

A leadership and strategic decisions framework for construction company survival

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Abstract:

Like some other counterparts across the globe, the construction industry in South Africa is experiencing challenging times, which has led to the failure of notable large contractors. While some studies have suggested different reasons for this, a stream of scholars has argued that the company leadership can make the difference either directly or otherwise. However, studies on leadership in construction have been mostly at project levels, considering that construction is a project-based organisation. This study, therefore, examined the leadership of construction organisations from a strategic perspective, considering how it influenced the long-term performance and sustainability of large contractors. The study was based on a systematic review of literature, mainly using theoretical perspectives to realise the study's objective. Related keywords were developed and searched in relevant journal articles and conference proceedings. This exercise was performed in order to, establish the leadership attributes and strategic decisions responsible for sustainable construction business organisation performance. The findings suggest that construction company leaders can operate their companies more innovatively, ethically, and sustainably by adopting Honesty-Humility, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness (HEXACO), a transformational leadership style, conceptual and catalytic skills, and strategic leadership functions. However, the findings of the study are based on literature review and need grounding with primary data. Further research is required to incorporate the South African context to test the proposed leadership framework's generalizability using a convergent mixed-method research approach.

Keywords:

Construction performance, large contractors, leadership, Strategic decisions, South Africa

1 Introduction

This study investigated the functional role of the upper echelons of South African large contractors in the sustainability of their organisations. The construction industry in South Africa is experiencing challenging times, leading to notable large contractors' demise (Odendaal, 2018). Group Five, Basil Read, and NMC have liquidated, ESOR and Liviero are in business rescue and trying to sell out, while Murray & Roberts and Stefanutti Stocks have restructured (Hindle, 2018). Aveng had an accumulated debt of R3.25 billion in 2018, whereas it was once considered the leading construction firm in South Africa (Planting, 2020). A similar situation was reported of Clugston Group, Bardsley construction, and McGill & Co. in the UK (Kelly, 2020; Korman and Reina, 2018). According to the US Department of Commerce, construction and contracting businesses have the highest failure rate (Clayson, 2019). Wong and Ng (2010) also provided substantive evidence for Chinese construction companies' business failures based in Hong Kong. There are several reasons behind the plunging and failure of large construction businesses, and scholars have divergent views. While

some have connected failure to the complexity and the risky nature of the contracting business, high legislative loads, and changing industry dynamics (Mcintyre, 2011), other scholars have attributed the failure to increasing global turbulence and economic recession leading to cyclic market patterns, cash flow problems, and non-payment or delay in payment for contractors (Brooks and Spillane, 2015; Odendaal, 2018).

A stream of researchers has identified a lack of strategic leadership as the reason for large construction companies' failure (Borkovskaya, 2018; FMI Corporation, 2016). The FMI's study found that 76% of large contractor's failure is due to poor strategic leadership, submitting that strong leadership can serve as a cornerstone for success in even the most challenging market conditions. Similarly, Rivero (2014) showed that a lack of leadership and poor leadership exists within construction companies in the USA, China, UK, Sweden, and Australia, impacting construction performance negatively. McIntyre (2018) reported that Carillon's collapse was due to leadership failure. Given that leadership behaviour is a subset of the personality models, De Oliveira and De Lacerda (2015) suggested that leadership effectiveness in any organisation is a multi-dimensional construct comprising four dimensions: traits, skills, behaviours, and processes. Scholars have also called for a closer integration of leadership personality research in organisations (De Vries, 2018). Still, there is no known substantive empirical study or a detailed leadership framework of a leader-focused assessment for companies' performance in the South African context. This study responds to this knowledge gap.

2 Literature Review

There have been extensive studies on the subject of leadership. It has vast literature, as it is a central concern, *and* universal appeal (Northhouse, 2019). As a field of study, leadership has expanded dramatically in more organisations due to its recognised importance in the twenty-first century (McManus and Perruci, 2015). Studies have shown that leadership is the key driver responsible for organisational effectiveness (Alade et al., 2020; Goleman, 2004). Leadership a process of social influence that employs management tools to yield superior results and attribute causation to individual social actors (Kruse, 2013; Lunenburg, 2011). The role of theory in research has been noted by scholars, given that theories generate complex and comprehensive understandings of the phenomenon that are not easily explained, such as leadership that this study is investigating (Reaves & Hean, 2013). Further combining theories is plausible, especially when deciding on a complex phenomenon (ibid). As such, this study on the Upper echelon's theory (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), the Full Range Leadership Model (FRLM, Bass and Avolio, 1994), and the Strategic leadership theory (Finkelstein et al., 1996). The Upper echelons theory proposed that organisations reflect their top manager's cognition and values. Simultaneously, the strategic leadership theory suggested that the psychological makeup of the leader's specific knowledge, values, and preferences influences their assessment of the environment and strategic decisions. The FRLM, on the other hand, differentiates effective from ineffective leaders at all organisational levels based on their style. Studies researching leadership in the construction sector have mostly zeroed in from the Project level, considering that construction organisations are project-based (Graham et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2019; Ismail and Fathi, 2018; Simmon et al., 2017). The investigations have distinguished the components of leadership to the complex construction climate showing that due to the multi-faceted nature, leadership in construction is more challenging. They included visioning, team building, safety leadership, innovation, technical expertise, mentoring, trust, and ethical leadership as helpful components that affect the success of sustainable construction projects. However, concerning the components of strategic leadership in construction business organisations little is known and regarding the South Africa context.

2.1 Leadership traits

Leadership traits are the natural or acquired ability to lead and the innate qualities that differentiate leaders from followers and non-leaders (Dinh & Lord, 2012). The empirical study of Lo (2017) revealed that personality traits form the foundational antecedents to leadership. These are stable attribute patterns that form the leader's characteristics and influence people towards organisational goals (Sunindijo et al., 2007). Trait theory has been criticized for its unpredictability of the environment that may necessitate changes in the behaviour of leaders, there is a consensus emerging around the “HEXACO” (Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience) personality framework, and domains (Breevaart and De Vries, 2017; Gow *et al.*, 2016; Carmeli *et al.*, 2012; Peterson, et al., 2012). The current leadership trait proponents indicated that the HEXACO model is relatively stable and a better predictor of leadership, to be more associated as the basic structure connecting leaders with the current and future firm outcomes.

2.2 Leadership skills

The leadership skills theory is on the notion that leadership is a potential that emerges through experience and capability to learn and benefit from the expertise (Mumford *et al.*, 2000). The proponents of the skills theory of leadership argue that organisational leadership skills are capabilities and competencies that can be developed and improved over time through formal or informal education, practice, and experience (Mumford *et al.*, 2007). The leadership skills strataplex suggested that different leadership skills are required at different levels of the organisation. Whereas cognitive skills such as investigating, monitoring, information gathering and disseminating, general and essential cognitive capacities are required at junior levels of the organisation, interpersonal skills such as supervision, negotiating, human relations, people-orientation, social complexity, social judgment, and social capacities, are most needed at the mid-level of organisational leadership. However, at the organisational apex, strategic skills, mainly conceptual, take a systems perspective to understand complexity, deal with ambiguity, and influence the organisation. Liphadzi et al. (2015) recognized driving attributes of construction and project managers in the South African construction industry, which affect the accomplishment of construction projects.

2.3 Leadership styles

Leadership style is the leader's approach to providing direction, implementing plans, and motivating people for possible organisational outcomes (Serrat, 2020; Avolio, 2007). The concept of leadership style originally emerged from the work of Burns (1978). The literature revealed that using the appropriate leadership style is an essential factor that influences leaders' effectiveness (Sadeghi and Pihie, 2012). The Full Range Leadership Model (FRLM) condenses all leadership approaches into transformational (motivation, stimulation, and influencing), transactional (management-by-exception and contingent reward), and laissez-faire behaviours. Scholars have argued that leaders' behaviour towards providing direction, implementing plans, and motivating people will differ in different scenarios. According to Chan *et al.* (2014), transformational leadership is positively associated with innovation climate and organisational effectiveness in construction. Al Khajeh (2018) also inspected the effect of leadership styles on organizational performance. The attention was on six significant leadership styles - transformational, transactional, autocratic, charismatic, bureaucratic, and democratic.

2.4 Leadership and organisation performance measures in construction

Organisation performance (OP) is identify as one major indicator to evaluate leadership effectiveness (Oyewobi, 2016; Hove and Banjo, 2015). Ismail and Fathi (2018) recognized

leadership as one element that adds to construction organisation success. Additionally, they saw that decisive leadership is fundamental in any organization to accomplish organisational objectives and advance individual expert accomplishment. Oyewobi (2016) considered that the essence of measuring an organisation's performance is to provide viable and valuable information to decision-makers within an organisation. According to Tan et al. (2012), the main goal of measuring performance is to add value to its stakeholders. The current construction management literature indicates that several models were developed for measuring performance using critical success factors, performance measures, and indicators. However, organisations' performance indexes have traditionally concentrated on financial performance, tending to measure only what was easily measurable (Orozco, 2014). Samimi et al., (2020) and Kagioglou, et al (2001) suggested that companies include non-traditional measures while Oyewobi et al. (2019) used financial and non-financial measures of organisational performance to evaluate the achievement of companies in South Africa.

2.5 Mediation role of strategic decisions in the relationship between company leadership and construction organisational performance

According to Samimi et al. (2020), making strategic decisions is the first function of leaders at the organisational apex. Strategic decisions are extensive, risky, and hard-to-reverse decisions with significant long-term effects on the organisation (Papadakis and Barwise, 2012). These decisions are mostly concerned with the company's acquisition of sustainable competitive advantage. It is perceived that leaders sway emphatically or contrarily on organisational performance through their decisions. This declaration has incited researchers to examine the effect of strategic decisions on organizational performance. Scholars (Oyewobi et al., 2019; Borkovskaya, 2018; Dikmen et al., 2009) have also stressed the need for strategic perspectives leaders in construction companies. Most studies of strategy in construction revealed that strategic decisions significantly contribute to the company's performance. Simmons et al. (2017) concluded that the construction leaders' ability to develop quality strategic decisions in their context determines how the organisation will operate and perform sustainably. Isik *et al.* (2009) considered five strategic decisions as representative of the characteristics of the construction industry in Turkey: differentiation strategies, procurement strategies and Project Management strategies, investment strategies, and organisation planning/management.

3 Research Methodology

Through a systematic review of the literature, we searched keywords to measure the key variables of this study, "leadership," "strategic decisions," and "construction organisation performance." The search keywords include CEO leadership, leadership traits, leadership skills, strategy, strategic decisions, and company performance. The literature survey was on the study's objective to examine the role of the construction upper echelon leaders in their organization's sustainability performance. The journal articles, conference proceedings, online articles, and other related texts from Science Direct, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google scholar were the database used. The search process covered the year 1982-2020. The research articles in the leadership domains are quite broad, generating an initial output of over 45,000 articles. However, the keywords and the objectives narrow the dataset to the appropriate research fields for measurable outcomes. As indicated in the preceding section, construction organizations with leaders high in specific leadership components and strategic decision-making stand a better chance of survival in today's competitive environment. Hence, using the variables described in the preceding sections, the next segment presents the conceptual

framework developed for the study based on theoretical insights. The following factors: “HEXACO” personality framework, Multi Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), and the Catalytic Leadership Inventory questionnaire (CLI) are used to determine leadership attributes of the construction executives. Further, the leadership roles profile, strategic decisions, and company performance ratings of the executives will be determine using the variables previously identified in the literature.

4 Findings and Discussion

The strategic leadership framework drawn from the literature review are reflected in Figure 4. It is premised on the Upper echelon’s theory, Strategic leadership theory, and the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT) earlier discussed and supported in the literature (Samimi et al., 2020; Alade et al., 2020; Borkovskaya, 2018). Taking a gander at the diverse leadership frameworks proposed in past investigations spotlights project leadership performance but not from a strategic perspective.

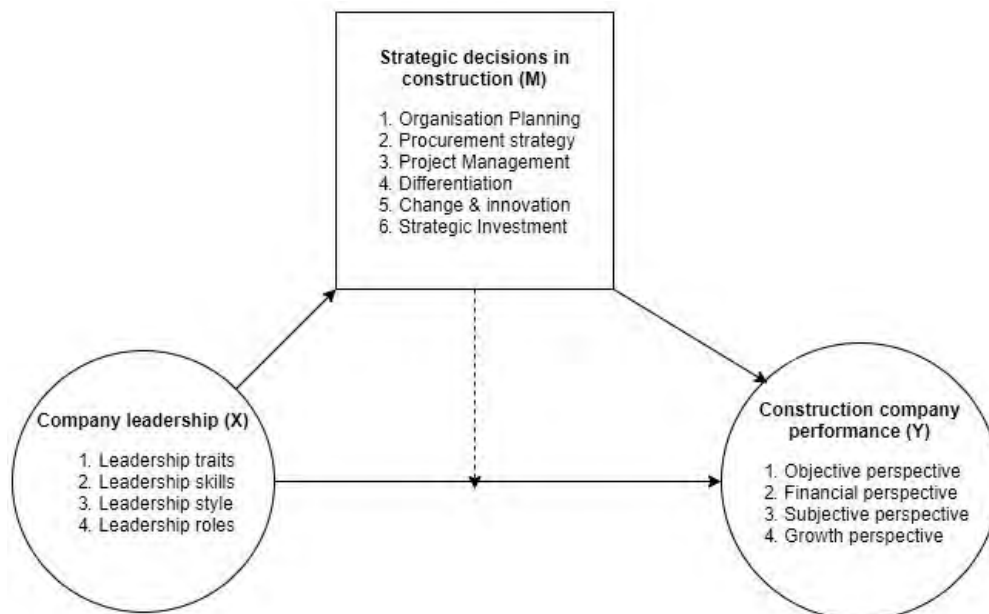


Figure 4. The Strategic leadership framework developed for the study.

The framework developed here suggests that the relationship between the CEO/company leadership components (traits, style, skills, role) and construction organisation performance is mediated by the strategic decisions of the company leaders. From a technical perspective, construction is a project-based industry and thrives on projects that imply that the procurement and execution of work are essential. However, considering studies alleging that the project performance pressures often obscure the broader social, economic, and professional context for strategic discussion in construction, this study included strategic decisions about broader issues of change, innovation, and strategic investment. Compared to their manufacturing and related industries, construction organisational leaders appeared rigid and slow in responding to change and innovation. The attitude of the company leaders vis-a-vis the constant rapid changes in the business and global world will be explicit from the framework. These changes are by the advancements in technology, communication, industrial revolutions, and sometimes disasters such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic that bedevilled the globe. Further, owing to the nature of construction as a capital-intensive and unpredictable venture, strategic investment

decisions of the construction company leaders are determined by three lines: financial investment (FI), human resource/training (HR), and corporate social responsibility (CSR). In the framework, therefore, the strategic roles of the construction company leaders in organisation, planning, procurement and project management, differentiation of their business, change and innovation and investment will be determined in relation to their leadership attributes HEXACO, (Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience), leadership skills, and leadership style variables. The mediating role of the strategic decisions and how the leadership components affect the construction company performance will be predictable from the different viewpoints, which are objective, financial, subjective, and growth perspectives. This finding could explain why some construction organisations survive in difficult times and others fail in South Africa.

5 Conclusion and Further Research

Various studies have indicated that company leadership plays a significant role in organisations 'performance outcomes. Considering the failure rate of large contractors in South Africa, it is evident that not every leader in the construction enterprise understood the parameters for operating a sustainable construction business. The findings of this review would be a steppingstone towards bringing construction leadership research in line with broader leadership theory. The strategic leadership framework developed could inform construction company leaders in their structural roles to envision more innovatively and operate their companies more sustainably. Further, leaders in construction could benefit immensely from using this framework to recognise potentials for succession planning and reduce the risk associated with failure of their construction business. However, this study has only used theoretical perspectives to develop metrics for measuring strategic leadership and performance in construction organisations. The implication of this is that further empirical research will be required to determine generalisability. The future study will use a convergent mixed-method approach where priority is for qualitative techniques to provide deep and robust narratives that will help to understand the company leaders' profile, strategic decisions, and outcomes. The quantitative aspect will measure the identified variables in the South African context. Respondents will be selected from a sample frame that consists of the large contractor category in South Africa (cidb Grades 7-9), the Master Builder Association (MBA), South African Forum of Civil Engineering Contractors (SAFCEC).

6 Acknowledgement

The financial support of NRF and the University of Cape Town towards this research is acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the authors and are not necessarily attributed to the NRF or the University of Cape Town.

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