



Prof. Ralf Muller

and his team

Prof. Shankar Sankaran
and Prof. Nathalie Drouin

IPMA Global Research Award 2019

Category: IPMA Research Award
Research Award Winner 2019

for the Research project:

Project Balanced Leadership in Projects

Existing theory tends to explain leadership either from a person-centered (e.g. project manager) or a team-centered (e.g. project team) perspective. Observed reality shows that leadership in projects is more diverse than that. A global study by 23 researchers in nine country teams used 54 case studies, 255 interviews and a worldwide questionnaire to investigate the particularities and impact of different forms of leadership in projects. Four different types of leadership were identified. The two traditional leadership types of vertical leadership by the project manager and shared/distributed leadership by project team members. These are complemented by two new, project specific leadership types, which are horizontal leadership, where the project manager temporarily appoints a leader from the team and follows, but also governs this leader throughout the appointment, and

balanced leadership, which is the application of the three leadership types in situational contingency over the life cycle of the project.

Horizontal leadership is so far only found in projects and consist of five events: nomination (of project team members), identification (of possible horizontal leaders), selection (of team members as temporary horizontal leaders), horizontal leadership by a team member and its governance by the project manager, and transition (of the horizontal leader to the team role). The five events are coordinated in a socio-cognitive space between the project manager and the team through a shared understanding of three key elements: empowerment (who is currently “in charge” as a leader), self-management (how good the person is in this role), and shared mental models (which

skills are available, through whom, and when). The particular combination of these three elements defines the extent to which horizontal leadership is possible.

Balanced leadership defines the situations under which any of the leadership styles is appropriate, such as horizontal leadership for problem solving by an expert, distributed leadership for innovation, vertical leadership for time/cost/quality decisions.

The results help project management practitioners to improve their leadership efficiency through conscious application of the socio-cognitive space, deliberate use of the five events with pro-active selection of possible horizontal leaders, and greater transparency in decision making and project leadership dynamics.

Zagreb
2019

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