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An investigation of leadership styles of construction professionals in the South African construction industry

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Abstract

The South African construction industry has a bearing on the economic abundance of the country. Consequently, maximum productivity is required; and to achieve this, proper leadership is one of the major factors that are needed. Literature suggests that there is huge leadership challenge among project leaders and professionals. However, little prominence is been given to the leadership competence of construction professionals in South Africa and other developing countries especially in practice. The main objective of this paper is to investigate the predominant leadership styles among construction professionals in the South African construction industry. The primary research data were collected through a structure questionnaire survey conducted on construction professionals in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. The secondary data were collected from literature review. Respondents were selected using heterogeneity and convenience (purposive) sampling techniques. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 software. Mean values and standard deviation were computed. The rank of the predominant styles among the identified construction professionals was established. Findings from the study revealed that the three leading predominantly used leadership styles among construction professionals are democratic, transformational and transactional leadership styles. In addition, the results revealed the predominant leadership styles used among each construction professionals in the South Africa. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by increasing awareness about the essential of leadership and the proper use of its styles at any given circumstance within the South African construction industry.

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1. Introduction

Innovation and improvement in project delivery are becoming the prime focus of developing countries in Africa especially South Africa [5]. There has been an improvement in the recognition of new ideas, and quest for creativity. Conversely, leadership skill which is one of the vital tools for effecting change still receives less attention than technical skill. As a result, the construction industry has suffered many leadership challenges and gaps including slowness in adapting to change, unpreparedness to uncertain future, and inappropriate implementation of strategic planning to mention but a few [17].

Leadership is essential in everyday life, in our families, schools, health sectors and organisations such as the construction industry. Without competent leadership people do what seems right in their own eyes; moving like sheep without a shepherd. Incompetent leadership is one of the reasons for inadequacy in balancing operational and strategic pressures even the managing of workloads [27]. On the other hand, proper leadership in any organisation

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helps mitigate wastage of resources especially time, labour and money while upholding quality of work in general. Leadership even goes a long way in maintaining staff morale and engagement. This is because it entails the support of an individual to a group of people in all the essentials necessary to the attainment of the set goals [1].

The subject - Leadership is challenging in the construction industry considering the nature of the environment which is a product of complex and changing situations [25]. In addition, the fact that human beings behavior and culture differ makes the value of this subject very crucial [3,25]. Hence, it is vital for a leader to have a proper understanding of the appropriate leadership style to adopt in order to adequately influence his or her subordinates. Research has been conducted on leadership styles in the construction industry [1,17,25,31]. Previous studies have focused mainly on project managers, construction managers and quantity surveyors [17,25,31]. Less attention has been paid to the styles of other professionals who participate and even lead in their various fields towards the timeous completion of construction projects [1]. To this effect, this paper investigates the predominant leadership styles among construction professionals in the South African construction industry.

2. Leadership in the construction industry

The competency of leadership has been the subject of much debate in the construction industry [1,25]. There are still some doubts whether the industry has enough leaders who can inspire and affect real change [33]. This is because; there is a need for the industry to rise above social, economic and environmental challenges prevalent in our society today. It is evident that the construction industry by its disposition is one of the industries that need leadership in its purest form; and with much emphasis on project management systems nowadays, a better management and leadership skills need to walk in tandem [14]. It is also an industry where everybody is expected to take responsibility whether one is a follower or not [1,30]. This is true with the saying; "trapped in any follower is a leader". Even the leaders are expected to lead themselves first. In addition, Toor and Ofori [33] noted that leadership disposition includes factors such as personal traits, ability to give clear information and the know-how of situational variables in operation. Therefore, in a project team, the construction professionals involved must take responsibility and apply the principles of leadership toward having a successful project delivery.

2.1 Leadership styles of construction professionals

Leadership by definition is more about influence [19]. This is in harmony with the saying that "He, who leads and has no one following, is only taking a walk". However, people will not follow a leader effectively without a proper application of leadership styles. Attitudes and behaviours when consistently combined in dealing with subordinates are point notes for the discovery of a leader's style of leadership [30]. Therefore, a leader is defined by the style he portrays [10]. Hence, Leadership style can be defined as the prevalent and consistent behavioural pattern of a leader [10]. It is the predominant behavioural pattern a leader uses in his or her effort to increase his or her influence on the subordinates [22]. However, knowledge of the environment and circumstances, and the understanding of people's behaviours and values are essential [3]. Hence, effective leaders vary their leadership style base on their context and followers' attribute [8]. Leadership, therefore, is very important in any undertaking where collaboration of the individuals is required such as in construction [25]. From the construction industry perspective, literature has revealed some perceived traits of leadership style of which includes, inspiration, motivation, rewards consciousness [18,30]. The following leadership styles that are predominantly used among leaders are hereby discussed below.

- Authoritarian leadership

Autocratic leaders as popularly known, self-confidently make decisions with the assumption that the subordinates will comply without any objection [11]. Autocratic leaders are popularly known to be work-centred because their major aim is to get things done and on time [27]. They set agendas as well as the modus operandi of the group and its policies; they give work to subordinates without first consulting them [11]. Authoritarian leadership is advantageous especially when there is a need to make a quick decision and execute a task in any undertaking [10]. However, the abuse of this leadership style is often problematic as it is often perceived as being bossy and dictatorial and domineering of which can install grudges among subordinate [30].

- Democratic leadership

This is the opposite of authoritarian leadership style. It involves the engaging of group members in the decision

making and working in tandem with them [18]. Leaders using this style confer final authority on the group; decisions are not solely made by the leader [17,30]. In other words, democratic leaders focus on gathering the group opinions and then voting for final approval [10]. This style is suitable for personnel who appreciate getting involved in decision-making in an organisation. It is advantageous because it meets one of the Maslow's hierarchies of needs of employees as it boosts self-esteem [17].

- Laissez-faire leadership

Leaders who possess this style of leadership are characterized as being uninterfering with their subordinates [17]. In other words, the leader has no real authority but allows the group to perform based on their own decisions [4]. Laissez-faire style thrives in environments with highly skilled and self-motivated followers [18]. Therefore, the function of a laissez-faire leader *inter alia* is to ensure that highly skilled and trustable individuals are brought into the organisation [17,18].

- Transactional leadership

The primary aim of the leader with this style of leadership is to meet the need of the present condition and see to it that the organisation is run in an efficient manner [6]. A transactional leader first understands the subordinates' needs and clarifies how their desires can be met based on the fulfilling of conditional requirements [6,10]. In other words, transactional leadership style basically is centred on the barter between leaders and their followers [23]. This exchange can be in the form of incentives, increased remuneration or time off which serve as a motivation to the employees to perform more than expected.

- Transformational leadership

Per Daft [6] transformational leadership is much more concentrated on that of a leader's personal attributes, values and belief system rather than transactional relationship between the leader and follower. These leaders can inspire and lead changes in an organisation's visions, policies and affairs [6,10]. They present themselves as role models for employees, motivate them, stimulate their intelligence, help raise subordinate awareness and help subordinates understand the need for change [30].

- Strategic leadership

Strategic leadership focuses mostly on individuals at the top of an organisation and their effects on strategic processes and results [7]. It is believed to be the most appropriate style of leadership for organisations implementing corporate and social responsibility strategies [28]. The duty of a strategic leader is to inspire others to take the appropriate action while having in mind the best interest of the business and the people [28]

- Charismatic leadership

The word charisma is derived from a Greek word which means *divinely inspired gift* [10]. To have charisma in general is to have an attractive personality [10]. This personality *inter-alia* is the fire that lights up the subordinates to perform even more than required [30]. These leaders can influence their subordinate emotionally as well as inspire them for maximum input, irrespective of obstacles in the way [10,30]. The leaders are mission driven people and are positive about the attainment of the vision; and because of these; they are able to influence those around them to buy in their purpose [6].

2.2 Leadership styles in the Construction industry: global and South African experience

Leadership style of a leader can be influence by national, environmental or organizational culture [15,34]. For instance, it would be difficult to act in a more democratic style in a culture that value autocratic leadership. However, in a culture that is relationship oriented, being sensitive and considerate as a leader could thrive well [15]. In United Kingdom (UK), the Leadership styles used in their order of importance are strategic, democratic, Charismatic and transformational (28). In South Florida, the leadership styles of most construction professionals are high task oriented. However, just like other western countries they never negate the fact that a good working relationship between the leader and the subordinates are essential [29]. Western leaders not only focus on building teamwork, interpersonal bonds, dignity and trust, but also they are highly entrepreneurial and are inclined to taking risks thereby

differentiating themselves from their counterparts [30]. Conversely, in Hong Kong and China, where the culture is highly related, leaders prioritise the maintenance of a good working relationship more than getting the job done [30,32]. However, for subordinates on construction site, transformational leadership style is primarily used and secondarily supported with transactional style [32]. In United Arab Emirates (UAE) transformational leadership style is the most used leadership style [9]. In addition, many construction leaders also adopt consultative or participative (democratic) leadership style [35]. In Indonesia and Nigeria, the project leaders and managers are task oriented when initiating projects with their workforce [2,26]. Furthermore, Oke [26] affirmed that the Nigerian construction industry is dominated with autocratic style of leadership. However, in Ghana the predominant styles used by the construction and project managers are transformational and transactional leadership. Finally, for South Africa, leadership culture is that of “Ubuntu”, *Meaning* - a culture of acceptance, showing compassion, and tolerance [16]. In addition, leadership participation is mostly shared by the members rather than invested in one person [16]. Hence, the Leadership culture in South Africa is dominated with democratic, transformational and transactional style.

3. Research methodology

A quantitative approach was adopted in this research. This is because it is a scientific method which reduces complexity and simplifies situations to the point where they can be examined measured and tested [12]. It is one of the cost-effective ways to collect data from many respondents [20]. Hence, 5-point Likert-scale survey questionnaire was constructed from the literature review of leadership styles. It also accommodated a descriptive survey because of the exploratory nature of this research. A convenience (purposes) sampling was used, targeted at construction professionals in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. This is due to the relatively large number of construction companies in the province. The professionals were limited to project managers, architects, quantity surveyors, construction managers, civil engineers and town planners. 51 questionnaires were recovered out of a total of 81 distributed (63% response rate). Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 software. The reliability and internal consistency of the collected data was appraised using Cronbach’s alpha α . The α value for the leadership styles was 0.79. Outputs were mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values. Weights were assigned to each response ranging from 1 to 5 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The rankings of the predominantly used leadership styles of the various professionals were also assessed base on the mean values.

4. Findings and discussions

The findings centred on the five major leadership styles revealed from literature and portrayed in Table 1. The findings showed that Democratic leadership was ranked first with average mean score (AMS=4.29) and standard deviation (SD=0.14); Second was transformation leadership style (AMS=4.21, SD=0.26); third was transactional leadership (AMS=4.02, SD=0.19); laissez-faire leadership was ranked fourth (AMS=3.97, SD=0.27); and lastly the autocratic leadership style (AMS=3.05, SD=0.21).

Table 1. Predominant leadership styles among construction professionals in the South African Construction industry

Leadership styles	Mean	Standard deviation	Rank
Democratic leadership	4.29	0.14	1
Transformation leadership	4.21	0.26	2
Transactional leadership	4.02	0.19	3
Laissez faire leadership	3.97	0.27	4
Autocratic leadership	3.05	0.21	5

Table 2 revealed that for the project managers, the average mean scores of all the leadership styles were above 3 out of 5 except the autocratic leadership style which had average mean score (AMS=3.0). Indication showed that laissez-faire leadership style was the predominantly used leadership style among project managers (AMS=4.28); followed by democratic leadership style (AMS=4.23); while transactional and transformational leadership style have AMS of 4.13 each. However, autocratic leadership was ranked last (AMS=3.0).

Findings on the construction managers revealed that all the leadership styles exceeded the standard average mean score of 3.0. Democratic leadership style was predominant (AMS = 4.34); followed by transformational leadership (AMS=4.16); third, transactional leadership (AMS=4.09); fourth, laissez – faire leadership style (AMS=3.91) and fifth, autocratic (AMS=3.38).

Table 2: Leadership styles among each professionals in the South African Construction industry and their mean rankings

Professionals	1	2	3	4	5
Project manager	Laissez faire (4.28)	Democratic (4.23)	Transactional (4.13)	Transformational (4.13)	Autocratic (3.00)
Construction manager	Democratic (4.34)	Transformational (4.16)	Transactional (4.09)	Laissez-faire (3.91)	Autocratic (3.38)
Architect	Democratic (4.08)	Transformational (3.86)	Transactional (3.66)	Laissez faire (3.62)	Autocratic (2.76)
Quantity surveying	Transformational (4.27)	Democratic (4.22)	Transactional (4.18)	Laissez faire (3.72)	Autocratic (3.03)
Civil engineering	Transformation (4.66)	Democratic (4.40)	Laissez faire (4.22)	Transactional (4.11)	Autocratic (3.17)
Town planner	Democratic (4.46)	Transformational (4.17)	Laissez faire (4.03)	Transactional (3.94)	Autocratic (2.98)

Findings regarding the architects revealed that all the leadership styles obtained an AMS of more than 3 out of 5 except autocratic leadership styles. Democratic leadership majoring with (AMS =4.08); second was transformational leadership (AMS=3.86); third, transactional leadership (AMS=3.66); fourth, laissez-faire (AMS=3.62) and lastly autocratic (AMS=2.76).

Findings regarding the quantity surveyors portrayed that all the five leadership styles obtained an AMS of more than 3.0 out of 5.0. Transformational leadership style was ranked first (AMS=4.27). Democratic leadership style was ranked second (AMS=4.22); third was the transactional leadership style (AMS=4.18); while laissez-faire and autocratic leadership styles was ranked fourth (AMS=3.72) and fifth (AMS=3.03) respectively.

Findings from the civil engineers indicated that all the five leadership styles possessed an AMS of above 3.0 out of 5.0. Transformational leadership was also ranked first (AMS=4.66); followed by democratic leadership style (AMS=4.40); third was laissez-faire (AMS=4.22); while transactional and autocratic leadership occupied the fourth and fifth position with (AMS=4.11) and (AMS=3.17) respectively.

Finally, findings from the Town Planners revealed that all the various leadership styles obtained an AMS of more than 3.0 out of 5.0 scale except for the autocratic leadership style which was ranked last (AMS=2.98). Democratic leadership was ranked first (AMS 4.46); transformational leadership was ranked second (AMS=4.17); third was laissez-faire leadership (AMS=4.03); while transactional and autocratic leadership were ranked fourth and fifth with (AMS=3.94) and (AMS=2.98) respectively.

In general, based on the findings of table 1, laissez faire and autocratic leadership are on the downside when it comes to its influence on people to achieve the desired goal in South Africa. This finding is in agreement with that of liphadzi [18] relationship between leadership styles and project success. However, it is vital to note that the success of construction professionals in leading their subordinates effectively lie in their adaptive approach to any given situation and the utilisation of the leadership style that best suits the given situation or project [21].

5. Conclusions

The study set out to establish the predominant leadership styles of construction professionals in the South African construction industry. Findings revealed that democratic, transformational and transactional leadership were the leading leadership styles in the South African construction industry. It also revealed that laissez faire and autocratic leadership styles were the lowest used styles among construction professionals in the South African construction industry. It further revealed the predominant preferred styles among each of the mentioned professionals in their rankings.

The study provides useful insight on the issue of leadership styles in South African construction industry of which will help the various professionals identify their styles as well as discover areas they should improve on. This is because a particular leadership style won't get the entire job done. Hence, appropriate implementation of leadership styles will help mitigate unnecessary conflicts, increase productivity within the organisation as well as improve the Gross Domestic Product of South Africa.

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