be improved by including the team. Requesting team input and considering team suggestions facilitates communication and reassures team members that their opinions are important. Conflict may appear initially as a hindrance to team effectiveness but can be exploited through brainstorming to result in a more open environment.

5. Interpersonal Project Leadership Model: Analysis and Application

5.1 Analysis of the Model

“Students of human behavior have long known that knowledge of oneself – self-awareness, self-insight, self-understanding – is essential to one’s productive personal and interpersonal functioning, and in understanding and empathizing with other people” (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 57). Every great leader exhibits the trait of self-awareness to be successful as not only a leader but a manager as well. The figure in Appendix C shows that self-awareness appears as the pinnacle within the hierarchy of personal life-management skills. Before an individual can master the art of being completely self-aware, they must be willing to accept additional information about themselves that was once unknown to the individual. This ideal is difficult for some people to grasp and practice because some view the new insight as negative information that will lead to feelings of weakness and shame (Whetten & Cameron, 2010).

In analyzing for future needs the first level of the project leadership model, personal skills, self-awareness can be viewed as critical for the success of both the team member and team leader. The project team leader who leads through self-awareness will demonstrate to the project team that the leader is able to execute, remain aware, and then correct their execution path to become more effective. “The enigma of self-awareness can be managed, then, by exercising some control over when and what kind of information you receive about yourself, and by involving others in your pursuit of self-understanding” (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 60). As Whetten and Cameron have suggested, the team member assigned as the team leader can make a personal choice to remain unaware. However, accepting information from others which is inconsistent with one’s own self-perception can improve self-awareness.

The second level in the project leadership model, interpersonal skills, includes the process of motivating others. Motivation can be difficult to achieve in many circumstances due to a tedious project work environment. An individual team member’s performance cannot always be attributed solely to personal short comings. However, this is sometimes (e.g., in large corporations) perceived as the root cause. “Performance is the product of ability multiplied by motivation, ability is the product of aptitude multiplied by training and resources, and motivation is the product of desire and commitment” (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 327). One of the co-authors of this study has observed this concept in their professional experience as a project manager with a large corporation in the defense industry. This co-author received a high degree of scrutiny due to negative performance reviews from a manager lacking interest in team member development. This team member and the entire team would have improved performance had senior management facilitated motivation through better working conditions, sufficient resources, and attention to team member development.

The third level in the project leadership model, group skills, builds effective teams and teamwork. At the root of all effective teams are definitive communication standards and practices. Strong communication within a team builds solid relationships with team members, which assists with problem solving, brainstorming, and routine tasks. “That is, positive relationships help people feel safe and secure, so individuals are more able to concentrate on the tasks at hand” (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 238). Effective teamwork can also be used as a delivery method for empowerment among other team members and coworkers, which can lead to effective tasking to complete project responsibilities.

5.2 Application of the Model

Applying self-awareness is just as critical as becoming self-aware in a leadership situation, at work or elsewhere. The leader must be open to receive new information, understand it, and then apply it to current practices and principles of awareness. “Research on the concept of emotional intelligence – the ability to manage oneself and to manage relationships with others – has been identified as among the most important factors in accounting for success in leaders and managers” (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 61). If a leader or manager has the emotional intelligence to receive new information and then use it for self-awareness, they often will be able to demonstrate a strong self-awareness example to the entire team. As depicted in the figure in Appendix D, the five core values of self-awareness translate to managerial effectiveness. This relationship illustrates the importance of self-awareness in leadership and management.

To motivate others, the effective project team leader remains respectful and helpful while providing sufficient resources. If the leader is unable to motivate their team members, the working relationship can produce negative implications including poor performance, poor communication, and a hostile work environment. “Once a manager has ascertained that lack of ability is the primary cause of someone’s poor performance, a performance review interview should be scheduled to explore these options, beginning with resupplying and retraining” (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 328). Depending on the project tasking, the motivation effort can take many forms. It must be tailored to a form aligned with the team’s needs and interests.

Building effective teams can seem difficult at first, but an insightful framework can encourage the team to assist in developing trusting interpersonal relationships. Within an effective team, thorough communication is key to ensuring team success through not only tasking but also relationships. “Arguably the most important skill in building and strengthening positive relationships is the ability to communicate with people in a way that enhances feelings of trust, openness, and support” (Whetten & Cameron, 2010, 239). One of the co-authors of this study has witnessed in their career as a project manager that highly successful teams exhibit strong relationships, effective communication, and complete transparency with upper management and

the customer. Effective team building and execution depend on the team's personality because the requisite form and degree of communication may vary from one team to another. For example, continuous email exchanges with the leader may work well for some teams but not for others. The most effective teams are able to quickly resolve many issues with little supervision.

The Project Management Institute (PMI) implicitly sees the importance of self-awareness and explicitly recognizes motivation and team building. PMI explains, "Project managers have the responsibility to satisfy the needs; task needs, team needs, and individual needs. As project management is a critical strategic discipline, the project manager becomes the link between the strategy and the team." PMI adds that, besides "general management proficiencies required for the project, effective project management requires that the project manager possess the following competencies:" knowledge, performance, and personal. "Effective project managers require a balance of technical, interpersonal, and conceptual skills . . . :

- Leadership,
- Team building,
- Motivation,
- Communication,
- Influencing,
- Decision making,
- Political and cultural awareness,
- Negotiation,
- Trust building,
- Conflict management, and
- Coaching" (PMI, 2013, 17-18).

"Dulewicz and Higgs (2003) identify 15 leadership competencies (grouped into intellectual, managerial and emotional)." Self-awareness and motivation appear in the emotional category (Turner, 2007, 751-752). One of the co-authors of this study employed during his Coast Guard career similar leadership competencies, "the knowledge, skills, and expertise the Coast Guard expects of its leaders," organized into four hierarchical categories: (1) Leading Self; (2) Leading Others; (3) Leading Performance and Change; and (4) Leading the Coast Guard (U.S. Coast Guard, n.d., 1). Transcultural leadership competencies are "high personal integrity and strong character, emanating a perception of fairness at all times. Technical competence and an enterprising attitude are necessary to instill confidence. . . . The leader should empathize with personnel from various backgrounds, and be seen as enthusiastic and highly motivated" (Sohmen, 2014, 215).

6. Lessons Learned

This study has produced several important lessons learned. Self-awareness is foundational to effective leadership, as a person must know their capabilities in order to lead others. Building one's self-awareness is key in being able to work directly with, and lead, others.

The ability to motivate others is essential. The leader launches the project and delegates assignments, so an apparent lack of motivation on the leader's part can cause the team to become unmotivated. This shortcoming can lead to morale issues, ineffective team dynamics, and project failure.

At the root of all effective teams are strong communication standards and practices. Strong communication within a team will build solid relationships with all of the members of the team, which will assist with problem solving, brain storming, and routine tasks.

There is an innate hierarchy in achieving these skills (Figure 1). A project leader must first possess excellent personal skills, including self-awareness. Then, the leader may learn the interpersonal skills necessary to motivate others. Finally, the leader may learn and exercise the group skills needed to establish effective group communication standards and practices for team building. These skills cannot be learned effectively or practiced effectively in any other order.

7. Conclusions

Personal skills such as self-awareness, managing stress, and problem solving are the foundation of effective project leadership. These are skills that the individual must cultivate and build to continue developing as a leader. For future practices, being self-aware will be critical for the success of both the team member and the team leader. If the team leader performs their leadership while being self-aware, they will demonstrate to the project team that they are able to execute, remain aware, and then correct their execution path so it may become more effective.

Interpersonal skills such as supportive communication, gaining power and influence, motivating others, and managing conflict are the next set of competencies to be built in the hierarchy of effective project leadership. The motivational leader will be adept at building relationships and supporting their team. To find the root cause of poor performance and improve it for a team member or the entire team, the leader should broaden their scope of inspection to either improve working conditions or provide motivational tasking and resources.

Group skills such as empowering and engaging others, building effective teams, and leading positive change are the highest set of hierarchical skills that the effective project leader must master. Strong communication within a team will build solid relationships with all of team

members to assist with problem solving, brainstorming, and routine tasks. Effective teamwork can also be used as a delivery method for empowerment among team members and other coworkers, which can lead to effective tasking to complete project responsibilities.

The co-authors of the *An Interpersonal Project Leadership Model* study recommend future application of the model toward project success through effective leadership. They recommend project leaders develop emotional intelligence to accept new information and use it for self-awareness to show strong awareness to the entire team. They also recommend project leaders employ effective motivation to build strong team performance, efficient communication, and a productive work environment. They further recommend that project leaders overcome the initial challenges of building effective teams through a framework for interpersonal relationships leading to issue resolution with little supervision. Finally, they recommend definitive communication to ensure team success in tasking as well as in strengthening relationships.

Acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge the supervisory and editorial guidance by Dr. Victor Sohmen (Project Management Program, Drexel University) in developing this paper.

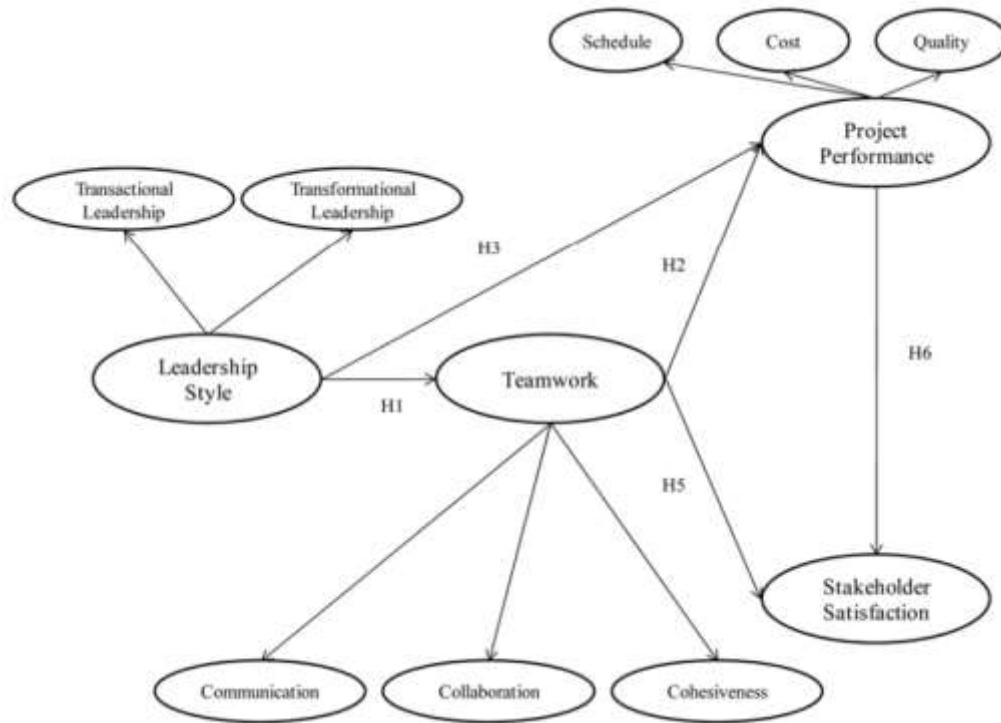
References

- Afsar, B., Badir, Y. F., & Saeed, B. B. (2014). Transformational leadership and innovative work behavior. *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, 114(8), 1270-1300. doi:10.1108/imds-05-2014-0152
- Herbert, S. (2016, November 22). Discussion board, forum: Unit 9: Content discussion, thread: Unit 9. Message posted to <https://login.drexel.edu>
- Kirkbride, P. (2006). Developing transformational leaders: The full range leadership model in action. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 38(1), 23-32. doi:10.1108/00197850610646016
- Project Management Institute (PMI). (2013). *A guide to the project management body of knowledge* (5th ed.). Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.
- Skuza, A. (2013). *Five ways to build an effective team*. Forbes. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2013/06/07/five-ways-to-build-an-effective-team/#7af350812dde>
- Sohmen, V. S. (2014). *Transcultural project leadership: A model for international project success*. Saarbrücken, Germany: Scholars' Press.
- Toor, S., & Arain, F. (2012). The quadrilateral model of leadership: Findings from a study on a mega project. *International Journal of Construction Project Management*, 4(2), 125-146.
- Turner, J. R. (Ed.). (2007). *Gower handbook of project management* (4th ed.). Aldershot, England: Gower.

- U.S. Coast Guard. (n.d.). *Coast Guard leadership competencies*. Retrieved from <https://www.uscg.mil/leadership/docs/pdf/competencies1.pdf>
- Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2010). *Developing management skills* (9th ed.). New York, NY: Prentice-Hall.
- Yang, L., Wu, K., & Huang, C. (2013). Validation of a model measuring the effect of a project manager's leadership style on project performance. *KSCE Journal of Civil Engineering*, 17(2), 271-280. doi:10.1007/s12205-013-1489-0

Appendix A

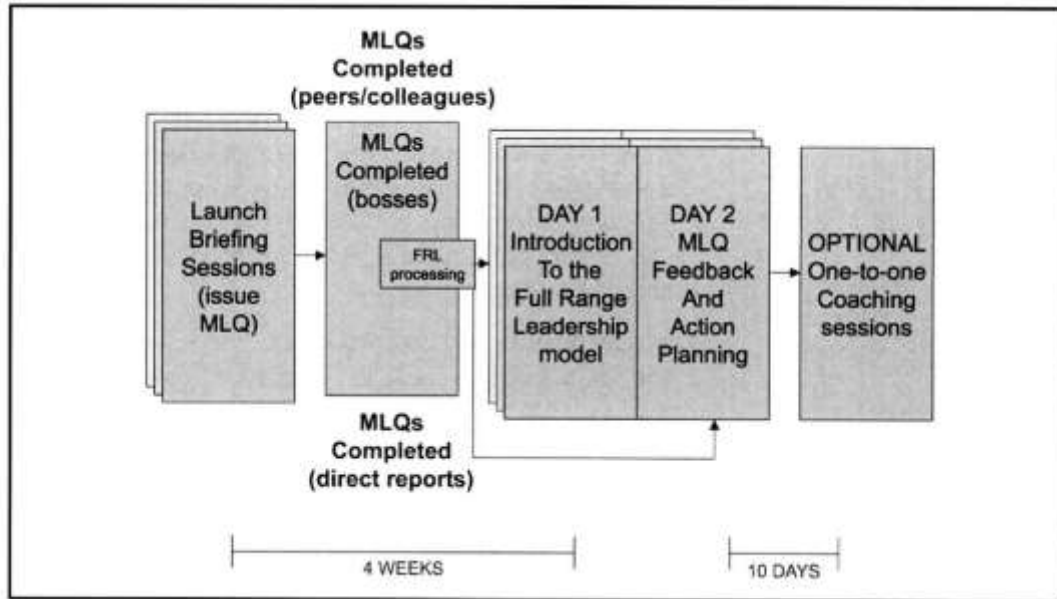
Project Leadership Model in the Construction Industry



(Adopted from Yang et al., 2013.)

Appendix B

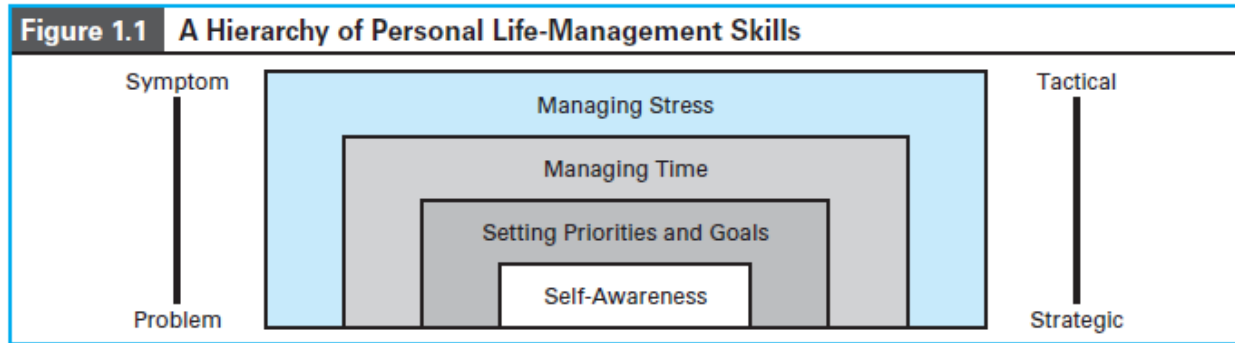
Transformational Leadership in the Full Range Leadership Model



(Adopted from Kirkbride, 2006)

Appendix C

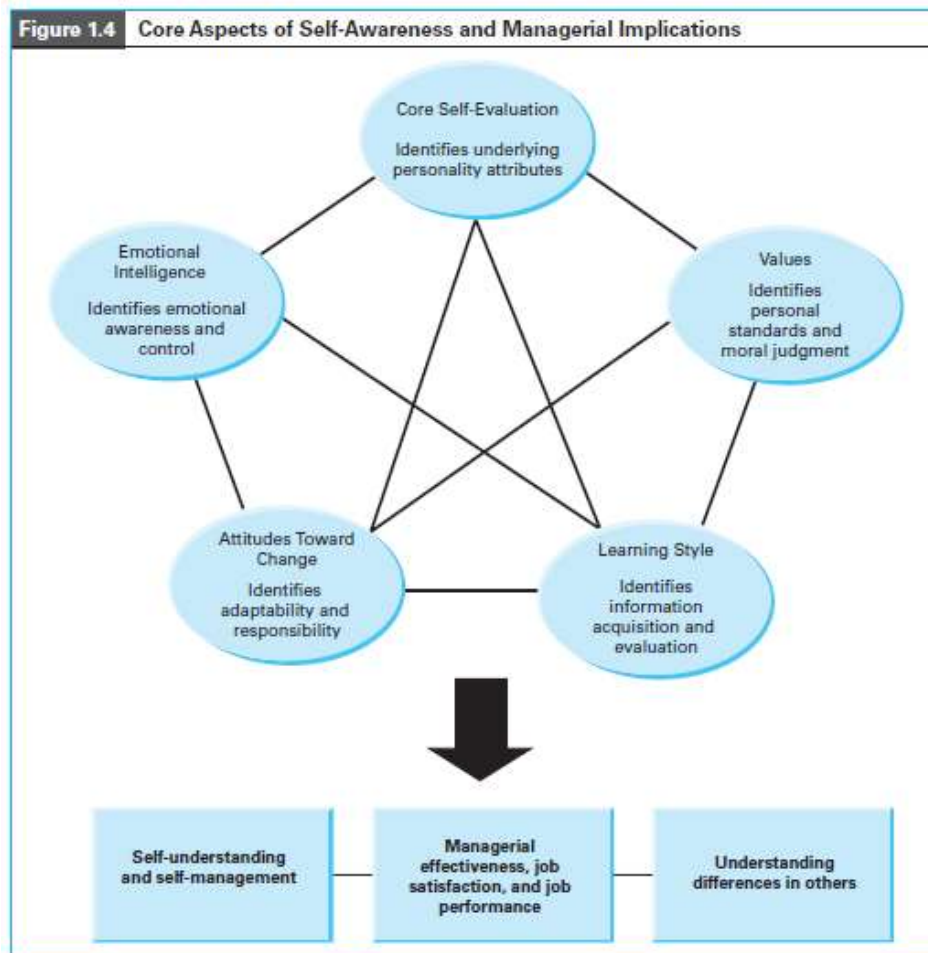
A Hierarchy of Personal Life-Management Skills



(Adopted from Whetten & Cameron, 2010)

Appendix D

Core Aspects of Self-Awareness and Managerial Implications



(Adopted from Whetten & Cameron, 2010)

Copyright of Journal of Information Technology & Economic Development is the property of Global Strategic Management, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.