

Project Leaders, Conflict, and Team Coordination: A Relational Leadership Approach in Temporary Organisations

Abstract:

Temporary Project Organisations (TPOs) operate in dynamic, high-pressure environments where effective leadership is critical for team coordination and performance. However, traditional leadership models, designed for stable organisations, often fail to address the unique challenges of TPOs, such as short-term relationships, uncertainty, and cultural diversity. This study investigates the role of relational leadership—characterised by shared responsibility, mutual respect, shared knowledge, trust, and communication—in conflict management and team coordination within UK-based multicultural TPOs. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research includes semi-structured interviews with project managers and a survey analysed through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The findings will contribute to extending relational leadership theory, developing a conflict management framework, and providing practical strategies for project managers. The study's implications are valuable for leadership training, conflict resolution, and project management education, particularly for professional bodies like APM and PMI, ensuring enhanced team performance in complex project environments.

Keywords: Relational leadership; conflict management; team coordination; temporary project organisations (TPOs).

Track: 25 Project Experience SIG

1.0 Theoretical Background

Temporary Project Organisations (TPOs) are designed to achieve specific goals within limited timeframes, bringing together diverse individuals who collaborate under unique and dynamic conditions (Ding et al., 2017; Turner & Müller, 2003; Agarwal et al., 2021). These environments are characterised by their transient nature, high levels of uncertainty, and the need for rapid coordination and decision-making (Zerjav et al., 2018; Sanchez-Manzanares et al., 2020). However, due to their temporary nature, TPOs face distinct challenges such as mental exhaustion, social isolation, and heightened stress, which increase the risk of conflict (Goetz et al., 2021). The absence of stable structures and long-term relationships complicates the development of trust, collaboration, and influence, which are essential for effective team coordination (Bakker et al., 2016). Despite the prevalence of conflict in TPOs, effective conflict management can enhance team performance, innovation, and productivity (Bachrach & Mullins, 2019; Tabassi et al., 2019, 2024). However, leadership strategies that foster healthy conflict management and team cohesion remain underexplored, particularly in project-based environments characterised by short-term relationships, resource constraints, and shifting priorities (Beck et al., 2022). Traditional leadership theories, which are rooted in permanent organisational contexts, often fall short in TPOs due to their reliance on stable structures and long-term interactions. This creates unique leadership challenges, such as navigating short-term relationships, fostering trust quickly, and managing diverse teams under dynamic conditions—all areas where traditional leadership models may not fully apply (Beck et al., 2022; Tabassi et al., 2019; Tabassi et al., 2024).

1.1 The Role of Relational Leadership in TPOs

Relational leadership, which emphasises interpersonal relationships, mutual respect, and effective communication, offers a promising approach to addressing the social dynamics of TPOs (Tabassi et al., 2024). Unlike traditional leadership models that focus on hierarchical authority and directive control, relational leadership is characterised by shared responsibility, mutual respect, shared knowledge, and open communication. This leadership style fosters collaboration, trust, and positive social interactions, which are crucial for effective team coordination in dynamic, temporary settings (Abson et al., 2024). However, empirical research on the role of relational leadership in conflict management and team coordination within TPOs remains limited (Abson et al., 2024). Moreover, the growing multicultural workforce in the UK, particularly in project-based industries, introduces additional complexities in team interactions and conflict dynamics (Shaughnessy et al., 2022). Understanding how relational leadership influences conflict resolution and team coordination in culturally diverse TPOs is essential for developing effective leadership strategies that enhance team performance and project outcomes.

2.0 The Research Gap

Although relational leadership has been recognised for its potential to enhance team coordination through social interaction and trust-building, its application in the context of TPOs, particularly within culturally diverse environments, is underexplored. Most existing studies on leadership and team coordination have focused on traditional organisational settings, overlooking the unique challenges posed by the temporary, dynamic, and multicultural nature of TPOs (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2022; Garengo & Betto, 2022). Furthermore, while effective conflict management is known to enhance team performance, the mechanisms through which relational leadership influences conflict resolution and team coordination in TPOs remain unclear (Bachrach & Mullins, 2019; Tabassi et al., 2019, 2024). This research

addresses these gaps by exploring the relationship between relational leadership and team coordination in UK-based TPOs, focusing on the role of conflict management in multicultural project teams. By investigating relational leadership behaviours—such as shared responsibility, mutual respect, shared knowledge, trust, and communication—this study aims to advance the theoretical understanding of relational leadership in project management and provide practical insights for effective leadership in multicultural TPOs.

3.0 Research Question

What is the relationship between the relational leadership exhibited by project team leaders and team coordination in temporary project organisations (TPOs), particularly in the context of within-country cultural diversity?

4.0 Proposed Methodology

Mixed-Methods Approach

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of relational leadership dynamics in TPOs. This approach allows for the exploration of complex social interactions and leadership behaviours while providing empirical evidence to validate the proposed theoretical framework. The research design is structured into two stages:

Qualitative Stage – Semi-Structured Interviews

The first stage involves conducting ten to fifteen semi-structured interviews with experienced project managers in UK-based TPOs. This qualitative approach aims to explore leadership practices, conflict management strategies, and their impact on team coordination in multicultural project settings. The interviews will also help refine the proposed framework by identifying relevant constructs and contextual factors influencing relational leadership in TPOs. Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the interview data, allowing for the identification of key themes related to relational leadership behaviours, conflict resolution strategies, and team coordination mechanisms.

Quantitative Stage – Survey Questionnaire

In the second stage, a survey questionnaire will be distributed to project managers and team leaders in UK-based TPOs to assess relational leadership behaviours, conflict-handling styles, team coordination, and team performance. The survey will measure relational leadership dimensions such as shared responsibility, shared knowledge, mutual respect, trust, and communication, adapted from established research by Tabassi et al. (2024). Team coordination will be evaluated using validated measurement instruments from Zhang et al. (2011) and De Dreu (2007), while team performance metrics will be adapted from Tabassi et al. (2016). A 5-point Likert scale will be used to measure the importance of various constructs, ensuring the reliability and validity of the survey instrument (DeVellis, 2016).

Sample Size and Data Analysis

A power analysis using G*Power software has determined a minimum sample size of 89 participants for statistical significance at a 95% confidence level. The survey data will be analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to examine the relationships between relational leadership behaviours, conflict management strategies, team coordination, and team

performance. The qualitative data from the interviews will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to relational leadership practices and their impact on team dynamics in multicultural TPOs.

5.0 Theoretical Contribution

This research aims to advance the theoretical understanding of relational leadership in project management by exploring its role in conflict management and team coordination within multicultural TPOs. Specifically, the study contributes to:

Extension of Relational Leadership Theory: By investigating relational leadership behaviours in the context of TPOs, this study extends relational leadership theory to dynamic, temporary, and multicultural project environments.

Conflict Management Framework: The research integrates socio-psychological theories to develop a new framework for conflict resolution in culturally diverse project teams, addressing the unique challenges of multicultural TPOs.

Cross-Cultural Leadership Dynamics: By focusing on within-country cultural diversity in UK-based TPOs, this study provides insights into cross-cultural leadership dynamics and their impact on team coordination and performance.

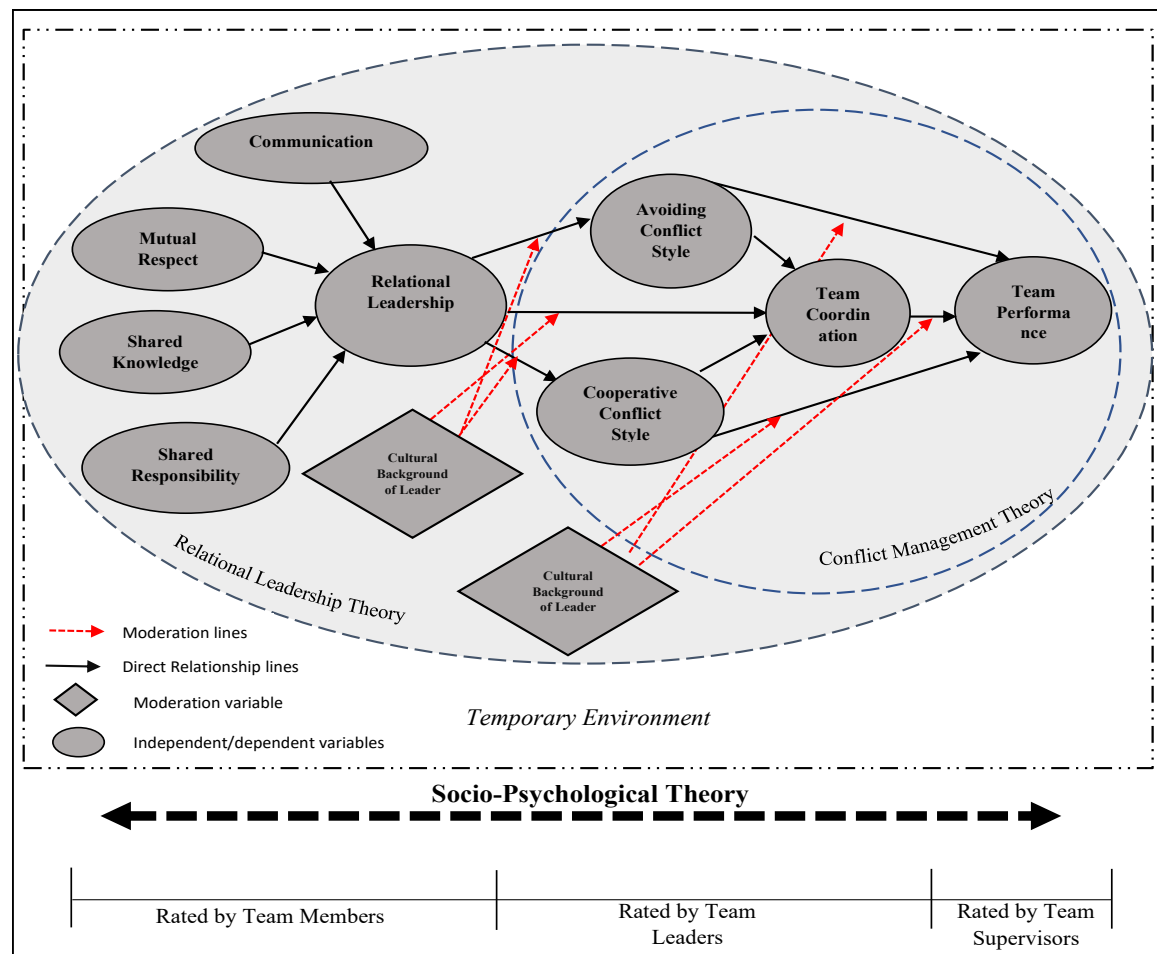


Figure 1- Hypothesised Model

6.0 Practical Impact

This research has significant practical implications for project managers, leadership trainers, and the wider project management community, particularly the Association for Project Management (APM) and Project Management Institute (PMI). Key practical contributions include:

Guidelines for Project Managers: The study offers practical strategies for effective leadership in multicultural TPOs, focusing on behaviours that enhance coordination through conflict resolution.

Conflict Management Model: A model for managing conflict in multicultural teams will be proposed, informing training programmes and leadership development initiatives.

Impact on Project Management Education: Findings will be integrated into project leadership training initiatives within the Project Management programmes at Manchester Metropolitan University.

7.0 Conclusion

This study addresses a significant gap in project management research by examining the role of relational leadership in managing conflict and enhancing team coordination within UK-based TPOs. Given the transient nature of TPOs, where teams form and dissolve within limited timeframes, effective leadership strategies that foster collaboration, trust, and coordination are crucial. However, traditional leadership models, which are primarily developed for stable organisational environments, often fall short in addressing the unique challenges posed by TPOs, particularly in multicultural settings. This research, therefore, explores how relational leadership—characterised by shared responsibility, mutual respect, shared knowledge, and open communication—can contribute to conflict resolution and improve coordination in diverse project teams. The study's mixed-methods approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the relational leadership dynamics in TPOs. The qualitative phase, consisting of semi-structured interviews with project managers, provides in-depth insights into leadership behaviours and conflict management strategies. The quantitative phase, through a survey-based study, empirically tests the relationships between relational leadership, conflict-handling styles, team coordination, and team performance using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). By integrating these findings, the study aims to develop a robust framework for understanding how relational leadership influences team coordination and project success in temporary and culturally diverse environments. From a theoretical standpoint, this study makes several key contributions. First, it extends relational leadership theory by contextualising it within TPOs, an area where existing leadership frameworks remain underdeveloped. Second, it integrates socio-psychological theories to propose a conflict management framework tailored to multicultural project teams, addressing the challenges arising from diverse perspectives, communication styles, and expectations. Third, by focusing on within-country cultural diversity in UK-based TPOs, the study provides valuable insights into cross-cultural leadership dynamics, an area of increasing importance given the globalisation of project-based work.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study also has significant practical implications. For project managers, the findings will offer evidence-based guidelines on fostering effective team coordination through relational leadership behaviours. The development of a conflict management model will provide practical tools for handling disputes constructively, reducing the risks of social isolation, stress, and decreased team performance in TPOs.

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