

The Key Competencies of Project Leader Beyond the Essential Technical Capabilities

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The project leader is the architect of the project success. Project leadership competencies largely influence the project success. Research has shown that the project leader is one of the most important success factors of the projects. This paper aims to study and capture the project leader's competencies beyond the essential technical capabilities in modern times through Thematic Analysis Method of qualitative research approach. To highlight the need for a new breed of project leaders, this paper discusses what could be the key competencies of project leadership beyond the essential technical capabilities. The study would assist corporate/firms to identify the key competencies of the project leader, so that corporate/firms can focus on identified competencies for new appointment/assignment of project leader or development of the existing project staff.

Introduction

In the age of globalization and dynamic projects environment, to select the appropriate project leader is a big challenge for any corporate/firms. Research has shown that the project leader is one of the most important success factors of projects. A project leader has an impact on the overall quality, timeline, cost and success of the project, and the quality of the individual project leader may affect the project cost by as much as 10% (Herbert *et al.*, 1970).

In modern times, project leaders are not only responsible for managing the day-to-day technical, engineering and standard works or achieving short-term goals of the project such as conforming to the basic triangle of time, budget and acceptable quality, but also have for aligning with the rapid change in the business environment, so as to achieve long-term project objectives and Return on Investment (ROI). They also need to manage change, scarcity of competent resources, deal with various behavioral issues with internal and external stakeholders and build high relationship (Toor and Ofori, 2008; and Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011).

Managing projects in the modern times requires a different kind of skill set, knowledge and behavioral attributes. Accordingly, the focus of this paper is on the competencies of

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project leadership and how these leadership competencies may fit the needs of a successful project. In the modern times, project leader needs to have and apply different leadership behaviors, competencies and styles. The project leader should possess not only essential technical knowledge but also should have positive values, highest levels of ethics, morality, lead from the heart, personal capabilities, out-of-the-box thinking, interpersonal skills, etc. (Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011).

With the increased emphasis on modern-time project management systems, firms are now seeking professionals with better management and leadership skills rather than essential technical skills (Dulaimi, 2005).

In the context of project manager's specific behavioral competencies, the aim of this paper is to identify the need for a new project leader's competencies and style to suit the modern project environments. To capture the behavioral attributes, qualitative research methodology is considered to be better and covers each attribute in detail. In the modern environment, especially in India which has vastly diversified culture, dynamic process and fast growing project sectors, it is necessary to discuss the key competencies required for a successful project leader in modern times beyond the essential technical knowledge.

Literature Review

Lloyd-Walker and Walker (2011) discussed different types of authentic leadership styles in the 21st century. The paper focused on the characteristics of authentic leadership and how this leadership style would fit the needs of successful project leaders in the 21st century. Authenticity in leadership is described by George (2003) as being true to yourself; of being the person that you are, rather than developing an image or persona of a leader. As per Toor and Ofori (2008), managing projects in the 21st century requires a different approach and therefore different attributes, knowledge and skills of project managers; a new leadership style will be required. Muller and Turner (2007) discussed the interaction of the project manager's leadership style with project type, and their combined impact on project success. Different leadership styles are more likely to lead to a successful outcome on different types of projects. A recently developed integrated model of intellectual, emotional and managerial competence (IQ, EQ, and MQ, respectively) is used to identify project manager's leadership styles.

According to Toor (2006), with increased emphasis on project management systems, construction firms are now seeking professionals with better management and leadership skills rather than technical skills. However, educational institutions and construction firms continue to produce managers who lack leadership skills. This is due to traditional academic curricula which do not cover the development of individuals as leaders, the conventional transactional mentality and task-orientation of industry professionals. Moreover, the industry has focused on management, to the exclusion of leadership. That is probably the reason why construction project managers are not perceived as leaders and are mostly termed as managers (Russell and Stouffer, 2003).

As per Toor and Ofori (2008), the earlier perception of project leaders is largely built around power, authority, and task-orientation. This is due to the traditional focus on technical and managerial features of construction projects. However, greater challenges of modern times and increasingly different business environments necessitate a renewed vision for leadership research and call for a change in traditional perception and mindset about leadership in the construction industry. Globalization and fast changing nature of construction projects have necessitated a need for project managers to have and apply different leadership behaviors, competencies and styles. To highlight the need for a new breed of construction project leaders, the study discussed the recent construct of “authentic leadership” in the context of construction projects. Authentic project leaders possess positive values, lead from the heart, set highest levels of ethics and morality, and go beyond their personal interests for the wellbeing of their followers. They capitalize on the environment of trust and are able to motivate people and accomplish challenging tasks.

According to the authentic leadership (e.g., Gardner *et al.*, 2005; Ilies *et al.*, 2005; and Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008), authentic leaders display four types of behaviors. These include balanced processing, internalized moral perspective, relational transparency, and self-awareness. Balanced processing involves objectively analyzing all relevant information before making a decision. Leaders who are perceived to exhibit balanced processing solicit views from others that challenge their existing positions. Internalized moral perspective refers to leader behaviors that are guided by internal moral standards and values, rather than being based on external pressure such as peers, organizational, and societal pressures (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). Relational transparency involves making personal disclosures, such as openly sharing information and expressing true thoughts and feelings. Finally, self-awareness refers to the extent leaders understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and motives, as well as recognizing how others view their leadership. Thus, self-awareness includes both internal and external referents. Internal referents refer to leaders’ self-knowledge of their mental states, including their beliefs, desires and feelings, whereas external referents refer to leaders’ “reflected self-image” (how others perceive the leader). Leaders with high self-awareness behavior are seen to use both self-knowledge and reflected self-image to enhance their effectiveness as a leader.

Traditionally, project management is understood as using the right tools and techniques for being successful, regardless of a project manager’s match of type as explained in PMI- USA (2004). Muller and Turner (2010) focused on leadership competency profiles of successful project managers. Profiling personality with project provides the idiosyncratic combination of behavioral, temperamental, emotional and mental attributes of a leader, in order to derive a person’s particular leadership style. Profiles are often used to relate the profile dimensions to success or failure in a person’s leadership position, or alternatively select or develop managers from the match between existing profiles of successful managers and those of candidates for appointment to management.

The above-mentioned literature mainly discussed project leadership style, authentic leadership, authentic leadership style in 21st century, different kinds of project management profiles and their impact on project success. It had not covered specific attributes or competencies of a successful project manager. The above-said studies were conducted through quantitative research methodology by focusing on leadership style and project performance rather than specific behavioral competencies. Therefore, this paper intends to fill this gap by focusing on key competencies required for a project leader beyond the essential technical knowledge to develop a new breed of project managers for the modern times.

Data and Methodology

A sample of four experienced senior level managers working/worked in the corporate sector, having minimum 15 years of experience, and who are fairly aware of project leadership style was considered for the study. It was felt that considering the qualitative research method, the sample size would be adequate for the subject and its current scope of study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The participants' true opinions, thoughts and insights were collected.

To understand the project leadership style across the various sectors of business, the interviews were conducted in the following areas: engineering projects, banking and finance, research advisory, and information technology.

The data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis Method of Braun and Clark (2006), and the following steps were included in the study.

- Conducting interviews;
- Transcribing the data into text;
- Generating initial coding by searching for relevant theme;
- Reviewing the theme;
- Defining and naming the theme; and
- Report writing.

Results and Discussion

Based on the audio recorded interviews, the recording was transcribed into data (see Table 1) and initial coding was generated. The code frequency was also identified to understand the most important characteristics. After the review of common code and frequency of code, some codes were combined and generalized in the same group. The final code is presented in Table 2.

Based on Zenger and Folkman's (2002) 16 differentiating competencies, the codes were grouped into three themes: (i) Personal Capabilities; (ii) Interpersonal Skills; and (iii) Leading Change (see Table 3). The competence framework of these themes is explained in Figures 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Table 1: Views of the Participants				
S. No.	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
1.	Basic necessity of technical skill	Needless to say technical knowledge	First priority given to internal person	First preference to internal hire
2.	More than technical skills, nature and personality	Design understanding	Internal person knows the how of organization	Feedback on their past performance/ projects
3.	Motivation of person more important	Ability to take decision on the spot	Commitment	Special soft skill set like language/ culture
4.	Positive	Take right decision	Loyalty	Avoid conflict
5.	Enjoy the interaction with people	Good trouble shooter	Can work with peer/ colleague	Unique thinking in their past projects
6.	Belief in self	Detail orientation	Dedication	Capabilities to handle difficult situation
7.	Learning new things (it is very difficult to teach behavioral part)	Building strategy	Carry the company's brand image/value	Manage/drive the show
8.	Burning desire for job completion	Detail planning	Age/experience	Coordination
9.	Understanding of all requirement	Doing differently— New way	Pay part is not important or considerable	Domain knowledge
10.	Work with team (teamwork)	Look at change of process/improve process	Integration	If external, 50:50 balance on technical/ behavioral
11.	Trust in each other	Today's technical leader must need behavioral skills	Cool-headed	Leverage or flexibility in nature
12.	Cheerful	Technical skills given/ granted or considered	Facilitator of all the processes	If internal more focus on behavioral part
13.	Optimistic	Agile	Manage complexity	Adoptive
14.	Willing to look at new way/new thing	Thinks on feet	Who keeps things moving	
15.	Doing thing differently	Result-oriented	Communication	
16.	Think out-of-the-box	Time focus	Pleasing personality	

Table 1 (Cont.)

S. No.	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
17.	Risk failure	Can be able to see big picture	Charming personality	
18.	Essential technical/subject expertise	Building relationship	Other people should feel comfortable at work	
19.	Learn on the job	Ability to resolve conflict	Act as mentor	
20.	Effectiveness	Able to understand all	Allow/accept criticism	
21.	Able to see big picture	Coordination	Appreciate the good thing	
22.	Innovation	Communication	Positivist	
23.	Coordination/collaboration/cross-functional	Understanding of financial calculation	More weight to behaviors	
24.	Easier to teach or guide	Customer-orientation		
25.	Basic technical skills	Dedication		
26.	More focus/important on behavioral part	More weight to behaviors		

Table 2: Code Generation from Data

Coding	Code Frequency
Essential (basic) technical skill	4
Doing thing differently/new way/unique way	3
Team player	3
Communication	4
Coordination	4
Motivation	3
Cheerful (pleasing personality)	2
Optimistic	1
Innovative	2
Learning (adoptive)	3
More focus on behavioral part	4
Can be able to see picture in a holistic manner/big picture	3

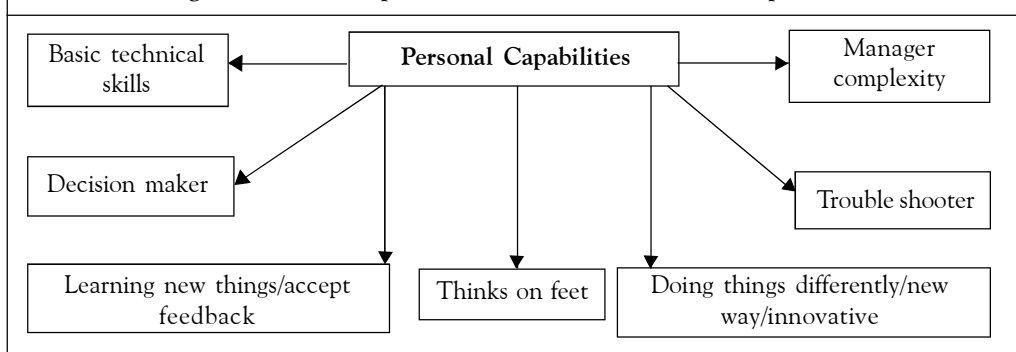
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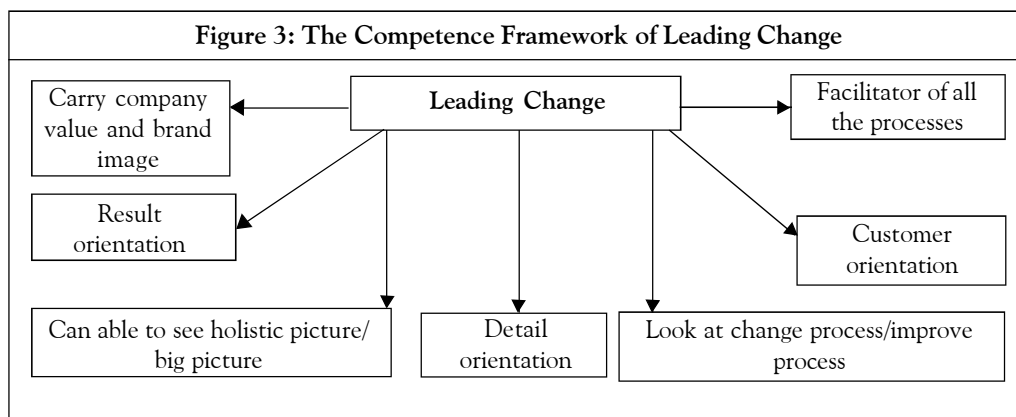
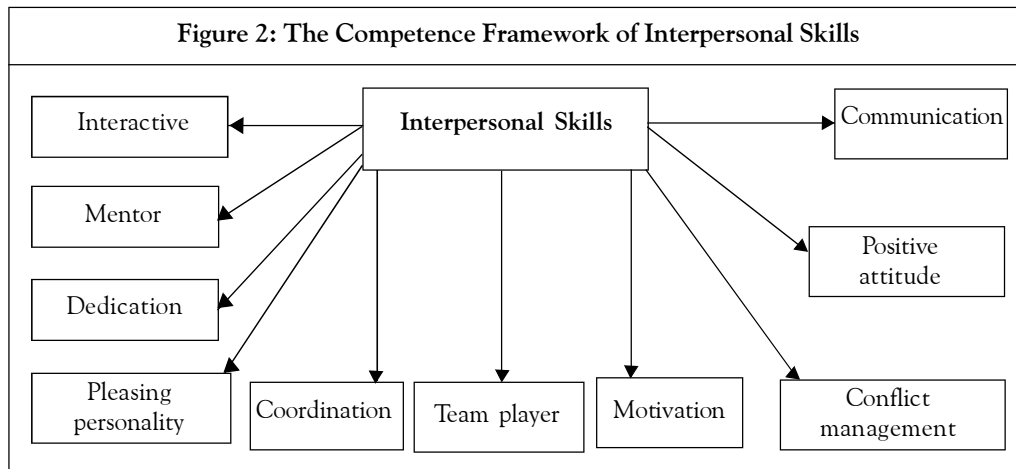
Coding	Code Frequency
Design understanding	1
Decision maker	1
Detail orientation	1
Agile	3
Result orientation	1
Time focus	1
Conflict management	4
Dedication	3
Trouble shooter	1
Interactive	3
Commitment	1
Loyalty	1
Positive attitude/positivist	2

Table 3: Themes Based on Zenger and Folkman (2002)

Personal Capabilities	Interpersonal Skills	Leading Change
Technical/professional expertise	Communicates powerfully and prolifically	Develops strategic perspective
Solves problems and analyzes issues	Inspires and motivates others to high performance	Champions change
Innovates	Builds relationships	Connects the group to the outside world
Practices self-development	Develops others Collaboration and teamwork	

Figure 1: The Competence Framework of Personal Capabilities





Conclusion

During the interviews, it was observed that all the participants focused more on behavioral competencies rather than technical capabilities. The findings reveal that in modern times, the technical capabilities are not just essential skills but are also considered as prerequisites for a project leader. Since the project leader has to deal with various constraints related to human and behavioral (soft) issues, the behavioral competencies are very much essential and important for a project's success. The participants also highlighted that as the project leader is the bridge and facilitator between ground worker, staff, stakeholders, management and project sponsors, a good command over behavioral competencies is highly desired and recommended. This study, therefore, has identified some of the key behavioral competencies—personal capabilities, interpersonal skills and leading change—for a project's success.

These findings can be applied and generalized to any type of industry and in any part of the globe due to the following factors:

- The participants were selected from multinational companies and also possess working experience with diversified culture and countries.

- The findings can be applied across industries since the participants were selected from various industries like IT, banking and finance, retail chain and research advisory.

Implications: There are very few studies covering the behavioral issues through qualitative research method. Therefore, this study could be a good addition to the world of literature. The study would also assist corporate/organizations to identify the key competencies of a project leader so that the organization focuses on identified competencies for any new appointment/assignment of a project leader or development of their existing project staff.

Limitations: The study focused only on key competencies of a project leader. Further, there is a great scope to explore each sub-component of the group and identified themes in greater detail. Also, there is a need to explore their individual impact on the project results and the performance rate.

Future scope: Researchers can adopt focus groups or in-depth interviews, followed by structured questionnaires to capture the specific dimension of each sub-component of the theme in greater detail. Further, the researcher can adopt mix research methodology (quantitative and qualitative) to explore each component and their individual impact on the project success with higher validity and reliability and may arrive at new observations and findings. ■

Acknowledgment: The author thanks Prof. Lakshmi Devasena and Prof. Abhilash Ponnampal of IBS Hyderabad, for their constant guidance and valuable inputs, and Mahesh M, Riaz Sheikh, Esan Ahluwalia and Santosh Pradhan for their inputs.

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Reference # 29J-2014-10-03-01

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