Identification and evaluation of the key social competencies for Chinese construction project managers

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Abstract

It is well understood that an individual's competency has a significant effect on his/her performance. While the more traditional "hard" technical skills of project managers have drawn much attention, little light has been shed on the "soft" skills, especially social competencies in the construction context. This study has adopted a well-established competency model from human resource management theories as a basis for the theoretical framework to examine the social competencies of construction project managers. This led to the development of a model via the use of a structural equation modelling approach. Four dimensions of social competencies for construction project managers were identified, i.e. working with others, stakeholder management, leading others, and social awareness. Attention to these attributes will help construction project managers to develop their social competencies, and could contribute towards a better performance in their workplace which will in turn improve the performance of the whole organisation. Implications of adopting this approach were also discussed.

1. Introduction

Competent project managers (hereafter referred to as PMs) with a range of core competencies have been critical to the success of projects. Gaddis (1959) for the very first time proposed a requirement profile for the ideal project manager. Since then, this field has attracted significant interests from academics, constantly seeking to identify the essential qualities of PMs (Leybourne, 2007; Loo, 2002; Pettersen, 1991). These studies have attempted to define requirements for PMs to be effective in terms of project management knowledge, skills and various personal characteristics. Similarly, the literature dealing with project managers' competencies has tended to focus on discussions about the technological skills of PMs, e.g. the PMs' competencies of planning, follow-up, controlling etc. Usually, such competencies are viewed as "hard skills" of PMs (Ingason and Jónasson, 2009; Posner, 1987), or entry-level skills (Jiang, 2002; Turner and Muller, 2003), or sometimes threshold abilities (Boyatzis, 1982; Skulmoski and Hartman, 2010). These are not underpinning characteristics that distinguish between average and excellent PMs, nor do such skills necessarily lead to an improved or a higher performance. Many studies dealing with competencies have advanced the knowledge about project management theory however they are not sufficient, on their own, to ensure that a person can become a competent project manager (Skulmoski and Hartman, 2010).

Within the management discipline, one of the most provocative ideas emerging from recent discussions of management concerns the potential relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and

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the performance of organisation members (Caruso and Salovey, 2004; Goleman, 1998). Emotional competencies may lead to superior performance of individual as interpersonal interactions are required in most organisational context to accomplish goals (Kim et al., 2009). Furthermore, a number of empirical studies have established a correlation between emotional competencies and work performance in various contexts (Boyatzis et al., 2002; Lam and Kirby, 2002; Semadar et al., 2006). Despite a growing awareness within project-based sectors of relationship between performance and PMs' competencies (Cheng et al., 2005), very few studies have been undertaken to investigate PMs' emotional competencies that underpin the high performance of individuals at work. Therefore, there appears to be a need to identify the emotional competencies that potentially influence the PMs' level of effectiveness.

This study attempts to fill this gap. The aim of this study is to identify and evaluate the key emotional competencies of PMs, in particular, one subset of emotional competencies i.e. social competencies. Empirical evidence was collected to establish the social competency model for construction project managers (CPMs).

2. Project management competence standards

In the past decades, the performance-based competency standards rather than knowledge standards have been widely adopted as a basis for assessing and credentialing PMs (Crawford, 2005; Webster, 2004). These standards include: the Project Manager Competency Development Framework (PMCD Framework) (Project Management Institutes, PMI, 2002) published by the Project Management Institutes (PMI), which is based on Project Management Body of Knowledge Guide (PMBOK® Guide) (Project Management Institute, PMI, 2000); Australian Institute of Project Management's (AIPM) National Competency Standards for project management (Australian Institute of Project Management, Sponsor (AIPM), 1996); and the International Project Management Association's (IPMA) four-level certification program. These competence standards have been widely used to certify project manager's competence with the assumption that: (1) management practices are context-independent and universal, and (2) the competencies that certified PMs developed on the basis of Competency Standards can lead to project manager's outstanding performance (Chen et al., 2008; Crawford, 2005). With a number of knowledge areas covered in the project management guidelines, efforts have been made to investigate the relative importance of project management knowledge areas. For instance, Zwikael (2009)'s study found that the knowledge areas with the greatest impact on project success were Time, Risk, Scope, and Human Resources.

However, the published project management body of knowledge and competency standards have not specified the competencies that PMs require in each phase of a project, or in certain type of projects. This is compounded by the lack of empirical research reported that either supports or questions this assumption (Stretton, 1995). In fact, prior studies have reported that there is no statistically significant correlation between effective performance and the widely used knowledge standards

in their entity, and performance of PMs (Crawford, 2005). Similarly, the PMP®-certification gained by PMs does not explain the difference between project performances (Anantatmula, 2008; Muzio et al., 2007; Starkweather and Stevenson, 2011). As a result, scholars began to employ standardized research methodology in management and related theory to research competencies in context of project management.

3. Project manager's competencies

There are no universally agreed definitions or theories of competency within the project management field (Cheng et al., 2005). Different terminologies have been used to describe the ability of a person at work in previous studies, e.g. competence, capability and competency. In fact, competency studies in project management literature have been undertaken at three main levels, i.e. organisation, team and individual (Frame, 1999). A competency is defined by Boyatzis (2008, page 6) as, "a capability or ability… a set of related but different sets of behaviour organized around an underlying construct". It comprises two parts. The first part includes three clusters of behavioural habits as threshold abilities, including expertise and experience, knowledge, and an assortment of basic cognitive competencies. The second part encompasses three clusters of competencies (ibid) differentiating outstanding from average performance (Goleman et al., 2002; Spencer and Spencer, 1993), which includes cognitive competencies, emotional intelligence competencies, and social intelligence competencies. Emotional intelligence and social intelligence form the mass of emotional competencies that are underlying characteristics of a person leading to effective or superior performance (Boyatzis, 1982). Emotional competency is built upon emotional intelligence of a person, and are interdependent and, to some degree, hierarchical (Goleman, 1998).

In this research, Boyatzis's definition of competency is adopted as it has been accepted and used in a range of studies and is easier to implement with respect to the survey. In accordance with Boyatzis's definition, a project manager's competencies are defined as a set of related but different sets of behaviour organized around an underlying construct. PMs' competencies are demonstrated by PMs managing projects, which, if done well, can lead to PMs performing outstanding work. Similarly, PMs' emotional competencies are based on project managers' EI, covering both emotional intelligence competencies and social intelligence competencies.

For identifying competency, McCelland (1973) stressed the importance of attending to worker attributes that are strictly discipline-related. Numerous empirical studies have been undertaken to provide empirical evidence to support the worker-oriented approach. Using a well-recognized psychometric tool for the first time in project management research, Thornberry and Weintraub (1983) highlighted five important aspects for proficient PMs as: oral communication, leadership, intellectual capabilities, stress management capabilities and management skills.

Under a worker oriented approach, the competencies identified are not job/context specific therefore it remains uncertain