Patterns of Social Intelligence and Leadership Style for Effective Virtual Project Management

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship of social intelligence and leadership style for effective project management in projects with varying degrees of virtuality. In the present study, the author determines what leadership style is preferred in virtual projects and analyzes the differential effects of varying degrees of virtuality on social intelligence and leadership style. The author tests hypotheses with data collected from virtual project management professionals working on information technology projects in five countries. Results show that social awareness and relationship management are positively related to concern for task and concern for people and are found to be higher in more virtual than less virtual project team members. The findings have significant implications for leadership skills and behaviors as well as the role of social intelligence for effective virtual project management. The article adds to the understanding of effective management of virtual projects, suggesting new options to consider for project management and HR professionals.

Keywords: Effective Project Management, Leadership Style, Social Intelligence, Virtual Projects, Virtual Teams

INTRODUCTION

With the rise in the virtual project teams it is important to understand what factors lead to high performance in the virtual work place. Virtual teams are becoming particularly dominant for information technology (IT) projects as multinational organizations outsource or develop software across many nations and diverse project teams. Nauman and Iqbal (2005) state several contributing success factors of virtual project management (VPM), namely, communication, motivation, information security, and trust building reinforce each other, thus leading to effective VPM. If not handled properly, these factors can become barriers to effective VPM. Malhotra et al. (2007) suggest that virtual leaders should play their role to overcome these barriers associated with the virtual work setting. In a virtual work environment leaders can’t maintain physical observations, so there is likely a need that virtual team leaders must acquire new skills (Chutnik & Grzesik, 2009). This leads us to propose that virtual project
leaders should have high Social Intelligence (SI) competencies to cope with the challenges of VPM.

The findings of Nauman et al. (2006) suggest that project managers demonstrate strong SI competencies (social awareness and relationship management) in a VPM environment when compared to other competencies. This provides us the rationale to further analyze SI in projects with varying degrees of virtuality. Further, Nauman et al. (2006) suggest that there is an overlapping relationship between the factors contributing to effective virtual project management and the competencies of Social Intelligence. Social Intelligence competencies help raise motivation, reduce cultural barriers, resolve conflicts, build teamwork and collaboration, and enhance communication among virtual project team members. Duarte and Snyder (2006) draw attention to some of the competencies that virtual project leaders should develop for managing teams effectively, namely managing across cultures, aiding in team members’ career development, building and maintaining trust, and networking. These competencies fall within the SI domain, thus demonstrating the role of social intelligence in effective VPM.

Our research extends the work of Nauman et al. (2006) by suggesting that SI contributes towards effective leadership behaviors (concern for both task and people), thus leading to effective virtual project management both in more and less virtual projects. Moreover, we further the work of Kayworth and Leidner (2001) who state that both relationship and task oriented behavior are important for online team leaders. We propose that more virtual projects demand high social intelligence and high concern for both task and people as compared to less virtual projects. Here we take social intelligence as an independent variable and leadership style (concern for both task and people) as a dependent variable.

We first introduce virtual project teams with varying degrees of virtuality and then discuss the importance of social intelligence for virtual project management and leaders as suggested in the literature. Following that we review existing theory on leadership in collocated and virtual environments and discuss why we opt for the managerial grid to examine the leadership styles in a project environment. After proposing related hypotheses, we study the relationship between Social Intelligence (SI) and Leadership Style in a project environment, and further, compare these aspects in projects with varying degree of virtuality. The paper concludes with a discussion of the general contribution of this research to the project management literature.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Virtual Project Teams

With the transition of organizations from traditional to virtual teams in the project environment, teams are rarely either purely collocated or purely virtual. Most of the teams in today’s organizations fall into a hybrid category (Griffith et al., 2003). Researchers have proposed a level of virtuality in the description of virtual teams (Griffith et al., 2003; Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005). Griffith et al. (2003) proposed three dimensions of “virtualness”: (1) the level of technological support used by the team, (2) the percentage of work that the team does with its members distributed across time and space, and (3) the distribution of the physical locations occupied by the team members. Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) have proceeded even further in arguing that geographic dispersion is not a prerequisite for team virtuality, but is likely to lead teams to adopt more virtual means of coordination. They have argued that even collocated members can communicate and coordinate in a highly virtual manner. Following this discussion, we asked respondents about the level of virtuality in the project context with two traditional dimensions, geographical dispersion and use of virtual tools. After asking questions on these two dimensions, they were further asked to specifically categorize their projects as less virtual or more virtual.

For this research, we take less virtual projects as the projects where project team members
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