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## Critical Traits for Effective Leadership Style in the South African Construction Industry

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### Abstract

Leadership is associated with certain traits or set behaviours that characterised the leader and which to some extent is essential for influencing others for maximum cooperation and productivity. In some cases, actions may speak better than words. People follow a leader not only because of what he/she says, but what he/she does or is made of. In other words certain qualities are responsible for effective leadership. However, researchers are still oblivious of which trait would always guarantee leadership success. Hence, the search for better leadership traits has continued to this day. Leaders may find themselves in demanding circumstances characterised with complexity, pressure, and uncertainties such as construction and its industry. In such situation, certain leadership traits may be critical more than others for a leader to make headway, as well as influence his/her subordinates towards salvaging the situation to a great extent. The main objective of this paper is to investigate the critical traits for effective leadership among construction professionals in the South African construction industry. The primary research data were collected through a structure questionnaire while the secondary data were collected from a detailed literature review. The survey was conducted in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. Respondents were construction professionals especially project managers. Respondents were selected using heterogeneity and convenience sampling techniques. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 software. Values were represented with descriptive statistics (mean) and standard deviation and were ranked according in descending order. Findings from the study revealed that ability to communicate well is of the optimum importance for effective leadership. Other findings include organised, integrity, self-discipline, experience, courage, visioning, empathy, honesty, problem solving ability, passion, creative, self-confidence, flexible/open to change, ability to inspire/motivate, composure, decisiveness, action oriented, risk taking, foresight, teachable and charisma. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on the effects of effective leadership for optimum performance in the South African construction industry.

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### 1. Introduction

Leadership studies have been approached in many different ways and views. In some cases, it is define as a process of guiding, directing and commanding others to achieve a desired goal as [7, 11]. In other words, it is a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent [3]. It is vital to understand that leadership is neither a position nor management. Leadership is that extra edge to management [17, 25]. The goals of managers come from "necessities" but the goals of leaders come from a

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place of "active attitudes" [25]. As leadership is an extra plus for management, so also an active attitude to Leadership [17, 24]. A manager can quit when the goings are down but a leader carries the burden upon him. A leader goes the extra mile and as well make the followers go also [17]. Maxwell [17] further posit that real leaders have the courage to face their fears, challenge the way things are, risk everything for the cause they believe in and do all that with no regard to personal gain [17]. This means that attitude, traits and qualities are major characteristics of leadership [10]. Hence, a leader's behavior, traits and attributes can be used consistently to influence the subordinates in the attainment of the desired goal [5]. Good Leadership ability is therefore critical for any construction organization to implementing a high performing culture of productivity and effective improvement [6]. The ability of the project leaders and superintendents to effectively motivate and navigate their subordinates will determine the success of the labour on the job [9]. In addition, the fact that the construction industry is characterized with complex and changing situations makes good leadership traits and abilities essential for overcoming challenges as well as the attainment of the project deliverables [20]. To this effect, this paper investigates the predominant leadership traits of construction professionals in the South Africa construction industry.

## 2. Leadership traits and attributes

Leadership traits can be defined as personal qualities and attributes that shape effective leaders [8]. These qualities and attributes can be inherent or learned [2, 4]. The influence an effective leader has on the subordinates is a product of firm balance of traits, attributes and behavioural pattern used in leading them [5, 15]. Hence, the trait theory focused on the analysis of mental, physical and social characteristic to gain more insight on the common characteristics among leaders [24]. The predominant thought was that the identification of traits calls for accurate prediction of a leadership ability in an individual or potential leader in the making [2, 24]. There are many qualities that make an effective leader of which there appears to be no guaranteed consensus [13, 15]. People behaviours, cultures and circumstances differ. Therefore, in any giving situation the effectiveness of the leader inter-alia will depend on the exhibition of the right qualities and traits [13]. An effective leader's personality traits should be seen not only within the boundaries of work but also outside its boundaries. This helps the leader achieve success and satisfaction in both work and personal life [5]. This is true with the popular saying that a leader can become the one he or she ought to be on the outside by first fixing his/her self on the inside. The acquisition of adequate leadership traits among construction professionals and as project leaders is essential to pushing team members toward performance enhancement in any project undertaking.

### 2.1. Personality traits of effective leaders

Literature has suggested a plethora of traits which can characterise effective leaders [1, 17, 20, 21]. Maxwell [17] in his 21 Indispensable qualities of a leader listed such traits like: "Integrity, charisma, commitment, communication, competence, courage, Discernment, Focus, Generosity, Initiative, Listening, Passion, Positive attitude, Problem solving, Relationships, Responsibility, Security, Self-discipline, Servanthood, Teachability, and Vision". Kirkpatrick and Locke [14] suggested that the elements of leadership trait are drive; desire to lead; honesty and integrity; self-confidence; and knowledge of the business. Other researchers like Ogunlana [20] as well as Barker and Coy's [1] also suggested traits like, desire to lead, Integrity, Humility, courage, humour, passion, compassion, wisdom, self-confidence and knowledge of the business. Furthermore, literature has revealed some perceived traits of leadership inter-alia which can thrive well particularly from the construction industry perspective of which include, inspiration, motivation and rewards consciousness [15, 21]. To this end, some of the prevalent leadership traits of effective leaders are expounded below.

- Communication skill

The leader should be able to get a message properly across to followers. Effective communication helps group members to follow through with the given instructions. The key to effective communication is simplicity. The ability of a project leader to listen, understand what others mean, and verbally persuade people effectively is attribute of good communication skill [13].

- Organised

The hallmark of effective leader is the ability to be structured and well organised. In other word, planning skill is vital for effective leaders. A leader who does not plan for himself and for the organisational activities is only planning to fail. Ability to plan includes judgment, perceptual foresight, conceptual foresight, ordering, elaboration and adaptive flexibility [15].

- Integrity

According to Maxwell [17] foundation of true leadership is "character (integrity)" as people will not willingly follow the leader to whom they distrust. Integrity is also very essential in moral leadership. It can bring a lasting success. An effective leader should do what he/she talks about always as a good example to his/her subordinates. Leaders must not only be honest and trustworthy but also trust their group members or followers

- Visioning

Vision is everything for a leader because it fuels the fire within which helps draw the leader and the subordinates forward. Jarad [13] defines visioning as a process which is categorised in phases such as the creation stage, improvement stage as well as the renewal stage of the vision. Many researchers assert that the goals of visioning include giving insight on the future to the organisation, guiding the decision making and connecting to the values [22].

- Self-confidence

The quality to believe in oneself is also pivotal if one is to accomplish anything here on earth. Without self-confidence, it is hard for a leader to take the bold step of convincing his/her subordinates or team that the challenging goal is possible to be attained [21].

- Flexible

Flexibility is vital today considering the advances in technology, global outsourcing and employees' attrition challenges etc. Therefore, the possession of flexibility is required if he/she is to cope with the changing environments and downsizings in the society [5].

- Courage

One of the most vital qualities useful for any undertaking is that of courage. This trait is essential because it helps the leader to face the day to day challenges that life may bring and the risk that goals with the attainment of each goal [5]. In addition, leadership starts from within (the heart of a leader) where courage resides [23]. Furthermore, it will be difficult to display other skills such as integrity, communication skill, decisiveness, inter-alia without courage [23].

- Empathy

The ability to understand another person's feelings, experiences etc. is one of the effective traits a leader can possess. A leader should be able to see things from others point of view. Being sensitive to others, understanding their feeling and finding the best way to communicate with them should be a priority for any leader [16].

- Passion and Motivation

Leaders with high energy and enthusiasm towards their goal never quit. This is because they are being fuelled by the above-mentioned forces which enable them to press on despite difficulties they may encounter in the way [16, 17]. Effective leaders use various forms of motivation where necessary in effectively moving the group forward.

- Commitment

Commitment is what separate doers from dreamers. A leader should be able to persist in what he believes and get amidst obstacles. A leader is constantly under a watchful eye by the subordinates. Any slip in commitment will clearly

be seen by the subordinates. Hence, it is important to maintain an attitude of commitment to the organisational objectives, as well as to the team.

- Teachable

A leader should always be teachable. To keep leading the leader should keep learning. It is a popular saying that “all leaders are readers”. As a leader, your growth determines who you are and who you are will either affect your organisation positively or negatively [17].

- Composure

Maintaining a good composure and stability are not only good for in leadership but also play a good role in managerial efficiency [15]. Stable leaders are intelligent about their emotions. The understanding of one's own strength and weakness and the seeking of improvement where necessary are factors that make for an effective leader.

- Problem solving

Problem-solving skill is essential for any leader. With problem-solving ability, the leader can analyse adverse conditions or conflict, differentiate between causes and symptoms [13]. As per Maxwell [17], Leaders with Good issues taking care of capacities suspect issues, acknowledge reality, can see the comprehensive view, handle one thing at once, and never abandon a noteworthy objective when they are down.

### 3. Research methodology

A quantitative approach was adopted for this study. Hence, a questionnaire was used as a tool for the collection of the primary data. Quantitative research is one of the practical approaches to gather information from an extensive sample of respondents using statistics [18]. It involves a survey to obtain information from a sample of people by means of self-report whereby a sequence of questions are posed to the respondents by the researcher [12]. The questionnaire was constructed using a 5-point Likert-scale survey. Weights were assigned to each response ranging from 1 to 5 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. A convenient sampling was used, targeted at 81 construction professionals in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. 63% response rate was achieved. The professionals were limited to project managers, architects, quantity surveyors, construction managers, civil engineers and town planners. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 software. The reliability and internal consistency of the collected data were appraised using Cronbach’s alpha  $\alpha$ .  $\alpha$  value for the leadership style actions was 0.76. Mean (M) value was used and the various leadership traits were ranked accordingly.

### 4. Findings and discussions

The empirical findings centred on the critical traits for effective leadership in the South African construction industry. Results according to table 1 revealed that good communication skill is very essential for effectiveness when leading people. Hence, it ranked first with Mean (M) value of 4.50 and having standard deviation (SD) value of 0.74. It was also revealed that effective leaders are much organised (M=4.26, SD=0.92). Integrity was ranked third (M=4.24, SD=0.94) while Self-discipline and commitment were ranked fourth position having the same value (M=4.22, SD=0.93). Other vital traits mentioned were as follows: Experience (M=4.18, SD=0.94, R=6); Courage (M=4.12, SD=0.82, R=7); Empathy (M= 4.06, SD=0.91, R=8); Visioning (M=4.06, SD=0.92, R=9); Problem solving ability (M=4.02, SD=0.84, R=10); Honesty (M=4.02, SD=0.84, R=10); Passion (M=4.00, SD=0.93, R=12); Creative (M=3.96, SD=1.00, R=13); Self-confidence (M=3.92, SD=0.90, R=14); Open to change (M=3.82, SD=0.94, R=15); Ability to inspire/motivate (M=3.82, SD=0.92, R=16); Composure (M=3.80, SD=0.67, R=17) etc. However, *Teachable* and *Foresight* have the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest mark having the mean value of 3.66 (SD=0.77, R=21) and 3.54 (SD=0.73, R=22) respectively. Finally *Charisma* was ranked last (R=23) with Mean value of 3.48 with SD=0.76.

Table 1: Critical Leadership traits

<b>Dominant Traits</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Communication skill	4.50	0.74	1
Organised	4.26	0.92	2
Integrity	4.26	0.94	3
Self-discipline	4.22	0.93	4
Commitment	4.22	0.93	4
Experience	4.18	0.94	6
Courage	4.12	0.82	7
Empathy	4.06	0.91	8
Visioning	4.06	0.92	9
Problem solving ability	4.02	0.84	10
Honesty	4.02	0.84	10
Passion	4.00	0.93	12
Creative	3.96	1.00	13
Self-confidence	3.92	0.90	14
Flexible/Open to change	3.82	0.94	15
Ability to inspire/motivate	3.82	0.92	16
Composure	3.80	0.67	17
Decisiveness	3.76	0.66	18
Action oriented	3.74	0.85	19
Risk taking	3.70	0.81	20
Foresight	3.66	0.77	21
Teachable	3.54	0.73	22
Charisma	3.48	0.76	23

## 5. Conclusions

The study set out to establish the critical traits essential for leadership effectiveness in the South African construction industry. The essence of leadership and its traits was clearly discussed. Findings revealed that good communication skill when dealing with people is very critical for effectiveness. In addition, it was also revealed that self discipline of a leader and commitment are very essential for influencing people. This is because, before one is qualified to lead others, he/she should first a lead himself/herself. Additionally, a leader is always on the spotlight and any slip in commitment will clearly be seen. Hence, a slack in commitment can affect the commitment of the subordinates. It can also reduce the quality of influence the leader has on the subordinate. Finding also revealed that a leader should possess certain traits like experience, courage, empathy, visioning and problem solving ability. People tend to listen to the leader who is a master in his/her craft. In addition, no one would like to follow a wimp as a leader and a person who does not know where he or she is going. Furthermore, people will listen to the leader who is able to understand their own feelings and able to sort out situation with the best possible option. Other important findings include creativity, passion, good composure, decisiveness, action-oriented, risk taking, foresight, a teachable attitude and charisma. This

study provides useful insight on key traits which when characterised a leader will enhance the influence he/she has on the subordinates. In addition, these traits when possessed or developed in abundance can help the leader to press the right leadership style buttons as occasion demands. Pressing the right leadership style button will then influence the subordinates and cause them to achieve the desired objectives. Project objectives when then achieved result to organisational success and in turn contribute to business growth of the industry and gross development product of the South African nation.

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