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LEADERSHIP IN IT PROJECTS: A CASE STUDY FROM POLISH COMPANY

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Purpose: The main goal of the study was to investigate the potential of servant leadership in increasing the effectiveness of IT project teams and to assess its impact on organizational culture. In addition, an analysis of leadership styles was conducted according to Hersey and Blanchard's situational model.
Design/methodology/approach: In-depth interviews were used to assess the potential of servant leadership in the IT industry, which were conducted among 5 leaders from the IT industry, while the analysis of leadership styles was conducted based on the LEAD-Self questionnaires developed by Hersey and Blanchard. The Benedictine model of management was included as an additional ethical context.
Findings: research results indicate that servant leadership has an impact on increasing the effectiveness of project teams and organizational culture. This is because it allows the project goals to harmonize with the needs of the participants, creating a symbiotic arrangement conducive to the development of both the team and the project. In addition, the LEAD-Self questionnaire shows that the dominant primary style, which the survey of leaders uses most often, is a supportive style.
Practical implications: Implications for organizations and leaders are given in the publication. The most important of them is to promote a supportive style among leaders that fosters effective and aligned project teams, as well as to implement proven leadership models, such as servant leadership, that incorporate ethical and moral values into project management.
Originality/value: The publication addresses the issue of servant leadership in IT project management and additionally considers the situational approach in this context. By doing so, it influences the expansion of knowledge in the field of human resource management in project management and emphasizes the importance of the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership in combination with the situational approach, which constitutes the originality of the study.
Keywords: leadership in project management, servant leadership, situational leadership, IT projects, benedictine model.
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The dynamic and constantly changing environment of IT projects makes it necessary for managers to not only interpret the changing needs of the market, but also to anticipate future technological trends. Moreover, IT projects are considered difficult ventures because they exhibit characteristics that distinguish them from other projects and increase the likelihood of failure (Khan et al., 2024). For example, it is necessary here for the project team to constantly respond to emerging needs in a timely manner and to work in interdisciplinary teams (Podgórska, 2022). This poses unique challenges for leaders in shaping effective project teams and building a supportive organizational culture. In this context, servant leadership, which focuses on team support and development, is a promising solution. The implication is that servant leadership integrates ethical and moral principles with management practices, supporting effective coping with change and technological challenges. The importance of this form of leadership also stems from the growing awareness of the importance of ethics in management. Also of interest in this context is the ability to flexibly adapt leadership style, which, as Hersey and Blanchard (2013) point out, should be tailored to the level of readiness and maturity of the team, allowing leaders to effectively manage teams in different project situations. Additionally, project managers' understanding of their own leadership style and the ability to predict team member's readiness to work are key in guiding people and projects (Kerzner, 2006; Podgórska, Detko, 2023).

The specifics of working in project teams, especially in the IT industry with agile approaches, include a number of key aspects that affect the effectiveness of project execution. Among some of the most important issues related to project success, the skills of the team and the ability of its members to self-organize are mentioned here. It also points to issues of how the agile approach fits into the corporate culture, for example, in terms of planning, reporting, hierarchical structures and just leadership. Additionally, the challenges of managing projects using agile approaches included: high capacity requirement of the users for testing, limited communication of large and distributed teams and more time and budget required in case of iterative development (Thesing et al., 2021).

Taking this into account, the main goal of the article was to explore the servant leadership potential in increasing the IT project teams effectiveness and to assess its impact on organizational culture. In addition, an analysis of leadership styles was conducted in accordance with Hersey and Blanchard's (2013) situational model. In order to achieve the aim of the research, the following three research questions were asked, i.e.:

1. What competencies should a modern IT project leader possess?
2. What characteristics should an IT project leader avoid?
3. What leadership style is dominant in contemporary IT project leaders?

2. Theorethical background

2.1. Competencies of a leader in IT project management

The evolution of project management has affected the role of the leader in shaping organizational culture, especially in the context of complex IT projects. The traditional approach, in which the leader mainly played the role of a manager focused on processes and tools, has evolved into a leadership style that places more emphasis on interpersonal aspects and teamwork. Moreover, in the digital age, where IT projects are becoming increasingly complex, leaders must not only manage resources and processes, but also inspire and motivate their teams. An effective IT project leader is not just a formal position, but first and foremost embodies the attitude of a natural leader who can inspire and motivate a team to action. With his charisma, commitment and ability to build relationships, he guides the team through the complexities of the project, supporting them at every stage and striving for mutual success (Podgórska, Juda, 2018; Podgórska, 2022; Podgórska, Detko, 2023).

A project leader, according to Blanchard and Broadwell (2019), should be the incarnation of servant leadership, focusing on the human dimension of management and shaping a culture that supports innovation and collaboration. Project management, therefore, requires a holistic approach that considers all these elements in a coherent way, which is the essence of effective leadership in IT projects and building the desired organizational culture.

In the PMBoK (2021) standard, the role of the project leader equated with the project manager is multidimensional. The standard describes the project leader as the person responsible for achieving project goals. For a better understanding of this role, the PMBoK project manager's responsibilities are broken down into specific areas pertaining to the various functions that occur in a project. In PRINCE2 (2019), on the other hand, one can see an emphasis on managing projects in controlled environments with a strong emphasis on the division of roles, management of project milestones, and regular reporting. In this approach, the manager focuses on executing the project according to the established framework, ensuring that all processes are followed and the project is delivered efficiently, on schedule and on budget. In the agile approach - Scrum, the competencies of a leader include a wide range of qualities and skills. Among the most important are the ability to make decisions, the ability to resolve conflicts, effective communication, and the ability to inspire and motivate team members. A leader should also have in-depth subject matter expertise in the area of the ongoing project and experience in project management. In addition, the ability to adapt to changing conditions and be innovative are essential in a dynamic project environment. Ultimately, the role of the leader is not only to manage, but also to build a cohesive and effective organizational culture that fosters long-term success (Schwaber, Sutherland, 2013).

An analysis of various methodological approaches to project management indicates that today's leader should combine technical competence with interpersonal skills, and emphasizes the role of the leader both in the context of supervision and coordination, as well as in ethical and communication aspects. It can also be concluded that the key qualities of an IT project leader are the ability to inspire and motivate the team, effective communication, conflict resolution and decision-making skills. Flexibility and adaptability in a dynamically changing environment are also important. The leader should promote a culture of continuous learning and innovation, while ensuring the development and well-being of team members.

2.2. Servant leadership in project management

The concept of servant leadership was created by Greenleaf (2013) in the 1970s and assumed that a leader first serves and then leads. It is based on key principles of ethical and effective leadership aimed at transforming organizations and societies. The application of servant leadership in practice shows that it not only supports the development of individuals, but also contributes to the achievement of the organization's strategic goals. Long-term benefits include the development of organizational culture, the individual development of employees and a reduction in staff turnover (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership). This is supported, for example, by Ehrhart's (2004) research, which indicates that servant leadership can improve organizational effectiveness and support employee development, and plays a key role in increasing leader, employee and customer satisfaction. Moreover, research by Wu et al. (2021) indicates that servant leaders are able to bring out servant behavior, especially among subordinates who are strongly focused on self-interest.

Spears (2004) identified ten key characteristics of servant leadership: (1) listening, enabling effective communication and understanding of team needs, (2) empathy: allowing leaders to understand the emotions and needs of their employees, (3) healing, referring to helping the team return to full team effectiveness after conflicts and stressful situations, (4) awareness regarding both one's own emotions and those of the environment, (5) persuasion, used to build consensus and support cooperation, (6) conceptualization, allowing leaders to think creatively and visionarily, (7) foresight enabling proactive planning and risk minimization (8) stewardship concerning responsible management of resources, taking care of technology, people and information with long-term benefits in mind, (9) commitment to the growth of people meaning investing in the skills and competencies, and (10) building community in and around the team and project supports collaboration, knowledge sharing and mutual support, which is critical to project success. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) also identified five key factors that define servant leadership: (1) altruistic calling, (2) emotional understanding, (3) persuasive planning, (4) wisdom, and (5) efficient organizational management. The authors combined these elements to create a harmonious organizational culture that promotes efficiency and consistency in operations.

The collaboration of the above researchers emphasizes that the aforementioned factors are fundamental to building effective and sustainable teams. Their work, combined with Ehrhart's (2004) research, provides a comprehensive picture of how servant leadership can transform organizations, leading to better performance and increased commitment from all team members.

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that in order for the above activities to bring lasting benefits to an organization, it is crucial for a leader to have the right social competencies. Flexibility, adaptability, initiative, leadership skills, the ability to build trust, and verbal fluency are essential for successful project team management.

3. Methods

The in-depth analysis and critique of the literature conducted in the first part of the study allowed for the development and adaptation of research tools. Leadership in project management was studied based on Greenleaf's (2013) concept of servant leadership and Blanchard and Hersey's (2013) concept of situational leadership. The integration of these two approaches allowed the leadership style to be flexibly adapted to the needs of the team. In addition, the analyses included Bombala's (2010) servant leadership perspective, which showed the importance of deep interpersonal relationships as a foundation for effective leadership, and the Benedictine model as an ethical context.

The study used qualitative research using free-form interviewing as a research method, which aimed not only to capture the complexity and dynamics of servant leadership, but also to understand its impact on the effectiveness of project teams. This approach enabled in-depth analysis, which is essential for drawing conclusions and developing recommendations to improve project management practices in the IT industry. In order to create a conducive atmosphere for conversation and to be fully attuned to the interviewee, interviews were conducted in the form of meetings from which notes were taken. In one case, the interview was conducted via the Microsoft Teams application. In addition to the in-depth interview, the study also used a tool to measure leadership styles - the LEAD-Self[1] (1993), which leaders were given after the free-form interview. The questionnaire was designed to assess the effectiveness and adaptability of leaders' leadership styles in various situations. It consists of 12 scenarios that leaders may encounter in their work. Each scenario offers four alternative actions (A, B, C, D), from which the respondent must choose the one that best suits his leadership style.

[1] Leader Effectiveness and Adaptability Description - Self Assessment.

The selection of the sample for the study was justified by the availability and kindness of the respondents, who agreed to devote sufficient time and attention to the interviews. Professional relationships, built by one of the authors of the paper with the respondents over many years and in various projects, provided deep insight into their experiences and perspectives. All of the interviewees work in information technology-related companies, serving as project team managers, making it possible to assess their approaches to leadership. Each leader has unique experiences and approaches to leadership, allowing for a wide range of opinions on the subject. Due to the diversity of roles and the context of the IT industry, the research sample is representative and allows for a comprehensive understanding of project management leadership.

The research included five project team leaders with diverse perspectives on IT project management. The surveyed group included: two Sales Directors, responsible for sales strategy and customer relationship management, one Creative Director, who leads the creative department and overseeing creative and innovative processes, one Product Manager, managing product development and coordinating activities between different departments, and one Project Manager, responsible for implementing projects according to schedule and budget and coordinating the work of project teams. As for the age of the respondents, two of them were in the 30 to 39 age group. This age group represents mature leaders who are in the dynamic stage of their careers and have significant experience in project management. The 40 to 49 age group also included two leaders. Leaders in this age group are characterized by extensive professional experience, which may translate into a more established and mature approach to leadership. The under-30 age group included one leader. This leader brings a younger perspective, which may be important for understanding new trends and approaches in managing project teams in IT. The age group over 50 had no participants, which may indicate the dominance of younger leaders in the IT industry. All leaders surveyed have a university degree (four leaders have a master's degree, and one leader has a part-time university degree). As for the experience of the surveyed leaders, 1 person had experience of 1 to 3 years, one person had experience of 3 to 5 years, and the largest number, 3 leaders, declared experience of 5 to 10 years. None of the surveyed leaders had experience of less than 1 year or more than 10 years. In terms of management certifications, one respondent held aPRINCE2 Foundation certificate, another held a PRINCE2 Foundation and a Prince2 Practitioner certificate, while two respondents held an MBA, indicating advanced management education. Only one respondent had no certification at all.

4. Results

Analysis of the respondents' statements shows that the management style of most of them approaches the concept of *servant leadership.* Respondents emphasize the importance of supporting and developing the skills of team members, which is a key element of servant leadership. Their focus on team development indicates their willingness to serve others and build strong, integrated project teams:

- *Respondent 1:* Encourages participation in training and offers mentoring.
- *Respondent 2:* Regular *feedback* sessions *and coaching.*
- *Respondent 3:* Enables in-house projects.
- *Respondent 4:* Organizes internal training and supports self-study.
- *Respondent 5:* Encourages training and supports implementation of own projects.

In addition, empathy and the ability to support the team is valued, which also fits in with the principles of *servant leadership*:

- *Respondent 2:* Emphasizes empathy and flexibility.
- *Respondent 5:* Values empathy, listening and supporting the team.

The analysis of the statements also shows that respondents strive to build positive and supportive relationships with the team:

- *Respondent 1:* Builds trust and inspires the team.
- *Respondent 2:* Stresses open communication and relationship building.
- *Respondent 3:* Involves the team in decision-making.
- *Respondent 4:* Regular meetings and feedback foster better relationships.
- *Respondent 5: Cares* for the team's well-being and gives them freedom of action.

Moreover, the analysis of the statements shows that the respondents' management style has a significant impact on the organizational culture:

- *Respondent 1:* His inspiring management style positively influences the team's motivation and innovation.
- *Respondent 2:* His flexible style allows the team to work effectively in different situations, which promotes the adaptability of the organization.
- *Respondent 3:* A participative management style leads to better team collaboration and commitment, which builds a positive organizational culture.
- *Respondent 4:* A transactional management style helps achieve goals and maintain discipline, which affects organizational effectiveness.
- *Respondent 5:* His supportive and submissive approach, giving the team freedom, positively influences the motivation and creativity of the team, although it can sometimes lead to a lack of structure.

Taking into account the respondents' answers, the competencies that a leader should possess were distinguished, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1.
Competencies of an ideal leader in IT projects according to respondents

Competencies	Description	Respondent's comments
Inspiring	Motivates and inspires the team to achieve high performance	Respondent 1: Focuses on inspiring and motivating the team, resulting in high performance.
Empathetic and flexible	He is able to adapt to different situations and needs of the team.	Respondent 2: His flexibility allows the team to work effectively in different situations.
Visionary and determined	Has vision and the ability to solve problems and make decisions.	Respondent 3: Stresses the importance of vision, determination and problem-solving skills.
Communicative	Communicate effectively with the team, both formally and informally.	Respondent 4: Highlights regular meetings and *feedback*, which promotes better communication.
Supportive	Promotes the development and well-being of team members.	Respondent 5: Focuses on supporting the team and giving them space to act.

Source: own elaboration.

Respondents also pointed out characteristics that an IT project leader should not have. These included lack of empathy, authoritarian and controlling, or inflexible. A detailed description of the survey responses is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Negative characteristics of a leader in IT projects according to respondents

Characteristics	Description	Respondent's comments
Authoritarian and controlling	Imposes his opinion and does not give the team freedom.	Respondent 5: He described his first leader as authoritarian, which taught him that such a style does not foster good relationships and motivation in the team.
Lacking empathy	Unable to understand and support his team.	Respondent 3: He noted that a leader's lack of empathy leads to low morale and higher employee turnover.
Inflexible	Fails to adapt to changing conditions and team needs.	Respondent 2: Indicated that a leader who is not flexible is often unable to respond effectively to changing project demands, leading to delays and frustration for the team.

Source: own elaboration.

In addition, the results from the LEAD-Self questionnaire indicate that the dominant primary style that the surveyed leaders use most often is a supportive style (B - low level of directive, high level of support). The second most frequent choice is the directive style (A - high level of directive, low level of support). Coaching style (C - high level of directive, high level of support) and delegating style (D - low level of directive, low level of support) are not used by respondents.

5. Discussion

The article posed three research questions. The first question referred to the competencies that a modern IT project leader should possess. The second was related to the characteristics that an IT project leader should avoid, and the third referred to the leadership styles that dominate modern IT project leaders.

Answering the first question, it can be indicated that on the basis of in-depth interviews, key servant leadership competencies were defined that can influence the effectiveness of IT project teams. These include empathy, the ability to listen and support the development of team members. These competencies foster trust and cooperation within the team, which directly translates into higher project performance. The research also found that IT project leaders need to have adaptive competencies, flexibility, communication skills, risk and conflict management, and technical skills in order to effectively manage teams in dynamically changing market and technological conditions. This is also emphasized in previous studies (e.g. Blanchard, Broadwell, 2019). Traditional management, often task-oriented, is characterized by less flexibility and treating employees more objectively.

Regarding the second research question, it should be noted that a modern IT project leader should not impose his opinion on team members and allow them to act freely. Moreover, if a leader is not flexible, he or she is often unable to respond effectively to changing project requirements, leading to delays and frustration for the team. It should also be pointed out that a leader's lack of empathy leads to low morale and higher employee turnover. Indeed, leadership based on empathy and support fosters an open and supportive organizational culture, which in turn increases project effectiveness. These findings are consistent with reports by other researchers (e.g. Ehrhart, 2004; Spears, 2004).

Answering the third research question, it is important to point out that a supportive style, characterized by high levels of support and low levels of directiveness, is conducive to building trust and cooperation within the project team. Moreover, practices such as regular training and mentoring are key to the ongoing development of leaders' competencies, confirming the benefits of applying servant leadership to IT project management. However, the implementation of servant leadership faces challenges and barriers, including the need to make a conscious decision to adopt this perspective and overcome resistance to change and difficulties in adapting to new management methods.

6. Conclusion

This article contributes to the literature on project management in the field of human resource management and from the perspective of organizations implementing IT projects. Moreover, it assesses the potential of servant leadership in the context of IT project management, showing how ethical and moral principles can support effective management in the technology industry. In practice, the article responds to the needs of companies by showing how servant leadership harmonizes the goals of the project with the needs of the participants, creating a symbiotic arrangement conducive to the development of both the team and the project. The findings also served to define the following recommendations.

As for the organization, the following recommendations are proposed: (1) it should be a priority for the organization to promote the concept of servant leadership, focusing on serving the team, developing team members and creating a healthy and ethical organizational culture (2) it is crucial to promote a supportive (B) style, characterized by low levels of directive and high levels of support, among its leaders, as this style fosters the creation of effective project teams in line with the servant leadership concept, (3) it is necessary to invest in the ongoing development of leaders by offering training programs, courses and certification opportunities. Leaders should be encouraged to regularly participate in professional development programs and benefit from mentoring and coaching, (4) organizations should also invest in developing leaders' competencies in IT project management, especially in terms of adaptability and flexibility in the face of changing market and technological conditions, (5) it is important for organizations to invest in new technologies that support the technical aspects of management and contribute to the development of an organizational culture that promotes innovation, collaboration and a strategic approach to management. Artificial intelligence-supported tools improve communication and coordination within teams, enabling leaders to quickly monitor progress, identify problems and make decisions. In turn, the automation of administrative processes saves time that can be spent on integrating teams, training and building a strong organizational culture.

Implementing servant leadership brings numerous benefits not only to the organization itself, but also to its stakeholders, including customers and employees' families. Effective implementation of servant leadership can bring long-term benefits, contributing to building a healthy, ethical and innovative organizational culture that supports employee development and the achievement of the organization's strategic goals.

The results of this study can serve as a valuable resource for promoting the concept of servant leadership among leaders and for companies seeking to increase organizational maturity. The findings and recommendations presented can support leaders in developing core competencies and implementing ethical and effective management practices that foster trust, collaboration and effectiveness in IT project teams.

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