

Exploring Business Leadership in a Start-up Active in the Construction Materials Industry

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Abstract. *The scope of the article is to identify the leadership importance and the impact that it has on a small start-up company active in the construction materials industry. Being a small organization and at the beginning of the journey, the challenges that leaders and subordinates face are diverse and of significant importance. The literature review studied in-depth revealed to us that leadership styles and the organization in which they are applied have major importance in business development and creating common objectives. The methodology used was qualitative, interviewing all the employees of the selected start-up, based on questions to reveal the perception of the employee regarding leadership in their organization. In conclusion, the research reveals that in a young start-up, leadership is very important, and the leader must communicate with the followers; motivate, influence, and help them to develop. This study focuses on critically exploring, analyzing, and understanding the implications that different leadership styles have over a start-up company active in the construction materials industry. This case study emphasizes consistent and relevant findings regarding the role of leadership characteristics and their implications on a small organization, in a quest of understanding if different approaches adopted by leaders may facilitate follower engagement that will drive organizational goals and performance. The research method is presented, consisting of a qualitative approach, with the use of interviews performed with all the employees of the selected start-up. Throughout the report, critical judgment is endorsed by relevant literature. Based on the collected responses, findings supported a strong correlation between the dominant form of leadership style and the effects on employees' responsiveness that is further shaping organizational achievements.*

Keywords: Business leadership, Leadership styles, Leadership theory, Start-up, Construction industry

Introduction

The paper approaches the subject of leadership from the descriptive perspective and qualitative research. The descriptive perspective studies the specialized literature to define terms such as leadership, types of leadership, and the correlation between leadership and engagement. And the perspective approached through qualitative research methods analyses the perception of the employees of a start-up in the construction materials industry regarding the leadership within their organization.

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The purpose of analyzing the leadership perspective within a start-up is to identify its usefulness in a restricted but very active environment in which the most important pillar of the organization is made up of employees, precisely because of their small number. The resources of a start-up are the ones that define whether the start-up has continuity and growth opportunities or will dissolve over time.

Literature review

The importance of leadership

Leadership is a complex phenomenon that includes the interaction between the leaders and the social environment of an organization (Bilhuber Galli & Müller-Stewens, 2012). Nowadays, many organizations, to be efficient and provide growth, are training their managers to develop their leadership skills and make them transform the company's vision into real action. But still effective leadership development, despite all the studies, remains elusive (Day et al. 2014). They also commented in their work that all organizations care about leadership, but management is more interested in how to develop leaders or efficient leadership, and less about leadership theory or what leadership model is right or fitted for their company. A study made by Rosenbusch and Townsend (2004) discovered that in the last century, leaders are facing much more difficulties and much more complex demands in comparison with other leaders from the past.

Organizational structures need to have proper leaders to guide people through these times of evolution when everything is developing very fast. Sometimes employees may have difficulties understanding the future and job stability, and they need good leaders to inspire trust and follow (Duncan, Keaster 2015).

An important thing that a leader should do is to motivate the people. A good leader knows how to motivate and to make it personalized for every person. Motivation is individual, not every person has the same things that motivate them, some are motivated by money, others by free time, etc. But employees who are internally motivated will provide excellent performance, a better conduit, and be more positive. They also have the ability to develop new skills and to work more productively and efficiently (Saleem et al., 2015).

Leadership is very difficult to define. Of course, we can say that leadership is the ability of person A to influence person B for both scopes. Also, we can say that a manager is a leader by default. If you are not a leader you cannot be named a manager. Most likely you can call yourself an employee with strong organizational capabilities, technical, or logistical. But this doesn't mean that you are a leader. Of course, we can find many definitions, but the word is very complex.

Leadership styles

There are a few important leadership styles like autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire, but also many others like transformational, transactional, charismatic, etc. The literature is full of leadership styles that are very important to determining performance, sustainability, and competitive advantage in an organization. A lot of business organizations have failed because of an inexistent or not properly used leadership style applied to the nature of the business (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018). Leadership styles are also depending very much on the context that is used. A very good leadership style for one organization or part of the organization as a group can be a catastrophe for another type of organization or even the same organization but a different group like marketing and production, or financial and sales. An important key is to understand and know what style of leadership can be used and when. But to know how to adapt to this requires talent, experience, and

an understanding of leadership. Some people are born with this capability, and another is trying to develop it over time but anyway, leadership cannot be learned, and it's always gained.

Autocratic leadership style, where all decisions are made by the top management without any opinion of the employees, and they must follow strictly (Cheng et al., 2007).

Democratic leadership style, where leaders encourage workers to share information between them and, they appreciate feedback from the followers (Offord et al., 2016). The democratic style is also quite similar to the laissez-faire style where leaders let the employees have autonomy because of their high level of experience and knowledge (Ojokuku et al., 2012).

Transformational leadership means very good communication to understand the employee, weaknesses, emotions, etc. These kinds of leaders are mentors or coaches, and they have a very good relationship with their followers (Bass & Riggio, 2005).

The cross-cultural leadership style appears when the leader leads an organization with people from different cultures, traditions, values, ethics, etc. In this case, the leader must understand all employees and customers, to have good productivity and maximization profit (Smith et al., 2008).

Paternalistic leadership it's like transformational in the matter of coaching employees, but in this case the relationship between leader and subordinates it's like parents and children. This style is practiced more in non-western countries like India for example (Pellegrini et al., 2010).

The relationship between leadership and engagement is a very important aspect that the paper is focused on. Why is it important to find out the engagement of employees in the start-up analyzed in the paper? Because the direct relation and connection with customers by a small number of employees can impact the ability of the start-up to exist.

As Anitha (2014) said in her work, the highly engaged employee can be one of the most valuable assets inside one company or organization, to gain a competitive edge over the competition. Also, a study from Gallup (2012) revealed that if an organization has engaged employees, they are very committed to the employer and this brings to the organization improvements, turnover, less absenteeism, fewer safety incidents, and more importantly, productivity. Leadership has a very close connection with employee engagement. It can be said that leadership helps to guide but also assist the employees or the followers in the journey, and it is crucial for an organization to have employee engagement to achieve its goals (Rittinger, 2014).

Implicit leadership theories

The interest in the way that employees are perceiving and responding to the leaders is very important nowadays. The implicit leadership theories (ILTs) that people have are usually based on the styles and behaviors that they had on a previous leader in their career (Lord & Dinh, 2014). Most people think that they can evaluate the leadership abilities of other people, and they are doing this based on their expectations. Also, people are storing in their memories the ILTs and they take them out on action when the observers are dealing with the managers (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004).

The first intentions to measure ILTs were developed by Lord and Dinh (2014) the result was a theory based on studies. The study revealed that the leader's perception is made by some cognitive categories hierarchically structured, which are connecting a set of prototypes made under people's influence, social connections, and experiences from the past with leaders. So, the observers can classify somehow the leaders taking into consideration the correspondence perceived between the leader's behavior and the different prototypes. Prototypics are considered traits such as dedication, intelligence, honor, etc., and the other ones like dishonesty and authority are ant

prototypic. Anyway, these can vary from person to person, from leadership style, and depending on context.

Epitropaki and Martin (2004) sustained that ILT can be changed and modified when the context is changing. So, they analyzed the study of Offermann, and they reduced the number of traits to only 21. The researchers let these 2 traits be considered anti-prototypes like tyranny and masculinity, and they reduced the prototypes from 6 to 4: dedication, dynamism, intelligence, and sensitivity. So, the study revealed that some important parts of the ILT can provide stability in the long term and some others can be canceled and new others replacing them.

A very important study of ILT was realized by GLOBE (House et al., 2004) and the dimension of this study was huge, taking place in 62 countries. The researchers during the study analyzed a lot of important aspects like beliefs, values, and some norms or rules between the cultures.

After completing this study, they identified 9 cultural dimensions and 21 leadership scales. In the end, they reduced them to 6 leadership styles: team-oriented, participative, charismatic, self-protective, autonomous, and humane-oriented (*Table 1*). The study had great value; identified the leadership styles universally accepted.

Table 1. The 6 leadership styles identified by GLOBE

Leadership style	Ranking	Description
Charismatic/value based	4.5 - 6.5	Stress high standards, decisiveness, and innovation; seeks to inspire people around a vision; creates a passion among them to perform; and does so by firmly holding on to core values. This includes the facets of visionary, inspirational, self-sacrificial, integrity, decisive, and performance oriented.
Team-oriented	4.7 - 6.2	Instills pride, loyalty, and collaboration among organizational members, and highly values team cohesiveness and common purpose or goals. This style includes the facets of collaborative team orientation, team integrator, diplomatic, (reverse scored) malevolent, and administratively competent.
Participative	4.5 – 6.1	Encourages input from others in decision-making and implementation; and emphasizes delegation and equality. This style includes the facets of (reverse scored) autocratic and (reverse scored) non-participative.
Humane	3.8 – 5.6	Stresses compassion and generosity; and it is patient, supportive, and concerned with the well-being of others. This style includes the facets of modesty and humane-oriented.
Self-protective	2.5 – 4.6	Emphasizes procedural, status-conscious, and “face-saving” behaviors; and focuses on the safety and security of the individual and the group. This style includes the facets of self-centered, status-conscious, conflict-inducing face-saver, and procedural.
Autonomous	2.3 – 4.7	Includes only one facet concerned with autonomy. It is characterized by an independent, individualistic, and self-centric approach to leadership.

Source: House et al (2004)

A leader is not only a title, or a position in one organization that could be occupied by a person. A leader must have some specific attributes and responsibilities to be a leader in the proper sense of the word. If you are the leader of your team or are you going to get a manager or team

leader position, you need to know what to take in your knowledge bag to be appreciated by the team members and the business environment.

The relation between subordinates – environment – leadership style

The origin and the understanding of the concept: Psychologist Robert House developed *The Path to the Objective Theory* in 1971, based on the observation that leader behavior and the perception of employees following their behavior led to a certain outcome, so a chosen leader path leads to the fulfillment of an objective. The theory was also influenced by *The Expectations Theory* (Lee, 2007) and was updated by House et al. (2002).

Because employee satisfaction determines performance, leaders can adapt their leadership behavior and style according to their expectations (for example the need for structure, affiliation, control, autonomy, recognition, reward, etc.).

An important aspect to mention here will be the perfectionism of the leader. As we discovered in the literature, the perfectionism of a leader can motivate and increase the energy of the followers. They will be more engaged and properly involved in the projects, which of course is great for the company. But here can appear a small danger: if the leader is extremely perfectionist, the engagement of the employees tends to decrease (Xu et al., 2022).

Also, the leader has the role of supporting the overcoming of obstacles arising from the working environment that cannot be solved by subordinates – like defining or redefining tasks, setting objectives, establishing the level of autonomy of employees, etc. (Table 2).

Table 2. Selection of leadership style according to the needs of subordinates and particularities of the working environment

Subordinates	Environment	Leadership style adopted
Wants authoritarian leadership External control Reduced abilities	Complex or ambiguous tasks Strong formal authority Good working group	Directive
Do not want authority Internal control Good abilities	Simple or structured task Weak formal authority Not good working group	Support
Need to be involved Internal control High abilities	Complex or ambiguous tasks Weak or strong formal authority Good or inappropriate working group	Participatory
Wants authoritarian leadership External control High abilities	Simple or structured task Strong formal authority Good or inappropriate working group	Achievement-oriented

Source: Authors' own research.

According to (House et al. 2004), for the employees to reach their goals, the leader must support them in identifying the objectives and the ways of achieving them, by removing the environmental obstacles and by properly rewarding the activity.

We identified here a supportive leadership style, being an environment with simple structured tasks and a small group of people, therefore we decided that it needs simple and concluded questions that we added to the research method below.

Methodology

The organization interviewed is a start-up in the construction materials industry and has been present in the Romanian market since 2020. It is an organization with foreign capital, but whose goal in the first year was to be self-supporting.

The research is based on both secondary research (literature review) and primary research (qualitative research). The secondary research was carried out to analyze the specialized literature regarding concepts such as leadership, types of leaders, and the relationship between leaders and engagement.

The primary research is based on an interview guide with six questions (*Table 3*) and five respondents, the employees of a start-up – to understand their perception of the concept of leadership and the level of leadership in the organization where they work. This is also the main objective of the research. The owner of the company wants to find out what the employee's opinion regarding company leadership is, what kind of leadership style they perceive.

Table 3. The interview questions

Codification	Question
Q1	Since when have you been working with A start-up?
Q2	What do you know about leadership? What is a leader?
Q3	Do you have leaders in your organization?
Q4	How would you describe the relation between an employee and a leader?
Q5	Is there any difference between a leader and a manager?
Q6	Do you think your manager is a leader?

Source: Authors' own research.

The interviews took place individually with all the participants of the study. First, the participants have been informed about the study, what is scope, and the fact that their information will not be divulged.

The leadership word was familiar to most of the people who participated, but as far as we were deep in the meaning of the word or discussed details about leadership for example leadership styles, some of the people were a bit confused meaning that they didn't know how to define the styles of the leadership in the theoretic form or definition, but they could explain with their own words what kind of style is used in their organization, so the most of them could identify only two main types of leadership styles: autocratic and democratic.

The research was conducted during the last quarter of 2022.

Results and discussions

The organizational structure is standard and compact, consisting of a local CEO, two area sales managers, a support manager, and a finance specialist. The start-up does not have a conventional office and all interactions take place online.

Also, the following questions were designed in such a way as to reach two aspects: to be following the specialized literature regarding leadership theories and to be simple and

understandable to the study participants in such a way that they could understand them and be able to offer a clear and objective answer.

Q1 - Since when have you been working with A start-up?

All the employees are working in the start-up from 2020.

Q2 - What do you know about leadership? What is a leader?

Leadership in the employee's opinion is the ability to lead people, keep things under control, and inspire and encourage people to make them follow. A mix of answers all highlighted the same aspects. Leaders are those who motivate people, make them work in a team, listen to them, think positively thinking, love to work with people, and give them a good vibe.

Q3 - Do you have leaders in your organization?

The CEO of the company believes that at the group level are leader, but his job is to manage and to be a leader for his team. From the employee's perspective, all the employees consider that there is a leader in the organization but one of them considers that this leader is not the CEO.

Q4 - How would you describe the relationship between an employee and a leader?

All the employees came to the opinion that first, they should be good colleagues, with relations based on trust, open relations, and very good communication. Trust and communication are the two words that everybody from the employees used to describe the relationship between a leader and the employee, together with friendly and open conversations.

Q5 - Is there any difference between a leader and a manager?

Here all the participants came with the same opinion: The manager only gives tasks, and he is not interested in the methods of the people. It's ok or not, they are not interested in whether the tasks are reachable or not, or if the people are motivated to complete those tasks. On the other side, the leader creates energy that motivates people and encourages people. Regarding the tasks, the leader is not only giving the tasks, but he listens to the people, understands if they can do it or not, and more importantly, the leader shows the people how it should be done. By doing this, the leader motivates people and helps them to develop themselves. The thing that a simple manager will not be interested to do is.

Q6 - Do you think your manager is a leader?

Four out of five employees consider that their manager is a leader, and only one considers that his boss is not and still has „a lot to learn to become a leader”.

After analyzing the answers of the people inside this small organization, it's easy now to understand that employees know, in general terms, what a leader is and his main attributes. Therefore, we concluded that the employee's perception of a leader is according to the literature review that we studied for this research. The result was that 4 of 5 employees declared that their boss is a leader and not just a manager.

Important to mention that during the interviews, which were not only a simple set of questions with simple answers but from the main questions we developed other new questions based on their answers, and we ended up with a friendly and open discussion with the employees. In this way, we discovered that the relationship between employees and their boss it's not only professional, but they are also friends, discussing hobbies, private life, personal problems, etc. This clearly revealed that the leadership of the company is in very strong connection with our literature review.

More than that, we identified here in most of the relationships that employees described a powerful connection with their leader, sharing personal problems, hobbies, etc. This shows that the leader has many components of emotional intelligence. And a recent study from (Gransberry, 2022)

discovered that emotional intelligence improves management practice, and this results in more positive responses from employees.

That being said, we think that the questions achieved our scope to identify if people understand leadership, and more that, we conclude that most of them consider their boss a leader, which was a pleasure for us to discover that.

Based on the primary and secondary research the main qualities that a leader should have is to focus on people, motivate people, help people to develop, influence people, and communicate.

We found these aspects during our research and communicated them to the owner of the company. Also, during our visits and interviews, we observed a very strong relationship between employees and their boss, this made them feel good, relaxed, and trustful around him. This important aspect we found also in a recent study which shows that such relation makes the employees very confident and increases job satisfaction (Sanda et al., 2022).

Even though we conclude that we are proud to discover the existence of strong leadership in the company and happy and loyal employees, we still do have some recommendations for the top management because they should not stop here. There is always a place for better, and they should evaluate themselves regarding the qualities presented below, which have been identified during the primary and secondary research. It is crucial for leaders not only to maintain them but to develop them as well.

Focused on people –the employees are convinced that the leader is focused on people and the manager only on the tasks. Of course, that leader also has the task in his mind and set as the objective, but the employees are convinced that the leader focused on people which means that he is paying attention to the team, checking if they understand the task, assure that they know what they have to do and by setting all of this, it will be clear that the final task will be done with success. But, as I said at the beginning, the focus is initially set on the people.

Motivates people – according to the respondents, the leader should motivate the employees before giving them tasks. If an employee is not motivated to do what the manager says, he will not be efficient, proactive and will not come up with new ideas to accomplish his tasks. People are different and they also have different types of motivation. Some of them are motivated by money, while another needs freer time and the recognition of another need. So, the leader is the one who should know his team, know the individual types of people, and find the proper motivation points that can affect the employees to make them feel motivated and give their best in their work.

Help people to develop –a leader should help people to develop themselves, personally and professionally. As the start-up employees are perceiving this, in their opinion every leader should help his followers to develop. He can do this by supporting them in the job, encouraging them to come up with ideas, empowering them to do things, delegating to them to start to feel that they should have trust in their capabilities, and making them feel independent. In this organization, the employees think that a leader who doesn't care about developing people, cannot be named a leader, no matter what other good qualities he has.

Influence people – the leader has followers, this is clear. But the followers should be influenced, to do the things that lead to the common objective. The leader should have this power to influence other people. Only by influencing the people can create a proper team who will fight for a common objective. The research doesn't reveal clearly if this power of influencing should be native or learned, but it was clear that the leader should have this magic tool.

Communicate – all the employees interviewed think that communication is a very important tool that a leader should have. A leader that doesn't have good communication with the

people, cannot be a leader. All of them gave many examples of the importance of communication. Using this tool, the leader will know the people, will find out important information, and know how to transmit data, tasks, etc. More of that, the respondents think that through communication, the leader can influence people, can bring them closer, and transmit trust and safety.

Conclusions

Based on the primary and secondary research, after analyzing the literature review and comparing with the results of the qualitative research, we discovered that the importance of leadership is crucial in a small start-up industry in construction materials. Being a small organization where everybody knows everybody, it can be very challenging for a manager without leadership capabilities to keep the team together and lead it to success.

The research also revealed that especially in a small start-up, the leader should: focus on people, motivate people, help people to develop, influence people, and communicate very well.

That being said, we believe that our research has reached its intended goal, and the study confirms what the specialized literature teaches us.

The main limitations are related to the sample scrutinized: the small number of employees interviewed, from a single company (start-up), in a single industry (construction materials). Further research should be conducted extending all the above-mentioned dimensions.

The next study that we intend to do is to apply the results from this study for a long period, not only in the current startup but also in new ones. The data results from this study will be correlated with the company's performance in time.

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