

## EXPLORING LEADERSHIP IN SELF-MANAGED PROJECT TEAMS IN MALAYSIA

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Case study

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*This paper focuses on a longitudinal approach in exploring leadership in Self-Managed Project Teams (SMPT). SMPT has been known to contribute to organizations by improving productivity and increasing organizational performance. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of leadership in this type of team can be seen as one of the important factors to ensure the success of organizations. Leading a team which manages itself is a challenge as increased autonomy and control is given to the team which eliminates the existence of a leader. It is important to understand the extent of how the external leader is involved within SMPT and whether the external leader approaches highlighted in the literature are applicable in such a situation and how these approaches change during work processes. This study comprises of evidence collected through semi-structured interviews in two small and medium sized organizations in Malaysia. Weekly telephone interviews as well as face-to-face interviews were conducted which provides contextual data for the research. In this research, the evidence suggested that SMPT transform from self-managed toward leader-managed resulting from several factors, such as conflict handling strategies. Specifically, it was found that avoiding conflicts, rather than confronting, transform the team into being leader dependent.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Self-Managed Project Team (SMPT) has been widely adapted particularly in project-based organizations. This is due to its flexibility and freedom in the work processes given to the team members in achieving the team objectives. In this type of team, leadership is no longer regarded as an individual responsibility but it is where group members share responsibilities which results

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in more effective leadership. In a SMPT, team members become the source of leadership in which they do not have a formally appointed leader but it is them who demonstrate leadership behaviour. The independence of this type of team on conducting their tasks eliminates the importance of having a formal leader within the team especially in assisting the team as other traditional team leaders would do. This is the major difference of this particular type of team compared to other types of work team where each of the team members is given the responsibility to manage their tasks rather than depending upon the team leader as other types of work team.

Previous research has discussed how these teams operate, how they are being independent, and do not need the existence and assistance of a formal team leader to make any important decisions regarding their assigned project (e.g. Cohen et al., 1996; Orsburn et al., 1990; Parker et al., 2015; Kainen et al., 2008). According to Cohen et al. (1996) the best way to lead self-managing teams is to have no leader at all, as there is no relationship between individual leadership behaviour and the effectiveness of the self-managing teams. It is argued that what is most important in team performance is the team members' involvement rather than an individual leader. This suggests that focus should be given to team member behaviours which may provide insight into effectively facilitating self-managed team processes.

Moreover, interference by the external leader is said to interrupt the process of the team which is able to manage themselves. This is as highlighted by Beekun (1989) that a self-managing team without a leader performs better than with a leader, either internal or external. Therefore, no matter which approach is taken by the leader, it does not contribute to the success of the team. Similarly, several researchers have discussed how leaders have been identified as one of the main reason for the failure of self-managing team development (Cummings, 1978; Letize and Donovan, 1990). However, despite the claim that the SMPT is a type of independent work team, it appears that the existence of a team leader is still required especially for the purpose of guiding the team activities. However, the team leader is required to have a special set of skills to assist this particular type of team (Elloy, 2005). This is important in determining the successfulness of a SMPT.

According to Yeats and Hyten (1998), the leader of a SMPT differs from the traditional leader in the way that their role is as a coordinator rather than being highly involved with the team activities. Adding to that, there is also the existence of an external supervision known as 'external leader' (Druskat & Wheeler, 2003; Stewart & Manz, 1995). The influence of an external leader on

facilitating self-regulating behaviours in self-managing teams is claimed as important towards team success (Manz, 1986). An effective external leader refers to those who are able to build close relationships between the team members and the top management by acting as a bridge connecting these two parties, also known as the *boundary spanner* (Cohen & Bailey, 1997). The boundary spanning activity is important in ensuring the success of the external leader as it is them who should be dealing with the team members as well as the management (Druskat & Wheeler, 2003).

Even though an external leader might be responsible for the team's performance, most of the time, they do not get involved closely with the team in the daily operational activities and decision making processes (Wageman, 2001). An external leader would usually be the one asking questions rather than giving instructions (Courtright et al., 1989). By asking questions, they aim to improve the team performance by getting the information needed and then encouraging the team members toward achieving their goals (Courtright et al., 1989). On the other hand, when people from different background and expertise, as well as different levels of experiences, work together, it may not be easy for them to cooperate well with each other. This will result in difficulties communicating amongst them which will then require someone to assist them to overcome the difficulties. Adding to that, there are also occasions when the team members of SMPTs need the leader to manage and organise the team rather than doing it themselves specifically when faced with conflicts. Therefore, it is worth exploring this issue in order to gain further understanding on the dynamics of leadership in SMPTs.

## 2. LEADERSHIP IN PROJECT TEAMS

Generally, project teams operate with the existence of a formal leader within the team. The leader carries out the responsibility of being in charge of the needs of the team members in order to achieve the project objective (Cleland, 1995; Morgeson et al., 2010). The team member is highly dependent on the leader in important processes within and outside the team such as decision making and problem solving regarding any aspect of the project. The main tasks of a leader within this type of team as highlighted by West (1994) are: setting clear shared objectives; changing the roles of team members; developing individual tasks; evaluating individual contribution; providing feedback on team performance, as well as reviewing the team strategies and objectives. Adding to that, the leader is also responsible for managing personnel resources as well as material resources (Fleishman & Zaccaro, 1992; Morgeson et al., 2010) which includes obtaining, allocating, developing, motivating, and

utilising personnel resources as well as managing, obtaining, and allocating material resources and then maintaining, utilising and monitoring the material resources (Fleishman & Zaccaro, 1992; Zaccaro et al., 2001).

In the event of conflict within teams, the team leader is responsible for providing solutions to the extent that they may need to become highly involved in the conflict in order to solve it which will then assist the team in achieving their project objective and increase the project team performance. However, the dilemma which is usually faced by the leader is the balance between the team and the organisational objective as well as managing individuals within the team as it involves different people with different styles of working and thinking. Nevertheless, the existence of a leader within the team is beneficial as this helps the team members to focus on their task and the managing and organising role is being carried out by the leader.

Leadership is defined as a process of providing guidance or influencing the team members on the decision of the team's objectives and motivating the team's behaviours towards achieving them (Yukl, 2006) as well as influencing on group maintenance and culture (Stewart & Manz, 1995). Even though the nature of leadership changes at different levels in the organisation and different working environments, the basic responsibility of a leader requires them to define the team's goals and strategies as well as planning to accomplish them (Zaccaro et al., 2001). For example, in a team which consists of experts and experienced members, they can take over several leadership roles which enable their leader to have extra time and resources to focus on other tasks. Thus, successful organisational team performance depends jointly on effective team and leadership processes. Teams always work in a dynamic and complex environment. This increases the needs of team members to coordinate their actions specifically in improving their work performance towards achieving the team's objective. Adding to that, the team members also need to be proactive in predicting any changes in terms of the work environment and their assigned tasks; they also need to respond to these changes. Even in a SMPT, there exists an external leader (Cohen et al., 1997) who holds the responsibility of supporting the team to ensure the team's success. Hence, it is worth being able to understand how leadership and team processes are coordinated. It is arguable that leadership processes is one of the most crucial determinants of team effectiveness, particularly in organisations in which leaders play the main role in planning and strategizing for the team. Therefore, exploring into the processes of leadership, specifically in teams, will enable us to gain deeper understanding on how leadership and teams integrate together and to what extent the involvement of a leader is needed and beneficial to teams.

### 3. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This study uses multiple comparative case study method. Case study is an exploration of a case or multiple cases over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. The use of multiple case studies in this research follows the principles of data collection established by Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (1994). Multiple sources of evidence are used, which includes in-depth semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2007), consisting of face-to-face interviews and weekly telephone interviews which are applied in the data collection. With regard to this research where an inductive approach is being adopted, cases are selected based on theoretical sampling instead of random sampling as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989). Theoretical sampling underlines the importance for cases to be selected for theoretical exploration rather than statistical hypothesis-testing purposes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling provides flexibility during the research process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and it involves sampling to test, elaborate and refine a category, their relationship and their interrelationships.

In this study, the data collection process was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of semi-structured face-to-face interviews in two organizations in Malaysia, ITCo and HerbalCo for three months with a total of 15 respondents. One project was selected from ITCo and one project from HerbalCo. For the ITCo, there were six team members interviewed which consisted of one multimedia executive, two animators, two modellers and one storyboard artists. Meanwhile, for the HerbalCo, there were nine team members involved. Interviews were conducted with four scientists, two quality controllers and three research and development executives. Tables below show the background of the respondents.

*Table 1. Interviewee details for ITCo*

No	Interviewee	Gender	Age	Functional Background	Tenure
1	MrH	Male	32	Art and Design	5 years
2	MrQ	Male	40	Graphic Design	7 years
3	MrS	Male	31	Multimedia	3 years
4	MrD	Male	25	Computer Animation	2 years
5	MrF	Male	25	Computer Animation	3 years
6	MrE	Male	24	Graphics and Animation	1 year

The data gathered from the face-to-face interviews provided the contextual background for the study. This then continued with the second phase of the data collection which involved weekly telephone interviews with the respondents for another three months, in order for the researcher to gather processual data for the study.

Table 2. Interviewee details for HerbalCo.

No	Interviewee	Gender	Age	Functional Background	Tenure
1	DrW	Male	43	Production and operation	8 years
2	MrSh	Male	40	Management	8 years
3	MrHn	Male	27	Product Development	3 years
4	MrK	Male	26	Chemical expert	3 years
5	MrS	Male	26	Chemical expert	3 years
6	MrM	Male	27	Biology researcher	4 years
7	MrH	Male	32	Plant Research	5 years
8	MrB	Male	24	Product Research	1 year
9	MissM	Female	28	Quality and operation management	5 years

The data were then analyzed in two stages: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. This took place after the transcription and translation of both face-to-face and telephone interviews being conducted after the face-to-face interviews. Within-case analysis is an in-depth study of each individual site. It entailed sifting through all the data gathered from weekly telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews. The idea was to allow the most significant information to emerge from all the data gathered during the interview sessions, while reducing its volume. The second step of the analysis consisted of cross-case analysis, in search for patterns of events. The cases were compared to each other and linkages between different types of conflict and conflict management strategies were highlighted. The similarities and differences among them were noted for further analysis. Cases that indicated different patterns from the other cases were subjected to further comparison with each other.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Project D: Online Gaming

In this project, the team is working on an online gaming application. Each of the team members will usually share any of their newly acquired skills in using new software. This enables them to improve their own skills towards

meeting the output specification given by the client. The team members delegate their tasks to ensure that the project will proceed to schedule. Each of the team members is given several weeks to work on their parts and then the team sets a date that they will have another meeting to compile all their work output.

*“We need to discuss a lot at this stage as they are still some confusion on the development process and we wanted to make sure that we are able to produce the output as expected by the client. But all these discussions were just among us. It is better this way that we are able to discuss freely compared to the meetings with the management.” (MrF, Wk1)*

*“We had our discussion every two days so that we can discuss anything especially on the development of the characters. It’s something new to some of us so we need to discuss a lot on the matters. We are doing our best to produce the output as according to the client’s requirement. It is a big project so we need to make sure that everything is perfect.” (MrS, Wk1)*

As the project progresses, the team faced difficulties during the compilation of the work output produced by all of the team members. There are several team members who are having problems in completing their tasks and no improvement being made by them despite the comments that they received and help given by some of the other team members.

*“MrM should refer to us whenever he’s not sure with any single thing. Things would be better if they sought us first before completing the task. This would save plenty of time rather than showing us the output which is not as the project requirement.” (MrE, Wk4)*

*“Well, I’m quite annoyed with MrM’s attitude. He could just ask us if he is having problems with his task. We are a team. During the frequent meetings that we had previously, he showed no sign of needing our guidance but now his output is giving us difficulties to compile. Now we need to spend more time on that.” (MrS, Wk4)*

The team members start to feel unhappy with some of the team members and they feel that they need to solve the issue immediately. As a result, some of the team members decide to have a discussion in order to prevent the same thing from re-occurring. The meeting enables the team members to voice out and confront each other by showing the work output that was assigned to each

of them. By doing this, they are able to compare the work between themselves. The work output which is completed according to the specification given by the clients is compared with those which are not up to the standard required by the client. In order to do this, the team members are given the chance to give comments and critiques on each other's work.

The team members begin to understand the difficulties faced by some of the team members in doing their assigned task and they are willing to provide assistance to them. They are able to improve their work quality as now they are aware of which aspect of their tasks needs improvement and they can seek help from others.

As the project progresses, the team is faced with another difficulty during the compilation of the work output produced by all of the team members. They realize that the previous problem is repeating. Even though they have taken some actions previously, there are several team members who are still having problems in completing their tasks and no improvement is being made by them despite the comments that they have received and help given by some of the other team members.

*“During the meeting, they will agree with the comments. It seems that they really understand what to do next. Which part needed to be fixed and things like that but, well...they keep doing the same mistake.”*  
(MrE, Wk7)

*“We talked about this several times. In each and every meeting. We help them by showing them how to do it, how to produce excellent output, but somehow they still repeat the same mistake. I'm not sure how to help them anymore.”* (MrE, Wk7)

*“It is not always easy when some of the members prefer to stick to their own ideas and are not willing to accept comments from others. The meeting which was supposed to help them doesn't seem useful for them.”*  
(MrD, Wk7)

At this point, the team realizes that they are in need of assistance from the external team leader whom they believe will be able to help solve the problem. This is to ensure that some of the problematic team members are able to complete their tasks according to the specification that is required by the client. The external team leader begins to get involved with the project in this phase



and he tries to discuss with those who seem to have problems in completing their task and tries to understand the problems that they are facing.

*“As to what happened before, it caused some problems because of some the misunderstanding. So now, I would prefer to just go straight to the management and let them deal with it. That’s a huge relief that I don’t have to deal with that anymore.” (MrD,Wk9)*

*“We will share our problems and we will talk to each other of what we will do and how we are going to do it. It feels good that he (the management) helped to decide and try to solve our problems. So now we could focus on our work rather than getting involved with other things.” (MrS,Wk11)*

*“He will worry about the problems and we can focus on our tasks. It is much better this way to have someone helping us in making decisions and such.” (MrE,Wk12)*

Over time, the team had task and relationship conflicts due to the performance of some of the team members which was not according to the clients’ specifications. They also faced the problem of lack of team members for the project. The team members were not willing to work extra hours in order to meet their approaching deadlines. The team then started to face some other conflicts which caused them to be highly dependent on the management in order to help them continue working on the project.

#### **4.2. Project E: Herbal Drink**

This is a project on developing a new formulation for a herbal drink product which is based on a type of herb, Noni (lat. *Morinda Citrifolia*). In this project team, the team members allocate daily five to 10 minutes for morning briefing with all the team members. During the morning briefing, all the employees gather and take turns giving a brief motivational talk to everyone to start the day. This is then followed by the “*Morning Market*” session which involves only the project team members; it is a session that is compulsory for all of the team members to attend and to update each other on their previous day’s progress and their plan for the day. Any issues that arise are also discussed in the session. The project team members work closely with each other and have frequent discussions amongst themselves whenever there is an important decision to be made. They decide upon solutions together without involving the team leader.

*“We will voice out our comments during ‘Morning Market’. We will prepare our report at the end of each day so by the next morning we are well-prepared to report and also we need to plan on what to do for the rest of the day.” (MrK, Wk1)*

*“It is good to have this daily as we don’t really keep any problem to ourselves. Everything is shared and we do help each other. In a way it is good but sometimes the meeting drags for almost two hours and still we are not able to come to a conclusion.” (MissM, Wk2)*

In the middle of the project, the team is faced with conflict when they are dissatisfied with the way tasks are being allocated and performed as well as having arguments on the ideas and opinions of others. The team members at this stage try to ignore each other as they feel that if they try to talk, it will cause more disagreement and this will make matters worse. There is very minimal interaction within the project team. The project team members communicate only on very important matters and even during the “Morning Market” session, they no longer discuss or give opinions to help others. The lab manager, MrSh plays an important role to make sure that the objective of the session is achieved.

*“The management will need to help us on this. No one seems to agree on what to do next. We need to plan but every time we had a meeting, there’s no final decision being made.” (MissM, Wk7)*

*“I don’t want to give any opinion. No one will agree and it looks like everyone is busy with their own task and we seldom communicate with each other unless it is very important. It is very quiet in the lab nowadays.” (MrK, Wk8)*

*“For me, I would prefer to talk with MrSh if I needed anything. He will be able to help. If I try to talk to others, we will be arguing as there are things that we are not happy with. Especially on the workload that we are burden with. I feel that we are not that cooperative anymore. Before this, everyone was willing to help each other and as our work is related to one another, there was no problem to seek for assistance and work together. But now, it’s not the same.” (MrS, Wk8)*

*“It’s no longer the same working environment as before. We are so quiet and I can see people coming in and out of MrSh’s office. I guess we would rather communicate with him rather than among ourselves now. The*

*unhappy feeling that we are experiencing changed the team. I hope the management can help us to improve the situation. It is getting worse. How can we work with minimal interaction as we are in a team.”*  
(MrM,Wk8)

*“It is a good thing I guess to have someone to rely on whenever we are having problems. We used to solve our own problem, everything is just within the team, but with this changes, I would say that I feel more comfortable having MrSh helping us with our project.”*  
(MrK,Wk12)

The interviews started when the project was in the middle of the experiment process. It can be seen in the earlier phase of the interviews that the project team members were well-organized and responsible towards their tasks for the project. As the project progresses, they started to face task and relationship conflict as they were experiencing lack of manpower for the project which led to other problems within the team. It can be seen that the team members were trying to avoid each other which caused them to start being dependent on the management in order to help them to solve their task and relationship conflicts.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that there is no formal leader within the project team, but there is an external leader assigned by the management who is positioned outside the team. The external leader is responsible as a mediator between the team and the organisations and is passively involved with the team activities. During the earlier interview sessions, it is evident that the team members were being independent and a passive role was being played by the external leader with regards to the team processes. However, over time, the project team changed into being leader-dependent which shows that the team members required the assistance from the external leader especially in dealing with conflicts. The leadership style changed from being passively involved towards actively involved with the team. The external leader assisted the team members in giving solutions to the conflict that they were having and helped them to make decisions on proceeding with their projects. This was triggered by the different types of conflicts that occurred as well as the conflict management strategies that the project team adopted.

The external leader changed their role into being actively involved in a SMPT, in order to facilitate the changes of conflict handling approach which

resulted in team members giving the responsibility to the leaders rather than dealing with the conflict as they usually did. The transformation of leader positioning in SMPTs is consistent with the argument by Wageman (2001) that external leaders in SMPT roles, responsibilities and duties need to be established in order to handle this specific type of team. As claimed, to be given the freedom in decision making it is evident that SMPTs still rely on the role of a leader at certain points of a project when conflict is perceived as a distraction and interferes with their work process. The model introduced on SMPT transformation towards being leader dependent differs from the existing model of team development which have been discussed in the previous literature e.g. Tuckman's model (1965), who defined the patterns of group development as progressing through a sequence of stages and activities and focused on the order of these stages.

Meanwhile in this study, the development of the SMPT shows changes in the social dynamics whereby conflict and its management strategy affect the team and trigger the transformation of the SMPT towards being leader-dependent. The two cases in this study demonstrate that their conflict management strategy changed towards conflict avoidance as a way of being unwilling to get further involved in the conflict. By avoiding, the team members continued dealing with each other as if the conflict never occurred. This resulted in being highly dependent on the external leader as the leader had to be responsible to solve the team's conflict as well as be responsible for the decision-making process. This occurred due to blaming which made them choose to either avoid or pretend during the event of conflict.

The changes of responsibility gave them more time to focus on their work and not to be blamed for any mistakes and the team leader was fully responsible for solving any conflict. This was influenced by the conflicts that the team faced as well as how the team managed conflict. The changes of conflict management approach towards avoidance resulted in the repositioning of the leader as the external leader that later became an internal leader within the team. It is also identified that the changes that occurred were also triggered by the pressure of the approaching deadline.

Interestingly, the findings of the study oppose the stages of transition to self-directed teams proposed by Orsburn et al.(1990). Teams are expected to be going through several stages, beginning with the start-up where the team would be in the stage of confusion. After the start-up stage, the team would be a leader-centred team. After a while, it becomes a tightly formed team. Finally, the team transforms into a self-directed team. This occurs as the team receives

sufficient training and direction from the leader, up to a stage that they know and become an expert at what they are doing. Finally, the team becomes independent and transforms into a self-directed team. It can be assumed that a team might be going through a circle of stages which begins with being self-managed and end with leader managed and the cycle continues until the end of the team project which results in the effect of external or internal factors as being focused in this research, the trigger for the teams transformation is conflict and its management strategies.

Therefore, the standard forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning group development model (Tuckman, 1965) differ from the findings of this study which show that a cycle of complex stages rather than a linear sequence. In addition, this study shows how the team affects external leadership as well as team structure. By having an external leader, being involved in the team and informally becoming the internal leader, the functionality of the team has changed, whereby the team members give the responsibility for decision making and problem solving to the team leader. This study also suggests that the transformation of the SMPT is related to the team's deadline. The finding of this study, which is the transformation of self-managed teams towards being dependent toward the external leader, is represented in Figure 1.

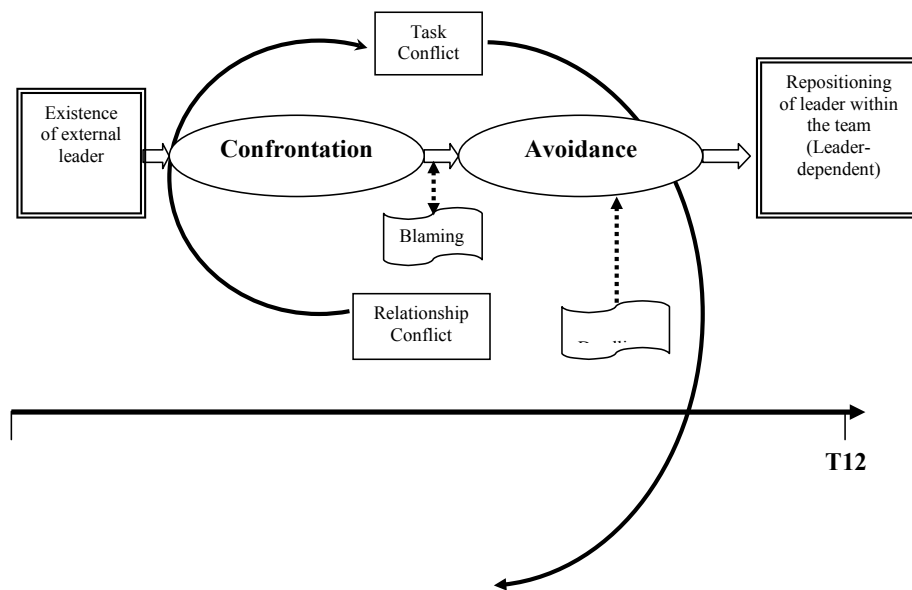


Figure 1. SMPT Transformation Model

It demonstrates that, over time, positioning of the leader within the SMPT changes, as the team members become leader-dependent, which is evident when team members begin to seek assistance from the management. This is influenced by the types of conflict that the team faces as well as how the team manages conflict. It is evident that the event of conflict increases over time and the team's approach towards conflict management changes which is triggered by deadline which in the end results in the changes of positioning of the leader. Conflict avoidance occurs when those involved with conflict do not want to get involved further in the conflict. Responsibilities of managing conflict are being transferred to the external leader as project progresses.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study adds value to the leadership issue in SMPTs. The processual approach contributes to an in-depth study of the process of leadership in SMPTs so as to better understand the complex social dynamics of self-managing project team phenomena. Such in-depth exploration highlights the process dynamics, which could help explain the complex situations in the issue of leadership in SMPT. The approach contributes to another social dimension of group development which looks in-depth into conflict, particularly the managing strategy and the leadership involvement in SMPT.

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## **ISTRAŽIVANJE VOĐENJA U SAMOUPRAVNIM PROJEKTNIM TIMOVIMA U MALEZIJI**

### **Sažetak**

Ovaj se rad bavi longitudinalnim pristupom istraživanja vođenja u samoupravnim projektnim timovima, za koje je poznato da doprinose povećanju produktivnosti i povećanju organizacijskih performansi. Stoga se razumijevanje dinamike vođenja u ovakvoj vrsti timova može smatrati jednom od važnih čimbenika, koji doprinose organizacijskom uspjehu. Vođenje samoupravnog tima je izazov, povezan s nepostojanjem (internog) vođe, s obzirom da njegovi članovi imaju visoku autonomiju i kontrolu. Važno je razumjeti koliko je eksterni vođa uključen u rad samoupravnog projektnog tima, u kojoj su mjeri teorijski pristupi vodstvu primjenjivi na ovu situaciju i koliko se ovaj pristup vodstvu mijenja prilikom radnih procesa. Ovaj se rad temelji na empirijskim podacima, prikupljenim uz pomoć polu-strukturiranih intervjua u dvije malezijske organizacije, male i srednje veličine. Tjednim telefonskim intervjuima, kao i osobnim kontaktom, provedeni su intervjui, koji su dali kontekstualne podatke, važne za istraživanje. Rezultati ukazuju da se samoupravni projektni timovi transformiraju, od samoupravljanja, prema vođenju od strane vanjskog lidera, na temelju nekoliko čimbenika, koji uključuju i strategiju upravljanja konfliktima. Pritom je utvrđeno da izbjegavanje konflikta čini tim ovisnim o vanjskom vođi, za razliku od otvorenog sučeljavanja.