Situational and Contingency Leadership Theories:

A Summary Of Hersey And Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory And Fiedler's

Contingency Leadership Theory

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Introduction

"Do I have what it takes to be a leader?" is a common question one asks when exploring how to lead a group, and what leadership means to the individual. Perhaps this person should consider "What do I need to do to be an effective leader?" This paper describes two theories that explore these questions: Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey's Situational leadership theory, and Fred Fiedler's Contingency theory. Both theories are based on a distinction between relationship and task motivations of the leader in determining one's style and emphasize the importance of matching the leader's style to the follower and the context. Blanchard and Hersey's Situational leadership theory describes how a leader should adapt one's style to the follower's needs. And Fiedler's Contingency theory explains how certain leader styles are more successful in different contexts. This paper summarizes each theory and explores real-world application through an example case and then concludes with an analysis of the strengths and weakness of each of these theories.

A Summary of Situational Leadership Theory

Situational leadership is based on the idea that different situations require different types of leadership in order to produce the most effective results (Northouse, 2013, p. 87). In essence, context matters. A leader should focus on adapting his or her leadership style to meet the needs of the follower and the current environment (Northouse, 2013, p. 87). Hersey defines leadership style as "the patterns of behavior (words and actions) of the leader *as perceived by others*" (1984, p. 27). He also asserts that there is no "magic solution for leaders" (1984, p. 15). From this perspective the follower becomes a key factor in leadership situations to which no single approach can be universally applied. Situational leadership stresses the fluidity of leadership, and the need for constant reassessment and recalibration.

In order to determine what style of leadership should be applied, the leader should, as the theory name suggests, assess the situation. Blanchard defines the situation, the follower's performance, as a combination of competence and commitment with regard to the given task (1985, p. 50). He defines competence as "a function of *knowledge* and *skills*, which can be gained from *education, training*, and/or *experience*". He also defines commitment as a "combination of confidence and motivation" where confidence represents one's perception of one's ability to complete a task independently and motivation represents one's drive to complete a task well. (1985, p.49) The combination of competency and commitment is referred to as the developmental level of the follower. Based on this assessment, a follower will be placed into one of four developmental categories, D1 through D4, as illustrated in Figure 1. It is important to keep in mind that a person's development level is not a fixed characteristic, but something that can change depending on the task at hand (Hersey, 1984, p. 47).

Figure 1. Situational leadership theory: follower developmental levels

Image obtained from http://mragraz.wikispaces.com/Leadership+and+Management

For example, a person with little knowledge of how to complete a task who is enthusiastic about taking on the challenge would be placed at a low development level, or D1. A person with moderate competence, coupled with a low motivation to perform would be considered a D2. A person with moderate to high competence, but a poor attitude toward completing a task would be considered a D3. A person, who is confident, skillful, and committed to the task, would be placed at a high development level, or D4 (Blanchard, 1985, p. 50).

Once the follower's development level is assessed in a given situation, the leader should tailor his or her style to match the follower's current state; in other words an effective leader must meet the follower's developmental level. Situational leadership theory considers leadership to be composed of a directive and a supportive dynamic (Blanchard, 1985, p. 46). Directive behavior is task oriented, focusing on the details of completing the task. On the other hand, supportive behavior is more relational and focuses on making people feel comfortable, which can be accomplished by listening, providing praise, and encouragement, facilitating open discussions, and clarifying (Hersey, 1984, p. 32). Highly directing leadership is determined to be the appropriate leadership response to followers who have a low competence level with regard to the task. Highly supportive leadership, therefore, is a response to followers who exhibit a low level of motivation or commitment with regard to task completion. (Northouse, 2013 p. 89-91). Leadership styles can be classified into four categories of directive and supportive behaviors as shown in Figure 2.

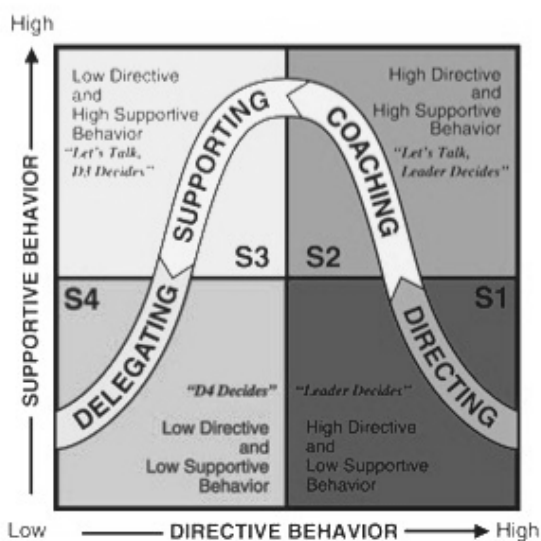**Figure 2. Situational leadership theory: leader styles**

Image obtained from http://mragraz.wikispaces.com/Leadership+and+Management

The four styles of leadership guide the leader to match the developmental level of the follower, specifically, their competence and confidence, with regard to the particular objectives to be attained. The first style, directing (S1), focuses on the provision of detailed and closely managed instruction under continual supervision; leadership that is highly directive, with a low supportive element. This style of leadership is dominated by one-way communication in which the leader guides the follower through every step of the process. The forthright direction entails defining the essential aspects of necessary actions to be taken in order to achieve the desirable outcome. The instruction may include: informing as to what needs to be done, how it needs to be accomplished, in what time frame it needs to be completed, defining who is responsible for which aspects of the process, and essentially creating the container for the work to be done (Hersey, 1984, p. 31). In directing, the prominent focus is on unidirectional communication from leader to follower with the sole purpose of successfully achieving goals; however, in coaching (S2), an element of emotional support is introduced to the process.

The coaching leadership approach is dual faceted as it combines the strongly directive element with supportive behavior. As another directive style of leadership, it continues to focus on the method necessary to attain objectives while it simultaneously provides emotional encouragement and reassurance. Coaching works to boost the morale of the follower while still outlining the steps necessary to accomplish the set goals. However, coaching allows for a two-directional interaction between leader and follower, as opposed to the solely unidirectional nature of communication in the directing style (Blanchard, 1985, p. 56-7).

The supporting style (S3) of leadership is premised on the utilization of supportive actions that serve to naturally extract and hone the follower's abilities to effectively achieve the task. In this approach, the emphasis is on the development of interpersonal relations and has a

participatory element in which the leader includes the followers in the determination of plan and process. The leader provides emotional support through inclusion, genuine listening, positive and constructive feedback, commending, and expressing gratitude to the followers (Blanchard, 1985, p. 56-7).

In the delegating leadership style (S4) the leader acts in a less emotionally supportive manner and places a significant amount of responsibility on the follower. In handing the reins over to the follower, the leader maintains a supervisory role and oversees the individual or group delegated with the task. With delegation of tasks, the leader instills a heightened level of confidence and ambition in the follower. This occurs without the provision of strongly supportive behavior, and rather through the leader succumbing dominant control, thereby instilling a sense of independence in the followers as they work to accomplish the goals. The four styles of leadership provide differing approaches as they are comprised on a spectrum of low to high supportive and directive behavior (Blanchard, 1985, p. 56-7).

Situational leadership theory emphasizes that no single leadership style is superior to another, because each style most effectively serves a particular situation and specific followers at a certain point in time. In order to maximize success, leaders must adapt their leadership style to the characteristics of those being led and consider the nature of the task at hand as it relates to the developmental level of the followers. This leadership theory relies on the "recognition of the follower as the most important situational determinant of appropriate leader behavior" (Graeff, 1983, p. 290). Just as an animal adapts to the ever changing environment in which it inhabits for the purpose of survival, a leader must remain flexible and adjust his or her leadership style to the dynamic and continually fluctuating qualities of the individuals being led to best serve the goals.

A Case Example of Situational Leadership

Eric Ellsworth, President and CEO of Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) of Greater Indianapolis and Chair of the Emergency Assistance Fund Board for the Association of YMCA Professionals, is a strong advocate for using Situational Leadership theory in the workplace (Cassano, 2006). In these roles he is responsible for overseeing a budget of $33 million, the management of the association leadership team of the YMCA programs in the greater Indianapolis region, and the development of a new branch in downtown Indianapolis (Dick, 2014). Featured in an article of *Smart Business Online,* he shares that he values being able to set aside time every week to assess situations presented to him and to plan his intentions around meetings with groups of employees (Cassano, 2006). From the perspective of the Blanchard-Hersey Theory of Situational Leadership, consider the following hypothetical scenarios from a day in the life of Eric Ellsworth.

At the beginning of his Monday morning, Eric leads a 9:00AM meeting with his association leadership team. He goes over the prepared agenda that he created after reflecting on the previous week in order to process possible leadership issues facing the team while opening a new branch. One intention he has for the meeting is to establish hiring committees for different departments within the new YMCA. He has already considered that the senior administrators at this organization have hired many workers under his direction and are thus aware of the dynamics he is looking for in this new location. Acknowledging the high level of commitment and competence of his team, he knows that he can **delegate** the hiring process to his vice president of human resources and vice president of operations.

Next, Eric visits the construction site of a YMCA expansion project in downtown Indianapolis. A group of local high school students has volunteered to help with construction, a

strong public relations move. Eric notices that the high school students are standing around the site simply watching the construction take place. He decides to speak to their advisor, who is excited to teach her students about non-profit organizations and the support that the YMCA provides to the community. However, she has never led a group of students on this sort of expedition and the project manager she had been in touch with is out sick. Eric assesses that the teacher has a low competence in the task of getting the high school students involved because she has never done this before and was expecting guidance, but is very excited and willing to get involved as shown by her passion for her students' learning. He decides to **direct** her in the steps to take to get her students involved in the project.

Toward the end of the day, Eric heads back to his office and notices his executive assistant is struggling to hide the frustrations she is feeling. She is new to the YMCA and has returned to the workforce after taking five years to be at home with her children. Her previous experience has given her the necessary skills to succeed in this role, but she is showing signs of frustration in managing her work-life balance. This feeling has made her reluctant to take on additional projects, as she is uncertain about committing her time to the projects. Eric decides to take the final half hour of their workday to speak with her one on one. He listens to her story and assesses how complicated the projects he has asked her to accept are and what her skills are to accomplish the task. Knowing that she has moderate competence but low commitment to taking on new responsibilities, he decides to take a **supportive** approach. He proceeds to remind her that she was selected for this position out of hundreds of applicants and that she was highly recommended from her previous employer for her incredible work ethic.

Throughout this day Eric as CEO experienced three different scenarios in which he had to adjust his style of leadership. With his senior administrators he felt that due to their high levels of

commitment and competence he was comfortable **delegating** the tasks that needed to be

accomplished in hiring for the new YMCA branch. Next, in showing his support for the first day

of construction, he was able to **direct** an advisor to teach the students about building and

expanding a non-profit organization. Toward the end of the day he **supported** his executive

assistant questioning her competence in the workplace.

A Summary of Contingency Leadership Theory

Contingency theory is a leader-match theory, one that matches leader style to the

organizational context. Fiedler's Contingency Leadership Theory is the most widely recognized

among this group of theories and is the focus of this summary. Fiedler's theory is based on his

study of leader styles in various work situations and their related effectiveness. The study

provided empirical evidence supporting generalizations about which leadership style best

matches certain organizational contexts. According to the theory, a leader's style is characterized

as task-motivated or relationship-motivated. Achieving the desired goal primarily drives the

former while the latter is focused on relationship building (Northhouse, 2013, p. 109-110). The

theory also incorporates the "degree to which the leader can control and influence their

leadership situation" which is determined by three variables that can be measured through

leader-member relations, task structure, and position power (Fiedler, Chemers, Mahar, 1976, p.

26). See Figure 3.

Figure 3. Contingency leadership model

Leader-member relations	Good				Poor			
Task structure	High Structure		Low Structure		High Structure		Low Structure	
Power position	Strong Power	Weak Power	Strong Power	Weak Power	Strong Power	Weak Power	Strong Power	Weak Power
Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Preferred leadership style	Low LPCs Middle LPCs				High LPCs			Low LPCs

(Northhouse, 2013, p.111)

In the top row of the figure, the leader-member relations variable, the most important variable, is described as good or poor and refers to "the amount of loyalty, dependability, and support" the followers demonstrate for the leader. (Fiedler, Chemers, Mahar, 1976, p. 27) The more support from followers, the better leader-member relations are. Task-structure, the second most important variable, refers to the extent to which the goals and related procedures are clear and spelled out (Fiedler, Chemers, Mahar, 1976, p. 28). The clearer the task, the more control and influence the leader has; this is considered high structure. Tasks that are vague involve multiple solutions and alternatives and leave the leader with less control and influence; this scenario is considered low structure. Finally, position power refers to the level of influence the leader has with respect to rewarding or punishing followers, specifically as it relates to status within the organization and compensation. The more a leader has authority to hire, fire, or influence rewards, the stronger the leader's position power (Cruz, Nunes & Pinheiro, 2011, p.14). By assessing these three variables one can determine the leader's level of situational control. In Figure 3, high control situations are characterized by the dotted boxes and include good leader-member relations, high structure, and strong position power whereas low control situations are shaded grey and include poor leader-member relations, low structure, and weak positional power.

To assess leader style, Fiedler developed the Least Preferred Coworker Scale (LPC) which involves evaluating one's least preferred coworker on a bipolar scale of various characteristics such as pleasant versus unpleasant, etc. The scale identifies a score for the leader which is then categorized as low (task-motivated) or high (relationship-motivated). Leaders with low LPC scores are effective in both very high control and very low control situations, categories 1, 2, 3, and 8 as shown in Figure 3. Those with high LPC scores are effective in moderate control situations, categories 4, 5, 6, and 7 (Fiedler, Chemers, Mahar, 1976, p. 5). By assessing the leader's style and the situational variables, Fiedler argues that it is possible to predict the effectiveness of the leader. The following case is an example of how the theory works.

A Case Example of Contingency Leadership

United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon is the eighth person to hold his title, and has been in office since 2007. Six principle organs make up the United Nations System: General Assembly, Security Council, Economic and Social Council, Secretariat, International Court of Justice, and the Trusteeship Council ("United Nations System", n.d.). The Secretary-General oversees the Secretariat and is appointed by the General Assembly with the recommendation of the Security Council, for five-year terms. Unanimously re-elected in 2011, Ban Ki-moon is in his second term indicating **strong leader-member relations** among his colleagues and superiors according to Contingency theory.

As the leader of the Secretariat it is his role to be "equal part diplomat and advocate, civil servant, and CEO," and the other organs entrust him to bring awareness to problems and create plans to address them. In this position he holds **strong position power**, perhaps not in the literal translation of Contingency theory (a leader's influence on a follower's organizational status and compensation) but certainly through the amount of influence his position affords both within the

organization and his constituents. ("The Role of Secretary General, n.d.). His work setting is global and can be described as **low structure** according to Contingency theory due to the complexity of the issues and the multitude of optimal solutions and strategies to achieve them. Yet, Mr. Ban creates structure in this environment by creating action plans such as his thirteen page, five-year action agenda elaborating on the four key points of his current mission ("Working with and for Women and Young People," n.d.).

In his position he is not necessarily empowered to impose or enact his action plans without collaboration within the UN System, and thus his **position power** can be varied in these situations of collaboration and he becomes more dependent on a relationship-oriented style of leadership. Using Figure 3 to guide an assessment of Mr. Ban's leadership style, it appears that he is a middle to high LPC and perhaps moves between task and relationship focuses depending on his position power in a given situation.

Strengths And Critiques of Situational and Contingency Leadership Theories

Situational and Contingency theories contribute to the field of leadership studies most significantly by reminding us that there is more to leadership than the leader alone. The theories account for the situation or context in which one leads as well as the commitment and competency of the follower. While these theories don't offer a complete conception of leadership they offer some components that contribute to the overall field. The strengths and critiques of both theories are summarized here.

Situational leadership is a longstanding theory, developed almost forty years ago it has been used in a variety of leadership contexts ever since. Among its strengths is its widespread recognition and utilization, especially in leadership and management training programs. The theory's practicality and ease of use and understanding is one of its greatest strengths. The

prescriptive nature of the theory is another strength providing guidelines for leaders to address the varying needs of followers emphasizing that each follower is unique and does not respond to one, static style of leadership. This requires leaders to be flexible and adapt to the needs of the follower and the situation. The model of Situational Leadership provides a basis for this challenge. While the theory has many strengths, it can also be critiqued from several perspectives. (Northouse, 2013, p. 92-96)

First, Situational theory does not have a strong body of research support; it especially lacks evidence indicating its efficacy. While the theory has face value when applied to situations, this doesn't mean it explains the phenomenon of leadership. There is little exploration to determine whether the outcome of applying situational theory is any more effective than another theory. And some limited studies have been conducted that question the prescriptions between leader style and follower characteristics outlined in the theory. Similarly, the authors have been criticized for the lack of clarity in their definitions of competence and commitment and how they interact to form the concept of development and the distinctions articulated for the related four levels. Another criticism involves the failure to consider the influence demographic characteristics such as age and gender have on the follower developmental level and the quality of the match to the leader style. While the theory addresses one to one relationships between leader and follower, it does not describe how these concepts can be applied to groups, a more common challenge for leaders in today's environment. (Northouse, 2013, p. 92-96) And finally, it is also unclear whether or not cultural contexts were considered in both the development of the theory as well as its application. Often, leadership theory is based on studies involving Western culture and fails to incorporate a multicultural perspective and influence. This is a limitation in the theory's applicability on a broad level.

Similar to Situational Leadership theory, Contingency theory has several strengths as well as critiques. Just as Situational Leadership theory does, Contingency theory incorporates the follower and considers the context in its perspective of leadership. Contingency theory also has a predictive element in that it prescribes which type of leader will be successful in differing contexts and tries to match the leader to the context in which s/he will be effective. This basis can help develop leadership profiles for certain contexts and be used in hiring decisions when contexts are stable. Contingency theory also emphasizes that leaders are not required to be successful in all situations and contexts and it offers a roadmap for predicting the best matches. And finally, the theory is based on a great deal of empirical research and has stood the test of multiple studies supporting its claims (Northouse, 2013, p. 113-116).

While there is a strong body of research to support the theory, it does not explain why certain styles are more effective in certain contexts. Also, the scale that the theory is based upon lacks face validity, doesn't correlate well with other leadership measures, and involves projection. The LPC scale measures the leader's score by asking the leader to describe another person. These elements invite skepticism despite solid test-retest reliability. Another critique is that in practice, real-life application of the theory is complex, it requires assessing the leaders' style as well as leader-member relations, task structure, and leader position power. These situational variables are not simple to assess and it requires time and patience to do so accurately (Northouse, 2013, p. 114-116). The theory also fails to discuss how culture and social identities influence the situational variables and their related assessment. These questions and critiques limit the practical application of this theory.

Conclusion

When considering the timeline of leadership theory, Situational and Contingency theories add an important component to the evolution of the field. Preceding theories such as Trait, Skills, and Styles approaches focus solely on the leader and ignore what Situational and Contingency invite us to consider, the follower and the context. These are important dimensions of leadership that subsequent theories such as Leader-Member Exchange theory, Transformational Leadership, and Servant Leadership have taken up. While Situational and Contingency Leadership theories have sound criticisms, they do make a solid contribution to our understanding of the complex construct of leadership and how we can practically apply it. For more information about these theories and interactive ways to explore their concepts click here or go to http://situationalandcontingencyleadership.weebly.com/.

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