

LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

Leadership Theories, Styles, and Approaches

By Alexis Shoemaker

Leading through change crystalizes the need for effective leadership practices. In the previous column, I described leadership fundamentals and change theories as a foray into addressing how leaders can begin to establish “purpose, vision, and direction.”¹

Throughout the following discussion on leadership theories, styles, and approaches, the acknowledgement and acceptance of *the incomplete leader* should not be overlooked.² Leaders are humans with strengths and weaknesses. Understanding these strengths and weaknesses is a powerful tool.

In general, leaders are responsible for “sensemaking – interpreting developments in the business environment, relating – building trusting relationships, visioning – communicating a compelling image of the future, [and] inventing – coming up with new ways of doing things.”³ To effectively execute these overarching responsibilities, “the incomplete leader knows when to let go, when to ask for support, and how to do so in a productive and alliance-building way.”⁴ The inclusive nature and optimistic framing of the incomplete leader—that is, focusing on nurture over nature—focuses leaders on perpetual learning and improvement over innate ability.

As you read the following column (and all other columns in this series), consider your own leadership practice and how it maps onto the discussion. What is your leadership environment? How do you currently approach

that environment? What are new practices you may want to incorporate into your leadership repertoire? What are your strengths? What are your shortcomings? Who complements your shortcomings, and how can you involve them and learn from them in the future?

LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Underlying the practice of leadership are generalized theories intended to be situationally adaptable. In other words, there is no “correct” theory for all situations. Rather, the theories are intended to be used, exchanged, revised, and tailored to the most natural state of leadership for the practitioner, the team with which they are working, and the institutional landscape in which they function.

Leadership theory has undergone three evolutions since its inception. *Trait theories* were among the earliest in this field. These theories hold that the qualities of a good leader are fundamental aspects of an individual’s personality.⁵ Early on, it was held that leaders are “better than the average person in terms of intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility, initiative, persistence, self-confidence, and sociability.”⁶ Due to the difficulty involved in altering these traits, “trait theories imply that leaders are born not made; that is, leadership is not something

that can be taught or learned.”⁷ This narrow view creates difficulties in practice that the second evolution of leadership theory seeks to ameliorate.

In the twentieth century, in pursuit of a fuller picture of leadership theory, we see the emergence of *skills theories*. These theories hold that “effective leadership depends less on what the leaders are and more on what they are able to do.”⁸ In the mid-twentieth century, it was suggested that “effective leadership depends on the leader possessing skills in three areas: technical—knowledge of the job, profession, or task; human—the ability to work with people; and conceptual—the ability to understand ideas and principles.”⁹

As leadership theory continued to develop, behaviors emerged as associated with effective leadership. The Ohio State University produced some of the most famous studies on *behavior leadership* theory. “These studies identified two basic types of leader behaviors: *task behaviors*—actions that relate to the work to be done; and *relationship behaviors*—actions that focus on the feelings of subordinates.”¹⁰ The University of Michigan revealed very similar categories labeled “*production orientation* and *employee orientation*.”¹¹

These evolutions in leadership theory leave us with a valuable framework of traits, skills, and behaviors. Falling out from these overarching leadership theories are leadership styles and approaches.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

Leadership styles are the amalgamation of trait, skill, and behavior theories. The following classification system offers a high-level perspective on leadership styles and their impact on an organization or team.

“Organizations that are high on production (task) and low on relationships are said to have *authority-obedience management*. Essentially, they are dictatorships, although they may be productive. Those high on relationships and low on concern for production are described as having *country club management*.

They may be great places to work, but get little or nothing accomplished. Organizations that are low on both concern for people and production exhibit *impoverished management*. This would create a dreadful and uninspiring environment, and employee retention would be a primary challenge. The ideal type, showing high concern for both people and production, is called *team management*.”¹²

These classifications don’t just offer a vocabulary for leadership styles; they drive home the impact of leadership on a team and organization. There are, however, other theories that color in the details of leadership styles and offer insights into how leaders are accomplishing their styles.

Circumstances often dictate the type of leadership style needed to inspire morale and induce productivity. These *situational theories* hold that adaptability and the ability to read a situation or environment and develop a style tailored to the observed needs are hallmarks of an effective leader. Taking this a step further, *contingency theories* provide a way of matching leader styles to defined situations. “The situation may be favorable or unfavorable to the leader, depending on three variables: leader-member relations (e.g., the degree of trust, cooperativeness, and friendliness between the leader and followers), the task structure (whether the job to be done is clear and specific or ambiguous and uncertain), and the position of power of the leader (i.e., the formal position of authority the leader holds).”¹³

According to these findings, task-oriented leaders do best when conditions are very favorable or very unfavorable, while relationship-oriented leaders do best in the intermediate circumstances. This highlights the need for reflexivity of oneself as a leader and one’s environment on both a micro and macro scale. Contingency theories add a level of sophistication to the previously discussed trait, skill, and behavior theories and help us begin to understand why some styles of leadership are successful in certain circumstances while others are not.

Other popular leadership style theories include *path-goal theories*, which “emphasize how leaders can adapt their behaviors to motivate followers and enhance satisfaction and performance.”¹⁴ Additionally, there are *leader-member exchange theories*, which “view leadership in terms of interactions between leaders and followers.”¹⁵

To effectively deploy this knowledge, leaders should look at their immediate team, the department and/or organization, and the organization’s position in the larger landscape. By evaluating these circumstances with varying cadence (that is, examining the microenvironments more frequently than the macros), a leader is positioned to proactively address issues before they arise. This ultimately improves team morale and enhances work productivity.

LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

Intertwined with leadership theories and styles are leadership approaches. One such approach that has gained a following is *servant leadership*.¹⁶ This approach is defined by envisioning oneself as a steward and facilitator for the team, working for and with them rather than above them. This flips the traditional hierarchy on its head and creates an ethos of collaboration and camaraderie.

A key aspect of this approach is shared success. In other words, servant leadership emphasizes balancing individual success with group success and using one’s position as a leader to bring greater visibility to the work of the team.

Another approach is *charismatic leadership*. This approach is defined by a leader who does the following: “advocates a vision that is different from the status quo but still acceptable to followers; acts in unconventional ways in pursuit of the vision; engages in self-sacrifice and risk taking in pursuit of the vision; displays confidence in his or her own ideas and proposals; uses visioning and persuasive appeals to influence followers, rather than relying mainly on formal authority; [and] uses the

capacity to assess context and locate opportunities for novel strategies.”¹⁷

To achieve this approach, the practitioner cannot become too familiar with their team. Balancing the need and human desire to be close to those with whom one works while simultaneously holding oneself apart can be quite difficult. It is important for leaders to understand the risk involved in estranging oneself from one’s team to maintain mystery and separateness. That is, too much separation can cause factious behavior in the team and can result in the leader losing touch with the quotidian experience. As they say, it’s lonely at the top.

CONCLUSION

Leadership is a complex and amorphous undertaking. However, by engaging in reflexive analysis of one’s own leadership practice and mapping that practice onto an existing framework and vocabulary, the leader is more equipped to successfully execute their responsibilities. Leadership theories serve as pillars around which practitioners can build leadership styles and approaches in a contextually aware manner. In my next column, I will discuss guiding principles and visioning for instituting meaningful and lasting change.

NOTES

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6. Stodgill, Ralph. 1948. “Personal Factors Associated with Leadership: A Survey of the Literature.” *Journal of Psychology*, (25): 53-71.
7. Northouse, Peter G. 2013. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Inc., pg. 32.
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9. Katz, Daniel. 1955. "Skills of an Effective Administrator." *Harvard Business Review*, (33):1.
10. Worth, pg. 111.
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14. Northouse, pg. 137.
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