

The evolution of leadership theory

[Business](#), [Leadership](#)



Introduction

In order to describe the evolution of leadership theory we must first define what we understand leadership to mean. An early or traditional definition of leadership may be, an interpersonal influence directed towards the achievement of a set goal or series of goals (Northouse, 2004, p 2). In accordance with the evolution of leadership theory the definition of leadership by a modern frame of reference may be, a relationship dynamic in nature based on mutual influence between leaders and collaborators in which both reach higher levels of motivation and moral development as they strive to affect change (Freiberg and Freiberg, 1996, p 298). This essay will describe the evolution of leadership theory as it developed from being based on individual personal traits and behaviors to the modern theories that are based on dynamic models of situation and on transformation.

Early Leadership theories: traits and behaviors

Ohio State University developed a theory of leadership from a series of studies that obtained data from questionnaires filled in by subordinates and another questionnaire filled in by managers that described the leadership traits and behaviors of their leaders (Fleishman, 1953, p 2). Two leadership styles were identified and hypothesized to be able to describe all leaders (Fleishman, 1953, p 2). The first leadership style was termed "initiating structure" (Fleishman, 1953, p 3). This leadership style described the leader who directs with transactional and task oriented style. This style of leadership has been described as great for routine and repetitive task, however on the negative side it has also been used to describe the micro-manager (Fleishman, 1953, p 4).

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Examples of how this leadership style may present in the workplace include the leader who lets work-unit members know what is expected of them; who schedules the work to be done; encourages the use of uniform work procedures; assigns work-unit members to particular tasks; plans tasks for work-unit members; makes his or her attitudes clear to the work unit; clarifies work roles and asks for results (Fleishman, 1953, p 4).

The second leadership style identified by the Ohio State theory of leadership was termed " consideration" (Fleishman, 1953, p 5). This leadership style described the leader who is people-oriented and participative, and transformational (Fleishman, 1953, p 5). Examples of how this leadership style may present in the workplace includes, the leader who treats all work-unit members as his or her equal; is friendly and approachable; does little things to make work pleasant; puts suggestions made by the work unit into operation; looks out for personal welfare of work unit members; encourages a supportive socio-emotional work atmosphere; maintains high morale in the work-unit and promotes a collaborative work atmosphere (Fleishman, 1953, p 5).

Around the same time period The University of Michigan conducted similar studies to the Ohio State work (Katz, et al, 1950, p 23) based on questionnaire responses by leader's subordinates and also developed a two-leadership style theory (Katz, et al, 1950, p 43). The first leadership style was termed " production centered" (Katz, et al, 1950, p 44). Examples of how this leadership style may present in the workplace includes, the leader who places an emphasis on the technical or task aspects of the job; is

concerned mainly with accomplishing group's goal and who regards group members as means to an end (Katz, et al, 1950, p 44).

The second leadership style offered by the Michigan State University theory was termed " employee centered" (Katz, et al, 1950, p 46). Examples of how this leadership style may present itself in the workplace includes, the leader who places an emphasize interpersonal relations; who takes a personal interest in the needs of employees and who accepts individual differences among members of his / her team (Katz, et al, 1950, p 44). These earlier studies of leadership theories drew conclusions from research data that only looked at the single dimension of leadership being the observation of the leader's traits and behaviors. Although these studies provided valuable insight into which leadership traits and behaviors may have been associated with higher levels of productivity, the theories lack the depth of understanding that a dynamic model would bring which accounts for the interaction of the leader's subordinates and the workplace situation.

Modern Leadership Theories: dynamic models of situational and transformational leadership

The leadership theory termed situational theory is based on the amount of direction and socio-emotional support a leader should provide to a specific situation (Blanchard et al, 1999, p 59). This theory developed by Hersey and Blanchard, recognizes four different leadership styles that are telling, selling, participating and delegating (Blanchard et al, 1999 p 60). The leader determines which style to use depending upon the specific task that is to be accomplished and the maturity level of the followers.

The maturity of the followers was a term coined to explain the willingness of the followers to take responsibility for directing their own behavior (Blanchard et al, 1999, 60). A combination of a demanding task with a low maturity level would require the leadership style of telling (Blanchard et al, 1999, p 60). The leadership style of selling would also suit a situation with a demanding task and low level of follower maturity while the leader is still responsible for the goal being achieved the followers are encouraged to participate (Blanchard et al, 1999, p 61). The leadership style of participating suits situations of a less demanding task and low-level maturity of the followers (Blanchard et al, 1999, p 61). Finally the leadership style of delegating is matched to a high level of follower maturity and therefore is suited to all levels of demand in terms of task (Blanchard et al, 1999, p 61).

The transformational leadership theory recognizes the changing demands that an organization may face, like the situational leadership theory however it places its greatest emphasis on leadership behavior and traits (Northhouse, 2004, p 173). While this may seem like a return to the earlier more limited theories of leadership as developed in the mid 1900s via Ohio State and Michigan State Universities it is in fact seen as a very creative and flexible leadership theory (Northhouse, 2004, p 173).

The transformational leader instills feelings of confidence, admiration and commitment in the followers. Such a leader inspires the followers to forgo their own interests for the good of the organization (Northhouse, 2004, p 178). Transformational leaders appeal to the moral and ideals of followers and inspire them to look at problems in new and creative ways (Northhouse, 2004, p 183). Studies have correlated the transformational leadership theory

in the workplace leads to lower staff turnover rates, higher productivity and higher employee satisfaction.

In summary, the evolution of leadership theories has developed from the relatively static and one-dimensional views of the personality traits and behavior theories studied in the 1900s to the dynamic and flexible theories of situational and transformational leadership theories developed in the late 1900s.

References

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