LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF THE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS IN INDUSTRY AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS - A CASE STUDY FOR MASTER STUDENTS

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Abstract

Current conditions in the economies in transition, affected by the globalization of the business, focus on social awareness for improvement and development of the professional soft skills. While one part of the managers faces with bad forecasts for the success of the company, where they work, the rest of them, quite confidently and reliably recognize all possibilities, even in critical conditions and fail to cope with the challenges and to express their superiority above others. These professionals, so successful in modern organizations, are making the valuable asset of the companies that are leading. These managers possessing appropriate soft skills become the corner stone of organizational business success.

This paper deals with the self-awareness of the young professionals on master study curricula Project management at Faculty of Electrical Engineering and IT in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia. The survey includes was conducted in a period of 5 years and the number of respondents is about hundred. The analysis summarized the results of a such survey concerning the managerial role and focus in detail in the responses pertaining to the interpersonal roles and leadership capability. The results could be used as a basis for further investigations of the needed skills for young professionals in industry for improvement of the effectiveness of their academic knowledge in engineering business practice.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Current conditions in the economies in transition, affected by the globalization of the business, focus on social awareness for improvement and development of the professional soft skills. Today beyond the knowledge and technical skills, employers are looking for business awareness and capacity for self-esteem and self-management in job applicants (Atfield & Purcell, 2010).

Brown and Hesketh (2004) assume that personal qualities and attributes such as interpersonal skills and time-management, together with organisational skills and efficiently problem solving capacity are important for the chief managers in order to evaluate their employees. It is therefore necessary for graduate students or young managers to be able to communicate, negotiate, and work as a team, to have informational and decision making capacity and also ability to recognize all possibilities, even in critical conditions and to cope with the challenges. Only these kind of professionals are making the valuable asset of the companies that are working for.

Professionals and managers possessing appropriate soft skills become the cornerstone of organizational business success.

What about the young professionals and graduate students in small and developing countries like Republic of Macedonia? What kind of skills do they possess? Are they aware of that? How they develop and improve their skills?

Asking to self-esteem the knowledge and skills they possess, graduate students and young professionals from business organizations, did not come with facts, but compare themselves with the abilities of some reference groups. Relevant in the case of students, are skilled students or other members of their peer group, teachers or trainers. For the employees essential are senior and project managers with such abilities and attributes they are familiar to. It is, also, important to have in mind that self-rating or self-esteem is subjective and highly context-influenced.

Respondents also mention that universities attempt to incorporate skills development into their teaching and learning provisions. University and high schools in developed countries and European Union have already included huge modifications to existing course content, through embedding the development of particular skills within the wider academic content, the development of new courses and teaching methods, and the provision of stand-alone skills courses offered either at the departmental level or on a university-wide basis (Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2006, p. 4). That is the reason why master students have great expectation for enhancing or modifying their abilities and capacities through professional work and education.

In order to develop and/or to improve the ability to work on a projects, to communicate, negotiate, to lead and make decisions, all respondents continue education on next level, master or doctoral degree. They assume that Project management course with implementation of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in projects and in business also is one of the best options.

To obtain the personal characteristics of the managers, Mintzberg (1973, pp. 54-99) analyses managerial activities and responsibilities. He divided managerial role into three sections: interpersonal, informational and decisional. Every section was than subdivided into three subsections. Within the interpersonal section he defined manager role as a leader, person that motivate, innovate and make changes to achieve business goals; as figurehead, promoter of commitment between organization and stakeholders and liaison is manager that prefer communication and relationships between stakeholders (between company and its partners and clients).

Monitor, disseminator and advocate roles are part of the informational category. When managers are able to identify the needs, programs and services
for company development they are classified as monitor.

Disseminator has competence to communicate effectively and to develop personal performance. They transmit the information from the outside to the company members, while advocate managers had working knowledge and transmit the date in opposite direction, from company to the clients or partners (outside of the company).

The final decisional section includes managers as: changers, disturbance handler, resource allocator and negotiator.

Managers that are willing to develop strategies, design plans and looking for new opportunities are named as changers or entrepreneurs. Disturbance Handler are forced to resolve problems/conflicts and to find new alternatives. They are named as resource allocator if they develop basic principles of company planning, manage times, develop budgets or design personnel plans. If managers are involved in major or local negotiations and have ability for problem solving and decision making they are classified as negotiators.

It is important to mention that all managerial roles (Mintzberg, 1973, p. 58), are integrated and could not be isolated from each other.

This paper summarize the results of a survey concerning the managerial role and focus in detail in the responses pertaining to interpersonal roles and leadership capability.

Section 2 of this paper examines the leadership trends in organization with a view to define academic leadership and evaluate the leadership potential of post-graduate candidates.

The results of the survey are presented in section 3. Conclusion and remarks from the survey are given in section 4.

2 LEADERSHIP TRENDS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

By the end of the 20th century Burns (1978) and House (1977) suggested that leadership could be understood as transformational or charismatic leadership. Transformational leaders were described as “inspirational, intellectually stimulating, challenging, visionary, development oriented and determined to maximize performance” (Avolio & Bass, 2004). This leadership style focuses more on the exchange between managers and associates through constructive and corrective behaviors, described as contingent reward, and management by exception, respectively (Avolio & Bass, 2002; 2004). What defines an effective leader or effective leadership behavior in one context may be completely different from what defines an effective leader in another setting (Fielder & Chemers, 1974).

The results from the large scale research project involving hundreds of business leaders in four different countries – Canada, the United States, England and China identified three core domains: character, capabilities and commitment, describing who the leaders are and what leaders do (Gandz, Crossan, Seijts, & Stephenson, 2010).

Leaders are forced to make changes in development of organizational strategies and ways of performing its business. Economy conditions impose leaders not only to adapt to changes in the environment but also to create change. However, academic leaders today must be able to demonstrate teamwork and communication capabilities beyond the confines of their own faculty or academic discipline. The organizations need leaders who are able to manage the processes of change that are one step ahead of others who think long term and who understand that maintaining the status quo is detrimental in terms of turbulent change and environments.

Such managers are leaders; they lead organizations towards achieving superior performance. Undoubtedly leadership has become a critical factor in the success of modern companies and most expensive resource in any company. Human Resource departments in companies are facing the problem how to find the best managers for key managerial positions.
3 RESEARCH METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Although more present interest in the application of leadership, empirical research on the topic of leadership among young professionals in industry and other organizations in Republic of Macedonia are quite rare and for that reason a survey was conducted each year, from 2009 to 2014.

Almost hundred of young managers who continued their education on master studies in the field of Project Management - Leadership, management and communication have filled-out a particular questionnaire.

The group consists of female and male students, at the age of 24-40 years. Most of them have had working experience from 1-10 years and only 10% continue the education on masters after graduation.

The questionnaire included twelve questions divided into three sections. Section 1 collected students’ perceptions of their development of interpersonal skills and abilities in recent years. Sections 2 collected similar data in relation to their informational capacity and Section 3 required data or comments on any aspect of decision making process. Section 1 was divided on three subsections. The first one refers to managerial role as a leader, the second one as a figurehead and third one as a liaison.

Students were asked to define their level of competence, their strengths and weaknesses in relation to a range of skills on a scale of ‘1 to 9’. ‘1’ means that their skills are at low level, ‘5’ that their skills are good and ‘9’ that they have excellent managerial skills. They completed the questionairy independently and anonymous. An analysis was performed and results are graficaly shown on fig.1-fig.9.

According to the results, 15 of 97 surveyed participates (15%), have excellent skills as figurehead, 20% have low skills and most of them, about 50% have good managerial skills as figurehead, as it is shown in the Fig.1. Two of 97 respondents though they didn’t have ability to perform symbolic duties of a legal or social nature, if they are head of organization.

Fig. 1 Figurehead level of competence

Almost half of students think they have excellent (43%) or good (33%) competence as a liasion (Fig.2). They are able to communicate and to connect with experts outside the company in order to fulfill business startegy.

Fig. 2 Students ability as a liaison

The survey includes young managers from different types of companies likes banks, schools, private or public companies even employees in gouverment or governmental bodies and agencies. How they score their ability as a leader is shown in Fig.3.
The results show that most of the respondents think they had ability to be a leader and have high skills as task giver (53%) and visionary (49%) (Fig.4). The other half of the respondents define good or poor ability to motivate, encourage innovative performance and establish mutual trust.

Respondents believe postgraduate course will enable them to develop certain skills, and half of them believe job experience will enable them to develop specialist knowledge.

This is a good indicator for the organizations, since it shows increasing awareness of the usefulness of postgraduate studies and special leadership trainings for improving creative thinking, motivation and applying quality standards and concepts.

Section 2 gives a perception in relation to respondents informational capacity (fig. 5). The results show that more than 50% of respondents have excellent disseminator ability, 48% had ability to understand informal organization, to evaluate opportunities, to monitor, and only 17% believed that can act like advocate.

Mean and standard deviation for the sample is shown on fig. 5. Results show that respondents can easily assess the needs of institutions, define programs, use them to evaluate opportunities, communicate (mean value for disseminator and monitor role of the managers is almost the same) rather than to deal effectively with mass media and have working knowledge of political processes (low mean value for advocate).

The final set of questions concern the decisional roles of young managers and graduate students. The results at Fig.7 show that 60% of respondents are able to identify problems and work to resolve them.

More than half respondents (50-60%), are familiar with decisional role. Mean value for disturbance handler is the biggest and for resource allocator and negotiator the small one as it is shown in Fig. 8.
3.1 Analysis of the results

The main objective of the survey was to examine young managers perception for their ability and skills. According to Mintzberg study (1973, p. 130), managers had common roles but with different emphasis. He postulated that managers at lower levels tend to spend more time as disturbance handlers and negotiators and less time in the figurehead role. He also named two groups of managers – informational and decisional. Although Mintzburg classified managerial roles as changer, negotiator, disturbance handler and resource handler in one group, analysis of the respondents’ answers shows another (different) situation.

The results, as it is shown on Table 1, present the means and standard deviations for the sample of almost hundred master students on Project management study curricula.

Table 1. Means and standard deviation for managerial roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Managerial roles</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visionary</td>
<td>6.237113</td>
<td>2.597167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Giver</td>
<td>7.010309</td>
<td>2.451593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivator</td>
<td>7.309278</td>
<td>2.127992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figurehead</td>
<td>4.752577</td>
<td>2.626115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaison</td>
<td>6.56701</td>
<td>2.621653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor</td>
<td>6.216495</td>
<td>2.843951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disseminator</td>
<td>6.525773</td>
<td>2.65005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate</td>
<td>4.041237</td>
<td>2.66113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changer</td>
<td>6.185567</td>
<td>2.631262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disturbance Handler</td>
<td>7.195876</td>
<td>1.966592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Allocator</td>
<td>5.907216</td>
<td>2.954807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiator</td>
<td>5.907216</td>
<td>2.780447</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1964, in his study, Sayles notes that monitor phase always occure after solution of a problem so is better to be grouped with decisional roles then with informational as Mintzberg done in his study later (1973).

In order to correlate the managerial roles and to determine the distances among them, intercorrelation coefficients were calculated and shown on Fig. 9 managerial roles.

According to Fig. 9, first three managerial roles: visionary, task giver and motivator which define a leader role, are not correlated to each other. The correlation coefficient is about 0.1. It is assumed that correlation between them is too low, because of respondent’s subjectivity and because they try to find themselves in every managerial role.

If the lower bound for the value of correlation coefficient is assumed to be 0.5 than visionary as a manager role is correlated with monitor and changer/entrepreneurial.

The question is: Are they really connected?

It seems that changer will be familiar with visionary role only if he knows how to recognize momentum during his business mission to find out new and better opportunities for the company.

Fig. 8. Mean and Standard Deviation for Sample
Visionary Task Giv Motivat Figure Liaison Monit Disser Advoc Chang Distu Reso Negot

| Visionary | 1.00 |
| Task Giv  | 0.11  |
| Motivator | -0.07 |
| Figurehe | -0.09 |
| Liaison  | -0.06  |
| Monitor  | 1.00  |
| Dissemin | 0.11  |
| Advocate | -0.08 |
| Changer  | 0.95  |
| Disturba | 0.12  |
| Resource | 0.22  |
| Negotiato| 0.34  |

4 CONCLUSIONS

A lot of companies, even in the developed countries, failed because of not skilled staff. Economy in transition and social conditions could be the reason for low level management competence. The awareness of the necessity to maintain-up and apply technical knowledge, skills and technique, should be an objective for the top managers in the age of New Economy.

The survey conducted to the master students at one Faculty of Engineering and Information Technologies in the Republic of Macedonia is one of the rare surveys of this kind in the field of management and leadership.

According to the survey results, we can conclude that most of the respondents are aware of the ability and skills they possess. Most of them already had job experience and are aware of the technical knowledge they possess. But they believe that university is the place where can develop and improve most of the managerial roles, especially informational.

Now on one side there are graduate and master students and their abilities, and on the other side business and industry leaders and universities.

What kind of skills and knowledge university offer and what leaders need?

What today business leaders need is to increase productivity while decreasing costs. They highlighted three kind of skills needed by job
applicants: teamwork, communication and flexibility. Written and oral communication skills are very important in today's high-powered workplace, but employees must also be able to use modern technology to communicate.

Maybe it is time universities and high schools to develop new or to modify the study curriculum and context of the lectures according to business and industry needs.

We hope that such research, as it is already presented in this paper, could improve the self-awareness, integrity and needed competences of the young professionals at their engineering workplace for a more efficient and effective appliance of their respectable technical knowledge.

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