Research Article

UNLEASHING CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON CORPORATES ACROSS 3 COUNTRIES

***Eswar Prasad and Dr. Truptha Shankar**

School of Commerce and Management Studies, Dayananda Sagar University, Bangalore, India

Abstract

In the wake of the recent pandemic, and war tensions in certain nations that resulted in ripple effects across the global economic terrain, business leaders must redefine their leadership profiles to swiftly navigate through this turbulence. Given the pressing need to overcome the above rampant challenges, the current study aims to understand in detail a few modern management practices globally. We approached 3 leaders from India, 3 from USA, and 2 from UK across sectors. Findings reveal that Situational Leadership is crucial. Emphasis is to be given to understanding the business context, and practical agility alongside Project Management Methodologies (PMM).

Keywords: Situational Leadership, Contextual Understanding, Common Sense, Project Management Methodologies (PMM).

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Leaders undoubtedly agree that the outside environment is experiencing radical changes at an unprecedented level in recent times [1]. During such daunting situations, leadership style plays a central role in helping organizations sail swiftly through the troubled waters using effective Project Management techniques as illustrated by Shaikh [2]. Leadership styles evolved from the prominent authoritarian ones in the likes of Hitler to the servant leadership exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi. However, not a single style could be used as a magic wand for all the situations that resulted in the birth of the Situational Leadership style. As rightly cited by the Indeed editorial team [3] in Mar 2023, this style is an amalgamation of various behavioral styles such as Telling, Selling, Participating, and Delegating, whose application largely depends on the situation at hand. Almost a decade ago in Dec 2015, Tripathi [4] provided excellent insights on why Situational Leadership is critical for the success of any organization in the current turbulent era. Situational Leadership also acts as a lever for Leadership agility which was discussed in detail by Joiner [5] in her book. Certain aspects such as contextual understanding of the projects are needed to be able to embrace the situations in their true form. Maaninen [6] in 2009 studied the importance of understanding the dynamics of a project from a context standpoint. Almost 2 decades ago in 2004, Araujo [7] developed context models for managing software development knowledge. Though the citation of context has been there for so many years, the literature has scarce resources around this in the past few recent years. Similarly, the generic concept of common-sense usage is also left unattended by many organizations although it's been cited by magazines like Forbes [8] way back in 2015. Fast forward to 2023, Zhou [9] constructed a 3D model knowledge base by common sense fusion.

*Corresponding Author: *Eswar Prasad,*
School of Commerce and Management Studies, Dayananda Sagar University, Bangalore, India

Hence there is a need to deep dive into this leadership trait in the current digital era of 2024. In the current empirical research study, we obtained data from 8 real-life corporate leaders working for established organizations in the UK, USA & India. The analysis of the respondent's dataset reveals the requirement of a fusion of all management techniques and practices like what is mentioned by Duckett [10] in her Jan 2022 article.

Objectives

This study has the following research objectives

- Is Situational Leadership the most preferred style in the current uncertain world?
- Is contextual understanding more important than following specific project methodology practices?
- In stressful situations, is common sense more important than following any project methodology practices?

Scope

The scope of this study is to obtain deep insights from industry experts on management practices such as choice of leadership in turbulent times, the need for contextual understanding to run projects efficiently, unleashing the importance of using common sense in highly demanding situations, and finally getting the leaders' perspectives on problem-solving vis-à-vis project management methodology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We picked 8 highly established Tech companies out of which 3 are in India and 3 in USA and the other 2 in the UK. We analyzed the findings across the research study's key objectives.

The Corporate Leader's demographic details are as follows:

- On average these participants seem to possess close to 2 decades of real-time experience in the corporate sector.
- Most of these leaders operate in the Information Technology-related sectors.
- Broadly, here is the geographical distribution of the survey participants: 3 from India, 2 from USA and 2 from UK.
- Most of these leaders are leading projects within the service industry compared to product-based setups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Analysis

Following are the results for all eight corporate leaders for non-qualitative (non-descriptive) questions –

- Preferred Leadership Style - 7 leaders opted for "Yes" for Situational Leadership, and only one responded with a "No".
- Inference: Situational Leadership seems to be the preferred leadership style.
- For the question "In stressful situations, you tend to use common sense more often than using any project methodology practices?" 7 leaders said "Yes" and 1 said "No".
- Inference: Common sense seems to supersede project management practices at least during fight or flight situations.
- For the question "Is contextual understanding more important than following specific project methodology practices?", 6 founders said "Yes", and 2 said "No.
- Inference: Context is the King! Everywhere in the Digital Age [11]
- For the question "Do you agree, no matter what methodology it is, be it Agile or Traditional, everything boils down to situationally attacking the problem and resolving it?" 5 leaders said "Yes" and only 3 said "No".

Inference: Fundamental principles of management remain the same. Modern project management methodologies are like old wine in a new bottle.

Based on the choice made by the founders on the above research questions, it is evident that "Situational Leadership" seems to be the need of the hour. Contextual understanding and the usage of common sense seem to be more important than following the PMM blindly. One-third of the participant population feel that situational understanding is needed for problem-solving, irrespective of the choice of methodology.

Qualitative Analysis

Following are the responses to the research questions from each of the 8 leaders –

Question 1:

Is Situational leadership the most preferred leadership style in the current VUCA (Volatile Uncertain Complex Ambiguous) times?

Leader#1: "No"

Remarks –
"Always serve"

Leader#2: "Yes"

Remarks –
"I'm a big believer in having DISC assessments completed for your team. No two people are alike and once you have some insight into their work personality, then a manager/leader will get more results by following a situational leadership methodology."

Leader#3: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Strongly believe in Situational Leadership and have used it for decades. It works and works well with multi-cultural and multi-generational teams."

Leader#4: "Yes"

Remarks –
"The question was rhetorical. If times are volatile how can a fixed / set leadership mindset work? Situational leadership is the way to go."

Leader#5: "Yes"
Remarks –
"Every situation is caused by some certainties and some uncertainties, maintaining the balance and moving ahead makes the situational leadership preferred and effective style."

Leader#6: "Yes"

Remarks –
"For end goal or success; situations also need to be considered sometimes."

Leader#7: "Yes"

Remarks –
"In the current ever-changing world, it is important to adapt one's style to the situation and look at indicators such as the type of task that we are trying to achieve, the nature of the team one is dealing with, and many other factors that might contribute to getting the task done."

Leader#8: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Traditional approach towards management and leadership won't work when the business environment is unpredictable."

Author's Inference: Psychometrics or personality assessments could be precursors to the leadership style, especially the situational leadership style. Responses from other leaders are greatly inclined towards situational leadership.

Question 2:

In stressful situations, you tend to use common sense more often than using any project methodology practices?

Leader#1: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Not common sense. Use experience and intuition first."

Leader#2: "Yes"

Remarks –
"To be an effective PM, you have to break the rules, be flexible and think outside the box."

Leader#3: "Yes"

Remarks –
"While the methodology in use always informs the situation, common sense needs to be there as well. It usually is not an either/or situation."

Leader#4: "Yes"

Remarks –
"It's best to remove the stress first lest it leads to blunders."

Leader#5: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Methodologies set the balance and common sense pushes the thoughts forward."

Leader#6: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Stress is an emotion and so its outcome can only be related to any human trait."

Leader#7: "Yes"

Remarks –
"As mentioned above every situation in real life or on the job front is different so it is important to react with common sense in every situation not only stressful situation."

Leader#8: "No"

Remarks –
"Project methodologies provide you with tools to complete the job and help you to organize with the time and resources. Not following will create more stress."

Author's Inference:
While most of the leaders have opted "Yes" for this question, analyzing the comments reveals that common sense should be there on the side and may not be the primary one.

Question 3:

Is contextual understanding more important than following specific project methodology practices?

Leader#1: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Methodology is blind when used alone."

Leader#2: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Project management's process is meant for organizing and controlling risk. The process is a means to the end, but it should not be rigid. The process is to treat like guidelines in some areas."

Leader#3: "No"

Remarks –
"The methodology needs to work within the context of the project and organization. So, this is not an either/or situation. A PM cannot apply a methodology properly without understanding the industry, the specific organization they are working within, and the goals of the project."

Leader#4: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Context is always more important than following a playbook blindly."

Leader#5: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Where there is inexperience, methodologies give a steady path, contextual understanding help common sense being used properly."

Leader#6: "No"

Remarks –
"Practices are base; contextual understanding comes above it."

Leader#7: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Again, methodologies are only developed to give us a framework and guide us to get the task done. If we don't understand the context of the methodology one can fail getting their job done even when the framework is applied correctly."

Leader#8: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Every client requirement is different. Amending and making project methodologies project-specific will be beneficial."

Author's Inference:
One of the leaders who opted for "No" in fact emphasized that contextual understanding is not an either/or situation for a project manager, but it is mandatory to have that understanding.

Question 4:

Do you agree, no matter what methodology it is, be it Agile or Traditional, that everything boils down to situationally attacking the problem and resolving it?

Leader#1: "No"

Remarks –
"Not every "problem" needs to be attacked or solved. Everything boils down to people."

Leader#2: "Yes"

Remarks –

"Isn't that how you get requirements?."

Leader#3: "No"

Remarks –
"While the methodology should be selected based on the situation, the answer is not to just apply a situational approach at each step. Finally, if there is a mismatch of resources, technology, or expectations, it will take more than responding to each issue as a unique situation to be successful overall."

Leader#4: "Yes"

Remarks –
"If there is a problem someone is after your neck. Solve the problem first. Then worry about everything else."

Leader#5: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Yes."

Leader#6: "No"

Remarks –
"Mostly agile."

Leader#7: "Yes"

Remarks –
"As mentioned in the earlier responses at the beginning of this questionnaire every situation is different and needs a different approach to resolve and move towards the goal for no matter which methodology you use it is always important to situationally attack the problem while trying to be as close as possible to the preferred methodology."

Leader#8: "Yes"

Remarks –
"Having a fit-for-purpose Methodology always helps."

Author's Inference:

Overall detailed comments were more centered on dealing with people, which in essence is closely associated with situational leadership. However, one of the leaders was focusing on applying situation leadership with some tweaks.

Limitations

- The sample size of 8 representative companies is too small to formulate any concrete recommendations.
- Most of the participants are from the IT sector. Diversity is missing.
- No hypothesis was presented and subsequently tested using statistical methods as the primary focus of this study is qualitative study-based research. However, thematic analysis can be done in future.

Conclusion

To combat the volatility in the outside world, corporate leaders shall revisit their current leadership approaches and help organizations thrive. While the current research study's hypothesis points to the application of situational leadership as the preferred style in these volatile times, survey respondents' data goes one step further and recommends tailoring this leadership model to overcome its deficiencies. However, results also complement that this style is indeed a crucial aspect to be considered for organizational growth. Participants almost unanimously agreed that contextual understanding is paramount in every element of leadership. They also reckoned that it is not just an alternative but mandatory for any business to flourish. According to the leaders of these corporate organizations, common sense supplements the effectiveness of any model or methodology and may not be the primary driver for resolving all problematic scenarios. Lastly, problem-solving requires an understanding of the situation at hand, being agile to flexibly alter the solutions, bring in the contextual parameters and finally making use of the existing processes, tools, and practices of Project Management. All these parameters in unison can assist organizations in defeating the complex problems resulting from the VUCA nature of corporate projects. The concoction of various project management practices effectively led by a situational leader focused on context and usage of contextual understanding could result in innovative outcomes thereby leading to a win-win situation for corporate leaders and their organizations.

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