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# LEADERSHIP IN CONSTRUCTION PARTNERING PROJECTS

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years there has been a growing interest in the use of partnering in construction. Central to any successful partnering arrangement is the change in cultural and behavioural characteristics towards mutual trust and understanding. Leadership is originally the source of the beliefs and values which forms shared assumptions of organisational culture. This paper builds on the leadership literature which has so ably demonstrated the influence of powerful leaders. As Bueno and Bowditch states “the reality may be that managing will remain much more of an art than a science”. However true this statement may be, there is a number of things that management can do to further cultural integration and the success of construction partnering projects. This paper initially reviews the theory behind partnering, culture and leadership. It stages arguments and discussions over the importance of behavioural aspects of leadership and explores applicability of leadership styles to construction partnering projects. Further, this establishes the requirement of project leader to exhibit different leadership styles and modes of motivation to demonstrate a range of behaviours together with the combination of transformational and transactional, firelighter leadership style.

**Keywords** – Partnering, Culture, Leadership.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the use of partnering in construction (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a; Dainty et al, 2001; Wood and Ellis, 2005; Ingirige, 2004). Partnering and the related forms of collaboration have been seen as a way of dealing with the fragmentation and lack of integration that have bedevilled attempts to improve project performance over the years (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a). This represents perhaps the most significant development to date as a means of improving project performance, whilst offering direct benefits to the whole supply chain (Larson and Drexler, 1997; Wood and Ellis, 2005). Many commentators argue that partnering can have a substantial positive impact on project performance, not only with regard to time, cost and quality objectives, but also with regard to more general outcomes such as greater innovation and improved user satisfaction (Latham, 1994; Bennett and Jayes, 1998; Bennett et al., 1996; Bresnen and Marshall, 2000c).

Partnering has been defined as ‘a long term commitment between two or more organisations for the purpose of achieving specific business objectives by maximising the effects of each participant’s resources (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a). While there is an agreement about this overall philosophy of partnering, there are varying views on its features. This includes wide range of concepts capturing culture, behaviour, attitudes, values, practices, tools and techniques. Leadership is considered as the source of the beliefs and values, and therefore it has the most significant role to play in the transformation of attitudes. As the part of Doctorial study, ‘Rethinking leadership in construction partnering projects’, the discussion in this paper revolves around the necessity for cultural transformation and the leadership of construction partnering projects.

## 2. CONCEPTS OF PARTNERING

According to Naoum (2003) partnering is a concept which provides a framework for the establishment of mutual objectives among the building team with an attempt to reach an

agreed dispute resolution procedure as well as encouraging the principle of continuous improvement. Thus partnering is intended to reduce the adversarialism which is said to be typical in the industry and which has confounded previous attempts to encourage better integration and cooperation between contractual partners (Latham, 1994; Egan, 1998; Bresnen and Marshall, 2000b). Similarly, partnering has also been defined as management approach used by two or more organisations to achieve specific business objectives by maximising the effectiveness of each participant's resources based on mutual objectives, an agreed method of problem resolution and an active search for continuous measurable improvements (NAO, 2001).

Furthermore, mutual trust and understanding of each others' commitments appears to be the prerequisites of changing traditional relationships to a shared culture in partnering (Barlow and Cohen, 1996; Bresnen and Marshall, 2000c; Naoum, 2003). Bresnen and Marshall (2000a) reinforce the requirement for the change in attitudinal and behavioural characteristics to achieve mutual trust. Barlow et al. (1997 cited Naoum, 2003) succinctly argues that, to achieve mutual trust, organisations must ensure that individual goals are not placed ahead of the team alliance. All these point out that, partnering is built upon the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of participants which lead towards mutual trust to move away from traditional adversarial culture of construction industry.

Since partnering is seen as a recipe for potential benefits, its success factors are worthy of in-depth investigation. There is a lack of attention to these critical factors that need to be addressed if partnering is to be successfully implemented as a strategy for cultural transformation (Cheng et al., 2000). This also likely to lead to a better understanding of partnering benefits and problems which could generate essential strategies to alleviate the root causes of poor project performance.

### **3. CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS OF PARTNERING**

Critical success factors are the key areas that are essential for management success. Cheng et al. (2000) suggested that partnering can become successful by using pertinent management skills and developing a favourable context. It is essential to create an appropriate environment in which inter-organisational relationship can flourish. Management skills are vital for effective control of the relationships. They form the basis for initiating and facilitating the partnering process. Similarly some partnering characteristics can affect the partnering relationships. In consequence, it is important to identify these critical characteristics which form the favourable context conducive to partnering success.

Breakdowns in communication and disruptive conflicts are always been a problem in construction and as a result it has become very adversarial in nature. Partnering requires timely communication of information and it encourages open, direct lines of communication among project participants (Hellard, 1995). Effective communication skills can help organisations to facilitate the exchange of ideas and visions, which can result in fewer misunderstandings and stimulate mutual trust. Correspondingly, effective coordination can result in achievement of stability in an uncertain environment by the creation of additional contact points between parties to share project information (Cheng et al., 2000). The other critical management skill is a 'productive conflict resolution' which can be achieved by joint problem solving in order to seek alternatives for problematic issues. Furthermore, regular monitoring and early implementation of partnering process are essential to ensure the success of partnering (Chan et al., 2004).

Similarly, some of the critical characteristics form the favourable context conducive to partnering by establishing interdependence and self-willingness to work for the long-lasting

cohesive relationship. Most of these contextual characteristics are soft critical success factors such as, top management support, long term commitment, mutual trust, willingness to share resources and commitment to win-win attitude (Cheng et al., 2000, Chan et al., 2004, Li et al., 2005). Support from top management is always a prerequisite to initiate and lead a successful partnering arrangement. While long-term commitment is expected from involved parties to integrate continuously to weather unanticipated problems, mutual trust is critical to open the boundaries of the relationship as it can relieve stress and enhance adaptability, information exchange and joint problem solving (Cheng et al., 2000).

As discussed, central to any successful partnering arrangement is the change in attitudinal and behavioural characteristics towards mutual trust and understanding. Green and McDermott (1996) argue the attitudes and the behaviour evident in the construction industry are deeply ingrained and that it is difficult to engineer any rapid movement away from such an embedded culture. According to Li et al. (2001) partnering requires a long-term strategic plan with cultural change intervention in order to move beyond a traditional discrete project nature. In effect, the development of trust between organisations is seen as a function of the length of the relationship between them, and the mechanisms that led to this alignment are viewed largely as informal. On the other hand, researchers believe that it is possible to bring about change over the timescale of a single project suggesting the view that partnering can be engineered and does not have to evolve naturally (Bennett et al., 1996; Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a). Despite the separation between informal developmental and formal instrumental views to alter the behaviour, it is certainly not easy to bring about cultural and behavioural change to adopt a new set of behaviours as a consistent way of working among the people.

Much of the literature tends to presume that cultural alignment is a prerequisite for partnering. Atkinson (1990) identified fear, perceived loss of control, difficulty in learning to do the things differently, uncertainty, addition in work and unwillingness to commit as the reasons for people to resist change. Hill and McNulty (1998) portray fear and uncertainty as the main barriers to change. Conceptualisation of the relationship between partnering and culture (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a), resistant to change from traditional, adversarial and exploitative ways (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000b), Lack of corporation based upon fundamental differences in interests between the parties to contract, profitability and uncertainty issues, unwillingness to commit fully to close, long term relationships together with the construction industry perception of mistrust (Cheung et al., 2003) can be considered as some of the reasons to resist cultural change towards collaborative relationships. Therefore it is imperative to understand the culture and values of the industry to overcome these barriers to change.

#### **4. PARTNERING THROUGH A CULTURAL LENS**

Schein (2004) defines organisational culture as the 'basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by member of an organisation, that operate unconsciously and define in a basic taken for granted fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment'. Hence expectations and strategy are rooted in 'collective experience' and become reflected in organisational routines that accumulated over time. Culture is also shaped by 'work based' groupings such as an industry or profession (Johnson et al., 2005). This cultural influence is better understood as the influence of the 'organisational field'. An organisational field is a community of organisations that partake of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently with one other than with those outside the field (Johnson et al., 2005). Therefore it is important to understand both the organisations comprising the field and the assumptions they adhere to.

Organisations within a field such as construction tend to cohere around common norms and values. Several industry commissioned reports shares this view, where problems such as low and unreliable demand and profitability, lack of research and development, inadequate investment in training, its current approach to the usage of tender price evaluations, an adversarial culture and fragmented industry structure, are widely recognised (Latham, 1994; Egan, 1998; Santos and Powell 2001; NAO, 2001; Fairclough, 2002). Successive independent reviews of construction have emphasised the need to improve the culture, attitude and working practices of the industry. As argued above, it is very important to understand the construction organisations and their underlying assumptions to make these attitudinal and cultural improvements in the construction industry. However trying to understand culture is not straight forward. The day-to-day behaviours not only give clues about the 'taken-for-granted assumptions' but are also likely to reinforce these assumptions. The cultural web (Johnson et al., 2005) is a useful tool to attain rich source of information about an organisation's culture.

The concept of the 'cultural web' is a representation of the taken-for-granted assumptions, or paradigms of an organisation and the behavioural manifestations of organisational culture (Johnson et al., 2005). It arose from the belief that understanding and characterising both the culture and subcultures within an organisation could help to predict how easy or difficult it would be to adopt new strategies (McGrady, 2005). This concept defines organisational culture as layers of values beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions. A discussion paper by the author Thurairajah et al. (2006), on the applicability of cultural web to construction partnering projects depicts the requirement on taken-for-granted assumptions to transform to accommodate the ever required collaborative, non-adversarial culture in construction partnering projects. In addition, Bresnen and Marshall (2000a) insist on top management support, commitment and enthusiasm in generating and sustaining changes in collaborative approaches.

Schein (2004) shows that culture can be analysed at several different levels, with the term level meaning the degree to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to the observer. These levels range from the very tangible overt manifestations that one can see and feel to the deeply embedded, unconscious, basic assumptions. In between these layers are various espoused beliefs, values norms and rules of behaviour that members of the culture use as a way of depicting the culture to themselves and others. Schein (2004) conceive culture as consisting of three major levels; artifacts, Espoused beliefs and values and basic underlying assumptions. While artifacts represent the visible organisational structures and processes, espoused beliefs and values symbolise strategies, goals and philosophies. However to get a deeper level of understanding or to predict the future behaviour correctly one must attempt to get at its shared basic assumptions and taken for granted perceptions. Leadership is originally the source of the beliefs and values that get a group moving with its internal and external problems (Schein, 2004). Once leader's proposals continue to work, they gradually come to be shared assumptions of organisational culture. As such, it is important to understand the concepts behind leadership to initiate a successful cultural change in partnering projects.

## **5. LEADERSHIP THEORY**

Discussions relating to leadership and leadership effectiveness were found in writings of ancient Greece and Chinese philosophers (Bass, 1990; Mello, 1999). Given such a far-reaching history, it would seem that there should be some clear and consistent definition of leadership. However, there has been no consistent definition of leadership. According to Yukl(Mello, 1999), Leadership has been defined in terms of multidimensional aspects of

leadership such as, individual personality traits, leader behaviours, responses to leader behaviours, interpersonal exchange relationships, interaction patterns, role relationships, follower perceptions, task goals, organisational culture, and nature of work processes. Also there is sharp disagreement as to how leadership relates to management, where the two overlap and whether the two are distinct processes/phenomena. One research points out management as more of an active process while leadership as an interactive process (Mello, 1999). Another interpretation conceptualises management as coping with complexity while leadership, by contrast, involves coping with change (Kotter, 1990). Hence, leadership is discussed here to construct the understanding of coping with change towards a collaborative transformation in construction partnering projects. Various paradigms of leadership are discussed below to construct a basic understanding of leadership theory.

The initial concepts dealt with the attributes of great leaders. Leadership was explained by the internal qualities with which a person is born (Bernard, 1926; Horner, 1997). The thought was that if the traits that differentiated leaders from followers could be identified, successful leaders could be quickly assessed and put into positions of leadership. This approach involved studying traits or characteristics of leaders to explain their success as leaders. The various types of traits examined by various researchers included physical characteristics, personality characteristics, social characteristics, and personal abilities and skills (House and Podsakoff, 1994). This research was based on the idea that leaders were born, not made, and the key to success was simply in identifying those people who were born to be great leaders. Though much research was done to identify the traits, no clear answer was found with regard to what traits consistently were associated with great leadership (Horner, 1997). One flaw with this line of thought was in ignoring the situational and environmental factors that play a role in a leader's level of effectiveness.

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These criticisms of traits theories moved studies of leadership to a focus on behaviour. This approach focused on how subordinates reacted to a leader's behaviour. These studies looked at leaders in the context of the organisation, identifying the behaviours leaders' exhibit that increases the effectiveness of the company. The well-known and documented Michigan and Ohio State leadership studies took this approach. Two different dimensions of leader behaviour were identified by these studies: consideration (the concern for people) and initiating structure (the concern for productivity) (Cole, 1997). The impact of this thought was in part the notion in the research done by Saal and Knight that leadership was not necessarily an inborn trait, but instead, effective leadership methods could be taught to employees (1988, cited Horner, 1997). However, there were some consistencies within certain types of situations which suggested that the situation or context of the leadership process might impact a leader's effectiveness. Also, continuing this work, Blake, Shepard, and Mouton (Cole, 1997) developed a two-factor model of leadership behaviour similar to that found at Ohio State and Michigan. They later added a third variable, that of flexibility. According to these studies, managers exhibit behaviours that fall into the two primary categories (task or people). Depending on which category was shown most frequently, a leader could be placed along each of the two continua.

These outcomes of the behavioural approaches towards leadership gave rise to situational analyses of leadership. These approaches explored the best way to lead which dealt with the

interaction between the leader's traits, the leader's behaviours, and the situation in which the leader exists. This concept opened the door for the possibility that leadership could be different in every situation (Saal and Knight, 1988; Horner, 1997). One such theory by Fiedler (Cole, 1997) argued that leadership style was innate; that leaders were either task or relations-oriented by nature and three situational factors (leader-member relations, task structure and leader position power) determined whether task or relations-oriented leadership was more appropriate. This gave rise to the state that the change in the situational factors would require a replacement of the leader. This assumption was discarded in the path-goal theory of leadership by House (Cole, 1997) which argued that effective leaders shift from one leadership style to another as situations warrant. House focused on the relationship between leader behaviour and situational variables. The importance of the followers in leadership emerged (House and Mitchell, 1974), and leadership was seen as an interaction between the goals of the followers and the leader. This theory suggested that leaders are primarily responsible for helping followers develop behaviours that will enable them to reach their goals or desired outcomes. House described directive, participative, supportive and achievement-oriented types of leader behaviour to guide followers.

As leadership research has grown and expanded, an even broader look at leadership has emerged: a focus on the organisational culture. According to Schein (2004), for leaders to be effective issues related to the culture must be clearly identified. Leaders must be able to adapt to change, depending on the culture, as the environment shifts and develops (Horner, 1997). In one study it was found that organisations that have tried to resist change in the external environment have experienced more difficulties than organisations that have responded positively to change (Baron, 1995). However, the application of these ideas is difficult, in part due to the organisational specificity of culture and the difficulty in defining culture (Horner, 1997). These studies suggest that leaders need to work within the culture to be most successful.

Furthermore, most of the leadership research and theories depend heavily on the study of motivation, suggesting that leadership is less a specific set of behaviours than it is creating an environment in which people are motivated to produce and move in the direction of the leader (Horner, 1997). These motivation theories add to leadership work because of the emphasis on the followers and what causes them to act, instead of focusing on the leaders and their traits, behaviours, or situations. Therefore leadership can be viewed as not only the process and activity of the person, who is in a leadership position, but also the environment leader creates and how the leader responds to the surroundings, as well as the particular skills and activities of the people being led.

Using motivational theories as support, additional leadership theories have emerged. This is represented by the comparison of transactional versus transformational leadership on the needs of the situation (Bass, 1985; Tatum *et al.*, 2003). This maintains the view that transformational leaders are charismatic. They create a vision of the future and inspire their followers to question the status quo and pursue new purpose. In this way, these leaders personally evolve while also helping their followers and organisations to evolve. Transactional leaders, by contrast, represent efficient managers who can focus on the task at hand, communicate clear expectations to their subordinates, solve immediate problems, and reward performance. Recent research suggests that there may be a third type of leader: the *laissez-faire* leader. The *laissez-faire* leader tends to lead by staying out of the way. The *laissez-faire* leader adopts a style of leadership that is sometimes characterised as passive-avoidant, management by exception, or administrative (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Tatum *et al.* 2003).

Gardner (1990) believed leadership as moving toward and achieving a group goal, not necessarily because of the work of one skilled individual but because of the work of multiple

members of the group. Manz and Sims (1991) suggested that "the most appropriate leader is one who can lead others to lead themselves". This view gave rise to the thinking of existence of leadership within each individual, not only confined to the limits of formally appointed leaders. Another theory on leadership looked at leadership as a process in which leaders were not seen as individuals in charge of followers, but as members of a community of practice (Drath and Palus, 1994). This has laid the groundwork for examining leadership as a process, taking the emphasis away from an individual.

In the process perception leadership is viewed as a process in which leaders are not seen as individuals in charge of followers, but as members of a community of practice (Drath and Palus, 1994; Horner, 1997). With this view, leadership is not so much defined as the characteristics of a leader, but instead leadership is the process of coordinating efforts and moving together as a group. However facilitating, coaching and empowering become essential in this perception. With collaboration, openness, and the creation of shared meaning, leaders elicit the commitment of others and guide the work process, allowing members to expand their skills and contributions to the organisation more broadly (Hackman, 1987; Horner, 1997)

It is evident that leadership concepts have moved from basic management theory and motivation, to process viewed and group targeted setup in the present dynamic environment. Table 1 summarises continuum of leadership paradigms reflecting different aspects of leadership.

*Table 1. Continuum of leadership paradigms*

<i>Leadership Characteristic</i>	<i>Classical</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Visionary</i>	<i>Organic</i>
<i>Major era</i>	Antiquity – 1970s	1970s – mid 1980s	Mid 1980s - 2000	Beyond 2000
<i>Basis of leadership</i>	Leader dominance through respect and/or power to command and control.	Interpersonal influence over & consideration of followers. Creating appropriate management environments.	Emotion – leader inspires followers	Mutual sense-making within the group. Leaders may emerge rather than be formally appointed.
<i>Source of follower commitment</i>	Fear or respect of leader. Obtaining rewards or avoiding punishment.	Negotiated rewards, agreements and expectations.	Sharing the vision; leader charisma may be involved; individualised consideration.	Buy in to the group's shared values and processes; self determination.
<i>Vision</i>	Leader's vision is unnecessary for follower compliance.	Vision is not necessary, and may ever be articulated.	Vision id central. Followers may contribute to leader's vision	Vision emerges from the group; vision is a strong cultural element.

*Source: Adopted from Avery, 2004*

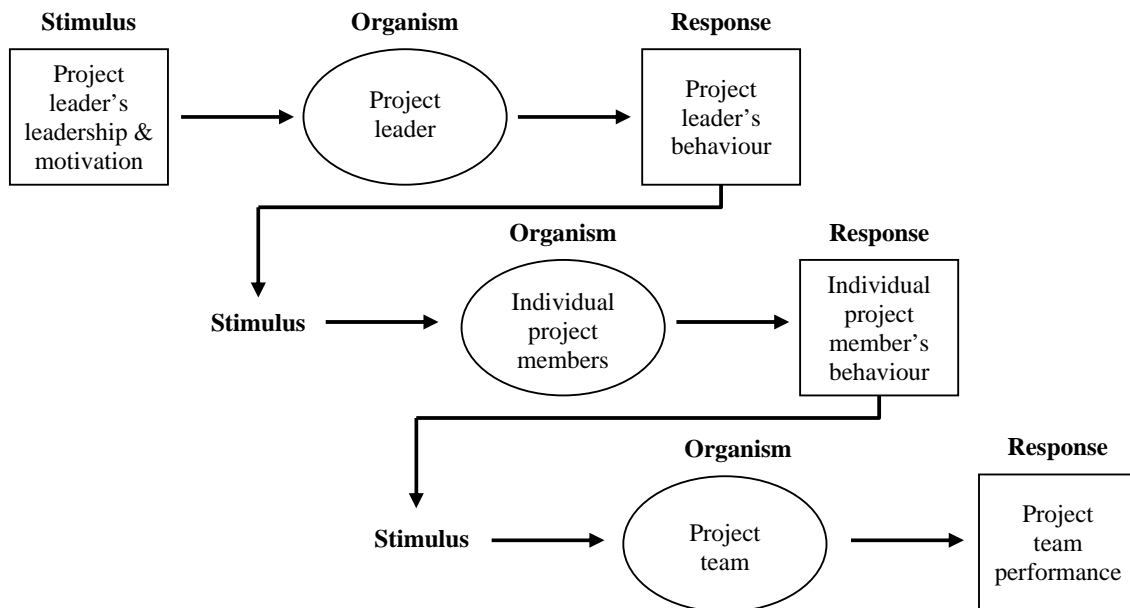
## **6. LEADERSHIP IN CONSTRUCTION PARTNERING PROJECTS**

Literature synthesis on partnering shows the significance of cultural and behavioural challenges inhibiting the adoption of partnering arrangements. Furthermore, common to all partnering relationship is the formulation of mutual objectives, trust and an understanding of



each other's commitments. However, it is less than clear about the way in which these essential cultural and behavioural characteristics are encouraged in construction partnering projects (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a). It is essential to bring about cultural change, encouraging project participants to transgress the conflicting interests and to build shared culture. Hence the primary concern of partnering project leadership is to bring about the cultural and behavioural change among the project participants to act towards collaborative performance.

Styles of leadership emerged from the behavioural studies as analysis of the ways in which leaders execute the functions. Partnering projects, with their primary concern over the change of behaviours of project participants require an initiation from follower centred, 'concern for people' leadership style. This can be further analysed with 'Stimulus–Organism–Response' cycle, a fundamental concept in the study of behaviour (Naylor et al., 1980; Liu et al., 2003) deals with the way in which the individual perceives some subset of the enormous variety of stimuli available in the individual's environment, processes them and finally produces behaviour. If leadership concerns about the ability to influence the behaviour of others via various leadership styles and modes of motivation, it can be taken as the stimulus on project members' behaviours as shown in figure 1. Project leader's stimulus would generate project leader's behaviour and that in turn would act as the stimulus for the behaviour of individual project members. This response might produce the expected performance from the project team. However, the environment is a collective organism composed of number of people in which the project leader is an entity. Hence, project organisation and the project leader within it are interrelated while both are active entities in their own right. They are connected to each other and influence each other dynamically (Liu et al., 2003).



*Fig. 1. From leadership to performance*

However, application of this conceptual model to construction partnering requires a bottom-up approach because of the integrated, collaborative project team performance. Partnering consists of various stakeholders ranging from client, contractor and subcontractor to various material and labour suppliers. This fragmented nature of individual project members would need various behaviours from project leader as the stimulus for the

appropriate response from the individual project members. Ultimately, project leader is expected to take different leadership styles and modes of motivation to demonstrate a range of behaviours.

According to Bass (1999), there is substantial empirical evidence to support the claims that leaders can exhibit a full range of transactional and transformational behaviours. Even though partnering requires transformational leadership behaviour to support the cultural adoption and change reactive transactional leadership behaviours are essential to lead people in the daily maintenance of the project. This combination of transformational and transactional, firefighter leadership style (Barber and Warn, 2005) is necessary to a project to maintain commitment to shared outcome and to achieve demanding objectives. However, management by exception and passive avoidant, fire-fighter style would not be appropriate to lead a partnering project. The firefighter leader is postulated to have experience in initiating structure, providing emotional consideration and competency on transformational behaviours, whereas the fire-fighter focuses on tackling problems as they rise (Barber and Warn, 2005).

Other concerning factor in the selection of leadership styles is the stages of team development process in construction partnering. As the participants integrate into a team, the development would move from forming, storming to norming and then to performing. As per goal theory of leadership, leaders are expected to shift from one leadership style to another as situations warrant. Beginning with directive style of leadership, partnering demands 'participative', 'supportive' and then 'achievement oriented leadership styles', as the project moves along the stages. However, with the existing requirement for various stimuli for individual project members at different stages of team development, this process becomes more complicated.

Adding to this, various authors have commented on the necessity of leadership to work within the culture to be effective. However, this may not be possible in the context of partnering as various parties to partnering bring different 'taken-for-granted assumptions' and cultures. As discussed earlier, leadership is originally the source of the beliefs and values and when the leader's proposals continue to work, they gradually come to be shared assumptions of organisational culture. Furthermore Schein (2004) states that cultural and behavioural characteristics can be shaped and reflected by proper leadership. This forms a very strong platform to create and manage project culture that could lead a construction partnering project to its success.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Partnering is intended to reduce the adversarialism which is said to be typical in the industry and which has confounded previous attempts to encourage better integration and cooperation between contractual partners. Central to any successful partnering arrangement is the change in attitudinal and behavioural characteristics towards mutual trust and understanding. Leadership is originally the source of the beliefs and values that get a group moving with its internal and external problems. Once leader's proposals continue to work, they gradually come to be shared assumptions of organisational culture. Discussion over the Stimulus–Organism–Response cycle to partnering projects shows the requirement of project leader to exhibit different leadership styles and modes of motivation to demonstrate a range of behaviours. Also partnering projects need combination of transformational and transactional, firefighter leadership style to support the cultural adoption and change.

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