

A Theory of Leadership: A Situational Approach

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Leadership: A Situational Approach

Most scholars agree that effective leadership is dependent upon matching the appropriate style with its complementary situation; that is, effective leadership is situational and contingent. The leadership theory we propose in this analysis is consistent with this assumption. Before we proceed further, we will summarize the basic assumptions of our theory.

1. There is no single best leadership style.
2. Effective leadership is dependent upon matching the right style with the appropriate situation.
3. There are two fundamental dimensions to leadership behavior: Task-oriented behavior and Relations-oriented behavior.
4. Long-term effective leadership requires that the group is successful in two functions: 1) Accomplishing the group goal and 2) Maintaining healthy interpersonal relations.
5. The critical component of the leadership situation is defined by the extent to which the group has been successful in maintaining itself while simultaneously achieving its goals.
6. Leadership also is developmental process: Teaching others to assume leadership.
7. Leadership is situational and fluid: As situations change so does the appropriate style of leading.

Dimensions of Leadership

The history of the study of leadership demonstrates that there are two general dimensions of leader behavior, which have been described by a variety of terms: initiating structure and consideration, nomothetic and idiographic, instrumental and expressive, production-oriented and people-oriented. In spite of the fact that these pairs of terms seem different, they are not. Each pair refers to the same basic dimensions of leadership. We prefer to call these terms task-oriented behavior and relations-oriented behavior because we believe that they clearly capture the meaning.

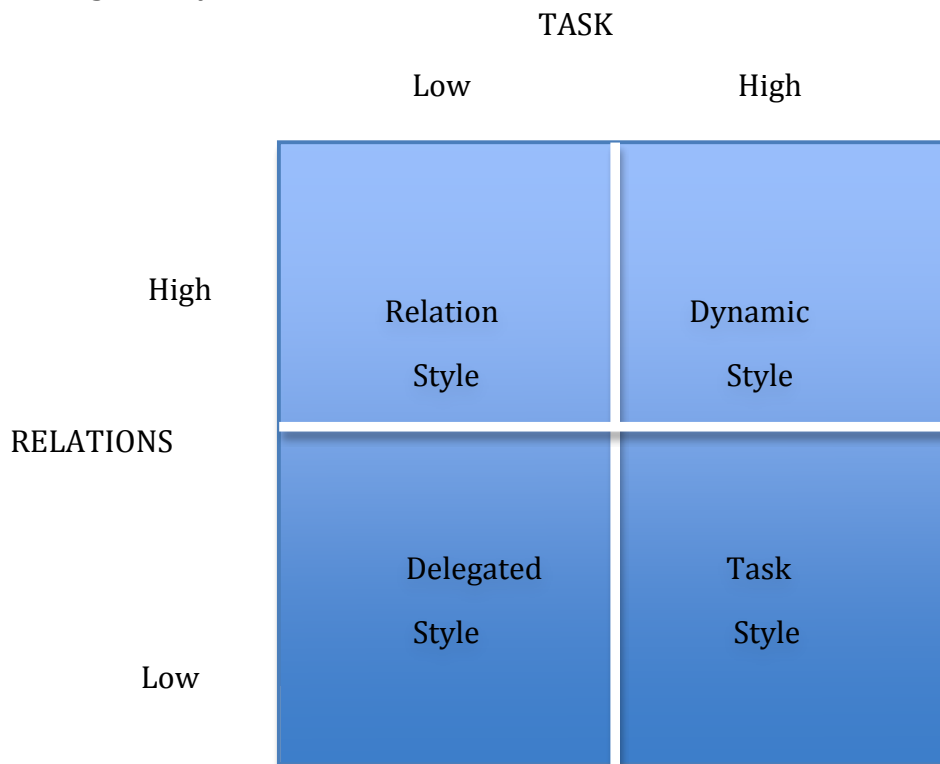
Two Dimensions of Leadership

Task-oriented style is leadership behavior that focuses on achieving the task or goal of the group. Setting goals, monitoring performance, specifying activities are typical of the actions that leaders take to guide groups toward goal attainment. In brief, the leader's behavior is driven by the goal and task at hand; goal accomplishment is over-riding concern of the leader.

Relations-oriented style is leadership behavior that emphasizes healthy interpersonal and cooperative relations within the group. Treating group members as equals, listening to other opinions, and genuine concern and support are the hallmarks of this behavior. In brief, the leader's behavior is motivated by a concern for group solidarity.

Four Leadership Styles

These two dimensions of leadership behavior (task and relations) form any number of leadership styles. For example, if one conceives of task behavior as having three categories (for example, high, moderate, and low) and relations behavior with the same three categories, then 9 leadership styles are generated. In other words, the number of leadership styles is dependent upon the number of categories for each dimension. At this stage in the development of the theory, we opt for a parsimonious model using only two categories for each dimension. Hence, our formulation of leadership is limited to four leadership styles (see Figure 1). The four styles of leadership behavior generated are called: Dynamic, Task, Relations, and Delegated Styles.



Leadership Styles

- *Dynamic Leadership* is leader behavior that combines and integrates behavior that is both task and relations oriented. The leader is responsible for moving the group toward the accomplishment of the task as well as insuring good interpersonal relationships among the members.
- *Task Leadership* is leader behavior that is starkly oriented to attaining the goal. The dominant behavior is production oriented. The goal must be met.
- *Relations Leadership* is leader behavior that is primarily concerned with individual's meeting their needs and forming a cohesive group. The dominant behavior is aimed developing good interpersonal relations within the group.
- *Delegated Leadership* is leader behavior in which the task and relationship functions are delegated to the group itself. The leader withdraws leadership initiatives, monitors progress, and encourages the emergence of leadership from group members. As the old saying goes, "Don't fix it, if it isn't broken."

Dimensions of the Situation

The next important aspect of our theory of leadership is the issue of how to conceptualize the situation. What are the important elements of the situation that mediate the effectiveness of the leader's behavior? More than four decades ago, Cartwright and Zander (1968) identified two basic functions essential for group effectiveness: achievement of the goal and maintenance of the group. In subsequent study by numerous researchers, these two characteristics have been confirmed as

necessary across a variety of groups in a myriad of situations. In short, groups are not effective unless they achieve their goals while maintaining themselves.

Goal Achievement. The achievement dimension refers to successful goal attainment. A critical question for any individual attempting to lead a group is how well does the group meet its goals and objectives. Is the group foundering? Is the group achieving its goals? Some groups do perfectly well in achieving their basic tasks. The leader needs to read the situation in terms of how well the group as a whole is progressing, which is a crucial aspect of success.

Group Maintenance. Simply achieving a specific goal, however, is not sufficient because over the long run the group has many goals to achieve. The group must also maintain itself, that is, strengthen the internal relationships among the members. Cohesiveness and solidarity are essential elements of healthy interpersonal relations, and sound interpersonal relations among group members are essential for long-term success. The leader also needs to read the situation in terms of how well the group as a whole is maintaining itself. How do group members get along? Do they support each other? Do they like each other? Do they work together cooperatively and supportively?

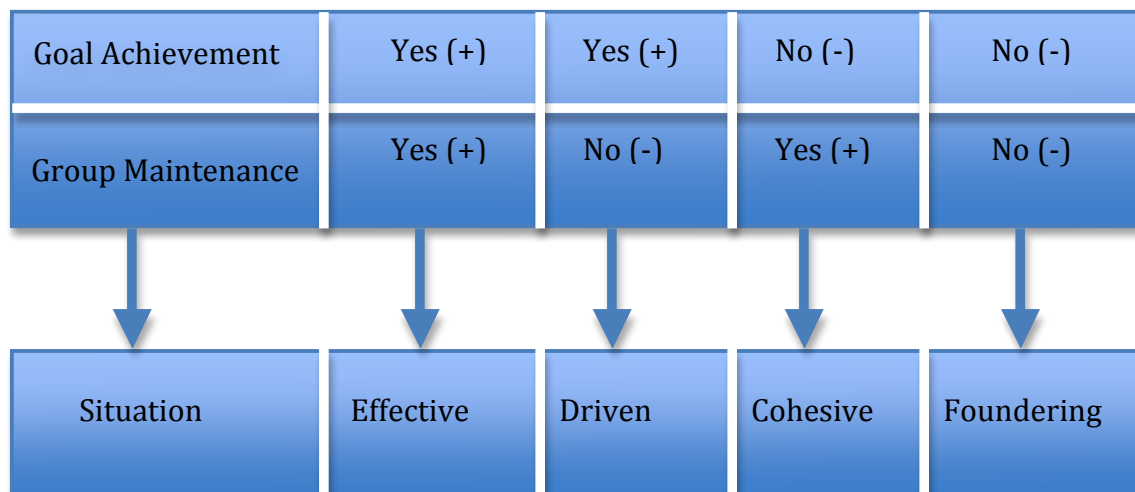
Identifying the Situation

To read and identify the situation, the leader asks the following two questions:

- 1) Is the group making satisfactory progress toward goal achievement?

2) Is the group cohesive and harmonious?

The answers to these questions define the four different situations. First, the group may be progressing toward the goal and working harmoniously—an effective situation. Second, the group is progressing toward the goal, but the members are often at odds with each other—a driven situation. Third, the group is making little progress toward the goal in spite of cooperative and cordial relations among members—the cohesive situation. Fourth, there is no progress toward the goal and bickering among group members—the foundering situation. The kinds of situations are summarized in the figure below.



Kinds of Situations

Matching Leadership Style with Situation: A Complementary Match

Remember that our leadership theory is situational dependent: the leader must match the appropriate style with the each situation. We call this selection complementary match because the leader must determine what is missing in the situation and then supply it with his or her leadership style. For example, in the case of an effective situation, the goal is being achieved and group relations are harmonious; therefore, the appropriate style is “delegated.” The leader must continue to delegate the leadership functions to the group. The appropriate leadership style delegated. At the other extreme, if the group is foundering, the situation calls for a dynamic leader style in which the leader is called on to provide leadership toward both goal achievement and group maintenance. This is the most challenging role for leadership because it is difficult to push the group toward the task while simultaneously building strong interpersonal relations among the membership.

In some situations, the group is showing progress toward goal achievement, that is, driven, but bickering and conflict among its members trouble the group. Here, the role of the leader is clear. The trouble must be ameliorated, and the leader must focus on developing healthy interpersonal relationships as the group continues toward goal achievement. In other words, a relations leadership style is essential and there is no need for the leader to push for the task. Finally, in some situations, group members work in harmony, but unfortunately fall short of goal achievement. Here again, the leader’s role is clear; it is one of refocusing the group on the task at hand. In a word, the leadership style is task oriented.

In brief, to determine the appropriate role for the leader, one must ask the question, “What aspects of effective group functioning are missing (goal achievement, group maintenance, or both)?” The leader must then provide the missing element or elements that are required for successful group functioning. In other words, the leader’s behavior must complement the group’s behavior by supplying any missing element for group effectiveness.

A Situation Specific Theory

To this point, the theory has been general; that is, we have been discussing the process in general, but that is a little misleading. We are not advocating the use of the model for general leadership decisions but rather for specific ones. A principal, for example, works with teachers on a variety of issues and processes. For instance, decisions are called for on curriculum matters, scheduling issues, management problems at the school and classroom level, parental inactions, evaluation, supervision, and on and on. Each of these areas is a potential situation for leadership and each calls for a separate analysis of the leadership roles of teachers and the principal. In some areas the teachers will have knowledge, skill, and interest, but in other domains one or more of these attributes may be missing. The point is that the leadership model we are proposing is used anew for *each situation*. In summary, the theory is not a general guide but a specific one, and its application changes as problems and issues change. Leadership is a continuously changing process contingent upon the nature of the situation.

Group Development

Not only does leadership change as the situation changes, but also roles change and the leader has an additional responsibility. Although the basic function of the leader is to read each situation and determine the appropriate leadership style, there is another responsibility. Leaders must work developmentally with others to produce the skills and knowledge that group members need to assume a more central role. For example, principals must help teachers grow in knowledge and perspective so that they can increasingly become the initiators of leadership. In a paradoxical way, leaders want to educate teachers to take over the initiation of leadership. One goal is to free the leader from leadership and delegate it to teachers when they are equipped to make and implement key decisions.

To this end, leaders must help others develop sound interpersonal skills to strengthen the interpersonal relations in the group (group maintenance). Moreover, teachers need professional development in such important professional domains as curriculum, teaching and instruction, classroom management, student evaluation and grading, as well as in professional and collegial cooperation. Professional development should increase the capacity of teachers to achieve goals (goal achievement). As teachers gain experience, knowledge, and skills in these areas, they are more prepared to assume independent leadership with their colleagues. In brief, effective leaders must teach others to assume leadership.

Summary

- There is no single best leadership style.
- There are two fundamental dimensions to leadership behavior: task and relations, which generates four distinct leadership styles—dynamic, relation, task, and delegated.
- Effective groups achieve their goals (goal achievement) while maintaining good interpersonal relations (group maintenance). Therefore, four key situations emerge—effective, driven, cohesive, and foundering.
- Effective leadership matches leader behavior to the situation.
- Leadership is situation specific, that is, the appropriate leadership style changes from situation to situation.
- Professional development is a crucial aspect of all leadership. The leader has a responsibility to teach others how to independently initiate and implement leadership acts.

The entire theory is pictorially summarized in the figure below.

