

# LEADERSHIP STYLES

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Behavioral scientists have been involved in the study of leadership since the 1930s. One aim of these efforts has been to understand how leaders influence followers and gain their cooperation and commitment. For the last seventy years, the study of leadership styles has continued to evolve, riding the waves of change in social science, assumptions about the nature of leadership, and the way businesses function. This historical look at the field is intended to summarize what has been learned about leadership styles so that we may have a better handle on where the field is going and how it can improve the quality of organizational leadership.

## Early Efforts

Initial leadership research took place in an era influenced by the scientific management precept that there is “one best way” to accomplish a given objective. Also dominant was the idea that leadership is an ephemeral quality of “great men” whose personal attributes made them “natural leaders.” Research was not directly concerned with understanding leadership styles; it was a quest to identify the characteristics that differentiated leaders from followers and effective leaders from ineffective leaders. This line of inquiry waned as research suggested that personality traits and intelligence play only a small role in leadership effectiveness (see reviews in Bass, 1990).

The earliest studies of leadership styles (defined as the manner by which individuals in a position of authority influenced group activity) were conducted by Lewin and colleagues in the late 1930s (e.g., Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). In these experiments there was little concern about personal characteristics and attributes; the focus was on how leaders influenced followers and directed group activities. Three unique leadership styles were identified: an authoritarian style (directing group activity through unilateral decision making and personal control), a democratic style (involving group members in decision making processes), and a laissez-faire style (passive and disengaged, exerting little influence). Consistent with the tenets of scientific management, these researchers sought the most effective style and concluded that the democratic style leads to higher member satisfaction and involvement. However, no one style was the best in terms of group effectiveness and task accomplishment (see reviews in Bass, 1990).

## The Behaviorist Influence

The rise of behaviorism to the dominant view in psychology guided leadership research during the 1940s and 1950s toward the study of leader behaviors. Two independent programs of

research (at Ohio State University and University of Michigan) converged in the identification of two basic dimensions of leader behavior. One was task-oriented in nature, known as initiating structure or task-centered, and emphasized the use of position power for the planning, coordinating, improving, and monitoring of group performance. The other dimension was relational or people-oriented, labeled consideration or employee-centered, and emphasized the well being, personal growth needs, and contributions of group members. These twin pillars of leadership behavior proved highly robust, appearing ubiquitously in several subsequent streams of research on leader behaviors (see Bass, 1990, ch. 23).

Focus returned to the issue of leadership styles in the late 1950s and 1960s, as researchers began considering the effectiveness of various combinations of task-oriented and people-oriented behaviors. Influential was Blake and Mouton’s (1964) managerial grid, which identified managers’ leadership styles as located on a plane defined by the two dimensions of concern for task performance and concern for people. It was argued that the optimal style was a “high-high” team management style, the area defined by high concern for performance and high concern for people. Although there is some support for this position, the “high-high” style is not necessarily the most effective in every management situation (Bass, 1990).

## The Humanistic Influence

The late 1950s and early 1960s bore witness to the growth of a humanistic movement in psychology, which emphasized the personal growth and self-actualization needs of individuals. Definitive of this era was McGregor’s (1960) popular Theory X and Theory Y models of leadership, which contrasted underlying views of human nature. Theory X managers, the model holds, see their employees as passive, self-interested, and lazy, and thus lead with a task-oriented style to motivate and keep followers on task. Theory Y managers, conversely, view employees as self-motivated and desiring to contribute to the group’s goals, and thus lead with a people-oriented style in an effort to create conditions to tap their employees’ potential and personal growth needs. Consistent with the humanistic influence of the time, McGregor and others argued for the superiority of a people-oriented leadership style. This was very popular in the practice of management, but research efforts led to conflicting results: in some studies, a task-oriented style appeared superior, while a people-oriented style was more effective in others. Perhaps the most important long-term effect of this era of thinking about leadership styles

was the recognition that effective leadership requires both a forceful and directive component as well as an enabling component that takes account of the needs of those being influenced.

### The Rise of Contingency Theories

The vestiges of scientific management and the “one best way” assumption gave way to a new and more complex level of thinking about leadership styles in the mid-1960s. Parallel to this was growing debate in psychology regarding whether person characteristics or situational characteristics were the more powerful determinants of behavior, with “situationists” gaining most support. Fiedler’s (1964) contingency model spawned a new breed of prescriptive leadership style theories by suggesting that the reason previous research had failed to identify a universally “best” leadership style is because the effectiveness of a given style depends on the context in which it takes place.

Building on the research of the 1950s, Fiedler’s model portrayed leaders as motivated primarily by either task accomplishment or the development of supportive relationships with group members. Leadership situations could be defined on a continuum of favorability, depending on the degree of group dependability, task clarity, and the leader’s formal power. Task-motivated leaders were said to perform best in extreme conditions of high or low situational favorability; relationship-motivated leaders were said to perform best in the moderately favorable conditions. The theory has been extensively tested (see meta-analytic reviews by Peters, Hartke, & Pohlman, 1985, and Strube & Garcia, 1981), and this body of research generally supports it. The historical significance of this is validation of the idea that the optimal leadership style depends on the situational context. Interestingly, Fiedler’s successful Leader Match training program uses his theory to teach leaders how to change their leadership situations to match their leadership style, reflecting Fiedler’s scholarly roots in behaviorism and emphasis on situational causality.

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the advancement of several contingency leadership theories. At the same time, there was a growing person-situation debate in psychology, with both sides presenting compelling evidence for their position. Accordingly, situational leadership theory, path-goal theory, and the normative decision theory each prescribed leaders to alter their style to suit the conditions of changing situations.

Hersey and Blanchard’s (1969) situational leadership theory extended Blake and Mouton’s managerial grid approach by incorporating the group’s maturity level as a situational variable. The theory suggests that a leader’s style should emphasize task-oriented or relations-oriented behaviors, depending on how willing and able the group is to perform the task. Groups are seen as maturing in a life cycle from unable and unwilling, to unable and willing, to able and unwilling,

and finally to able and willing. Respectively, the prescribed leadership styles are a task-oriented *telling* style, a task- and relation-oriented *selling* style, a relation-oriented *participating* style, and finally a *delegating* style of low task- and relation-oriented behaviors. This theory has been highly criticized because of conceptual ambiguities, lack of a logical or empirical foundation for the group maturity life cycle construct, and little empirical validity evidence (see review in Bass, 1990). Nonetheless, the model has been immensely popular in practice and has served as the basis for many leadership training programs.

House’s (1971) path-goal theory was based on variables representing situational factors, follower characteristics, and several moderator variables. The theory assumes that motivation and performance is enhanced when a leader helps group members understand how their personal needs can be met through contributing to the organization or group (a goal) and helps to clarify strategies for members to achieve this (a path). To summarize this complex model, task-oriented behaviors are prescribed when the path is unclear and not recommended when the path is apparent. People-oriented behaviors are prescribed when the path is aversive or boring. Research suggests that employee job satisfaction and motivation can be enhanced by following path-goal theory’s prescriptions, but performance may be only marginally affected (Woffard & Liska, 1993).

A good deal of leadership research has been concerned with decision-making. The normative decision theory of Vroom and Yetton (1974) specified which decision-making style—autocratic, consultation, or democratic—is likely to lead to higher decision quality and follower acceptance under various situational contingencies. In this model, managers must make a series of judgments about their situation such as the amount of relevant knowledge they and subordinates have, the likelihood of followers to accept an autocratic decision, likelihood of follower cooperation, extent of disagreement among followers regarding alternatives, and the degree of task ambiguity. Plotting the answers to these questions in a flow chart leads to a recommended decision-making style. The latest version of the theory (Vroom & Jago, 1988) takes into account the relative importance of the various situational variables and includes an additional decision-making style—delegating responsibility to subordinates. Of all the contingency theories, Vroom’s theory has garnered the strongest empirical support (Yukl, 1998, ch. 11).

Although the contingency theories differ in content, they have a common theme. Each assumes that there is no universal leadership style that is superior for all tasks and situations. This implies that effective leaders must adapt to changing conditions by having a well-rounded repertoire of available responses, ranging from task-oriented forceful to people-oriented enabling styles, from autocratic to participative decision-making methods (Kaplan, 1996).

## A New Paradigm: Transformational Leadership

The 1970s saw dramatic changes in the study of leadership, as well as in the field of psychology more broadly. The cognitive revolution had dethroned behaviorism and brought information processing models of human behavior to the fore. There was also growing interest in an interactionist position that viewed the person and the situation as reciprocally influential. Although not directly concerned with leadership styles, Graen and colleagues advanced the vertical dyad linkage model that defined the individual group member-leader dyadic relationship as the context of influence processes (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975).

The 1970s also witnessed discussion about the differences between leaders and managers (Zaleznick, 1977). A fundamental distinction was made, relegating management to routine supervisory activities that kept an organization on a steady path and encouraged stability and continuity. Leadership, on the other hand, was glamorized as the force that dramatically altered the orientation, vision, culture, and sometimes even the mission of organizations through fundamental change. In the same period, House (1977) proposed a theory of charismatic leadership to describe how some leaders (e.g., John F. Kennedy) are unusually inspirational and influential, capable of persuading followers to identify with them and to internalize their beliefs and values. Peters and Waterman's (1982) widely read *In Search of Excellence* detailed how inspirational visionary leaders of highly successful businesses established strong organizational cultures that aligned employee commitment with the leader's personal vision and ideology. A stage was set for explaining how leaders can inspire performance beyond expectation by transforming followers' values, needs, beliefs, and attitudes. Dissatisfied with the inability of previous leadership theory to account for higher order revolutions in organizations, Bass (1985) helped shape a new paradigm by building on the work of Burns (1978) on political leaders with his theory of "transformational" leadership.

According to Bass, prior research was concerned with "transactional" leadership—how leaders appeal to followers' self-interests by setting goals, clarifying desired outcomes, providing feedback, and exchanging rewards for effort and accomplishments. For these purposes, task-oriented and people-oriented behaviors, directive and participative decision-making styles, and the like were well suited. Yet the transactional paradigm was insufficient for explaining how leaders motivate followers to move beyond self-interests to rally around collective values, celebrate a new vision for the future, and to elevate performance to extraordinary levels. These outcomes were argued to result from a transformational leadership style. Recent formulations (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994) specify transformational leadership to involve idealized influence (subordinating self-interest to the needs of others, sharing risks with followers, integrity, and setting challenging goals), inspirational motivation (imbuing followers' work with a meaningful sense of purpose and contribution), intellectual

stimulation (framing problems in a new perspective, questioning basic assumptions, advancing a compelling future vision), and individualized consideration (treating followers as unique individuals, understanding their needs and abilities, facilitating their personal development).

The transformational leadership style is not seen by Bass as supplanting a transactional style. Rather, it is intended to augment the effects of transactional approaches, and empirical data suggest that it does indeed do so (see review in Bass, 1990). A wealth of data indicates that transformational leadership is more strongly linked to organizational performance and effectiveness than is a transactional style (Lowe, Kroek, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Moreover, this appears to be a culturally universal phenomenon (Bass, 1995).

Originally, charismatic and transformational leadership styles were discussed as necessary in situations of crisis and emergency, but later theorizing stressed that they enhance performance in virtually all situations and occasions. In this sense, this way of thinking about leadership styles bears resemblance to the earliest work in the area in its "one best way" prescriptive theme. It was, however, urged that although publicly noted transformational leaders are often "great men" or "great women," all business managers have the capacity to develop a more transformational leadership style.

### A Look to the Future

The last decade of the twentieth century was a time of unprecedented change in organizational life. Rapid technological innovation, increasingly global market competition, growing demographic diversity in the labor pool, and a move toward flatter organizational structures all continue to challenge organizations to radically rethink the way they function. One thing sure to remain constant during these times of "permanent white waters" is the need for leadership. However, the way leadership is played out in organizations of tomorrow may take on a dramatic new look.

Modern realities are calling forth new models of leadership, models that move away from the idea of leadership as a property of a single influential person to a more relational perspective that views leadership as a shared social process where group members are reciprocally influential in creating meaning and purpose (Drath & Palus, 1994; Rost, 1991). As Fiat Auto President and CEO Roberto Testore put it, "For too long we have had a model of leadership founded on the power of the person.... To get the leadership we want requires a cultural change—away from the individualistic model toward a team approach" (Csoka, 1997, p. 7). It is not yet clear what the next face of leadership will look like. Nor is it certain that existing leadership theory will be adequate. The future promises to be a fertile time for reconceptualizing the role of leadership and influence, how and by whom it is enacted, and how organizations can bring people together in the creation and pursuit of a common purpose.

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