

LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

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Abstract: This article aims to examine effective leadership approaches essential for successful international project management. It begins by discussing principles of successful project management, followed by an exploration of transformational and transactional leadership styles, which are the most relevant and frequently applied in this context. The article evaluates project management effectiveness and highlights the unique challenges of leadership in international projects, focusing on the management of culturally diverse teams. Lastly, it addresses international leadership challenges, including communication barriers and cultural sensitivities. This article provides insights and strategies for leaders to enhance their effectiveness in a global project landscape.

Keywords: international projects, leadership, project management

JEL Classification: J530, M540

Introduction

The understanding of leadership has evolved considerably throughout human history. For centuries, leadership was seen as a personal quality, with thinkers like Confucius, Plato and Machiavelli emphasising virtues, wisdom and intelligence in leaders. In the 19th century, Carlyle's "great man" theory portrayed leaders as exceptional individuals. After World War II, leadership began to be understood as a process of influence, with scholars like Stogdill and Kotter defining it as guiding groups toward

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goals, often through non-coercive means. By the 1990s, thinkers like Bass viewed leadership as an interactive process, where anyone in a group could influence and lead, shifting focus from individual traits to group dynamics (Silva, 2016).

Leadership goes beyond achieving immediate goals or personal accomplishments; it is about creating a legacy. A leader's true legacy is measured by their impact on people, organisations, and society (Georgescu, 2023).

Today's leaders need more than technical skills; they require leadership abilities such as motivation, team building, negotiation, communication, and influence. Leaders must also address common team dysfunctions, including lack of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results, to ensure effective teamwork (Tunc, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to explore effective leadership strategies for managing international projects, emphasising the unique challenges that arise in cross-cultural and geographically dispersed teams. It aims to provide insights into how leaders can foster collaboration, ensure clear communication, and drive project success across diverse cultural and organisational boundaries.

Methodology

The analysis is based on a comprehensive review of the scholarly literature, focusing on academic studies, theoretical frameworks, and applied research findings in the field of international project management.

The review process involved identifying key themes and trends related to leadership practices, cross-cultural management, and strategic decision-making in global projects. This was achieved by analysing a diverse range of literature that encompasses theoretical perspectives, empirical studies, and case analyses. Particular attention was given to identifying challenges and opportunities faced by leaders in international project environments, as well as best practices for effective leadership in diverse and dynamic settings.

By integrating findings from various sources, this methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The aim is to provide a synthesised and structured overview that not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge but also offers actionable insights for practitioners and researchers in the field.

It is also worth highlighting potential directions for further research that the author intends to pursue in the context of expanding the explored topic. The author plans further research on the effectiveness of leadership strategies in international projects, considering global changes and technological advancements. The goal is to develop frameworks to support leaders in adapting to diverse cultures and organisational contexts.

Successful project management

Several widely accepted insights about project management include that project-based work has become a standard approach for structuring business operations, holds significant strategic value for project-oriented companies, and serves as the primary method for managing change in modern organisations (Aarseth et al., 2010).

Project management is inherently linked to change management. Many experts argue that there is no single leadership style that suits all project management contexts. Different leadership approaches yield varying results depending on the type of change project and the stage of its life cycle (Musa, 2024). Table 1 presents various leadership styles and how they fit into three organisational contexts: stable, significant change, and transformational change.

Table 1. The effectiveness of various leadership styles across different types of projects

Leadership style	Relatively stable	Context-significant change	Transformational change
Goal-oriented	Good fit	Moderate fit	Poor fit
Engaging	Poor fit	Moderate fit	Good fit
Involving	Moderate fit	Good fit	Moderate fit

Source: (Musa, 2024)

Table 1 indicates that the effectiveness of leadership styles varies by organisational context. Goal-oriented leadership works best in stable environments but struggles during significant or transformational change. In contrast, engaging leadership excels in times of significant and transformational change, as it effectively motivates and inspires teams. Involving leadership shows moderate effectiveness across all contexts, particularly in significant change, where collaboration is crucial. Overall, leaders should adapt their styles based on the context to effectively lead their teams and achieve organisational goals.

Committed project managers demonstrate strong organisational skills, reliability, and efficiency. They are known for detailed planning, strict adherence to project timelines, and maintaining high standards in project execution. These qualities significantly increase the chances of project success, helping to keep projects on schedule and within budget (Luo, 2024).

Defining project success requires a clear understanding of the factors that contribute to achieving desired outcomes. Project success is characterised by (Gronwald, 2017):

- fulfilling the project's technical requirements or achieving its intended mission.
- achieving a high degree of satisfaction among stakeholders;
- while technical performance is closely tied to how success is perceived, cost and schedule adherence are somewhat less critical to this perception;
- strong performance in terms of timeline and budget holds little value if the final product falls short in quality or effectiveness.

Personality plays a crucial role in project success as it influences interactions with team members, stakeholders, and the broader environment. Two Myers-Briggs Type Indicator dimensions, extraversion/introversion and judging/perceiving impact a project manager's approach (Luo, 2024):

- a) Extraversion vs. Introversion: Extraverted managers are strong communicators and engage directly, which may sometimes lead to conflict, while introverted managers rely more on intuition and strategic planning. Introverts may focus

more on individual team needs, while extroverts may prioritise overall results. Both styles have advantages but lead to different outcomes.

- b) **Judging vs. Perceiving:** This dimension affects project planning. Managers who rely on intuition may prefer intuitive information sources, while those with a judging orientation may use logic and data analysis for decision-making. These traits shape a project manager's strengths, communication style, and approach to team leadership, influencing project outcomes.

A project's success relies on the skills and competencies of its team members, who drive goal achievement and knowledge-building. Effective human resource management – including recruiting, training, and adapting roles – is essential. In project-based organisations, HR practices must be flexible, focusing on quick responses, cost efficiency, scope, and quality (Kwaśniewski, 2024). Ultimately, the most important measure of success is stakeholder satisfaction (Gronwald, 2017).

Transformational leadership

The effectiveness of transformational leadership is reflected in a leader's capacity to motivate and inspire their followers (Hussain et al., 2024). Transformational leadership has been a popular research topic over the past decades, focusing on specific leadership behaviors and their impact on performance. The theory now includes three main behaviors: idealised influence/inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Transformational leadership builds on transactional leadership by setting high expectations, creating an inspiring vision, and offering individualised support. Through these behaviors, leaders align team goals and values, and foster optimism, team efficacy, and identification, which ultimately boosts employee and organisational performance (Gundersen et al., 2012).

Leaders with transformational leadership skills and abilities play a crucial and practical role within organisations and companies. This is evident when examining the definitions and characteristics of transformational leadership, which highlight its significant impact on organisational effectiveness. Transformational leadership requires several defining traits (Okan, 2023):

- a high degree of courage and resilience,
- lifelong commitment to learning and personal growth,
- acting as a catalyst for change within the organisation,
- effective use of conceptual thinking skills,
- strong belief in the potential of others to foster collaboration,
- ability to encourage identification and internalisation among team members,
- driven by core guiding values,
- crafting and communicating a clear, compelling vision,
- persistence and determination to navigate uncertainty and complexity.

An important aspect in this matter is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model. The JD-R Model examines how job demands and resources impact employee well-being and performance. Job demands, such as workload and work pressure can lead to stress and burnout, lowering performance, while job resources like autonomy,

support, and feedback help employees manage tasks and maintain performance. The model operates through two processes: the health impairment process, where high demands lead to burnout, and the motivational process, where sufficient resources boost performance. Transformational leadership enhances the JD-R Model by providing vision and support, creating a resource-rich environment that helps employees handle demands, reduces burnout, and improves performance (Hussain et al., 2024). The JD-R Model of Work Engagement is presented in Figure 1.

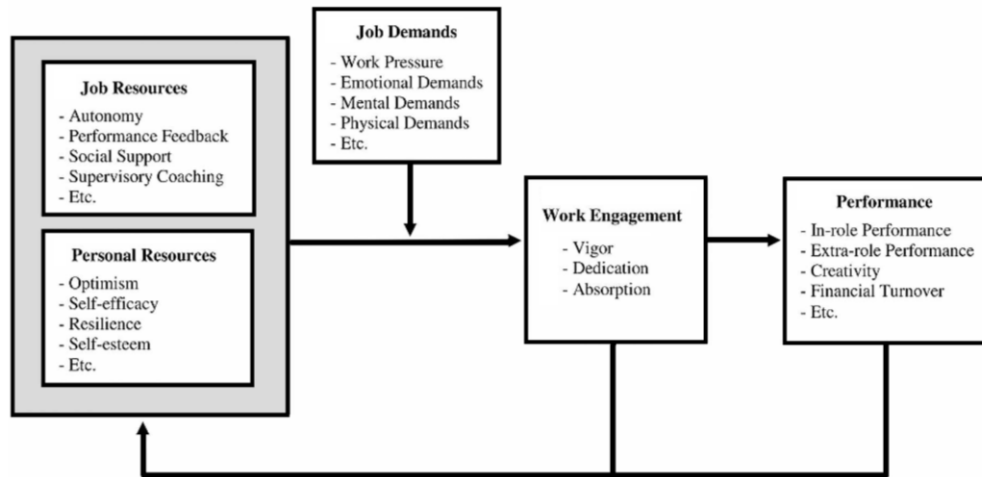


Figure 1. The JD-R Model of Work Engagement

Source: (Memon et al., 2018)

An exemplary case of transformational leadership is Satya Nadella, who, since assuming the role of CEO at Microsoft in 2014, has fundamentally transformed the company's organisational culture. Nadella's focus on empathy significantly reshaped both the internal dynamics of the company and its interactions with external stakeholders. He recognised that comprehending and responding to the needs of employees and customers was essential for achieving sustained success (Humans of Globe, 2024). The challenges faced by Microsoft and the solutions implemented by its CEO, Satya Nadella, to address these issues are presented in Table 2.

Under Nadella's leadership, Microsoft saw significant revenue growth, driven by its successful cloud division and strategic initiatives, boosting investor confidence and market capitalisation (Humans of Globe, 2024). With Satya Nadella at the helm, Microsoft's share price has increased by 969 percent, surpassing the 923 percent growth of Apple over the same timeframe, as well as the stock performance of Amazon, Meta, and Alphabet (Richter, 2024). Microsoft Azure became a key player in cloud computing, and the company's focus on innovation and customer solutions strengthened its market position. Employee satisfaction improved with a more collaborative culture, fostering greater productivity and creativity. Additionally, Microsoft's brand reputation grew, reflecting its commitment to innovation and customer satisfaction (Humans of Globe, 2024).

Table 2. Challenges and solutions at Microsoft under Satya Nadella's leadership

Microsoft's challenges	Nadella's solutions
Intense competition from rivals such as Amazon, Google, and Apple, particularly in cloud computing and consumer technology	Innovation was prioritised, with investments in emerging technologies and strategic partnerships to strengthen Microsoft's competitive position
Lack of a clear vision and cohesive strategy, with a focus on incremental improvements instead of innovation	A focus on innovation and risk-taking led to the success of Microsoft Azure and strategic acquisitions, such as LinkedIn and GitHub, to enhance Microsoft's market position
A competitive and contentious internal culture that hindered collaboration and innovation	A strong emphasis on empathy improved internal collaboration and customer relations, fostering a more customer-centric and team-oriented approach

Source: (Humans of Globe, 2024)

To sum up, transformational leadership is linked to various positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction, motivation, leader effectiveness, and organisational citizenship behavior. Charismatic and team-oriented leadership are universally valued, closely aligning with transformational leadership principles (Gundersen et al., 2012).

Transactional leadership

Transactional leadership was widely embraced at the start of the 21st century when adherence to rules and standard methods was highly valued in projects. However, as work shifted from manual tasks to knowledge-based projects, the relevance of this style has declined. Despite this, project managers often favour a task-oriented approach due to the structured nature of project management. While less popular now, transactional leadership can still be effective for highly process-driven projects or within specific cultural contexts, such as in Asia, where a balanced focus on relationships has proven beneficial in project leadership (Musa, 2024).

This leadership model, recognised as one of the most effective for achieving organisational goals, enhances employee performance by fostering a clear agreement between leaders and team members. These agreements outline specific targets for each team member to meet within a set timeframe. To support these goals, organisational leaders are responsible for providing agreed-upon rewards, including salaries and additional benefits (Santosa et al., 2023). Transactional leadership includes three key elements (Attaallah, 2024):

1. contingent reward, where leaders set clear tasks and reward employees based on task achievement, reinforcing proper behaviours;
2. management-by-exception (active), where leaders actively monitor and correct work when deviations occur;

3. management-by-exception (passive), where leaders only step in if problems arise.

Transactional leadership focuses on aligning employee self-interest with organisational goals through incentives. Unlike transformational leadership, which seeks to inspire beyond self-interest, transactional leadership relies on rewards and sanctions to guide performance effectively (Attaallah, 2024).

The best example of transactional leadership is Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft. Gates demonstrated this style through his emphasis on clear, measurable goals and meticulous planning, which shaped Microsoft's systematic approach to software development and business operations. Gates also utilised performance-based incentives to motivate employees, ensuring they met deadlines and maintained high-quality standards (Miroslavov, 2024). Table 3 presents Bill Gates's leadership strategy, highlighting key aspects of his approach to managing Microsoft.

Table 3. Leadership strategy and organisational practices under Bill Gates at Microsoft

Bill Gates's leadership strategy	
Emphasis on clear goals and structure	Clear, measurable objectives and detailed planning were prioritised, resulting in a systematic approach to operations and adherence to defined roles and organisational guidelines
Control and task orientation	Teams were managed with strict oversight, ensuring task completion and quality. Progress was monitored closely, with questions posed to address challenges and maintain alignment with deadlines
Implementation of rewards and penalties	A structured system of incentives and consequences was utilised to drive performance and uphold quality standards
Confrontational approach and rigorous hiring	Intense discussions were employed to align team efforts with organisational goals, while a stringent hiring process ensured the selection of top talent
Preference for stability over innovation	Established processes were favoured over adaptive or innovative approaches, with a focus placed on linear, well-defined projects

Source: Own study based on (Leadership Development, n.d.)

As a transactional leader, Gates shows limited flexibility in communication and fostering employee engagement. He monitors his team by conducting visits and posing challenging questions, persisting until he receives satisfactory answers

(Ahmed, 2024). This methodology appears to have been effective as evidenced by Microsoft's significant impact in transforming the global technological landscape under his leadership.

Transactional leadership is often applied when an organisation is in a critical phase that demands immediate results from employees, who must perform according to clearly defined objectives. This approach is common in organisations aiming for short-term gains or high performance, such as military units, sports teams, or companies focused on meeting tight deadlines. Unlike other leadership styles that emphasise employee development and long-term growth, transactional leadership centers on achieving immediate productivity and meeting urgent targets (Elnour, 2021). The relationship between Transactional and Transformational Leadership is illustrated in Figure 2.

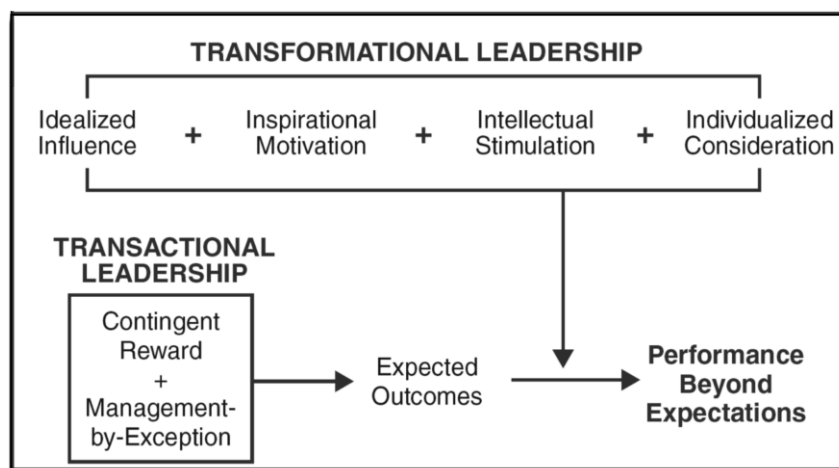


Figure 2. The relationship between transactional and transformational leadership

Source: (Elnour, 2021)

Project management effectiveness

Organisations have always needed to manage resources efficiently. However, as corporate activities grow more diverse, traditional management methods often fall short in addressing new tasks and unexpected challenges. If operations remained constant with routine tasks, established practices would suffice. However, when unique issues arise that demand innovative solutions, project management becomes essential. Unlike other management areas, project management not only aims to meet specific goals through systematic planning but also fosters efficiency, cost reduction, and effectiveness throughout the process (Csiszárík-Kocsir & Varga, 2024).

It is important to identify the interdependencies between managerial competencies, key success factors, management tools, and the effectiveness of project management. The model of the interdependencies between managerial competencies and project management effectiveness is presented in Figure 3.

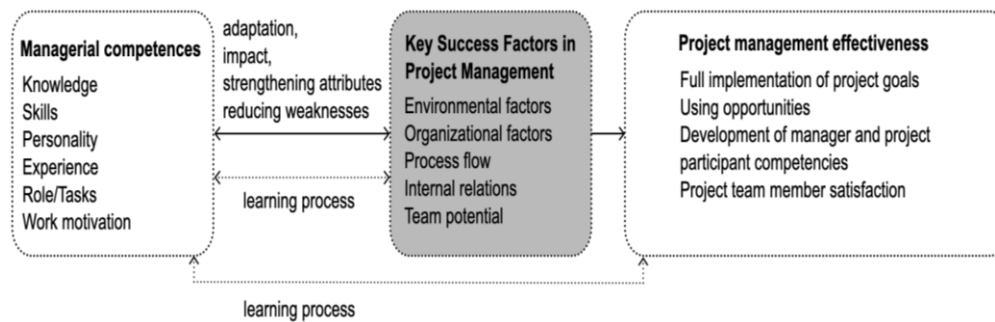


Figure 3. model of the interdependencies between managerial competencies and project management effectiveness

Source: (Kožuch & Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2013)

The model of interdependencies between managerial competencies and project management effectiveness shows that, by leveraging management tools like coordination, communication, and risk management, managers can focus on critical success factors. This process allows managers to reinforce existing skills or gain new ones through learning. Ultimately, effective project management aims to deliver value to all stakeholders, including the organisation, the manager, and the team. Direct benefits include successful project completion and goal attainment, while indirect benefits encompass organisational growth, satisfaction, and enhanced competencies for both managers and team members (Kožuch & Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2013).

Leadership in international projects

The success of international projects greatly depends on choosing project managers with strong global competencies. These leaders excel at addressing and managing the unique challenges of global projects, such as navigating international regulations and leading teams with culturally diverse members. Additionally, a global mindset allows them to identify emerging opportunities and leverage them effectively, fostering innovation and sustaining a competitive edge in international initiatives (Luo, 2024).

The goal of the leadership process is to achieve common objectives shared by both the leader and their followers (Silva, 2016). A project leader's effectiveness often hinges on a core set of qualities that enhance team performance and project outcomes. Key qualities of an effective project leader include (Tunc, 2018):

- flexibility and adaptability,
- strong organisational skills,
- capacity to handle multiple objectives simultaneously with balance,
- capability to focus on several tasks at once,

- proactive and takes initiative,
- persuasive and convincing,
- skilled at time management,
- able to recognise issues, seek solutions, and ensure successful implementation,
- tends to think broadly and generalise when needed.

An international project gains additional complexity by involving multiple economic entities across various international locations in its execution. A comparison of standard (understood as locally conducted projects in the classical sense of the word) and international project management is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of standard and international project management

Feature	Standard project	International project
Number of stakeholders	Usually, one organisation or a few operating locally; a relatively clear stakeholder map	Many independent international organisations or companies belonging to one enterprise, each representing its own interests
Location	One location	Multiple locations (countries, regions)
Level of complexity	Relatively low complexity; easier to manage project	High complexity
Culture	One and homogeneous	Multithreaded and diverse due to the local specifics of the organisations involved, language differences, and variations in corporate cultures
Resources	Available and focused on the project	Resources absorbed through various competing objectives
Regulations of the internal and external environment	Understandable and known	More difficult to understand, subject to interpretation, and potential sources of conflict
Communication	Easy due to geographical proximity	Complicated by distance and different time zones
Risk	Relatively low, easier to manage	High risk due to less control over the project, a greater number of engaged stakeholders, and possible increased political risk in the country
Technologies	Consistent technology and systems	Various systems and technological platforms

Source: Own study based on (Sońta-Drażkowska, 2008)

Successful international project management demands adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication strategies to navigate the complexities of a global environment. International projects require a more nuanced approach due to their complexity, diversity and the challenges posed by multiple stakeholders across different locations.

International leadership challenges

According to the Project Management Institute (2017), more than 40% of projects fail to achieve their initial scope (Rogers, 2019). It suggests a need for improved project management practices, better alignment between project goals and resources, and perhaps a re-evaluation of methodologies used to plan and execute projects. Ensuring projects stay within scope and budget is essential for maximising organisational efficiency, client satisfaction, and overall project success.

In a globalised economy, international leaders encounter complex challenges requiring both cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Each dimension of international projects brings specific leadership challenges, such as (Aarseth et al., 2013):

- the number of different organisations, where effective leaders stay open to diverse perspectives;
- different languages, where good leaders engage local allies to communicate the project vision in native languages and reinforce it with local expressions;
- the number of various cultures in which effective leaders recognise and embrace cultural differences to align, motivate, and inspire their project teams;
- different time zones, where skilled global managers plan shared time, organise team events, travel to key activities, and coach local leaders throughout each project phase.

An exemplary case of effective leadership in managing cultural diversity is demonstrated by Adidas. The company embraces cultural diversity by promoting inclusivity in its global teams and valuing local cultures. It uses strategies like e.g. tailored marketing campaigns to resonate with diverse communities (Abbas et al., 2015). Another example is Google, which is committed to diversity and inclusion by promoting a diverse workforce, offering support for employee success regardless of cultural background, and fostering cultural exchange and diverse perspectives in the workplace (McGirt, 2017).

On the other hand, many companies struggle with effective leadership in managing cultural diversity. An example is Uber, which has faced several allegations of discrimination, including racial bias in its facial recognition system, leading to the wrongful termination of drivers of color (Haynes, 2023). Another example is Amazon. The global giant is facing lawsuits over racial discrimination, with employees accusing the company of biased treatment and hindering career advancement for black workers, reflecting challenges in effectively managing racial diversity (Dungan, 2024).

International project management involves navigating a complex array of challenges that can affect project success. Key challenges faced in international project management and their implications for successful project delivery are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Problem areas in international project management

Factor	Explanation
Treating international projects as standard projects	This mistake is most often made by managers who lack experience in executing international projects and replicate management methods borrowed from their experiences in managing standard local projects
Failure to consider the specifics of local cultures	Enforcing the same approach to project execution across different locations and business units can lead to a lack of local acceptance of the project and ultimately result in its failure
Lack of consistency in execution	When encountering problems in one location, managers often give up without drawing conclusions or lessons and attempt to initiate the project in another location, where there is also no guarantee of success
Insufficient demonstration of the project's goals and benefits	International corporations often receive projects imposed by headquarters for execution. In the phase preceding the project's launch, there is a lack of defining and communicating the benefits of the project for local companies. This results in low engagement and a lack of motivation to carry out project tasks
Over-reliance on technology	The use of advanced technology is not a foolproof solution to problems that often stem from the organisation, processes, or human resources
Lack of project performance metrics	Most international projects lack established metrics for measuring project outcomes. The inability to demonstrate the benefits of the project within the organisation leads to a decline in motivation and reluctance to perform tasks, as it encourages participants to focus more on failures than on successes

Source: Own study based on (Sońta-Drażkowska, 2008)

An important aspect of the challenges of international leadership is the ability to manage effectively despite various crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, geopolitical conflicts (e.g. the war in Ukraine), or economic downturns (including the 2008 financial crisis). It is important to note that there is no single universal leadership style that is ideal for managing a crisis, as each leadership style has its own strengths and weaknesses. Effective leadership during a crisis may rely on elements from different leadership approaches, tailored to the specifics of the situation (Du Plessis & Keyter, 2020).

It is crucial to emphasise that resilience is the cornerstone of international leadership in times of crisis. Resilient leadership involves balancing contradictory forces, such as being firm yet flexible, tough yet compassionate, and directive yet empowering. The COVID-19 pandemic tested leaders' ability to navigate these paradoxes while responding to emerging realities and sharing leadership with experts (Clegg et al., 2020).

The two leadership styles discussed earlier offer distinct advantages at various stages of a crisis, with transformational leadership being most effective in the initial phase and transactional leadership proving essential during execution and recovery. Transformational leaders foster trust, inspire motivation, and emphasise long-term

vision, which is critical in the early stages of a crisis, where swift adaptation and the preservation of morale are paramount. In contrast, transactional leaders prioritise organisational stability, enforce compliance with established protocols, and implement corrective actions through clear directives and performance-based rewards, making them particularly suited to managing the operational response and recovery efforts during a crisis (Du Plessis & Keyter, 2020).

The success of international projects relies on adapting management approaches to the complexities of global environments. Key pitfalls include underestimating cultural differences, failing to communicate project value locally, inconsistent execution strategies, and a lack of clear performance metrics. Recognising these challenges and addressing them proactively is essential for fostering engagement, alignment, and sustainable project outcomes across diverse regions.

Conclusions

The success of any institution largely depends on the leader's ability to manage efficiently and effectively. Leadership is a crucial asset for successful project management. Fundamentally, leadership exists when a leader guides followers or subordinates toward shared goals and achievements (Tambingon et al., 2024).

Among the wide array of leadership theories, numerous empirical studies highlight that transformational and transactional leadership approaches are the most relevant and frequently applied in project management (Musa, 2024).

Successful management of international projects requires adaptability, cultural awareness, and robust communication strategies to handle the intricate demands of a global setting. International project managers must navigate language barriers, cultural differences, and diverse regulatory environments, all while fostering collaboration among dispersed teams to achieve project goals effectively.

The ability to inspire and motivate team members across cultural divides is essential for international project success. By cultivating a shared vision and promoting inclusivity, project leaders can help build trust and commitment among team members from diverse backgrounds. This not only improves team cohesion but also enhances individual motivation, leading to higher productivity and more innovative problem-solving throughout the project lifecycle.

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STRATEGIE PRZYWÓDZTWA W ZARZĄDZANIU PROJEKTAMI MIĘDZYNARODOWYMI

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest zbadanie skutecznych podejść do przywództwa, niezbędnych do skutecznego zarządzania projektami międzynarodowymi. Artykuł rozpoczyna się od omówienia zasad skutecznego zarządzania projektami, a następnie eksploracji transformacyjnych i transakcyjnych stylów przywództwa, które są najbardziej istotne i najczęściej stosowane w tym kontekście. Oceniono skuteczność zarządzania projektami i podkreślono wyjątkowe wyzwania przywództwa w projektach międzynarodowych, koncentrując się na zarządzaniu zespołami zróżnicowanymi kulturowo. Na koniec poruszono kwestię wyzwań przywództwa międzynarodowego, w tym barier komunikacyjnych i wrażliwości kulturowej. Artykuł dostarcza spostrzeżeń i strategii dla liderów w celu zwiększenia ich skuteczności w zarządzaniu projektami w globalnym kontekście.

Słowa kluczowe: projekty międzynarodowe, przywództwo, zarządzanie projektami

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