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Project Manager Leadership Styles: Task vs. People-Oriented

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored applicable leadership behavior in terms of concern for task and/or people-oriented when leading project teams. Students enrolled in a university Master of Science in Project Management degree program were asked to respond to the Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment which is a useful framework to determine task-versus people-oriented leadership (Lusser & Achua, 2016). A chi-square test was conducted to determine if the observed values were significantly different from an expected value of five. With a p value $< .001$, the differences were determined to be significant. The chi-square goodness of fit test led to the rejection of $H1_0$ and the acceptance of $H1_a$. Additionally, the chi-square goodness of fit test led to the rejection of $H2_0$ and the acceptance of $H2_a$. The Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment, which is a useful framework for evaluating task-versus people-oriented leadership, revealed the students in a Master of Science in Project Management degree program tended to be more task or relationship leadership oriented, indicating that a concern for task and concern for people may be equally important, especially when managing projects internationally in different cultures which require situational leadership. The findings of this study have significant implications for leadership behavior when leading project teams. The findings can contribute to better understanding of the leadership styles which characterize project managers when leading project teams.

INTRODUCTION

The PmBOK (2013) has noted, “One of the key indicators of whether a project manager can successfully lead and develop individuals and project team is the use of interpersonal skills”. There is a wide range of interpersonal skills that a project manager must develop and learn to use at the appropriate time to include leadership, communications, organizing, team building, coping skills, technical, risk management, conflict, planning, administration, resource allocation, and change management (Kerzner, 2001; Pinto & Trialer, 1998). One of these key interpersonal skills is leadership which undoubtedly project managers must provide to successfully compete projects within the triple constraints of scope, schedule, and budget (PmBOK, 2013). Additionally, a project manager’s leadership personality, and his or her understanding of the personalities and behaviors of others, assist him or her in predicting a stakeholder’s behavior and job performance which is crucial in managing stakeholder engagement (Yukl, 2011; PmBOK, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The earliest research on leadership attempted to answer the question, “Are leaders born or made?” or, put differently, “Do leaders have certain personal attributes such as intelligence, honesty, self-confidence, appearance, or energy, that that common people do not have?” (Daft, 2011). After years of research, the leadership trait theory failed to produce a list of key leadership traits needed for success (Daft, 2011; Lewis, 2003). In the early 1950s, researchers shifted from the trait theory to behavioral theories which focuses on what the leader does, rather than who he or she is (Daft, 2011). One leadership study that served as a forerunner to the leadership behavior approach was the University of Iowa study conducted by Kurt Lewin and associates which recognized two basic leadership styles: autocratic leadership which tends to lead by position power, control of rewards, and coercion, and democratic leadership which relies on and encourages employees to participate in decisions, and respects the employees’ skills and knowledge (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939).

Moreover, leadership research on how leaders functioned in small groups was conducted at the University of Michigan under the direction of Rensis Likert who developed a questionnaire to gather data on leadership styles. This research identified two leadership styles: job-centered (extent to which the leader takes charge to get the job completed), and employee-centered (extent to which leader focuses on meeting the human needs of employees) (Lussier & Achua, 2016). Around the same time period, leadership studies were conducted at Ohio State which revolved around how leaders behaved when they were in charge of a work group or a work organization (Daft, 2011). Based on this research, two wide-ranging categories of leader behavior types emerged: consideration (the extent to which a leader is sensitive to subordinates, respects their ideas and feelings, establishes mutual trust, seeks input, finds the time to listen to subordinates, consults with subordinates on important matters or problem solving, expresses willingness to accept suggestions from subordinates, and treats subordinates as equals) and initiating structure (the extent to which a leader is task oriented by defining the subordinates' roles and tasks, directing subordinates' work activities toward goal achievement, ruling with an "iron hand," criticizing poor work, emphasizing the importance of meeting deadlines, and offering new approaches to problems) (Daft, 2011). According to the Ohio State leadership studies, a leader can display a high degree of both types, a low degree of both types, high consideration and low initiating structure, or low consideration and high initiating structure behavior (Lussier & Achua, 2016).

In 1951, Fred E. Fiedler developed leadership contingency theory which states that a leader's effectiveness is contingent, or dependent, on two sets of factors: whether the leader is task-oriented or relationship-oriented. Leaders who have task-oriented personality types tend to have considerable focus on details. They are not comfortable initiating an action plan until they are satisfied they have all the necessary facts. On the other hand, people who have relationship-oriented personality types tend to have considerable focus on the results and are comfortable initiating an action-plan when they have just the essential facts (Blake & Mouton, 1982).

One variable that influences a project manager's leadership style is his or her personality which shapes how he or she interacts and communicates with team members and key stakeholders (Lussier & Achua, 2016). Therefore, it is understandable that a project manager would apply leadership skills that matched his or her personality to have the greatest chance of achieving project success (Lewis, 2003). Clearly, a project manager must manage the classic triangle of deadline, scope, and budget along with leadership and personality needed for project success that meets stakeholders' expectations in a world where changes occur rapidly and dealing with different cultures is paramount (Lindblad, 2014). Therefore, we began our consideration of project manager leadership and personality types by accepting the premise that nowhere is the interpersonal skills of leadership and matching personality more important than with managing an organization's projects. Consequently, the success of a project relies on the effectiveness of a project manager's leadership communications skills to promote the chances of developing a high-performing project team and achieving the project's charter (Dow & Taylor, 2015). As a result, a project manager's leadership skills and type can greatly impact the achievement of the organization's project (PMBOK, 2013).

Leadership is typically situational (Hogg & Rast, 2012); thus project managers must realize that different situations call for different leadership styles because the type of leadership required for the life of the project with change and project managers will likely need to use different leadership approaches throughout the life of a project (Mulcahy, 2013). To lead team members, project managers must first know themselves (Snyder, 2012). Therefore, it is important for project managers to understand personality and correctly adjust their leadership style based on the maturity, experience, and the needs of the project team members and the complexity of the project(s) being worked (Mulcahy, 2013).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this present research study was to assess the overall alignment of survey results of project management graduate students who took the Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment survey as a means of developing insight of the leadership skills by evaluating results.

HYPOTHESES

H₁₀: Students in the Master of Science in Project Management program do not exhibit high task-oriented behavior as indicated in their leadership assessment scores.

H1_a: Students in the Master of Science in Project Management program do exhibit high task-oriented behavior as indicated in their leadership assessment scores.

H2₀: Students in the Master of Science in Project Management program do not exhibit high relationship-oriented behavior as indicated in their leadership assessment scores.

H2_a: Students in the Master of Science in Project Management program do exhibit high relationship-oriented behavior as indicated in their leadership assessment scores.

METHODOLOGY

Thus, we began our consideration of project management students' leadership styles with the following research question:

- 1) Do students in a Master of Science in Project Management degree program report that they exhibit applicable leadership behavior in terms of concern for task and/or people-oriented when leading project teams?

To find the answers for this question, a comprehensive literature review was completed followed by research hypotheses. By utilizing quantitative research methods, the Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment, which is a useful framework to consider to determine task-versus people-oriented leadership, has been used for data collection. After a descriptive analysis, a chi-square analysis was completed and results produced.

Data Collection

University students enrolled in a graduate project management degree program were requested to complete the Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment survey. Participants answered a short questionnaire which enables the classification of a person's traits using the Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment survey. The student responses were tabulated to determine their preferred leadership style.

Sample Characteristics

Project management graduate students working in various industries and organizations across the United States to include U.S. military members responded to the survey; in total, 131 graduate students answered the Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment survey. The Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment questionnaire could be considered a substantial sample of the overall population. To determine the students' Fielder leadership style, they were requested to complete a self-assessment which is a useful framework to consider to determine task- versus people-oriented leadership (Lusser & Achua, 2016). This self-assessment consisted of 20 questions that assessed the project management students on their task and relationship leadership styles. The Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment survey was completed between academic terms 2015 and 2016. Respondents' privacy and confidentiality were strictly protected.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Hypotheses:

H1₀: Students in the Master of Science in Project Management program do not exhibit high task-oriented behavior as indicated in their leadership assessment scores.

H1_a: Students in the Master of Science in Project Management program do exhibit high task-oriented behavior as indicated in their leadership assessment scores.

H2₀: Students in the Master of Science in Project Management program do not exhibit high relationship-oriented behavior as indicated in their leadership assessment scores. *H2_a*: Students in the Master of Science in Project

Management program do exhibit high relationship-oriented behavior as indicated in their leadership assessment scores.

The Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment, which is a useful framework for evaluating task-versus people-oriented leadership, revealed the students in a Master of Science in Project Management degree program, tended to be both more task and relationship leadership oriented. As a first step in evaluating the hypotheses, the descriptive statistics of the results of the student assessment were collected and evaluated.

High Task Leadership Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

From inspection of the descriptive statistics in Table 1, it is evident that the mean is greater than the midpoint (a score of 5), and the most common score (mode) was 9.

Table 1. *High Task Leadership Data Analysis responses*

High Task	
Mean	7.11
Median	7
Mode	9
Standard Deviation	2.25
Count	129

Frequency Analysis-High Task

The overall distribution of scores is provided in the frequency analysis chart. From inspection, the majority of scores exceeded the midpoint.

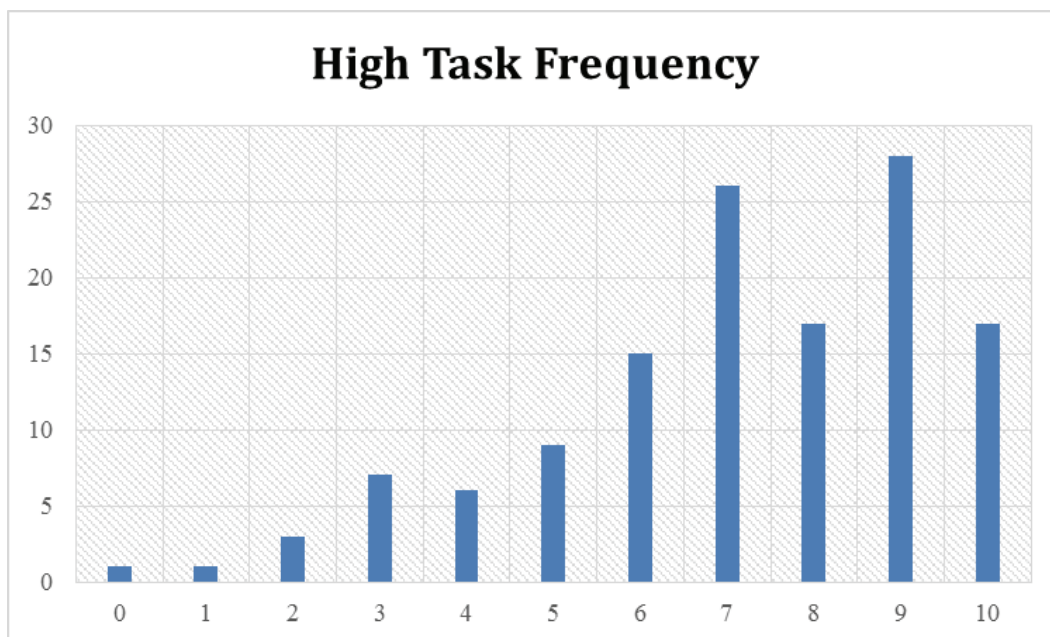


Figure 1. Frequency Analysis-High Task Ranked Responses

Significance of leadership scores

A clear pattern is observed in the descriptive statistics and frequency analysis. Of interest is the degree to which and significance of the scores above the mid-point scores of the assessment tool. The data is presented graphically as follows.

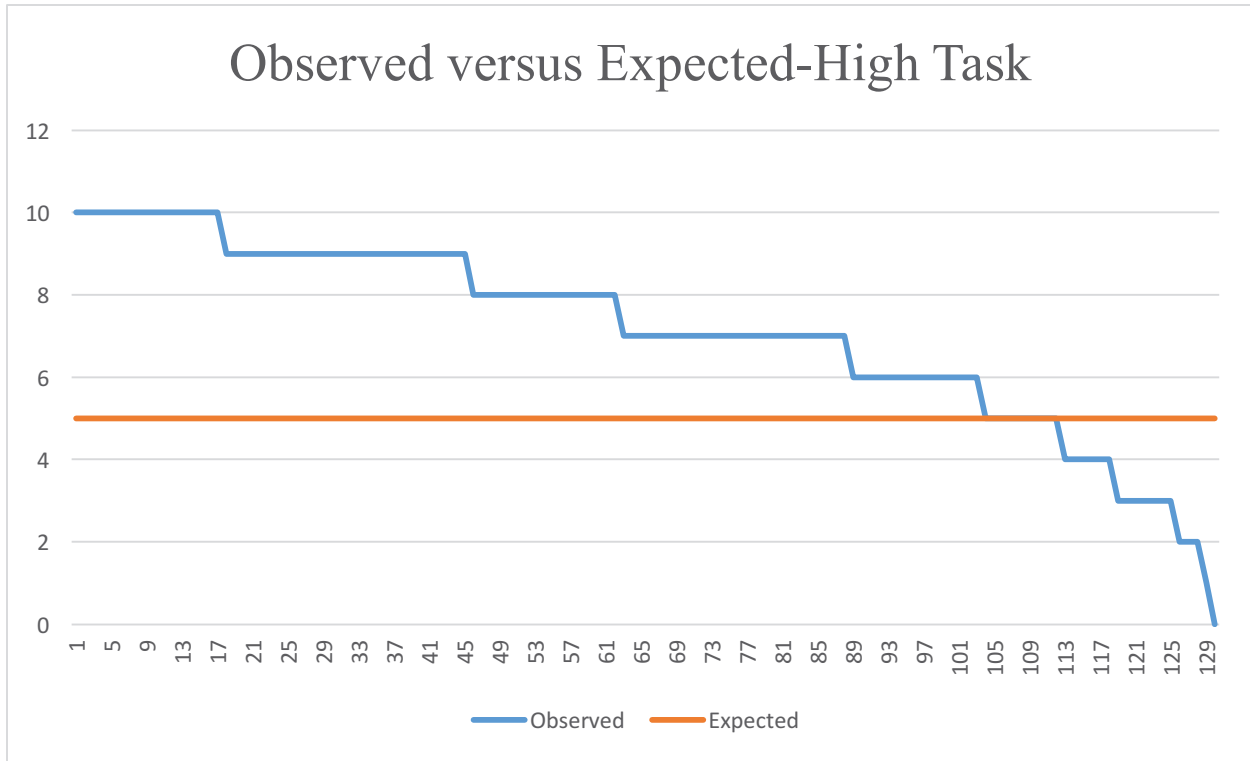


Figure 2. Observed versus Expected-High Task Responses

A chi-square test was conducted to determine if the observed values were significantly different from an expected value of five. With a p value < .001, the differences were determined to be significant. The chi-square goodness of fit test leads to the rejection of $H1_0$ and the acceptance of $H1_a$ (Minitab, 2013).

High Relationship Leader Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

From inspection of the descriptive statistics in Table 2, it is evident that the mean is greater than the midpoint (a score of 8.4), and the most common score (mode) was 10.

Table 2. High Relationship Leader Data

High Task	
Mean	8.4
Median	9
Mode	10
Standard Deviation	2.63
Count	129

Frequency-High Relationship

The overall distribution of scores is provided in the frequency analysis chart. From inspection, the majority of score exceeded the midpoint.

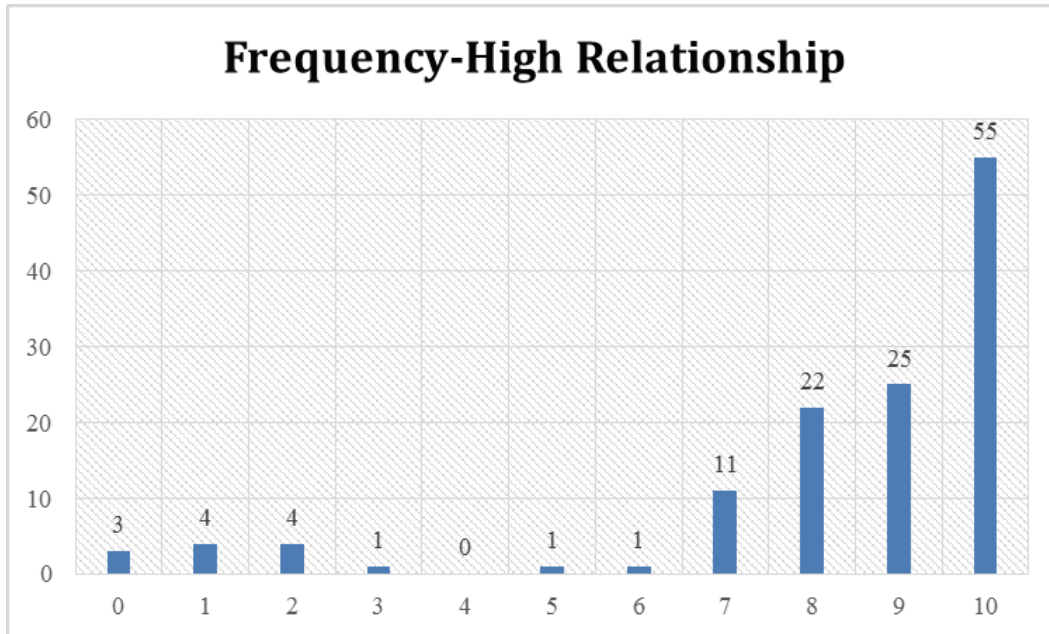


Figure 3. Frequency-High Relationship Ranked Responses

Significance of leadership scores

A clear pattern is observed in the descriptive statistics and frequency analysis. Of interest is the degree to which and significance of the scores above the mid-point scores of the assessment tool. The data is presented graphically as follows.

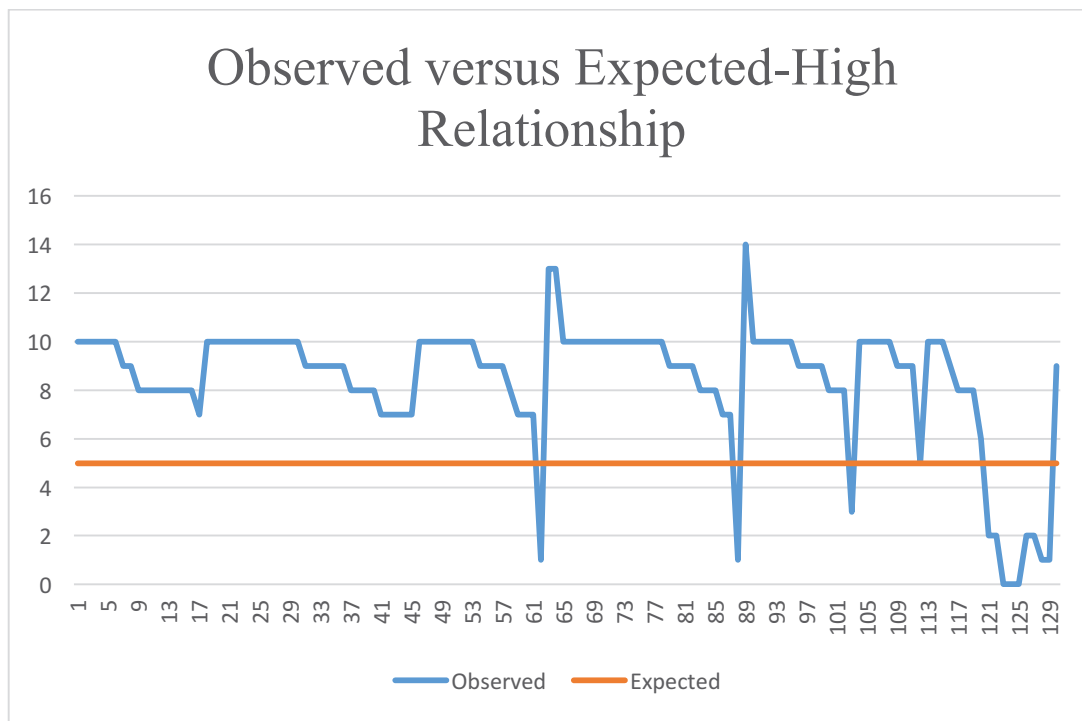


Figure 4. Observed versus Expected-High Relationship Responses

A chi-square test was conducted to determine if the observed values were significantly different from an expected value of five. With a p value $< .001$, the differences were determined to be significant. The chi-square goodness of fit test leads to the rejection of $H2_0$ and the acceptance of $H2_a$ (Minitab, 2013).

SUMMARY

This present research study was designed as an exploratory measure by utilizing the Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment which as a useful framework to determine task-versus people-oriented leadership used for data collection. One hundred thirty-one university students enrolled in a project management graduate degree program responded to the instrument. Our study results show project management graduate students exhibit a distribution pattern.

In conclusion, project managers are hired to manage projects using the triple constraints of time, cost and scope/quality. Not only is effective management necessary for ensuring projects are delivered on time, within budget and meeting scope specifications, but leadership skills are especially important for the project's success. The present study identifies leadership skills in terms of using task and/or concern for people. This study provides evidence on project management effectiveness with the intent of contributing to a better understanding and improvement of project management practices in the leadership behavior context. The findings of this study also have implications for teaching project leadership and within the project management literature; there is a lack of studies with a leadership perspective in general.

Ideally, the results of this present study will assist faculty and project management students to take a more positive approach to understanding their leadership task/relationship styles as it relates to project management. The Fielder Leadership Style Self-Assessment can be used by project management degree graduate students to help them better understand how their leadership styles for effective project management. Additionally, educational institutions can use this information when developing project management courses and lesson plans to assist students in assessing their and developing their leadership skills. It is significant that project management students know how to choose the leadership style for excellent project performance.

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