THE PRACTICE OF EXERCISING INFLUENCE IN THE SPHERE OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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Lucrarea prezintă rezultatele studiului elaborat de autori privind practica exercitării tacticilor de influenţă de către managerii de proiect ce operează în sectorul IT. Astfel, sunt prezentate o serie de contribuţii teoretice pentru abordarea conceptului de comunicare interpersonală persuasivă în vederea evidenţierii conexiunilor cu domeniul exercitării influenţei. De asemenea, se urmăreşte explorarea spaţiului creat de exercitarea tacticilor de influenţă în vedera atingerii obiectivelor organizaţionale.

La finalul lucrării sunt prezentate contribuţiile autorilor privind practica exercitării influenţei, luand în considerare sistemul de valori culturale ale angajatului roman.

The paper presents the results of the empirical study, undertaken by the authors, on Romanian project managers, active in IT sector. It approaches the interpersonal communication from the persuasion standpoint and explores the managers' exercise of influence in attempting to achieve the business objectives.

Finally, based on the research results, the authors share their views regarding how exercising influence are shaped by the cultural values, taking into account the Romanian employees' cultural values, as well.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, persuasion, influence

1. Introduction

Globalization has led to important changes in the business environment in which the companies operate, affecting the workplaces for greater interdependency and greater interaction of employees. These changes in the business world stress the increased importance of communication for the success of individuals and the companies in which they work.

The pressures resulting from globalization require managers to move the focus from planning, organizing, and coordinating, to communication. The old command –and-control managerial model, grounded in formal authority, has been replaced with interpersonal communication aiming at building professional relationships between different interest groups.

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Today, the modern workplaces represent a complex configuration of authority and interpersonal influence. In this context, managers are required to exercise the influence aiming at gaining people commitment. Thus, the role of interpersonal communication becomes critical in attempting to effectively persuade the employees for obtaining their compliance.

2. Conceptual framework

The meaning of communication has evolved over time. The study of communication literature reveals that communication could be approached as information transfer, transactional process, and dialogic process. As information transfer, communication occurs when information is transmitted between two individuals without distortion or personal interpretation. The changes in the modern workplaces in terms of the increasing diversity of the employees ensure that the problems of misinterpretation and error are compounded. As a consequence, this approach of communication is no longer considered useful in understanding the actual communication sphere.

Further developments have defined communication as transactional process that encompasses the information exchanged, and the perception of meaning between the individuals involved. This approach reveals that communication is a two-way process consisting of simultaneous interpreters of messages [1]. Afterwards, communication experts have criticized this model for being based on unrealistic assumptions and for its emphasis on shared meaning [2].

As reality shows, communication is not that simple or clear-cut being fraught with miscommunication. Thus, researchers have begun to examine communication focusing on the differences of perspective that may exist between communicators. They have developed the dialogic process of communication that take into account communication as a form of social information processing [2]. Furthermore, other scholars have pointed to communication as perceptual model in which both communicators create meaning in their own minds [3].

Obviously, the latest developments in communication research have distinguished the growing importance of interpersonal relationships in communication. Individuals, as communicators, do not live as isolated human beings; they belong to groups and communities and their actions affect others. On the other hand, the modern workplaces emphasize interpersonal communication as a key aspect in improving business communication. The increased diversity of the workforce as well as the interdependency of employees from different nationalities require augmenting the research efforts toward a better understanding of business communication.

One significant aspect of business communication is related to the purpose of communication. According to the scientific literature, the purpose of communication has been identified thousands years ago by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) in terms of informing, persuading, and entertaining [2]. Although entertainment is the purpose of much of the communication aspects, it is not highly related to business communication. At the first glance, communicating to inform is the main reason behind business communication. In the workplace context, the employees inform each other concerning different aspects of their jobs. They communicate to inform passing on information from customers, clients, and other colleagues. However, it is also important to acknowledge that most business communication is generally not intended solely to achieve this purpose. Most business communication includes some aspects of sales such as selling ideas, products, services, or selling oneself. Selling and persuading are nearly synonymous in the business world.

A root analysis provides an insightful illustration of the importance and challenges of the persuading purpose of business communication. As in [4] communicating to persuade is a difficult and time-consuming activity, being an important skill in today's business environment. Further developments of Conger's approach suggest that interpersonal communication is critical to effective persuasion and within interpersonal communication situations, persuasion is referred to term influence. Likewise, as the scientific literature emphasizes, the term persuasion is often used interchangeably with the term influence that is defined as the power to affect other people thinking or actions [5].

In the area of interpersonal influence, increasing attentions have been paid to examine the influence process from multiple perspectives. One of the first fruitful attempts in this matter has revealed the way in which people influence each other in organization [6]. This research has yielded nine generic interpersonal influence tactics, ranked in decrease order of use in the workplace: rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, consultation, ingratiation, personal appeals, exchange, coalition, pressure, and legitimization. Afterwards, other authors have structured the first five influence tactics in soft tactics because they are friendly and not as coercive as the last four tactics. Exchange, coalition, pressure, and legitimization are called hard tactics because they involve more overt pressure [7].

Researches on the use of interpersonal influence have focused on a broad range of variables including direction and objective of influence [8], personal and contextual variables [9], and effectiveness of tactic used [10].

Other scholars have proposed a systemic approach of influence - inputs, transformation process, and outputs. During the transformation process, managers

use specific tools – power bases -, and techniques – interpersonal influence tactics – to influence their subordinates [11].

Another significant contribution to exploring influence tactics was brought by Blaine who has defined three categories of interpersonal influence tactics: power rests on fear, power rests on correctness, power based on principles [12]. The first category encompasses a variety of tactics based on coercive power, such as pressure, legitimization, sanction, upward appeal, and assertiveness. The second category refers to inter-related power arisen from bargaining and trade-offs. These influence tactics are better than the first one, but have limited effects on individuals because of the parts involved in influence process are permanently monitoring the environment aiming at identifying better opportunities. The third type of influence tactics is based on trust and respect from the others. The significance of trust is deeply rooted in personal values and principles such as dignity, fairness, openness, pursuit of truth and respect. For the purpose of this research, the authors have focused on these three types of interpersonal influence tactics: coercive, interdependency, and leadership.

It is virtually impossible to consider influence as a type of interpersonal communication without also taking into account the concept of power [13]. The power is typically defined as the capacity or ability to influence others, to affect the course of actions, overcoming resistance. Distinguished experts in social science have argued the power does not arise spontaneously heaving reasonably clear dimensions: position powers and personal powers [14]. The well-known scientist McClelland contended that one of the basic human needs is the need for power. Because this need is learned and not innate, the power has been extensively studied [15].

According to literature, the position powers refer to the organizational dimension of power and encompass three types of power sources: legitimate, coercive, and reward. Legitimate power is the base of power that is anchored to individual's formal position or authority. Coercive power is the individual's capability to affect negative consequences. Reward power is related to the extent in which individuals obtain compliance by promising or granting rewards [14].

The personal powers – expert and referent - are based on the person rather than the organization [14]. Access to these two sources of power does not depend solely on the organization. In the case of expert power, people influence others because of special expertise, knowledge, or skills. Referent power operates much in the same way, individuals influencing others because they are liked and respected. As Maccoby has noted, referent power, called charisma, comes into play when individual's personality becomes the reason for compliance [16].

After a documented research in the scientific literature, the authors have chosen to analyze the current practice of exercising influence as a key feature within the persuasion purpose of the interpersonal communication′s sphere.

3. Research methodology

The aim of the research was to explore the Romanian IT project managers' mind-set in terms of interpersonal communication. Success or failure of IT projects depends on the capability of project managers to be good communicators in the pursuit of building cooperative relationships among different groups of people to complete the projects. As consequence, the paper is addressing three key objectives:

O1. Analyzing the Romanian IT project managers' power sources.

O2. Analyzing the Romanian IT project managers' behavior concerning the use of specific interpersonal influence tactics.

O3. Studying the correlation between social variables of Romanian IT project managers and the practice of exercising influence.

Fulfillment of the third research objective has required development of the following scientific hypotheses:

The 1st scientific hypothesis:

H_1: The respondents' gender influences significantly the managers' exercise of influence.

The 2nd scientific hypothesis:

H_2: The respondents' age influences significantly the managers' exercise of influence.

The 3rd scientific hypothesis:

H_3: There is a significant correlation between professional experience and managers' exercise of influence.

The authors have set out two types of variables: nominal and attitudinal. The nominally scaled variables consist of demographic and situational information. Addressing the problem of attitude measurement toward the complex process of exercising influence involves designing multiple-item scales. As researchers argued, developing a multi-item scale is a complex procedure due to the abstract nature of the characteristic that has to be measured [17]. As a summary, Table 1 shows the structure of relevant variables of the research.

The process of developing the content of each item concerning the research variables assessment has drawn knowledge from the relevant social science theories. *Personal powers* were measured adapting the results of researches in social science field to the particularities of project managers' work [18]. The items assessed the extent to which IT project managers develop amiable working relationships with project team members as well as the willingness to build team loyalty. Furthermore, items measured the degree in which IT project managers provide technical suggestions and share considerable experience with project team members.

The map of research variables

Research variables		Conceptual description	Operational description
Nominally Scaled Variables	Demographic variables	Gender	Feminine, Masculine
		Age	Age levels
		Educational background	Relevant education in project management
		Work experience	< 1 year; 2-5 years; 6-10 years; > 10 years
	Situational variables	Management level	Strategic Functional Operational
		Organization type	Budgetary Private capital Public capital
		Organizational structure	Functional; Matrix; Projectized
Attitude Rating Scaled Variables	The practices of exercising influence	Power dimensions	Position powers; Personal powers
		Interpersonal influence tactics	Coercive Interdependency Leadership

Developing the items aiming at assessing *position powers* has been taken into account important research insights about the exercise of power in organizations [19]. Examples measured the extent to which respondents reward team members' performance, apply specific coercive techniques, and use the legitimacy of authority to make managerial decisions.

The interpersonal influence tactics "coercive" were assessed using adaptation of items from the Profiles of Organizational Influence Strategies, POIS, elaborated by Kipnis et al. to the project management context [6]. Examples included the extent to which project managers agreed or disagreed to invoke the adherence with organizational rules, order for compliance, sanction, and seek support from superior management levels.

The interpersonal influence tactics *"interdependency"* were assessed using adaptation of items from the work of psychology researchers to the project management context [20]. The items assessed the extent to which project managers agreed or disagreed to act in a friendly way, create enthusiasm, and exchange bargains.

The interpersonal influence tactics "leadership" were assessed by developing items grounded in the work of the distinguished researcher Covey [21]. Examples included the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed to

lead with dignity, fairness, being guided by a core set of principles in decision making process, and have a sense of purpose for the common good.

4. Research results

The questionnaire was distributed to 385 project managers active in Romanian IT project management industry. Only 135 respondents have filled the questionnaire.

Gender structure was rather unbalanced (28.9% women and 71.1% men). Respondents' age was mostly of 36-45 years (42.3 %); 31.2% were up to 35 years; 20.0% were of 46-55 years, and only 6.5% were older than 56 years.

The structure of the sample in terms of management levels was as follows: 28.9% of respondents from strategic level such as Portfolio Manager/ Director of Project Management Office; 48.9% from functional level such as Programme Manager/Project Manager; 22.2% came form operational level – Project Leader/ Project Specialist.

All the respondents have had technical Information Technology (IT) backgrounds, and 33.00% of them have demonstrated adequate training/education in project management field. Only 4.44% of the respondents have been certificated as Project Management Professional (PMP[®]).

The professional experience was mostly less than one year work experience in project management (36.67%), 33.33% was between 2 to 5 years, 22.22% have had 6-10 years experience, and 7.78% have more than 10 years experience.

The respondents came from different organization types such as: 24.44% from budgetary organization, 68.89% from private capital, and 6.67% from public capital organization. From the structure standpoint, 68.89% of IT project managers already completed projects work within functional organizations, 22.22% in projectized structures, and only 8.89% in matrix organizations.

Statistical procedures were applied for data analysis, aiming to match the research objectives. The central tendency was calculated taking into account the way in which variables were measured (tables 2 and 3). The correlation coefficient - Goodness of Fit - χ^2 - was calculated for testing statistical hypotheses.

Table 2

Key power sources used by project managers

No.	Power sources	Arithmetic mean
1	Expert power	4.29
2	Reward power	4.09
3	Referent power	3.54
4	Coercive power	3.11
5	Legitimate power	2.87

Table 3

Key interpersonal influence tactics used by project managers

No.	Influence tactics	Description	Arithmetic mean
1	Interpersonal influence tactics "Leadership"	Building trust	4.35
		Sense of purpose	4.32
		Consultation	3.34
			4.00
2	Interpersonal influence tactics "Interdependency"	Inspirational appeal	3.69
		Ingratiation	3.34
		Exchanges	2.93
			3.32
3	Interpersonal influence tactics "Coercive"	Pressure	3.18
		Legitimization	2.22
		Sanctions	2.04
		Upward appeal	2.07
			2.37

Concerning the practice of exercise power (table 2), project managers are likely to exercise their influence through expert power (4.29) - stemmed from their knowledge, reputation, and status-, followed by reward power (4.09) and referent power (3.54). At the first glance, Romanian project managers are professionals with a solid foundation of knowledge in project management, being aware of best practices in the field. As in [22] the highly recommended powers for getting people to cooperate and perform are expert and reward power. At the opposite side, there is coercive power as the worst choice for project managers.

In the same light, the results point out that at perceived level project managers are likely to embrace leadership influence tactics (4.00) such as building trust, sense of purpose, and consultation (table 3).

Validation of the first research hypothesis ($\chi_c^2 = 0.494$) highlights that the respondents' gender does not influence significantly IT project managers' exercise of influence. This finding confirms the feminine dimension of our Romanian culture. The feminine/masculine dimension is the fourth axe of the Hofstede's cultural dimensions that help to explain the people behaviour from various cultures. In essence, this dimension assesses the degree in which a society is fragmented and differentiated based on people gender. In a masculine society the roles of men and women are highly differentiated, and the dominant values are success, money, and things. In the feminine society the roles are similarly, and the dominant values are care for others and quality of life [23]. In this context, the Romanian employees are not focusing on creating a highly competitive environment but rather on developing the social and human dimension of professional life [24].

Validation of the second research hypothesis ($\chi_c^2 = 0.736$) points that the respondents' age does not influence significantly IT project managers' exercise of influence. The finding draws the explanation from the relatively homogeneity of the sample, being mostly represented by young people up to 45 years (73.5%). Regardless of this, previous empirical researches undertaken by the authors have ascertained that the managers working behavior is significantly influenced by their age, with impact on working group cohesion and the quality of labor relationships [25].

Interestingly, the third research hypothesis ($\chi_c^2 = 0.843$) has been rejected, meaning that there is a significant correlation between professional experience of the respondents and IT project managers' exercise of influence. Thus, the powers used in leveraging the project team members are a matter of professional experience gained in managing project activities.

5. Conclusions

Although the sphere of interpersonal communication offers an interesting framework for studying the influence process, developing a theoretical model that may capture the complexity of reality is not within the scope of the research objective.

This is way the paper attempts to explore the challenging of using interpersonal influence tactics that require making the best use of interpersonal communication to effectively persuade people. As project managers have to promote interaction among project stakeholders balancing the competing parties, they should be aware of the importance of interpersonal communication in producing effective working relationships and ensuring a healthy project environment.

The study provides a starting point for investigating the practice of exercising influence within Romanian project management community. Consequently, the research has several shortcomings such as measuring only the managers' perception of exercising influence and the limited coverage of the survey in terms of sample selection, industry, and number of respondents.

Regardless of these, the future research will be undertaken capitalizing on this one and further considering the development of a theoretical model that may appropriately articulate the process of exercising influence within the sphere of the interpersonal communication. In the same light, deciphering the managers' mind-set through a constant effort of research is a requirement of professional responsibility because this yields clues for the benefit of the community.

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