

## Contingency Theories of Leadership

What makes leadership effective in a group or organization? Scholars have been preoccupied with addressing this key question perhaps since the inception of leadership as a formal field of scientific inquiry. One classic approach that gained prominence during the 1970s and 1980s is contingency theories of leadership. *Contingency theories* hold that leadership effectiveness is related to the interplay of a leader's traits or behaviors and situational factors.

### History and Background

The contingency approach to leadership was influenced by two earlier research programs endeavoring to pinpoint effective leadership behavior. During the 1950s, researchers at Ohio State University administered extensive questionnaires measuring a range of possible leader behaviors in various organizational contexts. Although multiple sets of leadership behaviors were originally identified based on these questionnaires, two types of behaviors proved to be especially typical of effective leaders: (1) *consideration*, leader behaviors that include building good rapport and interpersonal relationships and showing support and concern for subordinates and (2) *initiating structure*, leader behaviors that provided structure (e.g., role assignment, planning, scheduling) to ensure task completion and goal attainment.

About the same time, investigators from the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center conducted interviews and distributed questionnaires in organizations and collected measures of group productivity to assess effective leadership behaviors. The leadership behavior categories that emerged from the University of Michigan were similar to the consideration and initiating structure behaviors identified by the Ohio State studies. The University of Michigan investigators, however, termed these leadership behaviors *relation-oriented behavior* and *task-oriented behavior*. This line of research was later extended by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton in 1964 to suggest that effective leaders score high on both of these behaviors (high-high leaders).

Although research consistently supported the dichotomy between task and relations leadership behavior, little evidence suggested that these leadership behaviors were related to increased leadership effectiveness in group performance. Inconsistent findings characterized the bulk of research in this area, and soon the focus of attention on leadership behaviors as direct predictors of leadership effectiveness shifted. However, researchers did not abandon the task versus relations dichotomy altogether. Instead, an alternative approach was developed that emphasized the potentially critical role of the situational context in linking leadership behaviors or traits to effective outcomes. This alternate approach became known as the *contingency theories of leadership*.

### The Contingency Approach

#### ***The Contingency Theory of Leadership Effectiveness***

In the 1960s, Fred Fielder advanced the first theory using the contingency approach, the *contingency theory of effectiveness*. The main idea of this early theory is that leadership effectiveness (in terms of group performance) depends on the interaction of two factors: the leader's task or relations motivations and aspects of the situation. The leader's task or relations motivation is measured through the Least Preferred Coworker

scale (LPC). This scale asks leaders to recall a coworker (previously or currently) they work with least well and to characterize this individual with ratings on a series of 8-point bipolar adjectives (e.g., distant– cold). High LPC scores reflect more positive descriptions of the least preferred coworker, whereas low LPC scores evidence more negative perceptions. Fielder argued that an individual with a high LPC score is motivated to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships, whereas an individual with a low LPC score is motivated to focus on task accomplishment.

The interpretation of exactly what high and low LPC scores mean has been the subject of much controversy and debate. For example, Robert Rice suggested that scores on the LPC represent values and attitudes, whereas other scholars have drawn linkages between high and low LPCs and task versus relations leadership behaviors. Fielder contended that task and relations motivations are stable traits that are not easily amenable to change. Therefore, attempts to encourage a high or low LPC leader to adapt to changing situations would be difficult, if not altogether futile. To optimize the possibility of an effective group outcome, this model advocates matching a high or low LPC leader to the right type of situation.

The model purports that task or relations motivations are contingent on whether the leader can control and predict the group's outcome (i.e., situational favorability). Situational favorability depends on three assessments: (1) whether the leader perceives cooperative relations with subordinates (leader-member relations), (2) whether the task is highly structured with standardized procedures and measures of adequate performance (task structure), and (3) whether the leader's level of authority is punishing or rewarding group members (position power). The combination of leader-member relations, task structure, and position power creates eight different situational types, known as octants 1–8, that have been more broadly categorized as favorable situations, intermediate situations, and unfavorable situations. Each different situational type is most effectively handled by either a high or low LPC leader. Specifically, high LPC leaders are most effective in influencing group performance in intermediate situations, and low LPC leaders are most effective in favorable or unfavorable situations.

Fielder's contingency model has been used in training programs and has received a lion's share of research attention. A large number of studies and three meta-analyses more or less support the model's postulations. However, almost half a century after its introduction, further clarifications and future studies may be warranted to iron out both theoretical and methodological issues associated with the model. Nevertheless, many scholars consider the work by Fielder and his colleagues a classic contribution that inspired consideration of person and situational aspects in leadership.

## **Path–Goal Theory**

*Path–goal theory* was originally developed by Martin Evans in 1970 and expanded by Robert House in 1971 into a more complex contingency theory. Drawing on expectancy theory and the Ohio and Michigan leader behavior studies, House suggested that a leader should help elucidate the path for followers to achieve group goals. This involves the leader employing particular behaviors in specific situations to increase follower satisfaction and motivate efforts toward task accomplishment. The theory identifies four types of leader behavior that include supportive (relations oriented), directive (task oriented), achievement oriented, participative leader behavior, as well as two aspects of the situation, namely, follower characteristics and task characteristics.

In situations where the task is dull or taxing, the theory predicts that supportive leadership behaviors may increase followers' interest in task accomplishment and encourage followers' expectations of a successful outcome. In turn, this may motivate followers' efforts to achieve the task. In situations where the task is ambiguous or complicated, directive behaviors such as clarifying the task at hand and stressing rewards contingent on good performance could increase followers' positive expectancies. This may consequently motivate followers' efforts to achieve designated goals.

A large number of studies have examined postulates derived from path-goal theory. Overall, these studies provide mixed support for the theory. Various scholars have argued that it may be premature to draw any firm conclusions regarding the validity of the theory because of methodological limitations associated with past research and sparse empirical attention to various variables outlined in the model. For example, little empirical research has investigated participative and achievement-oriented leadership styles. However, path-goal theory has made an important contribution in highlighting the potential influence of leaders on followers' motivation and performance. Moreover, it has informed the development of subsequent leadership theories, such as the *substitutes for leadership theory* by Steve Kerr and John Jermier and the *selfconcept-based theory of charismatic leadership* by Boas Shamir, Robert House, and Michael Arthur.

## **Normative Decision Model**

Many contingency theories define leadership effectiveness in terms of group performance or team satisfaction. However, the normative decision model is a unique contingency theory in its exclusive focus on providing prescriptions to optimize the leader's decision-making process. The normative decision model, originally developed by Victor Vroom and Phillip Yetton in 1973 and later revised by Victor Vroom and Arthur Jago, emphasizes situational factors more than leadership behaviors. It outlines a set of five different decision-making strategies that range on a continuum from directive to participative decision making. These strategies include two types of autocratic styles (the leader decides alone), two types of consultative styles (the leader consults followers but decides alone), and a group decision-making option (group consensus).

The optimal strategy for decision-making situations may be reached by answering "yes" or "no" to seven questions on a decision tree that may or may not characterize the decision-making situation. Some examples of these situational considerations include the importance of decision quality, the likelihood that followers' would accept and implement the decision, and the amount of available information needed for the decision. The decision tree takes into account seven decision rules or heuristics that eliminate decision options that would jeopardize decision quality or hinder decision acceptance. In this way, decision-strategy options are realized from a feasible set that purports to optimize effective decision making.

A number of field studies and experiments conducted in various countries provide support for the model. For instance, in 1988, Vroom and Jago reported accumulated evidence that decisions following the decision tree were almost twice as likely to be successful than decisions that did not use the prescriptions advocated by the model. Furthermore, leaders who make decisions following the decision tree tend to receive favorable ratings from subordinates. Despite solid empirical evidence validating the model, scholars have noted various limitations. For example, while acknowledging the utility of the model, Sternberg questioned whether leaders are able to accurately answer the questions posed by the decision tree (e.g., forecasting follower acceptance). Overall, the normative decision model contributes an understanding of decision-making processes that underscores the significance of the situation.

## **Situational Leadership Theory**

The situational leadership theory put forth by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in 1969 proposes that leadership effectiveness depends on the leader's ability to tailor his or her behavior to the demands of the situation, namely, the subordinate's level of maturity. This theory builds on the earlier Ohio and Michigan studies and extends Blake and Mouton's work in emphasizing a combination of task and relation behaviors (but here task and relation behaviors are called directing and supporting). Hersey and Blanchard highlight four different types of leadership behavior based on combining directive and supportive behavior: telling (high directive, low support), selling (high directive, high supporting), participating (low directive, high supportive), and delegating (low directive, low supportive).

The leader's function is to continually evaluate and adapt his or her behavior to each follower's task maturity

(i.e., ability) and psychological maturity (i.e., willingness) to complete the task at hand. For instance, when a follower has lower maturity, it prescribes that a leader should tell the follower how to get the job done. When a follower is more mature, he or she does not need as much direction or significant support in accomplishing the task. In this case, it would be best to delegate the task to the follower.

Although intuitively appealing, the situational leadership theory has not received extensive research attention. Studies support the theory's postulate that low maturity followers benefit from directive behavior, but more empirical verification of the remaining postulates is warranted. The theory has been criticized for its narrow focus on only one situational variable, but it has contributed to the understanding of leadership effectiveness by underlining the need for leaders to adapt their behavior to different situations.

## Conclusion

Fred Fielder's seminal work helped to springboard the development of a series of notable contingency theories that account for both leader and situational variables. The complexity of contingency theories, however, has drawn criticism for a lack of parsimony. Furthermore, contingency theories have been viewed as a more mechanical approach that neglects considerations of instances of extraordinary leadership and group processes. Nevertheless, contingency theories of leadership remain an important contribution to the understanding of leadership effectiveness.

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## Further Readings

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### Entry Citation:

Seyranian, Viviane. "Contingency Theories of Leadership." *Encyclopedia of Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*. Ed. John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009. 152-56. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.



