

An Exploratory Analysis of Four Leadership Approaches

A Literature Review

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## Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to introduce and analyze four distinct approaches to leadership theory. These include the *Traits* approach, *Skills* approach, *Style* approach, and *Situational* approach to leadership. I will analyze all of the aforementioned approaches to leadership theory, and describe the key themes that emerged during the course of the literature review. Furthermore, I will synthesize and summarize the findings, identifying any similarities and differences of each leadership approach.

### **The Trait Approach**

The formal study of leadership started with the introduction of the Trait approach to leadership theory. The purpose of this systematic study was to determine why some people are great leaders, and why others are not. Early on in the study of leadership, it was believed that people were born with specific traits that made them great leaders, and only “great” people possessed them (Northouse 2010). In other words, early scholars believed that leaders were born, not made.

In 1991, Kirkpatrick and Locke stated, “it is unequivocally clear that leaders are not like other people,” (Germain 2012, p. 33). These two researchers and scholars postulated that leaders differ from non-leaders on six specific traits: drive, the desire to lead, integrity, self-confidence, cognition, and their business acumen (Germain 2012). Given this information, it may appear to some that the Trait approach is not particularly useful. If an individual’s personal attributes or traits are primarily fixed and stable from birth, what good is training and development for leaders within the organization? One

might be led to believe that a person's ability to be a great leader is not subject to change, and is rather "fixed," (Germain 2012).

Despite the apparent shortcomings of the Trait approach, it has a century of research to back it up. Furthermore, from this abundance of research, a large amount of data reveals the overall importance of personality traits on leadership effectiveness (Northouse 2010). As a result, the Trait approach to leadership has given us guidelines for what we need to look for if we want to be great leaders.

### **The Skills Approach**

Although the Skills approach to leadership takes a leader-centered perspective, much like the Trait approach to leadership theory does, the Skills approach focuses on specific skills and abilities that can be learned and developed (Northouse 2010). Skills can be taught, and skills and abilities are attributes of leadership expertise (Germain 2012). For example, skills like problem solving, social awareness, and knowledge, are at the core of sound leadership theory, and are also central to the underlying themes of the Skills approach. Fortunately, all of these skills can be learned through leadership training and development.

One of the strengths of the Skills approach is that it's intuitively appealing. Leadership is no longer reserved for the "Elite," or those individuals fortunate enough to be born and blessed with specific traits. On the other hand, since a person's skills and competencies can be developed with the right training, the Skills approach makes good leadership available to everyone, and therefore, more people have the ability and capacity to influence others in a positive way.

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Some scholars choose to criticize the Skills model, because it's hard to predict how differences in social skills and problem-solving skills affect overall performance. Furthermore, a major theme in the model is the importance of individual attributes in leadership expertise. These attributes are "trait-like," even though those who subscribe to this theory might argue that the Skills approach to leadership is by no means a Trait model (Northouse 2010). For example, effective leaders are often ambitious, driven, and outgoing. Some may view these attributes as more "intrinsic" in nature, and therefore, not teachable; however, others believe that "...even though some individuals may be better equipped to assume leadership roles, leadership training may enhance their overall abilities (Germain 2012, p. 38).

### **The Style Approach**

Unlike the Trait and Skills approaches to leadership theory, the Style approach emphasizes leadership behavior. According to Northouse (2010), the Style approach focuses on what leaders do and how they act; in other words, their leadership style. And upon the examination of successful leaders, researchers have learned that leadership style is an important indicator of overall organizational success (Harper 2012).

According to Style theorists, leadership is comprised of two types of behaviors: *task* and *relationship*. Task behaviors help leaders facilitate the accomplishment of organizational goals and objectives, whereas relationship behaviors help team members feel comfortable with themselves, others, and their work environment (Northouse 2010).

It's evident there has been a shift in how leadership has been defined through the years. According to Gupta (2011), specialists in the field have moved from a classical

approach, which tends to be more autocratic, to an approach that is more participative in nature. Organizational culture and workplace relationships are largely dictated by the leadership style of top management, and “... research indicates that leaders who get the best results do not rely on just one leadership style,” (Gupta 2011, p. 35).

Leaders are evaluated by the results they deliver for their organizations, and those results are dependent on their ability to lead and influence others. The Style approach reminds leaders that their actions take place on both task levels and relationship levels. Depending on the specific needs of a given situation, there are times when a leader needs to be more task-focused, and there are times when they must be more relationship-focused (Northouse 2010).

On the positive side, the Style approach to leadership has broadened the scope of research to include the study of behaviors. As a result, we no longer rely on the study of personal traits, attributes, and characteristics exclusively. Furthermore, the approach is reliable and valuable – wide ranges of studies support its findings. On the negative side, research has not been able to validate the impact of a leader’s behavior on organizational outcomes like morale, job satisfaction, and productivity. In addition, it’s been hard for researchers to identify a set of specific behaviors that consistently lead to effective organizational leadership (Northouse 2010).

### **The Situational Approach**

The last approach to leadership theory that will discuss is the Situational approach. The Situational theory attempts to match a specific leadership style to a specific situation or

circumstance (Sims, et al. 2009). The underlying theme is that one type of leadership is more effective in one situation over another (Sims, et al. 2009).

Assuming a leader is able to evaluate his or her employees, and assess their level of competence and commitment, the Situational approach implies that effective leadership will occur when a leader can accurately diagnose a situation, and then match his or her leadership style to it (Northouse 2010). The leader's ability to effectively evaluate subordinates is critical, because personal development is not static, nor is the level of individual development consistent from employee to employee. According to Northouse (2010), employees move both forward and backward along the development continuum.

This notion that a specific type of leadership might be more effective in one situation over another is nothing new (Sims, et al. 2009). In fact, situational leadership "is well known and frequently used for training leaders within organization," (Northouse 2010, p. 94). Additional strengths to the model include its practicality, the fact that it is prescriptive in nature, and that it stresses the importance of leaders being aware of the subordinates' needs, and then adapting their style of leadership accordingly (Northouse 2010).

On the other hand, the Situational approach is backed by limited research; it has an ambiguous conceptualization in the model of subordinates' development levels and how the leader is supposed to effectively match his or her style to them; it fails to account for demographic considerations in subordinates development; and it does not fully address the issue of one-to-one versus group leadership in organizations (Northouse 2010).

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### **Analysis & Synthesis**

Regardless of whether a leader or researcher subscribes to the traits, skills, style, or situational approach to leadership, leaders must get results for their organization. If they don't, their leadership tenure will be short-lived. And results come through people and their productivity in the workplace. This is why it's important for a leadership theory to be able to validate the impact of the approach on organizational outcomes like employee morale, job satisfaction, and productivity. Furthermore, organizations need consistency from their team members. Unfortunately, it's been difficult for scholars to identify a specific approach that leads to effective organizational leadership in nearly every circumstance.

One thing we do know is that there is a positive correlation between leadership behavior, psychological empowerment, and job satisfaction (Li-Fen, et al. 2013). According to Li-Fen, "Leadership behavior has a direct and matchless impact on the work environment, work outcomes and the success of organizations," (Li-Fen, et al. p. 23). What this means for those in the leadership field is this: organizational success improves when leadership improves.

Overall, the public opinion of leadership is not very positive. Furthermore, a large portion of the workforce is cynical, and therefore, less likely to be influenced (Schyns, et al. 2010). Leaders are ultimately responsible for the success and failure of organizations, and are therefore deemed effective or ineffective based on organizational outcomes. And perhaps this is a key reason for some of the unethical decisions that are made by some of today's top leaders. According to Vance, much of contemporary leadership can be

defined as being "arrogant, greedy, over-controlling, out of touch, and clueless," (Schyns, et al. 2010, p. 141).

It's evident that more research is needed. The main question is this: how do we further investigate what constitutes effective and ineffective leadership? Historically, effectiveness and ineffectiveness have been defined by whether or not a leader is successful or unsuccessful in the accomplishment of a goal (Schyns, et al. 2010), but our analysis must go deeper than this. Goal attainment cannot be the only deciding factor in the overall effectiveness of a leader. It's not uncommon for great leaders to miss organizational targets and outcomes due to factors largely outside of their control or personal scope of influence.

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