

Leadership Theories

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The nature and attributes of leadership is one of the most researched subjects within management and organizational psychology fields. This is due to the recognized importance of effective leadership for the successful goal attainment of organizations. Numerous studies aimed at examining various aspects of leadership rely on different theories of leadership for establishing grounds and drawing research questions. This paper will focus on trait, behavioral, and contingency theories of leadership. Trait theory explains leadership through reference to certain key traits that enable individual to lead others. Behavioral theories stress the central role of certain behaviors in effective leadership. Contingency theories emphasize the need to adjust leadership style and practices to the present circumstances. While the three groups of theories conceptualize different dimensions of leadership, they are interrelated, with behavioral and trait theories of leadership being extensions of one another, and contingency theories presenting key point and implications of both behavioral and trait theories of leadership combined with consideration for changing circumstances.

Trait theory of leadership assumes that ability to lead is associated with certain personal traits and abilities characteristic of certain person. Trait theory combines a number of personal characteristics that are thought to make successful and unsuccessful leaders. Some of these characteristics are inborn while others can be trained and developed. The idea that certain essential to effective leadership personal traits and skills can be trained is what leadership and business schools build their curriculums on. The essential leadership traits are established by numerous empirical studies examining successful and unsuccessful leaders. These studies indicate the number of traits and abilities that are associated with effective leadership. Namely, certain demographic characteristics, including, gender, level of education; task competence traits,

like, intelligence, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and emotional stability; interpersonal abilities, including, communication and team working skills, extroversion, and agreeableness (Derue et al., 2011). These traits are known to be characteristic and predictive of effective leaders. Some people possess them naturally, while others can train them if they will to become successful at leading others.

Behavioral theory of leadership relates effective leadership to certain behaviors and practices used by the person on leader's position. This approach to understanding the nature of leadership emphasizes the quality process of work and interaction with others as the most important for effective leadership. Relying on positive and productive behaviors and communication strategies is perceived to be the most fruitful for achieving success on individual, group, and organizational levels of leadership. Among the effective leaders' behaviors researchers single out the following: task oriented behaviors, including, initiating structure within the organization by defining tasks and roles for everyone, and contingent rewards; relational-oriented behaviors, like, being considerate and approachable to others, acting friendly, and treating all group members as equals, engaging in participative and democratic leadership; change-oriented behaviors, including, developing and communication a vision for change, encouraging innovative thinking, and risk taking (Derue et al., 2011). The above mentioned behaviors were found to correlate positively with effective leadership, while behaviors associated with passive leadership tend not to bring positive results.

Unlike trait and behavioral theories, contingency theories of leadership do not single out particular personal traits, skills, or behaviors as predictive of successful leadership. Instead, contingency theories emphasize that in order to be effective, leadership approaches and strategies should be sensitive to the circumstances. Hence, contingency theories of leadership regard

aspects of situation as determining the personal traits, skills, and behaviors that would be the most productive and effective for the particular case. Situational variables effecting the appropriate leadership strategy include task characteristics (complexity, stress), subordinate characteristics (skills, experience, motivation), leader-subordinate relations (shared goals, mutual trust) (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Contingency theories hold that effective leadership relies on one's ability to properly examine and diagnose the situation and be able to adjust and act in ways that are most appropriate and would be the most productive given the circumstances. Hence, from contingency theories' perspective, good leader should be flexible and ready to adapt to the changing situations.

The three theories of leadership described above emphasize different things as essential for becoming an effective leader, namely, personal characteristics, behaviors, and capacity to adjust to the changing circumstances of organizational operations. However, these three theories are not mutually exclusive, they merely emphasize different aspects of good leadership. Considering the ways in which these theories are interrelated, it is plausible to assume that trait and behavioral theories are different aspects of the same thing as one's traits and behaviors are known to determine and represent each other. In other words, one's behavior may be regarded as an extension of one's traits, skills, and personal characteristics. At the same time, one's traits and characteristics are assessed and developed based on one's behaviors. Hence, trait and behavior theories approach effective leadership from the same standpoint, even though they address different aspects of it. At the same time, contingency theories of leadership integrate the assumptions and essential claims of both trait and behavioral theories, and complement them by stressing the importance of remaining flexible and consider the changing circumstances. Contingency theories do recognize that certain personal traits and behaviors make up an

important component of effective leadership, yet, they treat these positive traits and behaviors as instruments that good leader should use in accordance with the situation.

Drawing conclusions, leadership can be explained via reference to certain personal traits and skills, effective behaviors, and the ability to adjust to the changing circumstance by trait, behavioral, and contingency theories of leadership accordingly. While these approaches are presented as distinct theories, they interrelated. Trait and behavioral theories conceptualized leadership in similar way but stress different aspects as crucial for effective leadership, namely traits and behaviors of leaders. Contingency theories of leadership combine the claims of both trait and behavioral theories of leadership, and emphasize that personal characteristics and behaviors should be used as instruments for effective management in continuously changing circumstances.

## References

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