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Project Managers’ Influence Tactics and Authority: A Comparison Across Project Structures

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Abstract

Information Systems (IS) implementation success has been a concern of both researchers and practitioners ever since firms have started to use computers to process their business data. Over the years, researchers have studied several aspects of IS implementation, be it measuring success or developing and testing models that explain IS project success or failure. However, up to now, very little of the IS implementation research has focused on the role played by the project leader. This paper presents the results of a study of 139 IS project managers. The study examined both the tactics adopted by these project managers to influence people, and their level of decision authority.

Introduction

Over the years, successful IS implementation has remained a concern of both researchers and practitioners. While researchers have studied several aspects of implementation, little of the IS implementation research has focused on the issue of the project leader’s role. This paper presents the results of a study which examined the relationship between the influence tactics adopted by project managers, their level of decision authority, and the project's organizational structure.

Theoretical Framework

Influence behavior.

Influence behavior is considered as central to understanding how leadership is exerted; it is also seen as a key determinant of managerial success (Yukl and Tracey, 1992). Several researchers have focused on understanding influence behaviors, and attempted to classify them into categories known as “influence tactics”. Building on earlier studies, Yukl et al. (1992) developed a nine category taxonomy: Rational Persuasion, Inspirational Appeals, Consultation, Ingratiation, Personal Appeals, Exchange, Coalition Tactics, Pressure, and Legitimacy Tactics (see Table 1).

Organizational structure.

Galbraith (1971) proposed a typology of organizational structure, which comprises three categories: functional, matrix, and product. While the functional organization has a functional authority structure, and the product organization has a product authority structure, the matrix organization has a dual authority structure. Organization members then have to report to two superiors: their functional superior, and the project leader. Project management researchers have refined the definition of the matrix organization into the functional matrix, the balanced matrix, and the project matrix (Larson and Gobeli, 1985).

Authority.

Authority is defined as the right to make decisions that others are bound to comply with (Yukl, 1989). The amount of authority detained by the various actors is central to the notion of the matrix organization. Most authors agree that as the structure goes from a functional organization to a project organization, the level of authority of the functional manager decreases, while that of the project leader increases (Galbraith, 1971; Larson and Gobeli, 1985).

Without formulating formal hypotheses regarding which influence tactics would be more likely to be used in a given structure, we might argue that the type of influence tactics adopted by project leaders will also be related to the type of organizational structure of the project they manage. Hence our two first research hypotheses:

H1: The more project-oriented the organization structure, the higher the level of project manager’s authority.

H2: The influence tactics adopted by project managers will vary across organization structure.

There exists a fundamental distinction between authority and influence: “While authority refers to legitimate power based on formal position, power and influence are broader concepts referring to generalized ability to change the actions of the others in some intended fashion” (Mowday, 1978). Therefore, we argue that the types of influence tactics used will differ along with the level of authority. A project leader with a high level of authority might resort to “hard” tactics such as pressure and legitimating while a project leader with a low level of authority would rather use “soft” tactics. Hence, the third research hypothesis:

H3: The higher the level of project manager’s authority, the more certain types of influence tactics will be used.
Specific project contexts, i.e., when are X-tactics more appropriate than Y or Z-tactics? Finally, a critical question is that of the tactics, and the successful completion of projects. Another is related to the appropriateness of specific influence tactics to groups that were named the X-tactics, the Y-tactics, and the Z-tactics.

Influence tactics were thus reduced into a three-factor structure, with adequate reliability and face validity. The first component was named “Z-tactics”; it regroups rational persuasion, consultation, and inspirational appeal. The last component, “X-tactics” joins together coalition, pressure and legitimizing.

Results

Hypothesis 1. Table 2 shows that the level of project manager’s authority increases from a functional matrix structure to a project management structure. An overall significant F statistic confirms that the more project-oriented the organization structure, the higher the level of project manager’s authority, hence supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2. The results obtained for the individual influence tactics provide little support for the hypothesis, since only two influence tactics (ingratiation and coalition) vary across organizational structures. Examining the influence tactic grouped into factors, it is observed that while the Y-tactics are used more often in the project organization structure than in the balanced matrix, and the X-tactics are more frequent in a project organization structure than in a project matrix, there is no other significant difference across organizational structures.

Hypothesis 3. The data partly support the hypothesis, since while some influence tactics are positively related to project manager’s authority (Pressure, $r = .19$, $p < .001$; Personal appeal, $r = .15$, $p < .05$), others are negatively related (Consultation, $r = .21$, $p < .01$). Managers with higher levels of authority tend to use pressure and personal appeal more frequently, and tend to use consultation less frequently. Also, while Y-tactics are positively related to authority ($r = .14$, $p < .01$), whereas Z-tactics are negatively related ($r = .15$, $p < .01$).

Conclusion

The findings of the study point to the mediating role played by project managers’ level of decision authority in linking organization structures to influence tactics. While influence tactics used do not vary across project structures, they do so across various levels of decision authority. In turn, the level of authority of project leaders varies across structures and steadily increases on the functional-project continuum. Another interesting result is obtained in factoring the influence tactics into three groups that were named the X-tactics, the Y-tactics, and the Z-tactics.

These findings lead to further research questions. One pertains to the relationship between decision authority, influence tactics, and the successful completion of projects. Another is related to the appropriateness of specific influence tactics to specific project contexts, i.e., when are X-tactics more appropriate than Y or Z-tactics? Finally, a critical question is that of the “fit” between structure, decision authority, and influence tactics.
## Table 2. Breakdown of Project Manager’s Authority and Influence Tactics by Organization Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Structure</th>
<th>Functional matrix (n=39)</th>
<th>Balanced matrix (n=38)</th>
<th>Project matrix (n=48)</th>
<th>Project management (n=13)</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>η²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager’s Authority</td>
<td>2.9 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.2 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.5 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.5</td>
<td>9***</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence tactic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rational persuasion</td>
<td>3.8 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.7 ± 0.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ingratiation</td>
<td>2.9 ± 0.7</td>
<td>2.9 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.0 ± 0.8</td>
<td>3.5 ± 0.8</td>
<td>2.9*</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exchange</td>
<td>2.1 ± 0.7</td>
<td>2.1 ± 0.6</td>
<td>2.2 ± 0.7</td>
<td>2.4 ± 0.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coalition</td>
<td>2.2 ± 0.6</td>
<td>2.1 ± 0.6</td>
<td>2.0 ± 0.5</td>
<td>2.4 ± 0.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consultation</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.8 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.8</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>inspirational appeal</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.7 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pressure</td>
<td>2.2 ± 0.6</td>
<td>2.4 ± 0.8</td>
<td>2.3 ± 0.7</td>
<td>2.6 ± 0.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal appeal</td>
<td>2.0 ± 1.8</td>
<td>1.8 ± 0.7</td>
<td>2.0 ± 0.5</td>
<td>2.1 ± 0.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>legitimating</td>
<td>2.5 ± 0.6</td>
<td>2.4 ± 0.5</td>
<td>2.4 ± 0.9</td>
<td>2.8 ± 0.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence tactic factor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z-tactics</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.7 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.8 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.8 ± 0.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-tactics</td>
<td>2.3 ± 0.5</td>
<td>2.3 ± 0.5</td>
<td>2.4 ± 0.5</td>
<td>2.7 ± 0.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-tactics</td>
<td>2.3 ± 0.4</td>
<td>2.3 ± 0.5</td>
<td>2.2 ± 0.5</td>
<td>2.6 ± 0.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Within rows, different subscripts indicate significant (at p < .05) pairwise differences for means on Duncan’s multiple range test. *: p < .05 **: p < .01 ***: p<.001

**References**


