

Task Leadership

When between one-third and one-half of recent scholarly leadership articles are devoted to transformational leadership (where followers' goals are broadened and elevated and confidence is gained to go beyond expectations) or charismatic leadership (where leaders by force of their personal abilities are capable of having a profound and extraordinary effect on followers), one wonders whatever happened to plain, unadorned leadership directed toward task completion. The answer is that such leadership, here called "task leadership," is alive and well and still serves as an irreplaceable leadership component.

The notion of task leadership, first hinted at by social psychologists Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt, and R. K. White (1939), gained dramatic impetus shortly after World War II. A new breed of leadership researchers began to break away from earlier "great man" (a leader as a person endowed with unique qualities that capture the imagination of the masses) and trait approaches (what traits make certain leaders "better" or more effective than others, or what traits make one person, rather than another, emerge as a leader?). Disappointed in their ability to clearly answer the trait questions, researchers decided to look at leadership behaviors in the hope that such behaviors would show clearer results.

Almost concurrently, research teams at The University of Michigan, Ohio State University, and the University of Southern California (USC) converged on similar kinds of leadership dimensions. At Michigan, these dimensions were called "production ("job") centered" and "employee centered" (Likert 1961, Ch. 2). At Ohio State, they were called "initiating structure" and "consideration" (Bass 1990, Ch. 24). At USC, the dimensions comprised such task aspects as advanced planning, job competence, and lack of pressure for production and consideration-oriented dimensions such as job helpfulness, lack of arbitrariness, sympathy, and the like.

These studies were based on survey questionnaires. However, at roughly the same time, some laboratory experiments were conducted at Harvard, and a research program ultimately using a variety of research methods was started in Japan (Misumi and Peterson, 1985). The Harvard work used small groups comprised students to identify emergent leaders (those arising from the situation) and identified "task-centered" and "socio-emotional" leadership dimensions. The Japanese mixed research methods studies identified performance behaviors (forming and reaching group goals [P]) and (group) maintenance behaviors (preserving group social stability [M]), summarized as the "PM" approach.

Essentially, all of this work tapped dimensions related, in one way or another, to those concerned with group and individual goals and means to achieve the goals (task leadership) and those concerned with maintaining friendly, supportive relations with followers (relationship leadership).

REFINING TASK LEADERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP LEADERSHIP DIMENSIONS

Much of the literature covering aspects of task leadership and relationship leadership has tended to treat them broadly or at a relatively high level of abstraction. That is, researchers have emphasized overall task leadership and overall relationship leadership. The problem is that the components making up each of these dimensions have tended not to be emphasized much, and therefore dimensions with the same or similar labels have often differed from study to study. Thus, it has been difficult to compare the results of one study with another in terms of follower satisfaction, performance, and so forth.

Business school professors Gary Yukl, Angela Gordon, and Tom Taber (2002) consider this issue in what they call a "hierarchical taxonomy" (system of classification) with three meta-categories (general, broadly defined), two of which focus on task leadership and relationship leadership aspects. After considerable conceptual and empirical work, the authors split task behavior into three more specific behaviors or components tapping short-term planning, clarification of task objectives, and role expectations, and split relations into five specific behaviors ranging from support and encouragement to empowerment. The authors conclude from their conceptual and empirical work that different components are likely to be important in different situations and, in most cases, should be emphasized in lieu of the broader gauge, more abstract task leadership and relationship dimensions.

Business school and public administration professors Robert Quinn and his associates (Quinn, 1988; Quinn, Faerman, Thompson, and McGrath, 2003) developed a model with eight dimensions, which they call "roles." Four of these roles can be readily classified as task functions and two as relationship functions as outlined here:

Task

Producer: Seeks closure and motivates behaviors that will lead to completion of a unit's task

Director: Emphasizes vision, setting and clarifying goals, and establishes clear expectations

Coordinator: Maintains structure, schedules, coordinates, and problem solves, and sees that rules and standards are met

Monitor: Collects and distributes information, does performance checks, and provides a sense of stability and continuity

Relationship

Facilitator: Builds teams, encourages expression of ideas, seeks consensus, and negotiates compromise

Mentor: Is aware of individual needs, listens actively, is fair, and attempts to encourage individual development

These roles, in a manner similar to the work of Yukl and associates (2002), can be considered as more specific aspects of higher-level task leadership and relationship leadership. In turn, Quinn and associates break these roles down still more specifically with what they term "competencies"—three per role.

COMBINATIONS OF TASK LEADERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP LEADERSHIP

From their inception and regardless of their level of specificity, task leadership and relationship leadership have been considered in combination, as in the Michigan, Ohio State, and other early research. The conceptual and empirical separateness of the Ohio State consideration and initiating structure research dimensions and social psychologist Robert Bales's task-centered and socio-emotional dimensions led to work arguing that the "best" leaders need to be high, or at least above the mean, on both dimensions.

Illustratively, psychologists Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1964) designed a nine-point grid with concern for production (task behaviors) on the horizontal axis and concern for people (relationship behaviors) on the vertical axis. These grid combinations ranged from a 1/1 "impoverished" style (low concern for production and people) to a 9/9 "team management" style (high on both dimensions). Similarly, a number of studies used the Ohio State consideration and initiating structures research dimensions, Bales's dimensions, or Japanese research psychologist Jyuji Misumi's dimensions to conclude that a high/high combination of the two dimensions was better than other combinations.

A key question in all this is how the relationship between the two dimensions operates. In the "additive" model, the assumption is that task and relationship aspects have independent additive effects on followers. For example, task leadership would be relevant only for accomplishing a task, or relationship leadership would be relevant only for supportive aspects. However, these behaviors would not be relevant for both aspects

simultaneously—both would need to be added together to enhance effectiveness.

Alternatively, there is a “multiplicative” model. In this model, task and relationship behaviors or components interact, and each facilitates the other in its impact with followers. For example, the impact of task behavior is more positive when relationship leadership is high than when it is low and vice versa, and if either one is zero, there is no impact.

Most of the studies examining high-high results have been based on questionnaire surveys on which people are asked to describe leadership at one point in time and to think back on how the leader typically behaved. Bales's experimental work was an exception, and the PM leadership work sometimes was experimental and sometimes used surveys. The survey work has tended to emphasize an additive model with far less work done using a multiplicative model, and, not surprisingly, relatively more support has been found for the additive than the multiplicative model (Larson, Hunt, & Osborn, 1976). Similar results have been found with the PM model (Misumi, 1985).

However, two recent studies extend the thinking on the high/high question. The first of these studies is Quinn and associates' work mentioned earlier. In an interesting twist, they paired each task dimension with a corresponding relationship dimension (e.g., producer-facilitator, director-mentor, etc.) such that the dimensions are considered opposites or competing with each other. A good leader attempts to balance each of these opposites. The authors have emphasized using competing dimensions virtually simultaneously. This emphasis is similar to the multiplicative model, where one dimension facilitates the other in impacting followers. Robert Quinn, Gretchen Spreitzer, and Stewart Hart (1991) have called this notion “interpenetration” (the simultaneous operation of opposites). A second study by business school professor Gian Casimir (Casimir, 2001) examines combining task and relationship aspects of leadership across time in terms of their linkage to follower satisfaction. In other words, how do the leadership aspects combine? Casimir examines the different combinations of task and relationship: order, temporality, and constancy. Order considers whether relationship leadership immediately precedes or follows task leadership. Temporality considers the time interval between task leaders and relationship leaders (e.g., support immediately after task or after, say, a thirty-minute delay). Constancy considers whether the two kinds of leadership are always combined in the same or different ways.

In a fixed form of constancy, there is only one type of paired combination (e.g., relationship is always provided immediately after pressure). In a variable form of constancy, more than one type of paired combination is used (e.g., support is sometimes provided immediately before task and other times after task).

One series of studies emphasized task orientation as pressures, whereas other work emphasized task orientation as job instructions. High points of Casimir's previously mentioned studies of male and female and blue-collar and white-collar workers, showed that task-oriented leadership (either pressure or instructions) should not be provided without relation-oriented leadership and that relationship-oriented leadership generally should be provided immediately before task-oriented leadership.

Clearly a leader must be concerned not only about exhibiting both task leadership and relationship leadership but also about the way in which these leaderships should be displayed over time in terms of order, temporality, and consistency. Yukl (1998) also points out that one can exhibit too much of a behavior (too much directiveness may cause resentment and inhibit initiative, and too much support may make a follower overly dependent). Furthermore, as business school professor Mark Peterson (1985) argues, different specific behaviors may be called for in different settings even though the leader is attempting to emphasize both task leadership and relationship leadership—in other words, task and relationship functions are reflected in different ways. The interactions between these dimensions, implied earlier, are complex indeed, and most studies have done little more than pay lip service to this complexity.

SITUATIONAL ASPECTS OF TASK LEADERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP LEADERSHIP

This discussion has hinted at the importance of the leadership situation for task leadership and relationship leadership. A few approaches recognize the interaction of situation and leadership. The first of these is the situational leadership approach (Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson, 2001), which posits that there is no best way to lead. This approach focuses on follower maturity or readiness in terms of ability and willingness to accomplish a specific task. Leaders adjust their focus on task behaviors, such as guidance, and on direction and relationship behaviors, such as socio-emotional support according to follower readiness (from low to high) to perform their task. Leaders are expected to develop the capability to diagnose demands of each of these readiness situations and then to choose and implement the appropriate leadership style in terms of the relative emphasis on task leadership and relationship leadership.

More specifically, the approach matches four task leadership and relationship leadership styles (S1–S4) with four follower readiness conditions (R1–R4) as follows:

- R1: Low readiness, unable and unwilling to take responsibility or insecure. S1 high-task, low- to moderate-relationship leadership, defines roles, eliminates insecurity about what must be done
- R2: Low to moderate readiness, unable but willing to take responsibility or confident. S2 high-task, high-relationship leadership, combines directiveness with supportiveness to maintain confidence
- R3: Moderate to high readiness, able but unwilling or insecure. S3 low task, high relationship, combines sharing in decision making with support to enhance security
- R4: High readiness, able, willing, and confident. S4 low task, low relationship, allows willing and confident followers to assume responsibility

The approach is intuitively appealing. It also has been incorporated into training programs by a large number of firms (Hersey et al., 2001) but does not have much systematic research evidence. Regardless, it illustrates well one way of bringing in explicit situational aspects in dealing with task leadership and relationship leadership.

A second situational approach is management professor Robert House's "path-goal leadership theory" (House, 1971; House and Mitchell, 1974). The term *path-goal* is used because the approach emphasizes how a leader influences follower perceptions of work and personal goals and the paths found between these two goal sets. The approach assumes that a leader's key function is to adjust his or her behaviors to complement work-setting situational aspects. When the leader can compensate for aspects lacking in the setting, followers are likely to be satisfied with the leader and/or be more motivated. For example, the leader could help remove job ambiguity or show how good performance could lead to more pay. Performance should improve with clarification of the paths by which (1) effort leads to performance and (2) performance leads to valued rewards. Although the approach includes more than task leadership and relationship leadership dimensions, these dimensions, labeled in the approach as "directive" leadership and "supportive" leadership, are two key aspects and form the basis for the following two predictions:

- Directive leadership will have a positive follower impact when the task is ambiguous and the opposite effect when the task is clear. Also, with highly authoritarian and close-minded followers, even more directive leadership is called for.
- Supportive leadership will increase follower satisfaction for those who work on highly repetitive tasks or on unpleasant or stressful tasks. For example, traditional assembly-line autoworker jobs are often considered highly repetitive and perhaps even unpleasant. A supportive leader could make these jobs more satisfying.

Although there is more to the path-goal approach than just described, the discussion suggests its relevance in terms of better understanding the interaction of task leadership and relationship leadership with various situational aspects. The approach has more supportive research than does the situational leadership approach and has recently been revised in an expanded version that includes a number of additional aspects in addition to task leadership and relationship leadership (House, 1996). Again, however, it provides an increased feel for the role of situational aspects in understanding task leadership and relationship leadership.

A final situational illustration worth touching on is the “substitutes for leadership theory” (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), which argues that sometimes hierarchical leadership makes essentially no difference. Certain individual, job, and organizational variables can either serve as leadership substitutes or neutralize a leader's impact on followers. These substitutes make a leader's task leadership or relationship leadership unnecessary or redundant in that they replace the leader's influence. For example, it may be unnecessary or not even possible to provide the kind of task-oriented direction already available from experienced, talented, and well-trained followers. Sometimes, also, a leader has little authority or is physically separated so that his or her leadership may be nullified even though task supportiveness may still be needed.

Still other approaches exist, but those discussed are among the most widely known. They capture situational aspects of task leadership and relationship leadership well.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

As mentioned, there is a trend for task leadership or the two-factor task leadership and relationship leadership to be displaced by such approaches as charismatic and transformational leadership. However, refinements—such as considering more specific task and relationship components, along with an emphasis on combining the two kinds of components, especially across time—appear to offer opportunities for rejuvenation. When the smoke clears for most approaches, task leadership and relationship leadership or something akin to them seem to appear, in one form or another, as important leadership aspects.

—James G. (Jerry) Hunt

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