Leadership Competencies for Sustained Project Success

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ABSTRACT

Success of organizational projects depends on leaders who are capable of determining not only the critical factors that lead to project success, but also applying leadership practices to sustain successful project practices. This study explores research on project success across multiple domains with the intent to identify a set of leadership competencies that lead to successful project initiatives. The results of the study identify a host of leadership skills that align to four leadership styles: equitable, servant, collaborative, and transformative. A leadership framework is proposed to associate the competencies to the styles.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative Leadership, Critical Success Competencies, Equitable Leadership, Leadership Theory, Project Success, Servant Leadership, Transformative Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Organizations must constantly evolve in the marketplace in order to remain competitive. This evolution is driven by changes introduced through projects that support the strategic organizational objectives (Cleveland, 2019). This study leverages the PMBOK Guide to define a project as “a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service” (PMBOK, 2013, p. 3). While the successful completion of such projects is critical for the growth of the parent organization, over 70% either get in serious trouble or fail before completion, thus costing organizations nearly US$30 trillion in financial losses (PWC, n.d.; Standish Report, 2015).

Extant literature suggests that one of the most critical issues contributing to the cause of project failures is the inability of executives to support organizational changes due to poor leadership competencies (Gartzia, Patzelt, Wolfe, & Shepherd, 2018; Nixon, Harrington, & Parker, 2012). Moreover, each project typically involves a different set of stakeholders with varying expectations that often introduce conflicting or costly changes to the original scope of the project (Davis, 2014). Project success is further impacted by numerous critical internal and external environmental factors (e.g., organizational structure, organizational culture, political environment, governmental regulations, etc.) (Belout & Gauvreau, 2004). As a result, project leaders need a varying set of leadership competencies to navigate such complexities in order to reach successful project completion.

The problem is that project leaders might lack specific sets of leadership skills to navigate the complexities noted above in order to reach successful project completion. As a result, the purpose of this study is to explore applicable leadership competencies that emerge from the literature on sustained

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project success, regardless of the context in which a project is being undertaken, the nature of the project itself, organization type, or size of the organization. The study proposes a framework that aligns these competencies to applicable leadership styles intended to ensure sustained project success.

The research question for this study is the following: What leadership competencies emerge from the literature on success of projects in organizations? The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review is conducted to identify a set of leadership competencies that emerge as associated with project success in organizations. Next, these competencies are aligned against a set of leadership styles and this alignment is assembled in a leadership competency framework. The paper concludes with a summary and recommendations for future research.

EQUITABLE LEADERSHIP

Equitable leadership style has a strong presence in the academic arena. A key ingredient in the development of an equitable leadership competency is building awareness of the impact of social justice on the success of educational project initiatives. In this paper, equitable leadership uses the definition proposed by Buettner, Schmidt, and Lobo (2012) who argued that equitable leaders are the one who fully participate in the same community alongside their followers and partake in the “balancing and burdens by all citizens, resulting in equitable living and a just ordering of society” (p. 948).

Bettez (2011) examined community building and the challenges faced when creating critical communities in today’s diverse educational landscape. In addition to feeling isolated from family and friends who were not in a graduate program, the very nature of graduate school could be intellectually challenging and emotionally taxing to a student. Therefore, building critical communities creates safe environments where students know that other members of that community are working through similar issues academically, if not personally. Academic leaders who are aware of this student’s challenges and facilitate the development of such communities will achieve sustained success in their educational initiatives.

Critical Communities

Critical communities that benefit the most from their members are formed by voluntary participants. Bettez (2011) argued that critical communities represent a blend of “multiple socially constructed realities, historical contexts, and lived experiences that are continually impacted by issues of power that are played out through complex interplays of structure and agency” (p. 81). Bell (2007) noted that social justice is not only a process but also a component of education that must begin with our lived experiences. In using theory to guide the development of equitable leadership competencies, the ideal leader would eliminate institutionalized oppression by providing the tools needed to empower “groups of people who share targeted status” (Bell, 2007, p. 13).

Critical communities are grounded on a foundation of equitable leadership, a practice “centered on a countering systemic and structural barrier that maintain disparities” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017, p.1). This type of leadership characterized as “transformative, antiracist, critical, self-reflective, focused on the sociopolitical, and rooted in practice and notions of constructionist leadership” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017, p. 26).

Eacott (2016) introduced social justice as a measure of sustained success in the context of higher education programs. The researcher argued that competition within the marketplace relies on social justice. The researcher proposed that equitable leadership in higher education should question the status quo in order to produce alternative solutions for social justice. Lumby and Coleman (2007) studied the education sector and argued that a double obligation exists for schools, colleges, and universities reflecting their cultural and social centrality. If the social justice process is to be promoted within the education system, equitable leaders in those institutions must support the process.
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