

Education for Project Leaders

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Abstract

At present, education within the field of Project Management in Slovak and the Czech Republic is carried out via commercial entities or within higher education, and the most used contents are the commonly used methodologies of project management. From the methodology perspective, the most critical areas are preparation of the project plan, resource planning and project realization following the methodology. However, completing a methodology training certificate or obtaining a university degree diploma does not automatically mean the success of the project or the success of the project leader. People are the critical element on which the project's success depends – whether they are the stakeholders, the end users, external or internal team members. This paper focuses on the real experiences of working project managers on their knowledge, skills, and talents regarding leadership and human skills. At the same time, it explores the elements that they consider key to the success of the projects they have led and successfully delivered. The result of this research is one of the inputs for creating a model for a comprehensive education of project leaders in leadership and human skills.

Keywords: project leadership; human skills; talent management

JEL classification: M15

Paper type: Research article

Received: 26 January 2023

Accepted: 1 May 2023

DOI: 10.54820/entrenova-2023-0025

Acknowledgements: M. Filipová would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by Comenius University Bratislava – Grant mladých UK nr. UK/306/2023.

Introduction

Leadership in project management is a widely researched topic, just as are project success factors. However, there are currently neither study programs related to project management nor project leadership courses at universities in Slovakia (*PortalVS.Sk*, 2022). Commercial providers of project management education focus on methodologies, especially on providing methodology-specific certificates after study and examination. A change has been observed in higher education in the Czech Republic – these days, 6 universities offer studies in project management (*Vysokéškoly.Cz*, 2022).

Based on many years of our personal experience in project management, we are convinced of the importance of project leadership in these two countries with similar historical background and close cooperation within many sectors.

From a perspective of project archetypes, we distinguish between Product development projects, Marketing projects, Internal improvement projects, Customer order projects, and Event projects (Jansson & Ljung, 2013). All these types of projects can be found in every industry.

The aim of this paper is to draw more attention to project leadership and its research in these two countries. Through the results of two case studies – the first one from public sector in the Slovak republic, which involved cooperation with experts from both the Czech Republic and the European Commission, and the second from the commercial sector in Slovakia, involving team members from Germany on the client side – to share a practical experience with managing projects for 8 years and by doing so to extend a baseline for further research on authentic leadership, human skills and talent management in project leadership.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the history of leadership theory and different leadership styles and their impact on project success. By this case study we intend to extend call of Ceri-Booms (Ceri-Booms et al., 2017) to integrate the importance of authentic leadership in teams in ICT projects. The need for authentic leadership was identified also e.g. in infrastructure projects (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011; Walker et al., 2017), construction industry (Love, 2020; Love et al., 2018; Toor & Ofori, 2008), alliance environments (Love et al., 2018) or inter-firm projects (von Danwitz, 2018).

Leadership in Project Management

Project management is not just about managing resources. People are the key to the success of any project - whether they are stakeholders, team members or end users. That's why we consider leadership to be one of the key factors for Project Leadership.

As early as 2010, Dechurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty & Salas reported a steady increase in interest in exploration of the team level influences of leadership behaviors (Dechurch et al., 2010). Since then, many studies have confirmed the impact of different leadership styles on the success of projects. This paper does not aim to present a complete list of research conducted or published meta-analyses.

Research also shows that both person and task-focused leader behaviors are positively and significantly related to team performance (Burke et al., 2006; Ceri-Booms et al., 2017). However, leaders' behaviors such as understanding of their own and others' emotions, regulating them constructively, being considerate of team members' needs, facilitating team members' development, coaching them, and using their skills and personal qualities to influence others to internally believe in their vision are also important to achieve higher team performance (Ceri-Booms et al., 2017).

Authentic leadership in Project management

The need for a different approach for Project management of the 21st century, for different knowledge, attributes and skills of project managers has been highlighted by Toor and Ofori in 2008 (Toor & Ofori, 2008). Based on this, Lloyd-Walker and Walker introduced authentic leadership in 2011 as a new 21st century leadership style, that all project managers need to adopt (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011).

Authentic project leaders consider a broader context than the simple "iron triangle" of cost, time, and quality. They represent values and ethical standards that benefit the wider community, inspire and lead by example, develop their team and support its growth, and build strong relationships within the team (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011). Authentic leaders foster learning from mistakes and growth mindsets in team members (Love, 2020), promote openness, and create an environment in which knowledge is effectively shared and leveraged (Love et al., 2018) and which helps to unleash innovation and creativity (Walker et al., 2017). By building on trust and determination, it reduces the time needed to counter-plan, sorting out or fighting resistance (Doz, 2020).

Authentic leaders can balance negative and positive ego-relevant information (Dinh et al., 2014) with focus on increased self-awareness and self-regulation (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

One of the basic tools of authentic leadership is the ability and willingness to listen and discuss not only problems but also people's expectations and ideas, creating a supportive environment for employees that balances the often-constant pressure for short-term goals and profit (Deszczyński & Beręsewicz, 2021).

We define authentic leaders as leaders who focus on self-awareness (of their emotions, feelings, states, and beliefs) and self-regulation to be able to be aware of the emotions, feelings, states, and beliefs of others and co-regulate. With a sense of purpose with a positive impact on the wider community or environment, high ethical standards and creating a safe space for growth and learning. They are able to take action and inspire followers to act and they are prepared to fail.

There are also changes in management style, values and worldview that are being caused by Baby Boomers handing over project leadership to Generation X and Generation Y. It is Generation X that is expected to use their authentic leadership skills to lead projects in a way that considers the interests of all stakeholders, ensuring the sustainability of businesses and promoting the development of socially responsible organizations (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011).

We also need to consider Generation Z entering the market with their own worldview and values, which also emphasizes the importance of leadership in project management.

Human skills

The use of different styles of leading people is not sufficient for the success of a project. Project leaders' human skills are necessary to lead people.

Lloyd-Walker and Walker also reported results of research, which confirmed project managers' human skills play an important role in successful project management by authentic leaders in the 21st century (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011). However, the aim of this paper is not to provide a complete list of the studies published so far, and their results, but to highlight the importance of human skills in successful project management.

Talent management

People can learn different skills. But if we develop the individual strengths and talents of the people who are members of the project teams, they can bring much more value to the project.

Authentic leaders are aware of their own strengths and knowledge (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011). They are also aware and appreciative of the strengths and talents of others and help them develop them into strengths (Avolio et al., 2004). Having the right people in the right place is very important in project management, although it is not always the case (Filippov et al., 2014).

Methodology

This study examined the leadership behavior, human skills, and talent management approach in two projects from the Slovak Republic.

For this research, we used the interview method in the case studies. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The research also included an analysis of available internal project management records.

For the purpose of this study, we examined two cases - one project whose subject was the development of a customized information system for a government institution. The second project was from the commercial sector, which also fell within the information technology sector. In both cases, the projects were large in scope and involved team members and stakeholders from multiple countries.

The first project was delivered for a public sector customer in collaboration with experts from the Czech Republic and the European Commission. The second project was delivered for a Commercial Sector customer, whose mother company is based in Germany and key decisions were made outside of the local team. In both cases, these projects were managed by M. Filipová, who took over responsibility from the previous project managers.

The decision for case study as a research method was supported by a proposal of Toor and Ofori to extend the traditional approach of interviews and survey questionnaires to life-stories, idiographic, historiometric, psychometric, and psychobiographical approaches (Toor & Ofori, 2008).

Another important aspect was the fact that if the questionnaire about these projects had been sent to both M. Filipová and their previous project managers, it is very likely that their statements would have differed substantially from her perception of the success of the projects and their approaches to project management.

In both cases, we examined the elements of leadership used in project management, the human skills identified as the skills that influenced the success of the project. As well as the use of talents, strengths, and their development over the duration of the project.

Case studies

Public sector project

This was a project implemented with European funds for a public sector client and lasted 16 months. The total expenditure for the project was EUR 11+ M. The aim of the project was the design and implementation of a tailor-made information system for the electronic support of one of the state administration agendas, including infrastructure, processes and personnel and organizational support. The aim of the electronification, was to reduce the administrative burden on citizens and business entities, to increase the transparency of official processes and reduce the time taken to process the relevant agendas. Also, to reduce expenditure within the state

administration, which was to be realized by increasing the electronification and automation of the processes and by eliminating duplication of tasks. Finally, the system had to be developed in accordance with the European Commission's requirements for the later integration of similar systems across the European Union.

The project was successfully delivered on time, to the required quality and within budget. Even after a change of management on the client side, the project was rated as one of the two best projects of the previous period by an internal audit.

Commercial sector project

The project was delivered for a client in the commercial sector. Originally, the aim of the project was to migrate the on-premises mailboxes of the Slovak client to the cloud environment. The original project duration at the time of taking over of the project management by M. Filipova was already exceeded by 10 months. During this period the scope of the project changed and expanded to include the migration of 2 additional cloud tenants to the new cloud environment, one of the tenants belonging to the mother company in Germany. Due to several issues on the project mainly related to communication misunderstandings, changes in priorities, scope and ineffective project management, the client set a deadline to complete the project within 2 months. If this deadline was not met, the client threatened to blacklist the contractor.

The project was successfully delivered under the new revised project plan. The client appreciated the change in approach to project management, communication and the proactive steps taken to resolve issues that arose during project delivery. The contractor was included on the client's list of trusted partners.

Research findings

Based on the analysis of leading the projects from leadership, human skills, and talent management perspective, the following list of aspects influencing the success of the project has been produced:

Leadership

Table 1

Leadership aspects influencing project success

Leadership aspects	Notes
Purpose driven approach	
Usage of different leadership styles	In line with different environments
Usage of different tools	
Work/success recognition	
Managing expectations	
Competency vs. responsibility	
Treating people as human beings	
Leadership	

Source: Authors' own compilation

In both projects, the purpose of the project and the positive impacts of its implementation were clearly communicated to all stakeholders. Given the diversity of environments, different leadership styles and different tools were used. There was an emphasis on recognition of success and completion of partial milestones (also due to the intangible final product handed over to the client), and a balance between

competencies and accountability. An important aspect was to treat the people on the project as human beings.

Human skills

The list of most important human skills used in both projects has been identified (see Table 2). This is not a list of all the skills used as others might have been identified in other projects.

Table 2

Human skills influencing project success

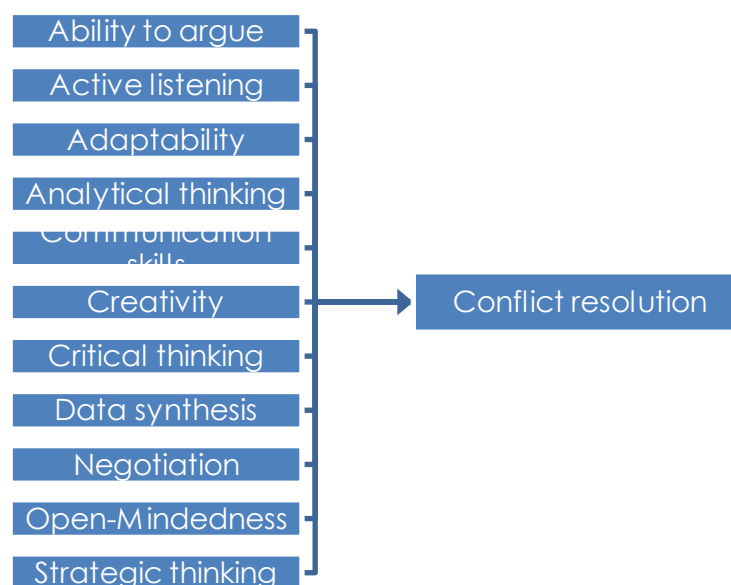
Human skills
Ability to argue
Active listening
Adaptability
Analytical thinking
Communication skills
Conflict resolution
Creativity
Critical thinking
Data synthesis
Giving and receiving feedback
Negotiation
Open-Mindedness
Problem solving
Strategic thinking
Teamwork
Trust building

Source: Authors' own compilation

We also identified that different combinations of human skills were applied in various situations. Following human skills were used in conflict resolution (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Human skills used for conflict resolution

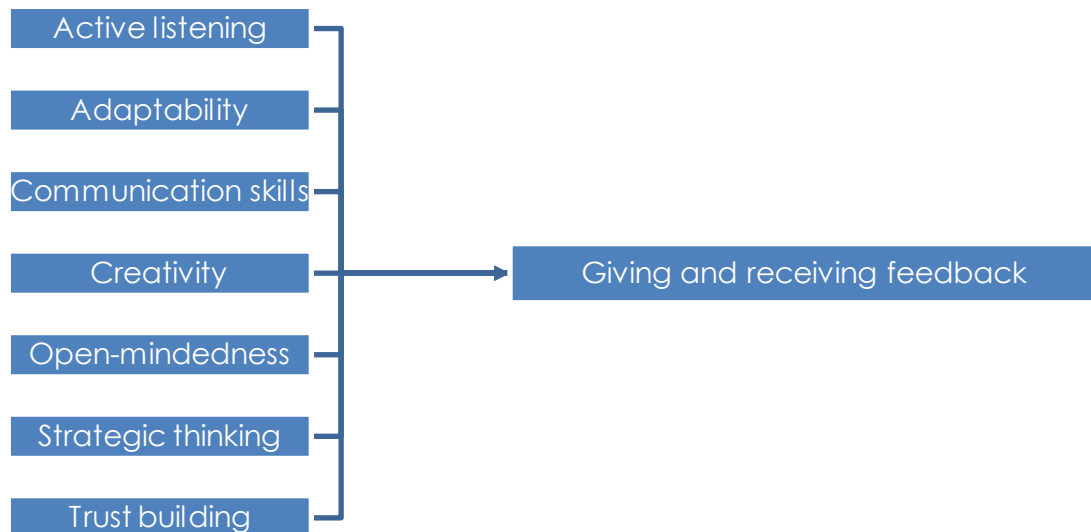


Source: Authors' own compilation

Following human skills were used while giving and receiving feedback (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Human skills used for giving and receiving feedback

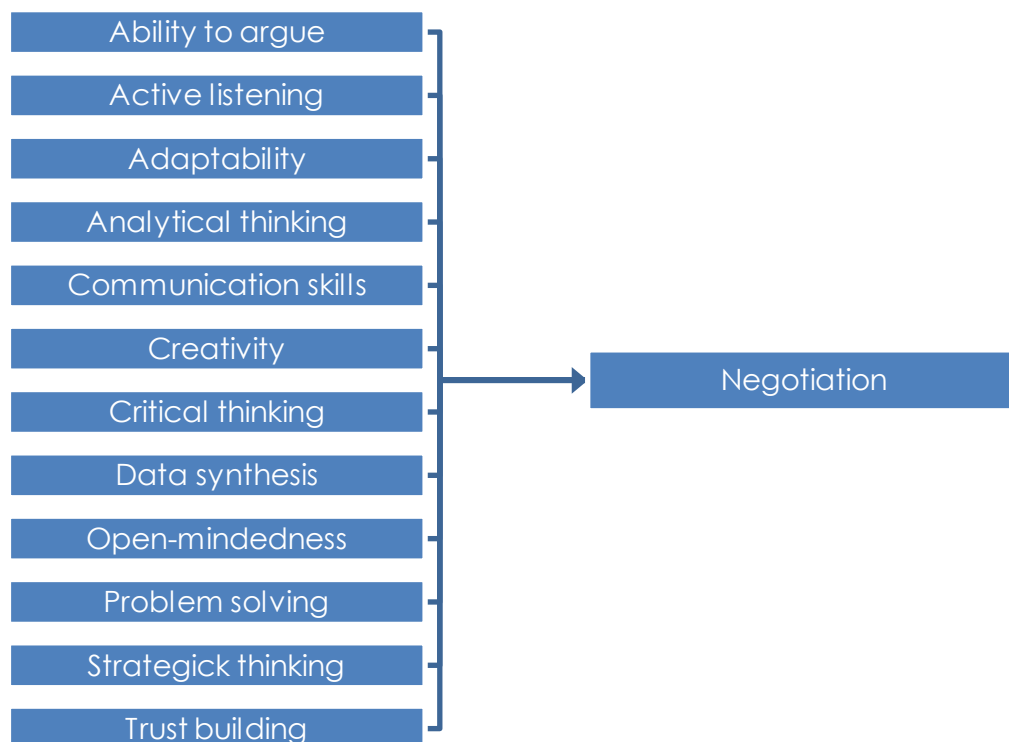


Source: Authors' own compilation

In preparation for and during negotiation, the following human skills were used (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Human skills used for negotiation



Source: Authors' own compilation

Talent management

In both projects, the diversity of team members' maturity, talents, strengths, and experience was encouraged. In the public sector project, team members had the opportunity to use designated time during working hours for further learning or personal development.

Table 3

Talent management - aspects influencing project success

Talent Management	
Diversity of experiences	within the internal team
Diversity of maturity level	within the internal team
Diversity of talents and strengths	within the internal team
Time for personal growth	during working hours
Talent Management	

Source: Authors' own compilation

Discussion

Using two case studies, this paper has identified key factors that have influenced the success of delivered projects in terms of leadership, people skills and talent management.

To date, few studies have systematically examined the role, impact, and outcomes of conflict resolution (von Danwitz, 2018). Based on the results of the case studies reviewed in this paper, we can confirm the importance of conflict resolution in project management - not only within the internal structures of the contractor but also conflicts between the contractor, the client, and possibly subcontractors or other stakeholders.

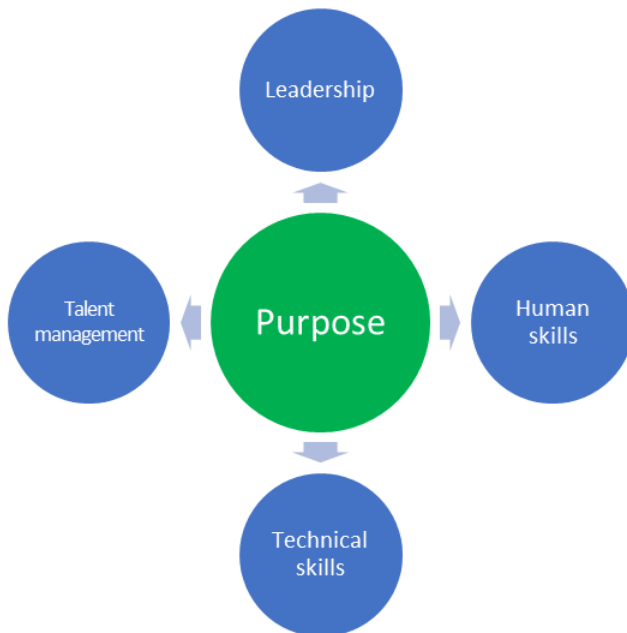
The results also confirmed the importance of exploring stakeholder management (von Danwitz, 2018). In both case studies, the stakeholders were not only on the side of the contractor and its partners or subcontractors but also on the side of the client and all its affected organizational units (whether subordinate organizations in the public sector or a mother company in another country in the case of the commercial sector). In the case of externally funded projects (i.e., EU funds) also the management of stakeholder relations in this context.

Issues of effective partner selection for inter-company projects are also seen as another promising area for future research (von Danwitz, 2018). This area does not appear in current results. A possible explanation for this is that M. Filipova took over the management of both projects at the stage when the partners were selected, contracted and delivered the deliverables.

Project leader education model

Based on these two case studies, which were among the more challenging projects, in terms of time, scope, and complexity, but also taking into account the project manager's years of experience in the field of project leadership, the following model of project leader education for discussion and further research is presented (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Project leader education model



Source: Authors' own compilation

Conclusion

This study has several limitations in addition to its contribution.

This study is limited by the fact that it examines two projects managed by the same person, albeit in different settings (public and commercial sectors) and both with international involvement.

At the same time, neither company delivering those projects had internal KPIs other than project profitability to assess project success objectively.

The paper aims to share practical experiences from many years of project leadership. It is believed that the ideas in this paper will stimulate further research and discussion on project leadership and the importance of educating project leaders in leadership, human skills, and talent management.

Another area of research that is considered important is the credibility and authenticity of a leader evaluated by his or her followers based on the perception of his or her attitude, facial expression, physical tension, tone of voice or small gestures such as holding the other's gaze or nodding in conversation (Ladkin, 2008) usually manifested through the physical language of the body and the emotional reactions of the leader (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Finally, there is a need to assess what effect the embodied authentic performance has on followers (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

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