

Leadership Theory

Great Man Theory

Leaders are born and not made. Great leaders will arise when there is a great need.

Description

Early research on leadership was based on the study of people who were already great leaders. These people were often from the aristocracy, as few from lower classes had the opportunity to lead. This contributed to the notion that leadership had something to do with breeding.

The idea of the Great Man also strayed into the mythic domain, with notions that in times of need, a Great Man would arise, almost by magic. This was easy to verify, by pointing to people such as Eisenhower and Churchill, let alone those further back along the timeline, even to Jesus, Moses, Mohammed and the Buddha.

Discussion

Gender issues were not on the table when the 'Great Man' theory was proposed. Most leaders were male and the thought of a Great Woman was generally in areas other than leadership. Most researchers were also male, and concerns about androcentric bias were a long way from being realized.

Trait Theory

People are born with inherited traits. Some traits are particularly suited to leadership. People who make good leaders have the right (or sufficient) combination of traits.

Description

Early research on leadership was based on the psychological focus of the day, which was of people having inherited characteristics or traits. Attention was thus put on discovering these traits, often by studying successful leaders, but with the underlying assumption that if other people could also be found with these traits, then they, too, could also become great leaders. Stogdill (1974) identified the following traits and skills as critical to leaders.

Traits	Skills
Adaptable to situations	Clever (intelligent)
Alert to social environment	Conceptually skilled
Ambitious and achievement-orientated	Creative
Assertive	Diplomatic and tactful
Cooperative	Fluent in speaking
Decisive	Knowledgeable about group task
Dependable	Organised (administrative ability)
Dominant (desire to influence others)	Persuasive
Energetic (high activity level)	Socially skilled
Persistent	
Self-confident	

McCall and Lombardo (1983) researched both success and failure identified four primary traits by which leaders could succeed or 'derail':

Emotional stability and composure: Calm, confident and predictable, particularly when under stress.

Admitting error: Owning up to mistakes, rather than putting energy into covering up.

Good interpersonal skills: Able to communicate and persuade others without resort to negative or coercive tactics.

Intellectual breadth: Able to understand a wide range of areas, rather than having a narrow (and narrow-minded) area of expertise.

Discussion

There have been many different studies of leadership traits and they agree only in the general saintly qualities needed to be a leader. For a long period, inherited traits were sidelined as learned and situational factors were considered to be far more realistic as reasons for people acquiring leadership positions. Paradoxically, the research into twins who were separated at birth along with new sciences such as Behavioral Genetics have shown that far more is inherited than was previously supposed. Perhaps one day they will find a 'leadership gene'.

See also

Stogdill, R.M. (1974). *Handbook of leadership: A survey of the literature*, New York: Free Press

McCall, M.W. Jr. and Lombardo, M.M. (1983). *Off the track: Why and how successful executives get derailed*. Greenboro, NC: Centre for Creative Leadership

Behavioral Theory

Leaders can be made, rather than are born. Successful leadership is based in definable, learnable behavior.

Description

Behavioral theories of leadership do not seek inborn traits or capabilities. Rather, they look at what leaders actually *do*. If success can be defined in terms of describable actions, then it should be relatively easy for other people to act in the same way. This is easier to teach and learn than to adopt the more ephemeral 'traits' or 'capabilities'.

Discussion

Behavioral is a big leap from [Trait Theory](#), in that it assumes that leadership capability can be learned, rather than being inherent. This opens the floodgates to leadership development, as opposed to simple psychometric assessment that sorts those with leadership potential from those who will never have the chance.

A behavioral theory is relatively easy to develop, as you simply assess both leadership success and the actions of leaders. With a large enough study, you can then correlate statistically significant behaviors with success. You can also identify behaviors which contribute to failure, thus adding a second layer of understanding.

Role Theory

People define roles for themselves and others based on social learning and reading. People form expectations about the roles that they and others will play. People subtly encourage others to act within the role expectations they have for them. People will act within the roles they adopt.

Description

We all have internal [schemas](#) about the role of leaders, based on what we read, discuss and so on. We subtly send these expectations to our leaders, acting as *role senders*, for example through the balance of decisions we take upon ourselves and the decisions we leave to the leader.

Leaders are influenced by these signals, particularly if they are sensitive to the people around them, and will generally conform to these, playing the leadership role that is put upon them by others.

Within organizations, there is much formal and informal information about what the leader's role should be, including 'leadership [values](#)', [culture](#), training sessions, modeling by senior managers, and so on. These and more (including contextual factors) act to shape expectations and behaviors around leadership.

Role conflict can also occur when people have differing expectations of their leaders. It also happens when leaders have different ideas about what they should be doing vs. the expectations that are put upon them.

Discussion

Role expectations of a leader can vary from very specific to a broad idea within which the leader can define their own style. When role expectations are low or mixed, then this may also lead to role conflict.

See also

Merton, R.K. (1957). *Social theory and social structure*, NY: Free Press

Pfeffer, J. and Salancik, G.R. (1975). Determinants of supervisory behavior: A role set analysis. *Human Relations*, 28, 139-153

Ohio State Studies

Research

A famous series of studies on leadership were done in Ohio State University, starting in the 1950s. They found two critical characteristics either of which could be high or low and were independent of one another.

The research was based on questionnaires to leaders and subordinates. These are known as the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LDBQ) and the Supervisor Behavior Description Questionnaire (SDBQ). By 1962, the LDBQ was on version XII.

Actions

Consideration

Consideration is the degree to which a leader acts in a friendly and supportive manner towards his or her subordinates.

Initiating Structure

This is the degree to which a leader defines and structures his or her role and the roles of the subordinates towards achieving the goals of the group.

Discussion

Although an early study, this is still often referenced. It is notable that the two factors correlate with the [people-task](#) division that appears in other studies and also as preferences (although the preference scale generally assumes an either-or structure rather than two independent scales).

Consideration is the people-orientation and Initiating Structure is the task orientation.

The Ohio State studies were conducted around the same time as the [Michigan Leadership Studies](#), which also identified as critical the focus on task and people.

See also

Fleishman, E.A. (1953). The description of supervisory behavior. *Personnel Psychology*, 37, 1-6
Halpin, A.W. and Winer, B.J. (1957). A factorial study of the leader behavior descriptions. In

R.M. Stogdill and A.E. Coons (eds), *Leader behavior: Its description and measurement*. Columbus, OH: Bureau of Business Research, Ohio State University

Stodgill, R.M., Goode, O.S. and Day, D.R. (1962). New leader behavior description subscales.

Journal of Psychology, 54, 259-269

The Managerial Grid

Description

Leaders may be concerned for their people and they also must also have some concern for the work to be done. The question is, how much attention to they pay to one or the other? This is a model defined by Blake and Mouton in the early 1960s.

Concern for People	High	Country Club management		Team management
	Medium		Middle of the road management	
	Low	Impoverished management		Authority-compliance
		Low	Medium	High
		Concern for Production (Task)		

Impoverished management

Minimum effort to get the work done. A basically lazy approach that avoids as much work as possible.

Authority-compliance

Strong focus on task, but with little concern for people. Focus on efficiency, including the elimination of people wherever possible.

Country Club management

Care and concern for the people, with a comfortable and friendly environment and collegial style. But a low focus on task may give questionable results.

Middle of the road management

A weak balance of focus on both people and the work. Doing enough to get things done, but not pushing the boundaries of what may be possible.

Team management

Firing on all cylinders: people are committed to task and leader is committed to people (as well as task).

Discussion

This is a well-known grid that uses the [Task vs. Person preference](#) that appears in many other studies, such as the [Michigan Leadership Studies](#) and the [Ohio State Leadership Studies](#). Many other task-people models and variants have appeared since then. They are both clearly important dimensions, but as other models point out, they are not all

there is to leadership and management.

The Managerial Grid was the original name. It later changed to the Leadership Grid.

See also

Blake, R.R. and Mouton, J.S. (1961). *Group dynamics - Key to decision making*, Houston: Gulf Publishing Co.

Participative Leadership

Involvement in decision-making improves the understanding of the issues involved by those who must carry out the decisions. People are more committed to actions where they have involved in the relevant decision-making. People are less competitive and more collaborative when they are working on joint goals. When people make decisions together, the social commitment to one another is greater and thus increases their commitment to the decision. Several people deciding together make better decisions than one person alone.

Style

A Participative Leader, rather than taking autocratic decisions, seeks to involve other people in the process, possibly including subordinates, peers, superiors and other stakeholders. Often, however, as it is within the managers' whim to give or deny control to his or her subordinates, most participative activity is within the immediate team. The question of how much influence others are given thus may vary on the manager's preferences and beliefs, and a whole spectrum of participation is possible, as in the table below.

< Not participative Highly participative >

Autocratic decision by leader	Leader proposes decision, listens to feedback, then decides	Team proposes decision, leader has final decision	Joint decision with team as equals	Full delegation of decision to team
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There are many varieties on this spectrum, including stages where the leader sells the idea to the team. Another variant is for the leader to describe the 'what' of objectives or goals and let the team or individuals decide the 'how' of the process by which the 'how' will be achieved (this is often called 'Management by Objectives').

The level of participation may also depend on the type of decision being made. Decisions on how to implement goals may be highly participative, whilst decisions during subordinate performance evaluations are more likely to be taken by the manager.

Discussion

There are many potential benefits of participative leadership, as indicated in the [assumptions](#), above. This approach is also known as consultation, empowerment, joint decision-making, democratic leadership, Management By Objective (MBO) and power-sharing. Participative Leadership can be a sham when managers ask for opinions and then ignore them. This is likely to lead to cynicism and feelings of betrayal.

See also

Coch, L. and French, J.R.P. (1948). Overcoming resistance to change, *Human relations*, 1,

512-532

Tannenbaum, A.S. and Alport, F.H. (1956). Personality structure and group structure: An interpretive structure of their relationship through an event structure hypothesis. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 53, 272-280

Tannenbaum, A.S. and Schmitt, W.H. (1958). How to choose a leadership pattern. *Harvard Business Review*, 36, March-April, 95-101

French, J.R.P. Israel, J. and As, D. (1960). An experiment on participation in a Norwegian factory. *Human Relations*, 13, 3-19

Lewin's leadership styles

Kurt Lewin and colleagues did leadership decision experiments in 1939 and identified three different styles of leadership, in particular around decision-making.

Autocratic

In the autocratic style, the leader takes decisions without consulting with others. The decision is made without any form of consultation. In Lewin's experiments, he found that this caused the most level of discontent. An autocratic style works when there is no need for input on the decision, where the decision would not change as a result of input, and where the motivation of people to carry out subsequent actions would not be affected whether they were or were not involved in the decision-making.

Democratic

In the democratic style, the leader involves the people in the decision-making, although the process for the final decision may vary from the leader having the final say to them facilitating consensus in the group.

Democratic decision-making is usually appreciated by the people, especially if they have been used to autocratic decisions with which they disagreed. It can be problematic when there are a wide range of opinions and there is no clear way of reaching an equitable final decision.

Laissez-Faire

The laissez-faire style is to minimize the leader's involvement in decision-making, and hence allowing people to make their own decisions, although they may still be responsible for the outcome.

Laissez-faire works best when people are capable and motivated in making their own decisions, and where there is no requirement for a central coordination, for example in sharing resources across a range of different people and groups.

Discussion

In Lewin et al's experiments, he discovered that the most effective style was Democratic. Excessive autocratic styles led to revolution, whilst under a Laissez-faire approach, people were not coherent in their work and did not put in the energy that they did when being actively led. These experiments were actually done with groups of children, but were early in the modern era and were consequently highly influential.

See also

Lewin, K., Lippitt, R. and White, R.K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created social climates. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 271-301

Situational Leadership

The best action of the leader depends on a range of situational factors.

Style

When a decision is needed, an effective leader does not just fall into a single preferred style, such as using [transactional](#) or [transformational](#) methods. In practice, as they say, things are not that simple.

Factors that affect situational decisions include motivation and capability of followers. This, in turn, is affected by factors within the particular situation. The relationship between followers and the leader may be another factor that affects leader behavior as much as it does follower behavior.

The leaders' perception of the follower and the situation will affect what they do rather than the truth of the situation. The leader's perception of themselves and other factors such as stress and mood will also modify the leaders' behavior.

Yukl (1989) seeks to combine other approaches and identifies six variables:

Subordinate effort:

the motivation and actual effort expended.

Subordinate ability and role clarity:

followers knowing what to do and how to do it.

Organization of the work:

the structure of the work and utilization of resources.

Cooperation and cohesiveness:

of the group in working together.

Resources and support:

the availability of tools, materials, people, etc.

External coordination:

the need to collaborate with other groups.

Leaders here work on such factors as external relationships, acquisition of resources, managing demands on the group and managing the structures and culture of the group.

Discussion

Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) identified three forces that led to the leader's action: the forces in the situation, the forces in the follower and also forces in the leader. This recognizes that the leader's style is highly variable, and even such distant events as a family argument can lead to the displacement activity of a more aggressive stance in an argument than usual.

Maier (1963) noted that leaders not only consider the likelihood of a follower accepting a suggestion, but also the overall importance of getting things done. Thus in critical

S2: Selling / Coaching

Follower: R2: Some competence, variable commitment / Unable but willing or motivated. Leader: High task focus, high relationship focus.

When the follower can do the job, at least to some extent, and perhaps is over-confident about their ability in this, then 'telling' them what to do may demotivate them or lead to resistance. The leader thus needs to 'sell' another way of working, explaining and clarifying decisions.

The leader thus spends time [listening](#) and advising and, where appropriate, helping the follower to gain necessary skills through coaching methods. Note: S1 and S2 are leader-driven.

S3: Participating / Supporting

Follower: R3: High competence, variable commitment / Able but unwilling or insecure. Leader: Low task focus, high relationship focus.

When the follower can do the job, but is refusing to do it or otherwise showing insufficient commitment, the leader need not worry about showing them what to do, and instead is concerned with finding out why the person is refusing and thence persuading them to cooperate.

There is less excuse here for followers to be reticent about their ability, and the key is very much around motivation. If the causes are found then they can be addressed by the leader. The leader thus spends time [listening](#), praising and otherwise making the follower feel good when they show the necessary commitment.

S4: Delegating / Observing

Follower: R4: High competence, high commitment / Able and willing or motivated. Leader: Low task focus, low relationship focus.

When the follower can do the job and is motivated to do it, then the leader can basically leave them to it, largely trusting them to get on with the job although they also may need to keep a relatively distant eye on things to ensure everything is going to plan.

Followers at this level have less need for support or frequent praise, although as with anyone, occasional recognition is always welcome. Note: S3 and S4 are follower-led.

Discussion

Hersey and Blanchard (of 'One Minute Manager' fame) have written a short and very readable book on the approach. It is simple and easy to understand, which makes it particularly attractive for practicing managers who do not want to get into heavier material. It also is accepted in wider spheres and often appears in college courses.

It is limited, however, and is based on assumptions that can be challenged, for example the assumption that at the 'telling' level, the relationship is of lower importance.

See also

P., Blanchard, K.H, and Johnson, D.E., Management of Organizational Behavior: Leading Human Resources, Prentice Hall, 2007

Vroom and Yetton's Normative Model

Decision acceptance increases commitment and effectiveness of action. Participation increases decision acceptance.

Description

Decision quality is the selection of the best alternative, and is particularly important when there are many alternatives. It is also important when there are serious implications for selecting (or failing to select) the best alternative.

Decision acceptance is the degree to which a follower accepts a decision made by a leader. Leaders focus more on decision acceptance when decision quality is more important.

Vroom and Yetton defined five different decision procedures. Two are autocratic (A1 and A2), two are consultative (C1 and C2) and one is Group based (G2).

A1: Leader takes known information and then decides alone.

A2: Leader gets information from followers, and then decides alone.

C1: Leader shares problem with followers individually, listens to ideas and then decides alone.

C2: Leader shares problems with followers as a group, listens to ideas and then decides alone.

G2: Leader shares problems with followers as a group and then seeks and accepts consensus agreement.

Situational factors that influence the method are relatively logical:

When decision quality is important and followers possess useful information, then A1 and A2 are not the best method.

When the leader sees decision quality as important but followers do not, then G2 is inappropriate.

When decision quality is important, when the problem is unstructured and the leader lacks information / skill to make the decision alone, then G2 is best.

When decision acceptance is important and followers are unlikely to accept an autocratic decision, then A1 and A2 are inappropriate when decision acceptance is important but followers are likely to disagree with one another, then A1, A2 and C1 are not appropriate, because they do not give opportunity for differences to be resolved.

When decision quality is not important but decision acceptance is critical, then G2 is the best method.

When decision quality is important, all agree with this, and the decision is not likely to result from an autocratic decision then G2 is best.

Discussion

Vroom and Yetton (1973) took the earlier generalized situational theories that noted how situational factors cause almost unpredictable leader behavior and reduced this to a more limited set of behaviors. The 'normative' aspect of the model is that it was defined more by rational logic than by long observation. The model is most likely to work when there is clear and accessible opinions about the decision quality importance and decision acceptance factors. However these are not always known with any significant confidence.

See also

Vroom, V.H. and Yetton, P.W. (1973). *Leadership and decision-making*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press

Contingency Theory

The leader's ability to lead is contingent upon various situational factors, including the leader's preferred style, the capabilities and behaviors of followers and also various other situational factors.

Description

Contingency theories are a class of behavioral theory that contend that there is no one best way of leading and that a leadership style that is effective in some situations may not be successful in others.

An effect of this is that leaders who are very effective at one place and time may become unsuccessful either when transplanted to another situation or when the factors around them change.

This helps to explain how some leaders who seem for a while to have the 'Midas touch' suddenly appear to go off the boil and make very unsuccessful decisions.

Discussion

Contingency theory is similar to [situational](#) theory in that there is an assumption of no simple one right way. The main difference is that situational theory tends to focus more on the behaviors that the leader should adopt, given situational factors (often about follower behavior), whereas contingency theory takes a broader view that includes contingent factors about leader capability and other variables within the situation.

Fiedler's Least Preferred Co-worker (LPC) Theory

Leaders prioritize between task-focus and people-focus. Relationships, power and task structure are the three key factors that drive effective styles.

Description

Fiedler identified the a Least Preferred Co-Worker scoring for leaders by asking them first to think of a person with which they worked that they would like least to work with again, and then to score the person on a range of scales between positive factors (friendly, helpful, cheerful, etc.) and negative factors (unfriendly, unhelpful, gloomy, etc.). A high LPC leader generally scores the other person as positive and a low LPC leader scores them as negative.

High LPC leaders tend to have close and positive relationships and act in a supportive way, even prioritizing the relationship before the task. Low LPC leaders put the task first and will turn to relationships only when they are satisfied with how the work is going.

Three factors are then identified about the leader, member and the task, as follows:

Leader-Member Relations: The extent to which the leader has the support and loyalties of followers and relations with them are friendly and cooperative.

Task structure: The extent to which tasks are standardised, documented and controlled.

Leader's Position-power: The extent to which the leader has authority to assess follower

performance and give reward or punishment.

The best LPC approach depends on a combination of there three. Generally, a high LPC approach is best when leader-member relations are poor, except when the task is unstructured and the leader is weak, in which a low LPC style is better.

#	Leader-Member Relations	Task structure	Leader's Position-power	Most Effective leader
1	Good	Structured	Strong	Low LPC
2	Good	Structured	Weak	Low LPC
3	Good	Unstructured	Strong	Low LPC
4	Good	Unstructured	Weak	High LPC
5	Poor	Structured	Strong	High LPC
6	Poor	Structured	Weak	High LPC
7	Poor	Unstructured	Strong	High LPC
8	Poor	Unstructured	Weak	Low LPC

Discussion

This approach seeks to identify the underlying [beliefs about people](#), in particular whether the leader sees others as positive (high LPC) or negative (low LPC). The neat trick of the model is to take someone where it would be very easy to be negative about them.

This is another approach that uses task- vs. people-focus as a major categorisation of the leader's style.

See also

Fiedler, F.E. (1964). A contingency model of leadership effectiveness. In L. Berkowitz (ed),

Advances in experimental social psychology, NY:

Academic press.

Fiedler, F.E. (1967). *A theory of leadership effectiveness*, NY: McGraw-Hill