Emotional and Social Intelligence in Project Management

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Recommended Citation
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ABSTRACT

Leading successful projects requires emotional and social competencies that are beyond the current scope of the methodology developed by the Project Management Institute. Projects include complex and dynamic social interactions involving power, human emotions, organizational politics, and interpersonal relationships. Emotional intelligence (EI) and social intelligence (SI) are socioemotional theories that focus on human emotions and relationships, and the understanding and management of these concepts. This research will include a review of the cognitive basis of EI and SI. Each of these social competencies will be reviewed in depth with their relationship to leadership in project management. The goal of this research is to develop the hypothesis that the next phase of project management research needs to focus on leadership and the social processes of projects using the lens of EI and SI.

Keywords

Project management, leadership, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, cognitive abilities.

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

The traditional view of projects as discrete entities has changed as organizations look at project managers as part of the leadership continuum in organizational transformation. Projects are a fundamental mechanism of change for organizational transformation. McAfee (2006) presents the view that people look at IT projects as periods of organizational change. In many organizations almost every non-operations related activity is referred to as a project (Dinsmore 1999). Projects are now intertwined with organizational change, and this presents the project manager with challenges in managing the human factors of those involved with or impacted by the project. The innate resistance to change by people and organizations (Koch, 2006, Kotter, 1995, Goleman, 1985) demonstrate how important it is for a project manager to understand and manage the emotional response to change. A popular quote by Dale Carnegie states: “When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion” (Carnegie 1982). A project manager must understand the role that emotion plays in team and organizational performance. The project manager is the primary communicator for the project to the external environment including executive management, sponsors, stakeholders, end users and others impacted by the project.

The PMI approach presents a standard methodology for managing the task lifecycle in projects (PMI 2008). This methodology is an important standard for the task based rigor and discipline of managing projects. Leadership in project management differs from this technical project manager role in that the focus is on relationship management. These relationship management skills must extend from the team level to stakeholders, clients, end users, sponsors, and executive management. The project manager needs to understand and maintain balance between organizational forces to keep the project aligned with the organizations goals. Through managing these social processes, the project manager is empowered to motivate teams, manage stakeholders, and resolve conflicts in project priorities and interpersonal conflicts within the project or extended teams. The application of EI and SI competencies to understand the social processes of projects takes on great importance as the complexity, scope, and global virtual nature of projects continues to increase.

The topic of EI came about as psychologists began to accept the notion of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983). Gardner proposed 8 different categories of intelligence of which only one is the logical-mathematical intelligence previously accepted as the scope of intelligence. (Bass and Bass 2008) describe EI as one of several socioemotional competency traits of leaders. EI has no distinct or commonly accepted definition since the scope of EI is still the subject of research and controversy (Mayer, Roberts et al. 2008). The most general definition is the ability to understand and manage one’s own emotions and to understand the emotions of others.

To enhance leadership some organizations have begun to use EI tests and training as selection criteria for leadership roles. (Grubb and McDaniel 2007; Mayer, Roberts et al. 2008) note that EI tests can be faked, and perceived EI and self reported EI only correlate well in leaders perceived by peers and team members as having key EI competencies and behaviors. Almost 70% of communication is non-verbal (Goleman 2006). The tone of communications, facial expression, gestures, and other physical communications are present in all relationship activities (Goleman 1985). (Goleman 1985) states that even people highly trained to pass lie detectors will display emotional leakage thorough these nonverbal communications channels.
Beyond EI there are skills valuable to a project manager in understanding the social nature of human interactions defined by the term social intelligence.

Like EI, Social Intelligence (SI) has its foundations in neuroscience. SI refers to the evolution, mechanics, and behaviors associated with the social brain (Cozolino 2006; Goleman 2006). The social brain is that part of humans that seeks out and interacts with others in human relationships. (Goleman 1985) reviews studies demonstrating that when people of two different emotional states sit quietly together, their emotional and physical states shift towards the calmer, more emotionally stable and physical state. This research demonstrates the basis of contagion, the seemingly infectious nature of human mood and emotions. Contagion is a product of two social functions, social transmission of emotion and physical state and of shared social frames (Goleman 1985). Social frames are collections of schema, each of which is a pattern of recognition and response to a social stimulus. Frames are scripts, patterns of interactions that guide us in our social interactions. From a leadership perspective, this opens the opportunity for a project manager to maximize productivity by using positive emotional contagion to motivate productivity (Flamholtz 1974; Goleman, Boyatzis et al. 2004).

(Goleman 1985; Zonis, Lefkovitz et al. 2005; Goleman 2006) demonstrate how culture and custom make a significant impact on social harmony. A project manager’s comprehension of social frames when dealing with global teams avoids uncomfortable breaks in the social fabric of collaboration (Goleman 1985). This relates back to understanding that 70% of communication is non-verbal (Goleman 2006) and that a socially intelligent project leader must understand the communication channels available and the cultural frames associated with those channels and communications in general (Zonis, Lefkovitz et al. 2005; Nauman, Elahi et al. 2006).

The breadth of information from neuroscience, cognition, business value of IT, project failures, organizational transformation, EI and SI can be overwhelming at first. The purpose of researching these topics in depth is to give the fundamental basis and organizational context for the importance of EI and SI to leadership in project management. The relevance to the project and the organization is in understanding how to maximize the productivity of the investment made in projects and to the shift from the perception of projects from a sequence of tasks to a perspective of linked social processes.

REFERENCES

