



# The moderating effect of program context on the relationship between program managers' leadership competences and program success

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## Abstract

We investigated the moderating effect of program context on the relationship between leadership competences of program managers and program success. Leadership competence was measured as the combination of intellectual competence (IQ), managerial competence (MQ) and emotional competence (EQ). A worldwide cross-sectional survey using the Leadership Dimensions Questionnaire (LDQ) and a program context and success questionnaire yielded 79 responses. Moderated hierarchical regression analyses (MHRA) were used to test the moderating effect of program context, which is characterized by organizational fit, program flexibility, organizational stability and resource availability. Results showed that program context positively moderates the relationships between program managers' IQ respective MQ with program success. However, the relationship between EQ and program success is lowered to insignificance in the presence of context. Managerial and theoretical implications are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Program context; Program success; Leadership; Emotional intelligence; Program management

## 1. Executive summary

Programs of projects constantly interact with their wider organizational context and markets, including various stakeholder groups. This requires program managers to be sensitive of the interaction between program context and program management activities. This challenges the program managers' leadership competences and makes them an important predictor for program success.

The research presented here explores how leadership competences of program managers relate to program success, and how program context variables moderate this relationship. A post-positivistic epistemological perspective with a deductive approach was adopted issuing a contingency theory perspective. A worldwide web-based survey collected 79 responses from program managers. Existing measurement tools were used, such

as for program success the dimensions of the program's contribution to organizational, delivery, marketing and innovation capabilities of the parent organization (Shao et al., 2012); and for program context the fit of the program to the wider organization, the flexibility, and stability of the organization, as well as the availability of resources to execute the program (Shao and Müller, 2011). Finally, the program manager personality was measured using the Leadership Dimensions Questionnaire (LDQ), to assess the intellectual (IQ), managerial (MQ, and emotional (EQ) leadership competences (Dulewicz and Higgs, 2005). Analysis was done using moderated hierarchical regressions (MHRA).

The results show that a positive correlation between IQ/MQ competences of program managers and program success. This relationship is positively moderated by the program context. However, the relationship between EQ and program success is initially also positive but and significant but becomes insignificant in the presence of the program context variables.

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This indicates that IQ and MQ link to program success in a more immediate, direct and apparent way. EQ contributes to success by influencing people, thus in a more indirect, long-term but fundamental way, which unfolds over time.

The contingency theory perspective was supported through a “fit” between programs and their context, as indicated by the positive moderation effect of program context on the relationship between IQ/MQ and program success. This extends the appropriateness of contingency theory into the realm of program management.

The results from the study allow developing a first model of a theory of program success based on leadership competences, which enriches the existing theories in the field of project and program management.

Theoretical implications of the study are drawn from the different roles of EQ for program managers and project managers. At the program level, EQ plays a more indirect role, while IQ and MQ plays a more direct role; whereas, at the project level, EQ is not only a direct predictor to success, but also statistically more important than IQ and MQ (Turner and Müller, 2006). This difference has implications for theory development in terms of a) the types of success factors, which differ by project and program level, b) the leadership theory for projects and programs, where in projects the direct interpersonal interaction plays a more crucial role for success, whereas at the program level the more rational and traditional managerial competences come to bear.

Managerial implications include that program managers are encouraged to be more open and adaptive to program context, actively interacting with program context through better exerting their intellectual and managerial competences (i.e. their IQ and MQ), and consciously developing their power of influencing (i.e. EQ). This implies the necessity of integrating leadership into program manager training and development curricula. Furthermore, senior managers should take into consideration the program managers’ personal traits, in terms of their leadership competences, when choosing program managers according to the climate of the organizations and characteristics of the programs, and make efforts to shape a favorable context for programs.

## 2. Introduction

About 30% of the global economy is based on project activities, and the majority is in form of programs or portfolios (Turner, 2009). Programs comprise of projects and related ongoing operations to achieve common objectives (Project Management Institute, 2006; Office of Government Commerce, 2007). Programs become increasingly prevalent as they provide a “missing link” between organizational strategies and projects (Partington, 2000; Murray-Webster and Thiry, 2000). This tendency is known as “from projectification to programmification” (Maylor et al., 2006).

Project management professional organizations established standardized methodologies to guide the management of programs, such as The Standards for Program Management developed by Project Management Institute (PMI®) (Project Management Institute, 2006), and Managing Successful

Programs developed by the Cabinet Office (Office of Government Commerce, 2007). These methodologies are widely accepted because they provide sound frameworks for program management, including program management principles, elements and processes. However, they are not a panacea for managing all sorts of programs. Beside this, they tend to overemphasize control in managing programs, which may results in insufficient flexibility to synchronize with strategy evolution, as well as ineffective co-operation between projects within the programs (Lycett et al., 2004; Pellegrinelli, 2002).

Researchers suggested that effective program management should be dynamic and flexible, adaptable to the changing context, co-creative and relationship-based (Lycett et al., 2004; Näsholm and Blomquist, 2015). This requires program managers having “a subtle blend of interpersonal skills and personal credibility, a deep understanding of the political dynamics of the formal and informal networks that form the organizational context, and a great knowledge of the broader strategic context” (Partington et al., 2005, p. 87–88). This requirement implies that the role of program managers has gone beyond “managers”, who are responsible for day to day management work, towards “leaders”, who are responsible for managing business and leading program teams (Milosevic et al., 2007).

The development in program management research shows similarities with research in project management. Discussions on project success over the last fifty years revealed that on top of the traditional “hard” factors, like clear mission, right methodologies, right tools/techniques, reasonable plans/schedules, effective controls/monitors etc., the “soft” factors, such as leadership of project managers, increasingly draw the attention of researchers as a means to predict project success (Jugdev and Müller, 2005; Pinto and Slevin, 1998; Cooke-Davies, 2002; Shenhar et al., 2001; Turner and Müller, 2005). Besides, acknowledging that “one size does not fit all”, project contextual factors are explored to understand the match between project characteristics and appropriate project implementations (Shenhar, 2001; Müller and Turner, 2007; Müller et al., 2012). The study engages with this trend by addressing the following research question:

How does program context moderate the relationship between program managers’ leadership competences and program success?

The unit of analysis is the relationship between program managers’ leadership competences and program success. The study adopted Turner and Müller’s (2006) methodology. They investigated the relationship between project managers’ leadership competences and project success in different types of projects. Accordingly, the present study measured program managers’ leadership competences as intellectual, managerial and emotional competences (i.e. IQ, MQ and EQ), as developed by Dulewicz and Higgs (2005) for their studies on leadership competences. Constructs for measuring program context and program success were taken from Shao, Müller and Turner (Shao and Müller, 2011; Shao et al., 2012).

The contribution of the study lies in a better understanding of leadership in programs, and its contingency on program

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