

Leadership Styles and Project Success: Perceptions of Project Leaders

Huzooree Geshwaree | Doargajudhur Melina

The Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, UK

Correspondence

Huzooree Geshwaree

Email: a.huzooree@napier.ac.uk

Abstract

This study explores how project leaders perceive the influence of their leadership styles on project success and team outcomes in remote work settings. Using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory as a lens, leadership is examined as a job resource that helps mitigate demands and supports positive outcomes. Through qualitative analysis of four focus groups with 36 UK-based project leaders across diverse industries, this research identifies leadership approaches that support teams to navigate the challenges of decentralized, digitally mediated work. By centering the lived experiences of practitioners, this study contributes to the emerging ‘third wave’ of project management literature, which highlights the psychosocial dimensions of leadership. It also provides practical insights into how leadership styles can be adapted to enhance both project success and team well-being in modern organizations.

1.0 Introduction

The ongoing digital transformation has accelerated organizations’ shift towards project-centric operations where success increasingly depends on managing complex, resource-intensive initiatives executed by temporary, often multidisciplinary, and inter-organizational teams (Schoper et al., 2018; Bjorvatn & Wald, 2018). These teams typically operate within organizations that structure their activities around projects, with clearly defined objectives, timelines, scopes, and resources (Singh et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2023). In such environments, projects are not merely operational units but strategic mechanisms driving innovation, growth, and change across sectors.

Concurrently, the rise of remote work has transformed how these project teams operate, introducing new challenges related to alignment, coordination, and timely delivery across geographically dispersed and digitally connected environments (Hill et al., 2024; Ren et al.,

2024). While remote work offers greater flexibility, it can also blur the boundaries between professional and personal life, increasing the risk of stress and burnout due to constant digital connectivity and reduced face-to-face interactions (Chi et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2021). In this context, project leaders, often working without formal authority, must navigate these complexities by promoting team cohesion, enabling rapid decision-making, and ensuring clear communication (Abson et al., 2024; Mubarak et al., 2023).

In response to such evolving work environments, project management research has entered a 'third wave' that places greater emphasis on leadership and other psychosocial factors as key contributors to project success (Winch & Pinto, 2022). This shift reflects a growing recognition that interpersonal capabilities, often referred to as power or soft skills, are just as vital as technical competencies in contemporary project environments (Project Management Institute, 2023). While the importance of leadership is increasingly acknowledged (Mubarak et al., 2023), scholarly focus on leadership in remote project contexts remains limited. Existing studies tend to prioritize conventional models, such as transactional and transformational leadership, leaving a gap in understanding the broader range of leadership styles that may influence project outcomes in evolving work settings (Abbas & Ali, 2023; Rehan et al., 2024).

The evidence on which leadership approaches are most effective in organizations managing projects is inconclusive (Ding et al., 2024; Mubarak et al., 2023). Some scholars suggest that passive leadership can support autonomy and flexibility in flat, agile project environments like those in the IT sector (Martela, 2019). Conversely, others find that active leadership, characterized by strategic involvement and presence, is often seen as more suitable in high-pressure or complex scenarios (Hasson et al., 2020). This variability points to the importance of leaders being able to adapt their style based on team dynamics and project demands. Among emerging approaches, inclusive leadership has gained attention for its potential effectiveness in project-oriented settings, as it blends active traits such as motivating and supporting team members with passive traits like openness to mistakes and learning (Ding et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2020). However, despite its relevance to today's collaborative and diverse project environments, inclusive leadership remains underexplored in the project management literature and deserves further scholarly focus (Zaman et al., 2024).

Moreover, there remains a significant gap in understanding how leadership influences critical team outcomes such as engagement, well-being, and adaptability in remote settings, particularly from the perspective of project leaders themselves (Abson et al., 2024). Insights

from lived experiences may shed light on how balancing leadership style can promote both positive team outcomes and project success, particularly in uncertain or high-demand situations (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on leadership styles in project management by exploring how project leaders navigate the challenges of contemporary project work and how their leadership approaches influence project success and team outcomes. In line with this aim, it addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ1a:** Which leadership style should project leaders adopt to promote project success?
- **RQ1b:** How do project leaders perceive their leadership's impact on team outcomes?

Drawing from Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, this qualitative study investigates how project leaders perceive their leadership styles as resources that help manage job demands and contribute to positive project and team outcomes in remote work settings. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section presents the literature review, followed by the methods, analysis, discussion, and conclusion.

2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Leadership and Project Success

While leadership has long been recognized as critical to organizational success, its role within organizations demands distinct attention due to the temporary, dynamic, and multidisciplinary nature of projects (Söderlund, 2011; Turner & Müller, 2005). Unlike traditional hierarchical settings, project leaders often lead without formal authority, relying heavily on influence, communication, and interpersonal skills (Mubarak et al., 2023). These characteristics are increasingly pronounced in modern, digitally enabled environments where remote coordination and inter-organizational collaboration are becoming the norm rather than the exception.

The full-range leadership model remains a foundational theoretical lens, encompassing transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles (Sohmen, 2013). Transformational leadership, with its focus on vision and motivation, has been linked to higher team commitment and innovation (Aga et al., 2016), while transactional leadership's emphasis on structure and rewards supports task completion (Ding et al., 2024). However, laissez-faire or passive leadership can undermine team performance, particularly in high-stakes projects (Shahzad et al., 2023). This contrast points to the complexity of leadership effectiveness in organizations,

influenced by contextual factors such as industry, team maturity, and task ambiguity (Martela, 2019; Steiro et al., 2022).

Defining project success has similarly evolved beyond the classical iron triangle of scope, time, and cost (Ika, 2015). Contemporary frameworks incorporate broader dimensions including stakeholder satisfaction, strategic alignment, and sustainability of project benefits (Ika et al., 2012; Khang & Moe, 2008). Leadership impacts these multidimensional success criteria by shaping team dynamics, decision-making processes, and adaptability to changing demands (Turner & Müller, 2005). Accordingly, effective leadership in organization must be responsive not only to operational goals but also to psychosocial dimensions of team functioning. Previous research has increasingly emphasized the critical role of leadership in shaping not only project outcomes but also team well-being and cohesion, especially in complex or uncertain contexts (Müller & Turner, 2007; Scott-Young et al., 2019; Abson et al., 2024). This study extends that line of research by examining how project leaders themselves perceive and adapt their leadership styles to navigate the psychosocial demands of their team for project success in a remote work context.

2.2 Remote Project Leadership

The shift to remote and digitally enabled project work intensifies leadership challenges. Remote work's inherent spatial and temporal dispersion complicates coordination and threatens shared understanding, trust, and cohesion (Hill et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2024). Communication relies on digital channels prone to interruptions and misinterpretations, requiring leaders to be proactive in managing information flow and maintaining psychological safety (Chi et al., 2021; Restubog et al., 2020). Moreover, the temporary nature of project teams limits the time available to build these interpersonal foundations, making leadership behaviors even more consequential.

Furthermore, the blurring of work-life boundaries in remote contexts intensifies stress and burnout risks among team members, calling for leaders who are sensitive to individual well-being and capable of promoting sustainable work practices (Zheng et al., 2021). Leaders must balance operational demands with empathetic support, which demands adaptability and emotional intelligence (Abson et al., 2024).

2.3 Theoretical Lens

Leadership in remote contexts presents unique challenges that are not fully captured by traditional models of work motivation or stress. Existing frameworks like the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977), Cognitive Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and Conservation of Resources (Hobfoll, 1989) have significantly advanced understanding of how workplace factors influence performance and well-being. However, these models mainly address traditional, co-located work and often assume long-term employment relationships, clear reporting structures, and fixed roles.

The JD-R theory (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023; Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, 2024) offers a more holistic, adaptable framework that aligns with the fluid nature of project work. It distinguishes between job demands, elements of the work environment that require sustained effort and are associated with psychological costs (e.g., time pressure, project complexity, role ambiguity), and job resources which are physical, social, or organizational factors that mitigate these demands and enhance motivation, performance, and well-being (e.g., team autonomy, leadership support, feedback).

This dual-process model captures the health impairment process (where excessive demands cause burnout) alongside the motivational process (where resources enhance performance), making it particularly suitable for analyzing how leaders perceive their leadership style functions as a buffer against strain and a driver of engagement (Bakker et al., 2023). This integrated approach is especially relevant in organizations, where leaders must manage high levels of uncertainty, short timelines, and cross-functional collaboration, often without formal authority or co-located teams.

Moreover, JD-R theory is inherently adaptable to different organizational structures and job roles, enabling researchers to account for variation across industries, team maturities, and project complexities. It also aligns with the ‘third wave’ of project management research, which emphasizes psychosocial and relational dimensions over purely technical metrics (Winch & Pinto, 2022).

3.0 Methods

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

This study employs a qualitative design as part of a broader research project, with subsequent phases planned for quantitative or mixed methods. The current focus is exploratory, aimed at uncovering leadership patterns influencing remote project team success.

Data has been gathered through four focus groups comprising of 36 UK project leaders from IT, consulting, manufacturing, construction, and banking sectors. Table 1 illustrates the participants demographic details. This study has adopted the purposive sampling approach to ensure diversity and relevance, focusing on leaders managing remote teams. Participants were recruited through the authors' professional networks and social media platforms.

Groups	No of Participants	Gender (M/F)	Age bracket	Industry
1	9	M (n=4) F (n=5)	25–34 (n=2) 35–44 (n=5) 45–54 (n=2)	Manufacturing
2	8	M (n=4) F (n=4)	25–34 (n=1) 35–44 (n=5) 45–54 (n=2)	IT & Consulting
3	10	M (n=5) F (n=5)	25–34 (n=4) 35–44 (n=4) 45–54 (n=2)	Construction
4	9	M (n=4) F (n=5)	25–34 (n=1) 35–44 (n=5) 45–54 (n=3)	Banking

Focus groups fostered dynamic discussion, allowing participants to collaboratively reflect on leadership practices and their impacts. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants received a briefing on JD-R concepts to ground the discussion. They were also assured that their contributions would remain confidential and that all responses would be anonymized during transcription and analysis.

Sample questions include:

- What leadership approaches do you use in managing your team?
- How do your leadership styles affect your daily project activities?
- What resources do you provide to help your team succeed?

- How do demanding tasks influence your leadership decisions?
- How do your actions affect your team's confidence and motivation?

3.2 Data Analysis

Data transcription is currently in progress. For the purpose of this study, an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gioia et al., 2013) will be conducted in four phases: familiarization, open coding to derive first-order concepts, theme development into second-order categories aligned with JD-R, and aggregation into overarching dimensions of demands and resources.

To ensure reliability, two researchers will independently code transcripts, discuss discrepancies, and finalize the coding framework collaboratively. Reflexivity is maintained through journals and diverse researcher expertise in leadership and JD-R theory.

4.0 Expected outcomes

Although data analysis is ongoing, anticipated findings (based on focus group discussions) include identification of leadership styles and behaviors that function as job resources, buffering demands and enhancing remote team performance. Themes are expected to reveal how leaders balance their approaches to promote positive team outcomes and project success.

Theoretical Contributions:

- Extends the JD-R model to the domain of remote work, highlighting leadership as a dynamic job resource in fluid team structures.
- Contributes to the third wave of project management research by foregrounding the psychosocial, lived experiences of project leaders.
- Challenges the dominance of traditional leadership models by exploring adaptive, hybrid leadership practices in remote work settings.

Practical Contributions:

- Offers project leaders insights into leadership strategies that promote engagement, flexibility, and resilience in virtual environments.
- Informs HR and learning professionals on how to design leadership development programs tailored to the demands of remote work.

- Encourages organizations to recognize the importance of relational leadership capabilities, such as trust-building and psychological safety, alongside technical skills.

5.0 Conclusion and Next Steps

This paper outlines a study that aims to deepen understanding of how leadership functions in contemporary remote project settings. By framing leadership as a job resource within the JD-R model, and by capturing leaders' own perspectives through qualitative approach, the study seeks to generate actionable insights into how leadership shapes both team outcomes and project success.

The next phase will involve conducting and analyzing focus group data, followed by a potential quantitative or mixed-methods phase to test the emergent themes more broadly. Ultimately, this research aspires to support both scholarly understanding and practical improvement in project leadership for the digital workplace.

References

- Abbas, M., & Ali, R. (2023). Transformational versus transactional leadership styles and project success: A meta-analytic review. *European Management Journal*, 41(1), 125–142.
- Abson, E., Schofield, P., & Kennell, J. (2024). Making shared leadership work: The importance of trust in project-based organisations. *International Journal of Project Management*, 42(2), 102575.
- Aga, D. A., Noorderhaven, N., & Vallejo, B. (2016). Transformational leadership and project success: The mediating role of team-building. *International Journal of Project Management*, 34(5), 806-818.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2014). Job demands–resources theory. *Wellbeing: A complete reference guide*, 1-28.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2024). Job demands–resources theory: Frequently asked questions. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 29(3), 188.

Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Sanz-Vergel, A. (2023). Job demands–resources theory: Ten years later. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10(1), 25-53.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191.

Bjorvatn, T., & Wald, A. (2018). Project complexity and team-level absorptive capacity as drivers of project management performance. *International Journal of Project Management*, 36(6), 876-888.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

Chi, O. H., Saldamli, A., & Gursoy, D. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on management-level hotel employees' work behaviors: Moderating effects of working-from-home. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 98, 103020.

Demerouti, E., & Bakker, A. B. (2023). Job demands-resources theory in times of crises: New propositions. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 13(3), 209-236.

Ding, G., Ren, X. & Lin, F. (2024). Adopting active or passive leadership in project-based organizations? The role of inclusive leadership in remote work environment. *International Journal of Project Management*, 42(6), p.102623.

Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), 15-31.

Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16(2), 250-279.

Hasson, H., Schwarz, U. V., & Tafvelin, S. (2020). Shared or different realities self-other agreement on constructive and passive leadership and employee outcomes. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 41, 37–51.

Hill, N. S., Axtell, C., Raghuram, S., & Nurmi, N. (2024). Unpacking virtual work's dual effects on employee well-being: An integrative review and future research agenda. *Journal of Management*, 50(2), 752-792.

Hobfoll, S.E. (1989) Conservation of resources. A new attempt at conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44(3), 513–524

Ika, L. A. (2015). Opening the black box of project management: Does World Bank project supervision influence project impact?. *International Journal of Project Management*, 33(5), 1111-1123.

Ika, L. A., Diallo, A., & Thuillier, D. (2012). Critical success factors for World Bank projects: An empirical investigation. *International Journal of Project Management*, 30(1), 105-116.

Karasek Jr, R. A. (1979). Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: Implications for job redesign. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 285-308.

Khang, D. B., & Moe, T. L. (2008). Success criteria and factors for international development projects: A life-cycle-based framework. *Project Management Journal*, 39(1), 72-84.

Khan, J., Jaafar, M., Javed, B., Mubarak, N., & Saudagar, T. (2020). Does inclusive leadership affect project success? The mediating role of perceived psychological empowerment and psychological safety. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 13(5), 1077–1096.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. Springer publishing company.

Restubog, S. L. D., Ocampo, A. C. G., & Wang, L. (2020). Taking control amidst the chaos: Emotion regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 119, 103440.

Schooper, Y.-G., Wald, A., Ingason, H.T., Fridgeirsson, T.V., 2018. Projectification in Western economies: a comparative study of Germany, Norway and Iceland. *International Journal of Project Management*. 36, 71–82.

Scott-Young, C. M., Georgy, M., & Grisinger, A. (2019). Shared leadership in project teams: An integrative multi-level conceptual model and research agenda. *International Journal of Project Management*, 37, 565–581.

Shahzad, K., Iqbal, R., Nauman, S., Shahzadi, R., & Luqman, A. (2023). How a despotic project manager jeopardizes project success: the role of project team members' emotional exhaustion and emotional intelligence. *Project Management Journal*, 54(2), 194-208.

Söderlund, J. (2011). Pluralism in project management: navigating the crossroads of specialization and fragmentation. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13(2), 153-176.

Sohmen, V. S. (2013). Leadership and teamwork: Two sides of the same coin. *Journal of IT and Economic Development*, 4(2), 1-18.

Singh, A. K., Jain, N. K., Sharma, M. G., & Nigam, S. (2023). Reconceptualization of absorptive capacity as potential and realized absorptive capacity for project-based organizations. *International Journal of Project Management*, 41(2), 102449.

Steiro, T. J., Vennatro, R., Bergh, J., & Torgersen, G.-E. (2022). On the dynamics of structure, power, and interaction: A case study from a software developing company. *International Journal of Management, Knowledge and Learning*, 11, 215–228.

Turner, J. R., & Müller, R. (2005). The project manager's leadership style as a success factor on projects: A literature review. *Project Management Journal*, 36(2), 49-61.

Winch, G., & Pinto, J. (2022). *The third wave of project management research*. In *Rethinking Project Management for a Dynamic World* (pp. 98–112).

Yao, Y., Zhang, L., & Sun, H. (2023). Enhancing project managers' strategy commitment by leader-leader exchange: The role of psychological empowerment and organizational identification. *International Journal of Project Management*, 41(3), 102465.

Zaman, K., Siddiquei, A. N., Badar, K., & Qureshi, M. A. R. (2024). The stress-inducing potential of inclusive leadership: Does resilience help? *International Journal of Project Management*, Article 102650.

Zheng, J. W., Gou, X. Q., Li, H. Y., Xia, N. N., & Wu, G. D. (2021). Linking work-family conflict and burnout from the emotional resource perspective for construction professionals. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 14, 1093–1115.