CONCEPTUAL PAPER
Leadership in project management: from firefighter to firelighter

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Abstract

Purpose – To demonstrate two distinct leadership requirements for project managers and establish a theoretical basis for distinguishing between these two types of leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – A framework linking transactional and transformational leadership qualities with project management attributes is developed.

Findings – Explains how reactive decisions relating to monitoring of schedules and budgeting data of projects has received the greatest attention in the literature but this is only one aspect of project control. Project leadership that is proactive in controlling projects is more effective.

Research limitations/implications – The implications of our findings are substantive. Project managers who focus on proactive leadership behaviour will be more successful in completing projects on time, on budget and to the specified standard as well as achieving the strategic purpose of the project.

Practical implications – Project managers need to pay more attention to the progress of their projects and forestall any problems rather than just being reactive problem solvers.

Originality/value – The paper provides a framework for establishing the linkage between proactive decisions that impact on the direction that the project is progressing and reactive decisions that solve the existing problems of project management. It is a different focus to the traditional project management leadership knowledge base.

Keywords Project management, Managers, Leadership, Project teams

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Project leadership is widely considered to be an important aspect of project control. While the theory of managerial control in projects is well developed, there remains the need to further develop understanding of the leadership style that complements the sophistication of contemporary control techniques and methods (Barber, 2004). Regardless of the availability of software tools, project control remains dependent on a leadership style that is outcome focused and not problem focused. Although problems will always arise and deviations from plan will occur, the need for control requires a shift away from reactive behaviours, the firefighter style, where the focus is on tackling immediate problems. A focus on outcomes depends on a proactive leader, a firelighter, who is able to explain the big picture, anticipate events and even prevent problems. The paper provides an analysis of relevant leadership literature to identify a set of leadership behaviours that can be used to develop a more proactive leadership style,

the firelighter style. A leadership model is presented that encompasses both the reactive and proactive leadership style.

Control over chaos

An underlying belief about any project is that human endeavour can achieve planned outcomes (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994; Gaddis, 1997). The project manager embarks on a project in the expectation that using a combination of resources, skilled people and appropriate methods, planned results can be achieved. Nevertheless, many projects run overtime, over-budget, or fail to achieve the expected outcomes. Unexpected events disrupt schedules and trigger consequential effects that intrude on the manager's capacity to keep the project to plan. All too likely the manager will respond to these unfolding events as they occur but this style of leadership behaviour is unlikely to be successful as one crisis leads to another. The project manager becomes consumed by fighting fires. Hindsight may show that these actions were reactive and achieved only short-term fixes.

The complexity of many projects and the interconnectedness of many resource decisions as well as unforeseen events that could occur that have not been covered by even the most astute planner. Also even the best attempts at control in planning may be subject to oversights that result in crises. Diagnostic systems with their tools and software are aimed at tracking project progress and deviations as they begin to arise. A reactive leader will depend overly on these tools to focus on specific problems in an unconnected manner and will look for quick solutions. In a complex system, this leadership behaviour will trigger other unintended effects and the project leader will become preoccupied with fire fighting.

Project management has continued to benefit from innovative methods, improved skills of project members, higher quality resources, and better control over resources through technological advances. The search for such improvement is an attempt to control potentially chaotic events. In addition there is not only a need for enhancement of the technical and managerial skills of the project leader, but also for ongoing leadership development. When project managers become frustrated with firefighting, it indicates a leadership style that is reactive rather than proactive. Corresponding to the future oriented directions of management is a body of leadership theory that does identify alternatives for the project manager. Future oriented leadership theorists (Bass *et al.*, 2003) indicate that proactive leadership entails an emotional as well as cognitive commitment from followers. The leader must evoke passion as well as reason. To continue the metaphor of a reactive leader being a "firefighter", the proactive leader is a "firelighter". The firelighter energises as well as makes visible an altered but achievable future.

The aim of this paper is to establish a theoretical basis for distinguishing reactive from proactive leadership in project management and for identifying the skill sets required for the project manager to make the shift in leadership style.

Achieving a broader range of desirable outcomes requires the leader to interact with various stakeholder groups and to be able to see and communicate the "big picture". The project leader needs to derive a vision that identifies a means to a common pathway and shared goals (Atkinson, 1999). In the firelighter role the leader illuminates the value of the project outcomes and the means to achieving them by communicating the bigger picture and its consequences. Doing so requires a leadership style with the

capacity to connect daily problem solving with planned strategies that may circumvent foreseeable problems and align the project's progress with the important outcomes.

The firefighter-firelighter leadership model

Although a range of leadership theories and models have been developed they can be categorised under some broad groupings (Northouse, 1997). Promising for explaining firelighter leadership are some of the transformational and charismatic theories that collectively have been called the new leadership theories (Marta *et al.*, 2005; Zaccaro and Horn, 2003; Hunt, 1999). These theories were developed in response to the apparent limitations of earlier theories (Yukl, 2001) in explaining how leaders can change the status quo and can lead those whom they may not directly supervise.

Transformational leadership is about lighting the fires of people's motivation and imagination. If leaders are to engage in purposive action they need to exhibit transformational leadership behaviours that direct people towards constructive effort and that provide others with a more integrated understanding of what is to be achieved. In contrast to the transformational style is transactional leadership that describes the reactive styles of leadership, otherwise known colloquially as putting out fires. At best, transactional leadership realises performance levels that meet status quo expectations. The transformational leadership model of Bass and Avolio (1990) recognises that there are times when leaders may need to apply a more reactive transactional style and be firefighters, but the main outcomes for success depend on the leader's capacity for being a firelighter.

There is substantial empirical evidence to support the claims that leaders can exhibit a full range of transactional and transformational behaviours (Bass, 1999). This model is particularly relevant for providing a theoretical framework to underpin the firefighter-firelighter distinction in project leadership. The transformational/transactional leadership model (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Bass *et al.*, 2003) forms the foundation of our firefighter-firelighter model (see Figure 1). However, our model differs from the transformational/transactional split because it separates the transactional segment into avoidant, reactive and maintenance behaviours. Our model emphasises the range of maintenance behaviours available to project leaders by specifically referring to the behavioural styles of initiating structure, emotional consideration and contingent rewards to highlight the particular combination leadership styles underpinning the firelighter leadership style.

The firefighter-firelighter model presents a range of leadership styles. Beginning with avoidant, also called *laissez-faire* by Bass (1999), which occurs whenever firefighters become overextended and as problems escalate they resort to avoidant behaviours where they ignore problems and avoid decision-making. The firefighter style is comprised of the reactive leadership behaviours of management by exception. Some firefighter leaders only take action when problems become chronic (management by exception – passive) whereas others actively track deviations from expected standards and react to deviations or mistakes (management by exception – active). The firefighter either actively addresses problems as diagnostic tools identify them, or waits for problems to become so obvious that they cannot be ignored. Either approach remains reactive.
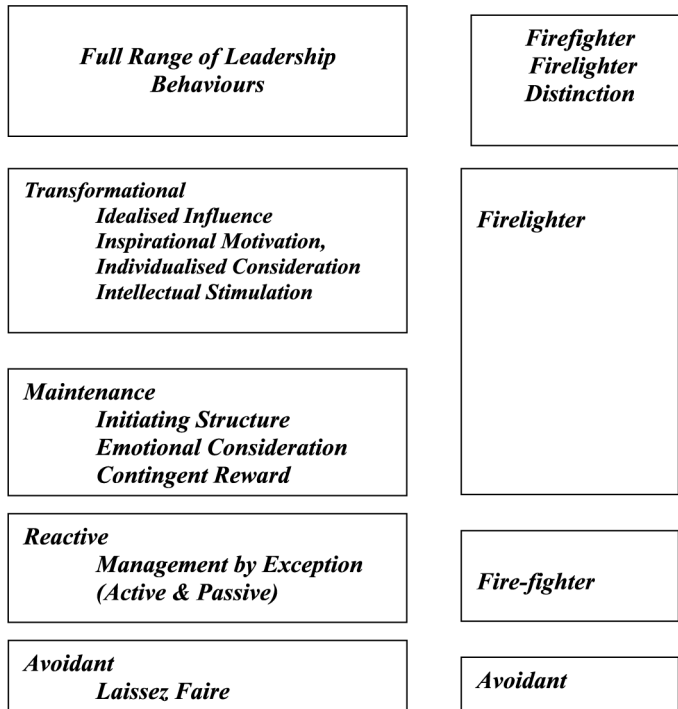
Figure 1.
The firefighter-firelighter
model of leadership

In contrast the firelighter leader will use a combination of maintenance and transformational leadership behaviours in a project setting to proactively lead the progress of the project. The firelighter must be able to lead people in the daily maintenance of the project (especially to keep control of time, cost, and quality). Contingent reward reflects a combination of task oriented and people supportive behaviours. Contingent reward, defined by Bass *et al.* (2003) is the capacity to set basic expectations and goals and to reward project members accordingly. The maintenance behaviours clarify the tasks, delegate responsibilities, identify rewards for effort and attend to the personal needs of the team members. These maintenance behaviours form a bridge to the transformational styles of leadership behaviours because they establish the foundation of credibility in the leader's competence and trust that enables the more demanding expectations of transformational leadership to be accepted among the team members.

Active transactional leadership involves developing social exchanges between the leader and followers that contribute to the maintenance of the task and the group. Research (Yukl, 2001) has identified two skill sets, initiating structure and emotional consideration, as important. In the initiation role the leader will engage in providing specific directions, organising people to tasks, and explaining contingent rewards flowing from achieving tasks. The leader will provide structure for the team to engage in problem solving and to carry out tasks successfully. Outcomes linked to this leadership role are maintaining the task orientation of the project team, particularly keeping it on time, and on budget. The other role of consideration is enacted when the

leader supports team members, assists in fulfilling their personal needs and ambitions, and generally does team building. Consideration is also expressed as the leader defuses conflict between team members and builds emotional attachment for the team and creates an appropriate social climate to the support the task. Snow *et al.* (1996) noted that in addition to defining the team's mission to key stakeholders, the leadership role is crucial for directing the project and for encouraging team members. Team members are unlikely to believe in the vision if the project leader is unable to organise daily project tasks and support people through the setbacks of the day. In a recent meta-analysis of original data, Judge *et al.* (2004) concluded that both dimensions are significantly related to a number of leadership criteria.

Although initiation and consideration are important, success as a proactive firelighter requires a continued focus on the elements of transformational leadership – the ability to express vision and promote inspirational motivation to support the project when transactional rewards may not be available. This may be the case at the beginning of the project when benefits are anticipated rather than realised. Other aspects of transformational leadership are required when problems occur and the established routines need to be revised or more drastically when a major crisis occurs and radical change is needed. The effective leader is able to handle change and deal with uncertainty by engaging followers in creative problem solving (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). Transformational leaders "stimulate their followers' effort to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways" (Bass *et al.*, 2003, p. 208).

Bass *et al.* (2003) define four components of transformational leadership which are aligned with the firelighter style:

(1) Idealised influence represents role-modelling behaviour where the leader instils pride, faith, and respect, and has a gift for seeing what is really important, and transmits a sense of mission.

(2) Inspirational motivation represents the use of images and symbols that enable the leader to raise the expectations and beliefs of their follower concerning the mission and vision.

(3) Individualised consideration represents providing experiential learning and occurs when the leader delegates a project, provides coaching and teaching, and treats each follower as an individual.

(4) Intellectual stimulation arises when the leader arouses followers to think in new ways in order to tackle problems, and the use of reasoning and planning before taking action. Effectively used, it can assist in the cognitive development of the follower and leader.

Transformational leadership involves raising the consciousness of followers by appealing to higher ideals and values, and moving the focus of followers away from their self-interests as encouraged by transactional leadership (Bass *et al.*, 2003). In other words, leaders encourage their followers to consider their actions beyond simply "what is in it for them". Transformational leadership is required to promote understanding of the wider benefits of the project among the stakeholders.

Project managers readily identify with the description of being a firefighter as they see themselves being called on to continually solve problems and put out fires. Less

well understood is how broader strategic outcomes can be achieved. The contribution of our firefighter-firelighter model is to expand understanding of the importance of the firelighter role.

Applying the firefighter-firelighter model

"A project manager is a businessman, a psychologist, an accountant, a technician, part designer, part nuts-and-bolts: a truly rare combination of skills" (Birnberg, 1998). A project manager wears many hats in orchestrating the project's progress and the firm/client partnership. The Project Management Institute (PMI, 2004) has developed a taxonomy, the project management body of knowledge (PMBOK) which identifies eight primary management competencies, which require the management of scope, time, cost, risk, quality, contract, communication and human resource. Project managers need to be highly effective people – people who possess knowledge of the technical details of their jobs as well as the capacity to get things done by leading the project team effectively.

The above description of the role of project manager underscores the need to develop leadership competence. The firelighter component of our model combines the day-to-day maintenance behaviours as well as the transformational behaviours. Having a vision is important for creating understanding of purpose but by itself it is insufficient for harnessing the energy of the group to solve problems as they occur. The project manager needs to be skilled in task and people behaviours to meet practical demands of the job. The project manger will, almost on a daily basis, need to adapt project members task perceptions to changing contingencies (e.g. late deliveries) and resolve the interpersonal and emotional issues arising from the grind of schedules and work pressures.

The well-defined set of project management skills contained in the PMBOK model (PMI, 2004) with their associated clear training pathways and tangible tools may result in an undue emphasis on monitoring. The prevalence of software tools in project management with their emphasis on monitoring past data reinforce a project leadership style that is reactive. The output from the software application encourages fire fighting. The monitoring software prominently displays deviations from goals and engenders a situation where the project leader should be seen to take control by implementing immediate corrective action. Reliance on monitoring software tools shapes the behaviour of the project leader in a reactive firefighter manner through the project life cycle.

An elusive ability that is crucial for good leadership in project management, but is often neglected, is the perception and control of forthcoming problems. To avoid reactive behaviour, project leaders need to perceive the forthcoming problems and be proactive in preventing the problems from occurring. In these instances, project managers become firelighters with the ability to motivate their teams to change and to implement different work practices that prevent the problems from occurring. Firelighters ignite their team's creativity and motivate the team to adopt the requisite behaviours to deal with the problem.

Firelighter leaders will exhibit a mix of transactional and transformational behaviours. However they will rely more on the transformational and active transactional behaviours rather than the more reactive behaviours of management by exception. The active transactional behaviours also provide the bridge to a firelighter

style of leadership for project managers who are caught in the confusion of reactive fire fighting. Particularly for a project manager, who has to perform within short time frames to produce specific outcomes, the shift to transformational behaviours is likely to hinge on being successful at the level of active transactional behaviours.

The firefighter-firelighter model with its linkage to leadership theory enables different leadership skills to be formally identified and addressed in the selection and training of project managers. The model shows a full range of leadership styles but weights the importance of the firelighter behaviours. The firelighter leader will have experience in initiating structure, providing emotional consideration and demonstrated competency in transformational behaviours, whereas the firefighter will focus on tackling problems as they arise.

The project leader needs to be a firelighter who maintains commitment to shared outcomes, encourages reflection before action and coaches others to achieve demanding objectives. The leader of the project team interacts with a number of networks. In this sphere the project manager has to be an ambassador and represent the team to others while at the same time protect the team from interference, explain the way ahead and motivate these external stakeholders to pursue objectives cooperatively with the project team.

Conclusion

The paper defines two different leadership styles for project managers. It introduces the firefighter-firelighter analogy to explore the distinction between leadership driven by crisis management and reliant on reactive problem solving compared with a leadership style that is proactive and seeks to align wider outcomes.

The paper challenges the belief that project leadership is principally about firefighting. The firelighter style defines a way of overcoming the inertia of reactive leadership. Doing so requires a leadership style that enables the capacity to connect daily problem solving with planned strategies that may circumvent foreseeable problems and align the project's progress with the important outcomes.

The firelighter leadership style is certainly more complex than that of the firefighter. The model identifies a set of firelighter leadership behaviours that are observable and provides practical implications for selection of a different style of project manager. It also enables significant changes in the performance evaluation of project managers.

Nevertheless, the research is embryonic on the connection between firefighter and firelighter leadership styles and future research is required on the impact of different firelighter leadership behaviours on the project outcomes. The paper has touched on the need for further research into support tools that will encourage project managers to lead project teams in ways that envision, mitigate and prevent problems. Tools that support predictive trends in a project's progress will enhance the leadership abilities of project managers who adopt a firelighter leadership style.

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