Leading Techies: Assessing Project Leadership Styles Most Significantly Related to Software Developer Job Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

The leadership behavior of the immediate supervisor is found to contribute to subordinate job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The purpose of this study is to assess leadership styles that are significantly correlated with software developer job satisfaction. The participants were software developers from 24 organizations in higher education, consulting, defense contracting, and local government. Correlations were assessed through multiple linear regressions. The results indicate a significant predicting relationship between project manager leadership styles and software developer job satisfaction. Contingent-reward, active management-by-exception, and laissez-faire leadership styles are found to be significantly related to overall job satisfaction when controlling the effects of the other independent variables. Implications of these findings are discussed along with recommendations for IT professionals and researchers.

Keywords: Contingent Reward, Job Satisfaction, Laissez-Faire Leadership, Linear Regression, Management by Exception, Project Management, Transformational Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Despite their strategic importance to organizations, a large percentage of information systems (IS) implementations still fail to deliver benefits or solve the problems for which they are intended. The latest Chaos Report from the Standish Group (2009) indicated that only 32% of software development projects were delivered on time, within budget, and with the required features and functions. Forty-four percent of projects were late, over budget, and/or delivered with less than the required features and functions. Twenty-four percent were outright failures. Projects plagued with budget and schedule overruns have cost billions of dollars to corporations and governments (Gorla & Lam, 2004).

The abandonment of IS projects has been costly. Oz and Sosik (2000) reported that the resulting financial damage in the United States alone was about $100 billion annually. The authors found three major factors affecting IS project failures: (a) the lack of corporate leadership, (b) inadequate skills and means, and (c) poor project management. Shore (2005) argued while leadership may be singled out as an individual contributor to failure, it transcends all organizational factors. Leadership affects
corporate culture, IS culture, IS strategy, and IS staff commitment. It affects business process reengineering, systems design and development, software selection, implementation, and maintenance. Without appropriate leadership, the risk of project failure increases (p. 1).

Failed IS projects often are the result of management and organizational issues (Liebowitz, 1999). Scholars have suggested that the human side of software development is more critical for successful project outcomes than the technology (André-Ampuero et al., 2010; Colomo-Palacios et al., 2010; Trigo et al., 2010). Gorla and Lam (2004) identified several team-related factors that affect software development project performance. The factors include the personality composition of members, team leadership, and intra-team communication and coordination. Sumner, Bock, and Giamartino (2006) suggested that the psychological orientation of IT professionals tends to influence their project leadership effectiveness. Why? According to the authors, a considerable amount of research indicates that IT professionals have traditionally lacked soft skills, such as the ability to manage people and communicate effectively.

**Leadership Styles**

There is a vast amount of research on the traits and behaviors associated with effective leadership. Bass (1996) theorized that every leader displays transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire behaviors to some degree.

Transformational leaders transform their followers into leaders. They do this by increasing awareness of the importance and value of a task, and getting followers to focus on organizational or team goals before their own self-interests. Bass (1996) characterized transformational leadership through the dimensions of (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration.

Idealized influence and inspirational motivation are associated with charismatic leadership. Idealized influence includes behaviors that allow the leader to serve as a role model for followers who admire, respect, and trust him or her. The leader emphasizes the importance of a collective sense of mission and reassures followers that they can overcome any obstacles. The inspirational motivation style encompasses behaviors that inspire and motivate followers through meaningful and challenging assignments. Through this behavior, the leader arouses team spirit, displays enthusiasm, and communicates a compelling vision of the future. Intellectual stimulation and individual consideration are associated with leaders who listen effectively and spend time teaching and coaching. The intellectual stimulation behavior kindles innovation and creativity in followers. The leader questions assumptions, reframes problems, and approaches old situations in new ways. The individual consideration style represents the special attention that a transformational leader dedicates to the achievement and growth needs of each follower (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Transactional leaders reward or discipline followers based on their performance. The leader assigns or obtains follower agreement on the task to be accomplished and offers contingent rewards for satisfactorily completing the assignment. Bass (1996) theorized that a transactional leader may adopt management-by-exception practices, which can be active or passive. Supervisors exhibiting these behaviors may actively monitor for deviances from standards, mistakes, and errors in the follower’s assignments and take corrective actions, or passively wait for problems to occur before taking any corrective action.

Laissez-faire leaders ignore the responsibilities of leadership, choosing not to exercise their authority. They intervene to correct mistakes and make decisions only when absolutely necessary. Leaders demonstrating this style exhibit passive behavior. They avoid making necessary decisions and delay actions (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

The leadership behavior of the immediate supervisor has been found to contribute to job satisfaction and retention (Jackofsky & Slocum,
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