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**PHASE-RELATED LEADERSHIP IN PROJECTS: A LITERATURE-BASED
PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP IN THE COURSE OF A PROJECT**

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Abstract: *This study examines whether the project manager's leadership style differs across the individual project phases. The focus is on the balanced leadership approach and a split in leadership responsibility between the project manager (vertical leadership) and the project team (horizontal leadership). A theoretical analysis and combination of project phases and leadership approaches was carried out using a literature review. The results of the analysis and combination show that leadership is not a static style, but a dynamic process of influence. At the beginning of the project life cycle, leadership responsibility lies primarily with the project manager. In the planning and definition phase of the project, the degree of responsibility assumed by the project team increases, while in the execution phase, situational change is most effective. In the final phase, it also makes sense to shift leadership responsibility between the project manager and the project team. In conclusion, it is clear that balanced leadership is a useful leadership approach in project phases.*

Keywords: *Balanced Leadership; Projekt phases; Project management; Situational leadership; Phase-related Leadership*

INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of leadership in project management depends on the project manager's ability to adapt their leadership style to the specific situation and requirements of each project phase (Pretorius/Steyn/Bond-Barnard 2017). This is proven by Ćwiąkała et al. (2025): their study shows that leadership styles have a significant impact on project efficiency. 92% of respondents are convinced that leadership directly influences efficiency (Ćwiąkała et al. 2025). Ghafory and Sahnosh (2024) emphasize the importance of the project manager's leadership style and conclude that the project manager's leadership style determines the success or failure of the project. However, as projects are becoming increasingly complex, partly due to digitalization (Hafseld/Hussein/Rauzy 2021), the project manager alone can no longer cover all areas completely and act as the sole responsible point of contact for all issues. In addition, due to the varying content in the different phases, projects are characterized by frequent personnel changes in the project team (Drouin et al. 2018). By choosing a suitable leadership approach, this complexity can be effectively managed, teamwork improved, and thus a successful project ensured. Choosing the right leadership style is crucial for achieving project goals and maximizing teamwork (Ghafory/Sahnosh 2024). However, the question arises as to how project teams can be managed efficiently in dynamic project structures. Müller and Turner (2007), as well as Joslin and Müller (2015), say that no single leadership style is suitable for all conditions and situations in a project. Rather, according to Müller and Turner (2007) and Müller and Jugdev (2012), the project manager must choose the leadership style depending on the type of project and other project characteristics and adapt it to the situation. According to Azman, Mohamed, and Odzaly (2020), current research emphasizes the need for project managers to switch flexibly between leadership styles in order to respond appropriately to the situation. This statement is supported by Pretorius et al. (2017), who say that a flexible approach that integrates different leadership styles depending on the project phase is essential for project success. This contrasts with traditional approaches, which focus on a single leadership style throughout the entire project life cycle and ignore the specific characteristics of the individual phases (Hasenzagl/Jung/Jung 2021). As Rifky (2025) as well as Ghafory and Sahnosh (2024) have pointed out, the key is to choose the right leadership style for the right situation, as this has a

significant impact on team performance and project success.

This paper examines the extent to which the adaptation of leadership style depends on the individual phases of a project. The following research question will be answered: **Does employee leadership differ in the different phases of a project?**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a literature review that examines the project phases and analyzes leadership in these project phases. This literature review primarily includes current scientific journals and scientific books to establish a solid theoretical basis. First, the issue is presented in the introduction. Then, the individual project phases and leadership models are presented. Finally, the project phases are described separately and linked to the leadership approaches recommended in the literature.

RESULTS

The project phases are first presented and explained below, followed by a discussion of leadership in project management.

Project phases

The definition of project phases refers to the activities related to the value creation process within the project, i.e., the project content. Project management phases, on the other hand, refer to project management and form the logical sequence of project management processes over the project life cycle (GPM 2017). This clarification is important because this study examines the relationship between leadership and project management phases, but the literature often only uses the synonym “project phases.” For the purposes of simplicity, this study uses the synonym “project phases,” but this refers to the project management phases.

A well-known classification of the phases in the project life cycle in Germany is that of DIN 69901:2009 (DIN 2009). Here, the project management phases are divided into initiating, definition, planning, control, and closing (DIN 2009), as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

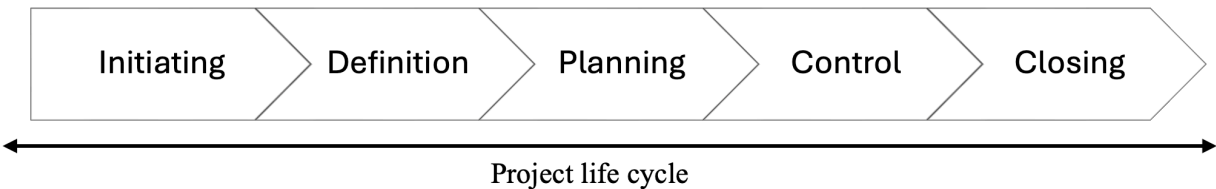


Fig. 1. Overview of project management phases according to DIN 2009

The German Project Management Association (GPM) has used the phases defined in DIN 2009 to outline a project process, which is described in the following: The project idea is defined in the initiation phase. This idea is analyzed and used to define a mission that sets out how the project is to be planned in order to meet the requirements. The mission is developed into a rough preliminary project plan, which must be approved by the client. In the definition phase, this project plan is further detailed and the project team is formed. The focus of this phase is on precisely formulating the objectives and coordinating them with the client. Furthermore, milestones are set and the costs are roughly estimated in this phase. Once the client has given their approval, the planning phase begins, during which it is determined in detail who will perform which tasks and by when. In the planning phase, the project structure plan is created in a high degree of detail. Based on this plan, deadlines, resources, and costs are scheduled. Since this phase is of great importance for the course of the project, it is characterized by frequent feedback. For this reason, the planning phase is often iterative. Once this plan has been approved by the client, the project moves into the control phase. Here, the planned tasks are implemented and continuously monitored. This phase often begins with a kick-off event to clarify the content, objectives, and tasks of the project to all project participants. Once the project objective has been achieved, the result is handed over to the client

for acceptance. This is followed by the transition to the closing phase. The closing phase serves as a process for the formally ending and final preparation of the project. In addition to securing the project documentation, this also includes events that serve to promote continuous development. The insights gained from lessons learned events are intended to improve future projects by avoiding mistakes. Finally, the project team is dismissed and the project manager is formally relieved of responsibility for the project. This marks the end of the project (GPM 2017; DIN 2009).

Other institutions also follow this structure of project management phases. The Project Management Institute also describes a five-phase plan. The phases described in the PMBoK are: Initiating, Planning, Executing, Monitoring & Controlling, and Closing (PMI 2021). At first glance, it is clear that these phases are identical to those of the GPM. Other institutions also specify five phases as the project life cycle. The Government Functional Standard for Project Delivery describes the five phases of Feasibility, Appraisal, Definition, Delivery, and Operation (Gov. UK 2025). Even though the phases differ slightly in some cases, they all follow the same structure: First, the project impulse is triggered, the project is planned and defined, then executed, and finally closed. The following table (Table 1) serves to illustrate and compare the phases according to the respective institution.

Table 1. Comparison of project management phases

Contents of the project phase	Phases according to DIN (DIN 2009)	Phases according to PMI (PMI 2021)	Phases according to Gov. UK (Gov. UK 2025)
Project impulse	Initiating	Initiating	Feasibility, Appraisal
Project planning	Definition	Planning	Definition
Project definition	Planning	Planning	Definition
Project execution	Control	Executing, Monitoring & Control	Delivery
Project closing	Closing	Closing	Operation

Dividing a project into different phases raises the question of how project teams can be effectively led in each phase.

Leadership in project management

According to Müller, Drouin, and Sankaran (2021b), there are few concepts “that have as many different definitions and are as widespread as leadership. Therefore, the use of the term should always refer to a specific context.” In this study, leadership refers to the context of projects, the project manager, the project team, and the leadership of this project team. To illustrate the influencing factors of leadership, it was transferred to theoretical models from which the well-known leadership theories emerged (Zaccaro et al. 2018; Weitlaner/Ellmann 2019). A division was made between classic and newer approaches (Jung 2017; Lippold 2019). Rieder (2014) and Weitlaner and Ellmann (2019) describe a further subdivision of classical leadership approaches into person-centered, behavior-oriented, and situation-dependent leadership theories, and a further subdivision of newer leadership approaches into relationship-oriented and system-oriented leadership theories. Person-centered leadership approaches focus on situation-independent personality traits of the leader and mostly ignore other factors (Mahlmann 2011; Rieder 2014; Blessin/Wick 2017). Behavior-oriented leadership theories consider the relationship between the leader and the led. Well-known leadership styles here are the authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles, which describe the relationship to varying degrees (Stippler et al. 2011; Hungenberg/Wulf 2011). In their work, Blessin and Wick (2017) describe that situational theories were developed because neither the characteristics nor the behavior of the leader alone are crucial for leadership success. Situation theories include contingency theory, which links a task- or relationship-oriented leadership style with individual situational characteristics (Jung 2017; Lippold 2019; Staehle 2014).

Relationship-oriented leadership styles, which are among the newer approaches, focus on the

relationships between the leader and the led (Weitlaner/Ellmann 2019). Well-known leadership styles here include the Full Range of Leadership Model, which divides leadership into transformational or transactional leadership (Bass/Riggio 2006). System-oriented leadership theories focus on viewing the organization as a system that can regulate itself and does not require external control (Weitlaner/Ellmann 2019; Stippler et al. 2011). This preliminary development of leadership theories shows that the relationship between the led and the leader is the focus of attention due to the development of work structures towards a digital environment (Antoni/Syrek 2017).

Mango (2018) and Schulze and Pinkow (2020) describe that, to date, there is no leadership theory that can fully capture the diverse content of leadership. Rieder (2014) expands on this statement, describing that there is no universally valid leadership style and that leaders should be familiar with different approaches in order to be able to respond in the best possible way in any given situation. Müller, Drouin, and Sankaran (2022) add that the leadership approaches described must complement each other. They add that situational use and timely switching between leadership approaches in dynamic structures is crucial and that this combination is collectively referred to as balanced leadership. Project management temporarily adapts its leadership style so that either the project manager or suitable team members take on the leadership role as needed. According to Drouin et al. (2021), the temporary change in leadership style in projects is considered the basis for success. The use of balanced leadership as a leadership practice allows for the flexibility to temporarily define the best leader for a given situation (Müller/Drouin/Sankaran 2021a). Balanced leadership is not a newly developed leadership theory. This leadership practice originated from a further development of contingency theory, which, as already mentioned, is one of the situation-dependent leadership theories and focuses on adapting the leadership approach to the respective conditions of the situation (Drouin et al. 2021). Balanced leadership describes the process when leadership responsibility shifts between the project manager and the project team (Müller/Drouin/Sankaran 2021a). According to Müller et al. (2021b), balanced leadership includes vertical leadership, horizontal leadership, and team-based leadership, the last of which refers to leadership from within the team. Müller, Packendorff, and Sankaran (2017) define horizontal leadership as a social process in which one or more members of the project team influence the other members of the project team, as well as the project manager, to perform certain tasks in accordance with the project plan. Vertical leadership is defined by the authors as the social influence process in which the project manager influences the project team or individual members of that team. According to Müller et al. (2021a), balanced leadership is an important leadership style for dynamic projects due to its potential flexibility. This view is also supported by Müller et al. (2022) and Rifky (2025). Rifky (2025) conducted a comprehensive literature analysis and concluded that success in projects depends largely on choosing the right leadership style. The author states that a situational leadership style is appropriate in order to obtain the necessary scope for action to be able to respond adequately to the dynamics during a project. Rifky (2025) does not refer directly to balanced leadership in his literature analysis. However, it becomes clear in his paper that his remarks are aimed at the content of balanced leadership. Drouin et al. (2018) support these statements with empirical research. In summary, their findings can be described as a situational interaction between the project manager and project team members: while vertical leadership sets the strategic framework and business guidelines, the team takes the lead in technical and operational situations, provided there is a basis of trust and proven competence.

DISCUSSION

The following section examines how balanced leadership is applied in the five project management phases: project initiation, project planning, project definition, project execution, and project closure. According to Pretorius et al. (2017), a flexible approach depending on the situation and project phase is crucial for project success.

In the project initiation phase, i.e., the start of the project, the project idea is adopted and work begins on specifying the project idea and planning the next steps. The focus in this phase is on setting up the project. In this phase, the project manager usually plays a more prominent role

in transforming the project idea into a project, convincing stakeholders, and ultimately obtaining approval for the project (GPM 2017; DIN 2009). Pretorius et al. (2017) recommend that, despite the strong focus on the project manager in this phase, leadership should not be exercised exclusively top-down, but should specifically involve the team and stakeholders. Müller et al. (2021b) support this and also state that leadership in this phase should remain within the team. In addition to the positive aspects of involving technical experts in the project initiation process, this early involvement increases the trust and commitment of the team. Team members thus showed greater commitment to the project, which is supported by empirical studies (Korsgaard/Schweiger/Sapienza 1995). Pretorius et al. (2019) also highlight the importance of early involvement of both the project team and key stakeholders. The rationale behind this recommendation is that, especially in this planning-intensive phase, collective intelligence and cooperative decision-making should be at the top of the agenda (Pretorius et al. 2019). At the same time, however, the visionary leadership role of the project manager remains highly important in the project initiation phase. Especially in this uncertain phase, when the project is still only a plan and the final details are still open, strong leadership by the project manager is crucial (Müller/Drouin/Sankaran 2018; Guan et al. 2023).

The project is worked out in detail during the project planning phase. The first step is to define a project team and finalize the project goal. These project goals are then specified in greater detail, formulated in measurable terms, and transferred to project documentation. In addition, the tasks and time required are roughly estimated and milestones are defined during this phase (GPM 2017; DIN 2009). Building on this, the tasks, schedules, and resources are defined in the project definition phase and mapped in a project structure plan. Dates, resources, and costs are then planned on this basis. Since there is always a need for coordination in practical implementation, this is an iterative process. Finally, the project plan is created, which combines the individual plans (e.g., project structure, resources, schedule, etc.) and must be approved by the stakeholders before the next phase can begin (GPM 2017; DIN 2009). Balanced leadership can contribute to project success in both project planning and project definition, as planning and detailing tasks can be specifically divided between project management and the team in both phases. According to Drouin et al. (2018) and Müller et al. (2021b), the project manager sets the framework and actively involves the project team members in the decision-making process based on their expertise. This is supported by Turner (1999), who said that in a phase where project planning is the main focus, space must be created for creative approaches and responsibility must be shared within the team. This division of responsibility early on in project planning and project definition supports the success of the project by promoting project planning, knowledge exchange, and team cohesion from the very beginning of the project (Ahmed/Khan/Philbin 2025).

During the project execution phase, the activities defined in advance are carried out according to the plan (GPM 2017; DIN 2009). Here, too, several authors recommend the use of balanced leadership. Müller et al. (2018; 2021b) recommend balanced leadership in this phase because project execution requires frequent and dynamic changes in leadership responsibility. Other studies describe that the focus in project execution is on task-oriented leadership. Specifically, this means that the project manager maintains an overview and intervenes when it comes to critical decisions or conflict resolution. The technical tasks are led by temporary managers from the project team (Müller et al. 2018). According to Müller et al. (2017), the use of balanced leadership in the execution phase of the project enables an efficient way of working, as the technical expertise of the project team members is used optimally and leadership lies where the greatest technical competence lies. In terms of content, project execution also includes monitoring and control functions (PMI 2021). The monitoring and control functions focus on measuring project progress, identifying deviations from the project plan, and intervening if necessary (Vučinić/Luburić 2023). According to Pretorius et al. (2017), at first glance this appears to be a leaders task for which a vertical leadership style is more appropriate. However, it should not be underestimated that dividing control tasks between the project manager and team members can be successful and efficient. This could, for example, take the form of self-monitoring by team members as they work on their tasks, with the project manager merely exercising overall control (Müller et al. 2018). According to Vučinić and Luburić (2023), however, it is crucial that the project manager's leading role in monitoring

and control remains essential. Turner (1999) agrees: in his view, leadership in this phase should lie with the project manager, who monitors the schedule, goals, and costs and must intervene appropriately. These statements are supported by Pretorius et al. (2017), who also recommend a vertical leadership style in this phase. According to them, balanced leadership in this phase means finding the right balance between areas where it makes sense to delegate leadership responsibility and those where it does not (Vučinić/Luburić 2023). According to Drouin et al. (2018) and Zwikael and Smyrk (2015), it makes sense to delegate technical decisions, detailed monitoring of work packages, and problem-solving decisions to the team members who have the highest technical expertise in these areas. The project manager should remain responsible for overall responsibility for achieving objectives, prioritizing changes, and reporting to stakeholders.

Finally, the project is formally closed during the project closure phase. This involves handing over the project results, reflecting on the project, and preparing the findings. At the end of this phase, the project team is dismissed and the project manager is released from their responsibilities (GPM 2017; DIN 2009). In this phase, too, the focus should be on a switched leadership between the project manager as the executive and the project team. This phase often involves reflection, the exchange of lessons learned, and the evaluation of project results, which can be better achieved through a cooperative leadership approach than through top-down leadership (Pretorius et al. 2019). Müller et al. (2021b) see this differently. They recommend vertical leadership for the final phase of the project and, accordingly, responsibility for the project manager.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses the research question of whether employee leadership needs to be adapted throughout the project phases. The literature review has shown that leadership does not remain static throughout all project phases. Rather, leadership is a dynamic process of influence and must be adapted to the respective situation. The assumption, repeatedly mentioned in the literature, that no single leadership style is suitable for all conditions and situations (Turner/Müller, 2005; Turner 1999; Adetola/Adetola 2023; Pretorius et al. 2019) is also supported by the consideration of different leadership styles in the project phases. In the course of this study, it was shown that project phases generally have an identical structure. A project starts with a project impulse, is then planned, defined, implemented/executed, and completed. On this basis, a recommendation was made for the leadership style of each phase, taking balanced leadership into account.

The literature review has shown that during the project initiation phase, the focus is on the project manager. However, it is important to involve the team at an early stage in order to increase trust and quality in the decision-making process. In the planning and definition phase of the project, leadership aims to set the framework for the project. The project manager's leadership responsibility lies in the areas of goal orientation and logical organization of the project, while the team's leadership responsibility lies in the quality of planning and knowledge exchange. For the project execution phase, the literature review shows that leadership responsibility often has to shift between the project manager and the project team. The project manager is responsible for the overall overview, makes and moderates decisions, while the project team assumes technical and primarily operational responsibility. A vertical leadership style is recommended for monitoring and controlling, but a useful division of tasks between the project manager and the project team can be efficient. Leadership in the final phase of the project should also be based on a divided but cooperative approach between the project manager and the project team. The project manager is responsible for formal tasks, such as completing the project or presenting the project results, while the team takes on leadership responsibility for tasks related to securing experience, such as lessons learned events. Studies have shown that a targeted change in leadership responsibility makes sense and is efficient for the content of this phase. Based on this analysis, the answer to the research question is: Yes, leadership differs within the various project phases. Balanced leadership can serve as a structural framework here because it does not prescribe a fixed leadership style, but rather enables the situational shift of leadership responsibility between the project manager and the project team.

It can therefore be concluded that a phase-based and flexible application of balanced leadership is beneficial. It enables the project manager to assume leadership responsibility for topics that require focused attention and to delegate responsibility for other topics to team members when appropriate. According to Müller (2024), this is precisely the goal of balanced leadership: to find the most suitable leadership style. When using balanced leadership, it is crucial that the project manager retains overall responsibility and that team members only take on individual leadership tasks from the overall structure.

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ЛИДЕРСТВО СПОРЕД ФАЗИТЕ НА ПРОЕКТА: БАЗИРАНА НА ЛИТЕРАТУРАТА ПЕРСПЕКТИВА ЗА ЛИДЕРСТВОТО В ПРОЦЕСА НА ИЗПЪЛНЕНИЕ НА ПРОЕКТ

Резюме: Настоящото проучване разглежда дали управлението на персонала от страна на проектния мениджър се различава в отделните фази на проекта. Акцентът е поставен върху подхода на балансирано лидерство и разпределението на отговорностите между проектния мениджър (вертикално лидерство) и проектния екип (хоризонтално лидерство). Чрез преглед на литературата са проведени анализ и комбинация на фазите на проекта и подходите за лидерство. Резултатите от анализа и комбинацията показват, че лидерството не е статичен стил, а динамичен процес на влияние. В началото на жизнения цикъл на проекта отговорността за лидерството се носи предимно от проектния мениджър. В етапа на планиране и дефиниране на проекта степента на поемане на отговорност от проектния екип се увеличава, докато в етапа на изпълнение ситуационната промяна е най-ефективна. В заключителната фаза също е целесъобразно да се промени ръководната отговорност между проектния мениджър и проектния екип. В заключение може да се каже, че балансираното лидерство в проектните фази е целесъобразен подход към ръководството.

Ключови думи: балансирано лидерство; проектни фази; проектно управление; ситуативно лидерство; фазово лидерство

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