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Leadership communication in project management

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify the important characteristics that a construction project manager should possess to ensure successful communication. The characteristics of a project manager indicate the type of leader and leadership style that the project manager applies during the management of projects. Method: A research questionnaire focussing on communication skills of project managers, in terms of importance for the successful management of projects was circulated. The results of the survey were compiled and analysed. The results of the research illustrate those characteristics which are important for managing projects successfully. The characteristics further indicate by implication the project managers' leadership styles with managing projects. The implications of this research may be in understanding the influence of the project manager characteristics. This may indicate to developers and construction companies that they should pay more attention to the characteristics of project managers' and their skills in communication, in order to improve the outcome of projects and to benefit the construction industry as a whole. The value is that the building industry, specifically project managers, should know the influence and effect a style of leadership has on the management of projects and that these characteristics are essential for effective completion of projects. Conclusion and recommendation: Knowledge of the characteristics and leadership styles followed by construction project managers will contribute to solving communication problems. The project manager has to sum up the situation and then adapt a style according to that specific situation.

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1. Introduction

Leadership theories developed over time. Historically, leadership theory developed during the 1930s-1940s, by focusing on leaders' personal traits, such as physical appearance and personalities. The behavioural school of studies, which focused on leadership tasks, developed in the 1940s. The assumption was that leadership may be learned and was not a trait people were born with. The 1960s gave rise to the contingency school, which was concerned with the appropriateness of different leadership styles in different leadership situations by matching the personal characteristics of a leader to the leadership situation. The visionary and charismatic school originated in the 1980s and focused on organisational change, through the development of vision, charisma, respect and trust. The emotional intelligence school emerged before 2000 (Müller and Turner, 2010).

This paper reviews leadership in general, project manager's skills and roles, the project manager's communication skills, project management leadership communication, communication skills and leadership, the research project and the conclusions and recommendations. Communication, as part of leadership, is essential in executing and managing projects, as well as for communication between the construction project team and stakeholders. The construction project manager therefore needs leadership skills to manage a project effectively.

2. Leadership

Studies on leadership styles show that the personality of a leader, the maturity of followers and the needs of the environment determine the leadership style to follow. An effective leader will be able to adapt a style or combination of styles of leadership to suit the circumstances. Any one of the styles might be effective in the right situation. The chosen style of communication will differ from leader to leader and from project to project, but communication with people remains an intrinsic part of leadership.

Leadership can be defined as a style of behaviour designed to integrate both the organisational requirements and personal interests in the pursuit of some objectives. Managers have a leadership responsibility. Project managers are often selected or not selected because of their leadership styles (Kerzner, 2001).

Barrett (2006a), and Müller and Turner (2010), show that leadership styles can be classified in six broad categories. These styles are directive, pacesetter, participative, visionary, coaching and affiliative. Kerzner (2009) add a further two styles, namely bureaucratic and laissez faire. The authoritarian/directive/commanding style is characterised by dominance and total control by the leader. This style of leadership would not be effective in motivating employees. The pacesetter style is characterised by meeting challenges and goals. The democratic/participative style is characterised by participation of the team in decision making and such a leader would probably hold frequent meetings, but would also survey employees and establish methods to obtain employee input. Employee input and survey results will assist the leader in knowing and understanding the environment better. The transformational/visionary style inspires the team with a shared vision of the future. This style of leaders would probably be very visible in the organisation, speaking frequently in public, hold frequent meetings and sending out statements that motivate and provide guidance to all the employees and by doing so improve communication effectively. The coaching style emphasises a strong, mentoring culture and probably places importance on training and development sessions and on management's responsibility to develop others, thus enhancing employees' effectiveness through skills and knowledge. The affiliative style creates harmony by connecting team members, both one-on-one and in small groups. The characteristics of these styles determine how a project leader deals with team members and influence the effectiveness of communication with the team.

Construction project managers should adopt a leadership style or combination of styles. Brits (in *Separating the good from the great*, 2009) confirms this by stating that a combination of leadership styles are required to accommodate the complex environment that projects are operating in. A leader might vary the leadership style depending on circumstances. Yang, Wu, Wang and Chin (2010) suggest that leaders vary the leadership style when the situation turns, using a different leadership style at different phases of the project life cycle.

To select the most effective leadership style for various situations requires the ability to assess situations correctly and applying appropriate styles for effective communication.

3. Leadership styles

The following leadership styles are selected as generally known styles of leadership in the business management arena (Smit and Cronje, 2002). The study does not discuss leadership styles as such, but leadership styles influence the effectiveness of communication and therefore a review of leadership styles is important. The styles may be applied individually, selectively or in combination, depending on different situations.

3.1. Contingency or situational leadership style

The contingency or situational leadership style is concerned with the appropriateness of different leadership styles in different leadership situations by matching the personal characteristics of a leader to the leadership situation (Müller and Turner, 2010).

3.2. Sloan or visionary leadership style

The visionary leadership style is vision orientated and to be effective in respect of the management of a project, the project manager should be an analytical thinker as well as being achievement orientated (Müller and Turner, 2010). With the Sloan or visionary leadership style, the leader uses the vision to give the life and work of the organisation a sense of meaning and purpose, but maintains the focus on the vision. This leader enlists others by involving them, listening to them and clearly communicating with them (Skipper and Bell, 2006).

3.3. Path goal leadership style

The essence of this theory developed by Robert House is that it is the leader's duty to assist the members in attaining goals and to provide the necessary direction and support to ensure that the team's goals are compatible with the goals of the organisation (Smit and Cronje, 2002).

3.4. Fiedler's leadership style

Fiedler (1967) presents a theory of leadership effectiveness that takes account of the leader's personality as well as the situational factors in the leadership situation. Fiedler's theory correlates with the situational style, which applies a style by matching the style and the situation, changing the situation so that it is compatible with the style (Smit and Cronje, 2002).

3.5. McGregor's theory X and theory Y style

McGregor proposed two fundamental approaches to manage people, theory X and theory Y.

Theory X assumes that the average person will do all to avoid work and responsibility, and therefore must be directed and forced to work (Burke and Barron). Liu, Fellow and Fang (2003) state theory X as employee-centred or people-orientated.

Theory Y assumes that team members enjoy work and will take responsibility for applying and directing the aims of the project. Team members may manage and work independently (Burke and Barron, 2007). Liu *et al.* (2003) state theory Y as production-orientated.

3.6. Life cycle leadership style

The life cycle theory of leadership was developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1972).

The life cycle theory of leadership is a contingency approach. Hersey and Blanchard believe that leadership must adapt to the 'maturity' of employees. Maturity does not mean emotional stability or age; it refers to work maturity, that is, a desire to achieve, a willingness to accept responsibility, as well as working knowledge and

working experience (Smit and Cronje, 2002). Effective leaders are neither pure task nor relationship behaviourists, but aim to achieve a balance between the task and relationship.

3.7. Behavioural leadership style

This style distinguishes between two basic styles of leadership, namely a task-orientated style and a people-orientated or relationship style. Achievement, motivation, willingness and ability to take responsibility, education and experience determine the mixture of the two elements (Walker, 2007).

The success of this leadership style does not depend so much on the style, but rather on the situation in which it is used. The implication of the behavioural leadership style is that in a communication situation, for example where task issues are discussed, relationships must receive ample attention to bring the discussion to a successful conclusion.

3.8. Action centred leadership style

John Adair (Burke and Barron, 2007) developed a different leadership style that focuses on leadership action. This style suggests that the project leader should focus on three responsibilities, namely task, team and individual, acting on the demands of each. A project leader must attend to the task, team and individual responsibilities but should focus on each one at different times in order to deal with specific needs (Burke and Barron, 2007).

In task orientation, the purpose of a team is to complete some work, so the leader needs to maintain focus on the achievement of objectives. Team orientation requires the leader to ensure that the team's collective needs are identified and group cohesion is maintained. Individual orientation requires the leader to recognise that each member of the group or team will have individual personal needs (Burke and Barron, 2007). It is important that the project manager, through communication, enhance the balance between the needs of the project tasks, the needs of the project team and the needs of the individual.

4. PROJECT MANAGER'S SKILLS AND ROLES

Philip of Macedon rescued his country from collapse and when asked to name the most formidable foe, he named Demosthenes (384-322BC), an orator and communicator in the Athenian court, with a background far removed from what might have been expected of a warrior or even an inspirational leader. Demosthenes received two pieces of advice as a young man: speak with positive intent and prepare your body for effective communication (Oschadleus, 2010). This illustrates the need to learn to communicate and to be able to communicate.

Steyn (2008) indicates that the project manager is the bonding medium holding the project together. The success or failure of a project is influenced by the project manager's appointment.

The value added to a project by the project manager is unique; no other method or process adds similar value (Stephenson, 2008). Miners (1969) states that many experts consider efficient communication in building to largely depend on the availability of a key coordinator, with the status, authority and ability to ensure that whatever is necessary will be done. The project manager is the single point of responsibility for a project. A successful project manager has to perform various roles and many of these simultaneously. Mabelo (2011) states that project managers who lack skills are a "common cause of project failure". According to Hauptfleisch and Siglé (2004) the project manager very specifically requires leadership skills and not only management ability.

The project manager needs to apply general management principles in the project environment. A number of roles are identified for the project manager, such as; planning activities, tasks, schedules and budgets; organising, selecting and placing the project team; leading the project team; controlling activities and schedules; ability to select and develop a team and motivation of the team; communicating with the project team and all stakeholders; problem solving, decision making or knowledge where to find help; negotiating and persuading; and understanding the environment (Baguley, 2010; Burke, 2003; Knipe, Van der Waldt, Van Niekerk, Burger and Nell, 2002; Steyn, 2008).

The project manager performs various roles, but needs skills to attend to these roles. These skills include the following; communication skills; interpersonal skills; stress handling skills; problem solving skills; management skills; presentation skills and leadership skills include the ability to inspire or motivate the project team as well as the ability to develop people in such a way that the goals of the project are achieved (Belzer, in Stevenson and Starkweather, 2009; Du Plessis, 2009b; Egeland, 2010; Steyn, 2008).

In this paper the difference between leadership as a communication skill and communication as a leadership skill is defined as follows:

- Leadership as a communication skill: Steyn (2012) refers to leadership as functions to get things done through others in other words the project team. Leadership includes delegation, coordination and communication to all levels (Van der Walt, Strydom, Marx and Jooste, 1996). Leadership is by definition therefore also a communication skill.
- Communication as a leadership skill: A leader must ensure that resources implement strategy, decisions and values, and should therefore inevitably possess strong communication skills. These skills are thus seen as integral parts of leadership skills.

The focuses are on the skills needed by project managers to communicate successfully. All the above-mentioned skills are important, but the project manager will not achieve anything without communication skills. The skills referred to above, and more specifically leader communication skills, assist the project manager to perform effectively.

As stated by Clutterbuck and Hirst (2002) “leaders who do not communicate well are not really leading at all, it is one thing to have the position, another to fulfil the role”. Belzer, in Stevenson and Starkweather (2009) confirms that leadership and communication are “extremely important” criteria for the successful completion of a project. The statement by Heldman (2011) “the better the project manager communicating, the smoother the project will go”, confirm the importance of communication.

5. THE PROJECT MANAGER’S COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The survival of any organised human activity depends largely on man’s ability to communicate with others. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of an organisation in which individuals operate in isolation without the benefit of communication (Feldberg, in Talukhaba, Mutunga and Miruka, 2011). It is important to determine the skills needed to communicate effectively for the benefit of the project.

Skills may be divided into three sets, namely cognitive; technical and communication skills. Cognitive skills relate to the knowledge base of the profession. Technical skills are the specialised practical and manipulative techniques essential to the profession (Hargie, 2007) and especially in the planning and implementation stages of a project (Odusami, 2002). Communication or social skills entail individuals having the ability to interact effectively with clients and other professionals (Hargie, 2007). The project manager needs to establish cooperative relationships with the project team members ensure a good climate for communication, identify participants for the project to ensure commitment and adopt an appropriate leadership style (Goodwin, in Odusami, 2002). Dick (1997) adds two additional skills, namely interpersonal skills and emotional skills. Emotional skills are the ability to make the right decisions under difficult circumstances, to take responsibility and to have courage. Interpersonal skills are having the self-confidence to communicate. Without emotional skills, the interpersonal skills may not be used effectively, and without the interpersonal skills, the technical skills may be wasted. Katz (in Odusami, 2002) suggests that all project managers require the same competence in each skill. Covey (2008) describes communication as an important skill in life and Heldman (2011) states that, “the most important skills a project manager possesses are communication skills”. These statements confirm that communication skills are important.

At various stages of a construction project people will have to explain, ask questions and discuss issues and ideas with each other. According to Laufer, Shapira and Telem (2008) construction project managers are engaged in oral communication for about 76% of the time. Emmitt and Gorse (2003) also state oral communication as the main method of communication and that it is good practice to record oral communication (Emmitt and Gorse, 2003).

The most common communication channel is speaking; it is immediate, spontaneous direct and used in a wide range of situations. However, verbal communication is most often misunderstood (Elder, 1994).

The majority of communication during a construction project may be spent on speaking and listening, and less time on reading and writing. Communication actions such as speaking, listening, reading and writing need expertise to be used successfully.

6. PROJECT MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

Axelrod (in Barrett, 2006a) states that effective leadership is still largely a matter of communication.

Reluctant communicators are unlikely to hold influential positions or be perceived by the team members as project leaders. Relationships should exist between project leadership with a high level of verbal participation (Emmitt and Gorse, 2007). Campbell (2011) states that, “good communication and strong leadership go hand in hand”. Project managers succeed by producing projects on time and within budget as well as effectively managing the interaction and communication between people and organisations. Barrett (2006b) states that project leaders “command others’ attention”.

Ineffective communication stems from arrogance, disorganisation, stubbornness, negativism and distrust (Pacelli, 2010). Bernthal and Wellins (2005|2006) add poor people and interpersonal skills as reasons why leaders fail.

To manage a project effectively three types of communication occur: vertical communication, the up and down flow of communication based on hierarchical relationships; horizontal communication, based on communication with peers; and diagonal communication, the upward relationships with managers and diagonal communication with contractors and/or suppliers or team members of other departments (Campbell, 2011).

Influential team members often realise that people making the most noise have little relevance and efforts should be made to encourage the reluctant communicators to participate (Gorse and Whitehead, in Emmitt and Gorse, 2007). Those project leaders with considerable communication skills and influence emerge as the dominant communicators, thus the attributes of dominant communicators may be closely associated with those of leaders (Emmitt and Gorse, 2007).

Leaders lead through effective communication. Good communication skills enable, foster and create the understanding and trust necessary to encourage others to follow a leader. Without effective communication, a manager accomplishes little. Without effective communication, a manager is not an effective leader. In fact, being able to communicate effectively is what allows a manager to move to a leadership position (Barrett, 2006b).

An early Harvard Business School study on what it takes to achieve success and be promoted in an organisation says that the individual who gets ahead in business is the person who is able to communicate, to make sound decisions, and to get things done with and through people (Bowman, Jones, Peterson, Gronouski and Mahoney, in Barrett, 2006b). As stated by Kouzes and Posner in Kellerman (2012) leadership “is not a solo act, it’s a team effort”.

Communication therefore is a strong force that influences project success. The project leader needs to develop a leadership style that fosters effective and efficient communication with stakeholders.

7. COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND LEADERSHIP

According to Barrett (2006b) leadership communication consists of layers, expanding skills from core strategy development and effective writing and speaking to using these skills in more complex organisational situations. As a project develops, the project manager will need to improve the core communication skills to become more effective in communication.

Barrett (2006b) emphasises that as a manager progresses to higher levels in the organisation, the more complex communication demands become. Further, that the framework is not meant to suggest a hierarchy, which is why it is depicted as a spiral.

Barrett (2006b) explains leadership communication as follows (Figure 1):

- Core communication. All effective communication depends on the core skill at the centre of the spiral. These are the more individual skills. Leaders in any organisation must master the skills at the core.
- Managerial communication. Managerial communication capabilities build on the core abilities. It is the capabilities more directly involved in managing others. It is the skills needed to interact with individuals and to manage groups.
- Corporate communication. Corporate communication involves expansion from the managerial skills to those abilities needed to lead an organisation and address a broader community. Communication becomes even more complex when managers move into a position where they need to think about the best way to communicate to all internal and external stakeholders.

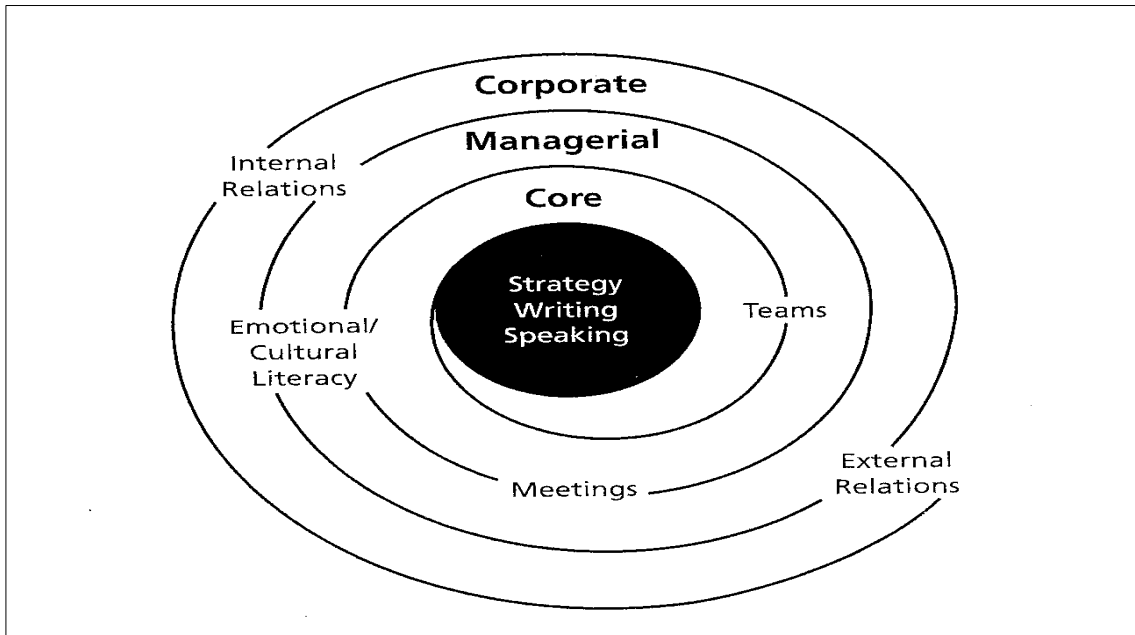


Figure 1: Leadership communication framework (Barrett, 2006a: 5)

The core skills that project managers need in order to be able to communicate effectively might be for example the skills of writing and speaking. Managers need to be able to structure and write effective and complex correspondence and documents, from emails and memos to proposals and reports. Managers need to be able to write and speak in using a level of language expected of leaders. They need to be able to create and deliver oral presentations. These are the core skills needed in communication.

Managerial communication skills that project managers need to be able to communicate effectively, might be for example listening. To listen is an essential skill in any situation, but is applicable within the managerial ring because managing others effectively requires attention to hearing what others are saying. The managerial ring might also include leading meetings as well as team development and team building.

The corporate communication skills that project managers need to be able to communicate effectively might be for example to be a leader. Effective communication depends on a style of leading the team and the external stakeholders. Leaders will find that, as they move into higher levels of an organisation, they become the project's face to the public.

8. RESEARCH PROJECT

A questionnaire survey was conducted, sending to a selected group of quantity surveyors, construction managers, engineers, architects and project managers. The number of questionnaires sent out was 302. The total response rate was 32%. It is significant in respect of the reliability of the response rate that 72% of the responses received were from project managers. However, the responses from the project managers did not distort the response data.

The purpose of the question was to determine the importance of characteristics that a construction project manager should possess to ensure successful communication. Further, to determine which characteristics are important for a project manager to communicate effectively with team members.

The characteristics of a person may contribute to managing a project more successfully and these characteristics are indicative of the style of leadership. It is important to determine the leadership style of a project manager, because it influences the successful execution of the project, the cooperation between the team members and the cooperation between the team and the project manager.

Table 1 shows the important characteristics and leadership style needed by a project manager to communicate effectively. Column 1 shows the characteristics of a construction project manager. Columns 2 to 7 present the responses in percentages, Column 8 depicts the average of the respondents' answers to the question regarding the characteristics of construction project manager and Column 9 the ranking in decreasing order. The 'none' responses were not taken into account in calculating the average.

Table 1: Characteristics of a construction project manager

Characteristics of construction project manager	Response (%)						Average	Ranking
	None	1 Not important 5 Extremely important						
		1	2	3	4	5		
Developing trust, collaboration and teamwork	3.0	0	1.0	5.2	28.9	61.9	4.4	1
Allowing the team members to take responsibility for their work	2.1	0	1.0	9.2	42.3	45.4	4.3	2
Sharing the vision of the project with the project team	5.2	0	2.0	8.2	28.9	55.7	4.2	3
Task orientation	3.1	1.0	1.0	15.5	40.2	39.2	4.1	4
People orientation	3.1	0	2.1	14.4	43.3	37.1	4.1	4
Information disclosure to team members for decision making purposes	3.1	2.0	3.1	18.6	43.3	29.9	3.9	5
Allowing the team to take part in the decision making process	3.0	0	3.1	16.5	48.5	28.9	3.9	5
Setting challenges and goals for team members	4.2	0	4.1	9.3	54.6	27.8	3.9	5
Support for team members training and development	4.1	1.0	5.2	19.6	45.4	24.7	3.8	6
Realising individual needs of team members	3.1	0	3.1	27.8	48.5	17.5	3.7	7
Trusting the team to take a decision themselves	3.1	1.0	4.1	32.0	41.2	18.6	3.6	8
Following the rule book	6.2	1.0	13.4	33.0	33.0	13.4	3.3	9

The characteristic that a construction project manager should possess to ensure successful communication ranked the highest by the respondents is developing trust, collaboration and teamwork. The characteristic ranked

second is allowing the team members to take responsibility for their work, third is sharing the vision of the project with the project team, fourth task orientation and fifth people orientation.

All the characteristics are *important to extremely important* for a construction project manager to possess to ensure successful communication during the execution of a project.

The characteristics the respondents rated as *extremely important* for a construction project manager to possess to ensure successful communication, are to develop trust, collaboration and teamwork (61.9%), sharing the vision of the project with the project team (55.7%) and to allow the team members to take responsibility for their work (45.5%).

The characteristics that the respondents rated as *very important* for a project manager to possess are to set challenges and goals for team members (54.6%), to realise individual needs of team members (48.5%), to allow the team to participate in the decision-making process (48.5%), information disclosure to team members for decision-making purposes (43.3%) and people orientation (43.3%). Following the rulebook (33.0%) is the only characteristic that is rated as an *important* characteristic by the respondents for the construction project manager to possess.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The project manager that is trusted by the team and gets the team to work together will communicate successfully. Project team members need to collaborate, share, collate and integrate information and knowledge to realise project objectives. A project manager does not communicate with language only, but also with character, which includes attitude, behaviour and personality.

Allowing team members to take responsibility for their work and sharing the vision with team members will enhance the formal flow of information in all directions, namely upward, downward, horizontal, diagonal and lateral, resulting in successful feedback. Thus, project managers who allow the team to take responsibility for their work will attain more from team members and communication will be more effective. The results indicated a people-orientated approach towards the management of a project.

The Fiedler leadership style states that team members trust leaders and clearly shows that work that is defined and communicated is effective. In the Sloan or visionary leadership style, leaders use the vision to give the life and work of the organisation a sense of meaning and purpose, but maintain the focus on the vision. This leader enlists others by involving them, listening to them and clearly communicating with them. Theory Y of McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y style assumes that team members enjoy their work and will take responsibility for applying and directing the aims of the project. This does not require external control but is achieved through participation, collaboration and reward for achievements. For workers to take responsibility for their work leads to maturity. The Situational leadership style includes understanding the level of the worker's maturity.

The styles that a project manager with characteristics such as allowing team members to take responsibility for their work; developing trust, collaboration and teamwork; and sharing the vision will apply during the execution of a project are the Behavioural, Fiedler, McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y, Sloan or Visionary and Situational leadership styles.

This implies that a project manager has to sum up the situation to adapt a style according to the situation, which implies the Situational leadership style. The Situational leadership style is the best style a project manager may apply during the execution of a project because it adapts a style according to the situation, which allows team members to take responsibility for their work, and allowing them to participate in the decision-making process. This implies that the project manager trusts the team. These characteristics of a construction project manager are the characteristics that will enhance effective communication and form the basis of a leadership style.

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