Revisiting the Contingency Theories of Leadership: Key Features, Meanings and Lessons

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Abstract
In a globalized, widely diverse and ever-changing world, the need for contingent leadership adaptive to the characteristics of the situation has become more insisting than ever. Therefore, this article examines six major contingency theories of leadership with an emphasis on the key features, meanings, and lessons for organizational leadership in various contexts based on decades of research on human behavior and performance. The goal is providing an understanding into the contingency theory of leadership by highlighting the different situational variables related to subordinates, tasks, and organizations and specifying what leader behaviors are most effective under what circumstances. Combined together, the theories investigated constitute a practical reference for helping leaders identify the features and therefore needs of the situation where they function and ultimately optimize their leadership behavior. The diversity characterizing today's organizations at national and international levels has created a need for a flexible approach to leadership, which this article serves to facilitate its understanding and application by providing a critical integrative review making sense of the research findings relevant to how leaders can adapt their behaviors to the situation where they operate.

Keywords
Contingency theories, leader behavior, subordinate performance, situational variables, task/subordinate characteristics

Introduction

The contingency theorists (Fiedler, 1964; Hersey and Blanchard, 1998; House, 1996; Kerr and Jermier, 1978; Yukl, 2010) attach special importance to the role of the situation in the leadership process. They argue that effectiveness is not inherent in any

particular model of leadership but rather contingent upon the situation. In other words, effectiveness is not to be found in any particular predetermined theory of leadership; instead, it depends on the extent to which leaders appropriately understand and address the needs of their respective organizations.

According to Gronn (2009), there is a need for a naturalistic approach to leadership, one in which leaders adjust their behaviors whenever needed to respond effectively to the emergent needs of the situation. In Gronn's (2009: 20) view, leadership needs to be "an adaptive or emergent response to wider environmental and immediate situational challenges that are specific to that context." Adaptive leadership is considered a major contributor to effective leadership because the situation is dynamic in nature rather than static, and therefore a flexible approach in which leaders can respond effectively to unexpected change is required. The need for a naturalistic approach to leadership, i.e. one which is in accordance with the natural habitat of the organization, is also underscored by Macbeath (2009) who insists that context is often vibrant and unpredictable and therefore does not lend itself to any one particular model of leadership. Emphasizing the dynamic nature of the situation, Macbeath (2009: 54) notes that leaders need to be "highly sensitive to a range of contextual factors in a continuing state of flux." Among these factors are sociocultural background, community type, organizational culture and structure, experience and competence, fiscal resources, and bureaucratic and labor organizations (Macbeath, 2009). These variables all combine together to determine the course of action likely to be most effective; as a result, they influence and are influenced by leaders' decisions. As indicated by Hallinger (2003: 346), leadership is "a

mutual influence process, rather than … a one-way process in which leaders influence others."

In their turn, Bossert et al. (1982) confirm that there is no specific recipe for effective leadership. Differences among organizations in terms of the contextual features do exist; consequently, leaders need to embrace an original, innovative, and creative approach to leadership, one which is focused on the exigencies posed by the situation. Based on quantitative studies of effective schools, Bossert et al. (1982: 38) have found that "certain principal behaviours have different effects in different organizational settings." This implies that the potential effects of any particular leader behavior are not fixed but rather variable depending on organizations' structural and cultural characteristics and how they change over time. Attempts to duplicate or wholeheartedly embrace leadership practices that proved effective in some other contexts could result in a waste of resources and cause organizations to lose rather than gain from change efforts.

The underpinning principle of the contingency theories is that "there is no one best style of leadership; it depends upon the situation within which the attempt to influence takes place" (Hersey and Blanchard, 1998:173). The key to effectiveness for leaders is to understand and align their behaviors with the special requirements of the situation in which they work. "The more that leaders can adapt their behaviors to the situation, the more effective their attempts to influence become" (Hersey and Blanchard, 1998: 173-4). Thus, Hallinger and Heck (1996) conclude that it is meaningless to study leadership in isolation from the context where it takes place. Leaders work at organizations with different constraints, resources, and opportunities that they have to

understand well in order to lead effectively. As a result, a flexible approach to leadership molded according to the specific needs of the school is a must for the success of leadership.

In this article, the focus is laid on four major contingency theories of leadership: the LPC Contingency Theory, the Path-goal Theory, the Situational Leadership Theory and the Leadership Substitutes Theory (Fiedler, 1964; Hersey and Blanchard, 1998; House, 1996; Kerr and Jermier, 1978; Yukl, 2010). A common feature among these theories is that they all examine the interrelationships among three major variables: leadership behaviors, situational characteristics, and subordinates' performance. However, the theories emphasize different aspects of the situation, leader behavior, and subordinate performance. When put together, these aspects provide an insight into the different characteristics of the situation that need to be considered and the kind of leader behavior that will be most effective in such circumstances.

The LPC Contingency Model

The Least Preferred Coworker (LPC) contingency model, developed by Fiedler (1964), is premised on the idea that leadership effectiveness depends on the interaction between two major variables: leaders' motivational orientation, and the level of their situational control. Leaders can be either *task* oriented or *relationship* oriented. The level of control they have over the situation hinges on three major criteria: leader-member relations, task structure, and position power.

Motivational orientation is measured using a scale of 16 to 22 bipolar adjectives, known as the Least Preferred Coworker (LPC). The scale elicits leaders' reactions to someone (a boss, subordinate, or peer) who they have worked with at some point in their

lives and whom they least prefer to work with again. A negative rating of the least preferred coworker indicates an emphasis on *task* achievement while a less critical depiction such a coworker reveals an emphasis on *relationships*. Task oriented leaders stress achievement-focused behaviors, set high expectations for subordinates, and show frustration with failure to meet such expectations. Subsequently, they obtain low scores on the LPC scale. When satisfied with how the work is being performed, low LPC leaders start to shift attention towards relationships with subordinates. On the other hand, relationship oriented leaders are less critical of people who contribute very little to the task. Interpersonal relationships with other people hold greater importance; these leaders therefore tend to be tactful, sensible, and supportive in dealing with subordinates irrespective of how well the task is being performed. Attention is turned to task achievement only when strong relationships with subordinates have been established. Relationship oriented leaders receive high scores on the LPC scale (Ayman et al., 1995).

Whether task oriented leaders are more effective than relationship oriented leaders or vice versa depends on the situation or what is termed *situational control* (op. cit.). This latter is defined by Fiedler (1978) as "the leader's sense of influence and control afforded by the situation" (cited in Ayman et al., 1995: 154). The level of influence or control a leader has depends on three major aspects of the situation: Leader-member relations, task structure, and position power.

- Leader-member relations refer to the extent to which a leader has friendly and productive relations with subordinates and the level of commitment and cooperation subordinates exhibit in order to achieve the task objectives.

- Position power points to the extent to which a leader has the power to evaluate subordinates' performance and provide rewards or punishments accordingly.

- Task structure refers to the extent to which there are (a) appropriate operating procedures for achieving the task, (b) clear and specific objectives, and (c) effective ways for assessing performance (Fiedler, 1967).

The first component, leader-member relations, has the most importance. Without mutual support between leaders and subordinates, improvement is most unlikely to occur. The lack of support from subordinates is likely to divert leaders' attention away from the task and towards attempting to control the group. Similarly, failure to establish positive relationships with subordinates may result in mistrust and reluctance to contribute effectively to the task. Second in importance is task structure followed by position power. These are also important aspects of the situation that determine the level of control leaders possess. Strong position powers and well-structured tasks give leaders greater influence over the course of events within schools, whereas limited powers coupled with poorly structured tasks undermine leaders' influence and pose impediments to the achievement of their proposed plans of action (Fiedler, 1967).

The three situational characteristics aforementioned combine together to determine the extent to which a situation is favorable or unfavorable. There are eight levels of favorability known as octants. A situation is *most favorable* (octant 1) when the task is highly structured, and the leader has strong relations with subordinates and strong position power. A situation is *least favorable* (octant 8) when the task is unstructured and the leader has poor relations with subordinates and limited position power. The underlying principle of the theory is that leadership effectiveness is determined neither by

motivational orientation nor by situational favorability alone. Rather, it is determined by the interaction between these two variables, the personal and situational variables. Accordingly, task oriented leaders, identified by their low scores on the LPC scale, are more effective in situations that are either *very favorable* (octants 1-3) or *very unfavorable* (octant 8). In contrast, relationship oriented leaders, associated with high scores on the LPC scale, are more effective in situations that are *intermediate* in favorability (octants 4-7) (Fiedler, 1967).

The central idea behind the LPC contingency theory is that situations differ in their characteristics in the same way that leaders differ in their personal traits. Therefore, a match between the situational and personal variables is needed for the success of leadership. However, such a view of effective leadership has several limitations. According to Yukl (2010), a match between leaders' motivational orientation and the characteristics of the situation or vice versa involves two options, which are both impractical. The first would require leaders to adapt to the situation while the second would entail adjusting the situation according to leaders' personal traits. The problem with the first option is that it is very difficult for leaders to alternate between two different motivational orientations in an effective manner. In addition, switching motivational orientations might be viewed by subordinates as inconsistent and unreliable leader behavior, and might prove to be destabilizing and demoralizing for subordinates and leaders alike. The second option, which involves adapting the situation to fit leaders' motivational orientation, is considered counterproductive and unethical. For example, reducing the favorability of a situation so that it could be in accordance with leaders' personal traits will result in a deliberate misuse or squandering of resources. This is

because such a tactic would entail providing less material and socio-emotional support for subordinates at a time when such support could be easily provided. Another major weakness of the theory is that it does not account for medium LPC leaders who constitute a majority. These leaders usually try to balance the need for accomplishing the task with that for establishing strong and positive relationships with subordinates. Medium LPC leaders have been found to be more effective than either high or low LPC leaders (Kennedy, 1982).

It is important to note that the LPC scale aims at measuring leaders' motivational orientation rather than their behaviors. "Although attitudes and values may be the basis for an individual's behavior, attitude/values and behavior do not bear an isomorphic relationship" (Ayman et al., 1995: 152). This means that individuals' values may or may not be manifested in their behaviors. How one behaves does not always reflect how one thinks or what he or she believes and vice versa. It is, therefore, the situation which moderates between values and behaviors.

The Path-goal Theory

The path-goal theory, first developed by Evans (1970) and later refined by House (1971), is based on three major variables: leader behavior, situational characteristics, and subordinate satisfaction and performance (House, 1996). The theory identifies different types of leader behavior that are suited for different situations, implying that leader behaviors that work well in some situations do not in others. In fact, leader behaviors are important and motivational for subordinates only to the extent that they "complement the work environment and supplement it with what is otherwise lacking" (Jermier, 1996: 313).

The path-goal theory is a dyadic theory that concerns the relationship between two major parties: an appointed leader and subordinates. The leader's major role consists in motivating subordinates to invest maximum effort in the task by offering appropriate socio-emotional and material support. House (1971: 324) states that:

> The motivational function of the leader consists of increasing personal payoffs to subordinates for work-goal attainment and making the path to these payoffs easier to travel by clarifying it, reducing roadblocks and pitfalls, and increasing the opportunities for personal satisfaction en route.

How leaders could influence subordinates' performance and satisfaction is explained through the motivation theory called the *expectancy theory* (House, 1971). According to the theory, work motivation is direven by a rational choice process in which a person chooses the amount of effort to invest in a job by drawing on two major variables: the complexity of the task, and the rewards provided upon completing the task. In this regard, Yukl (2010: 169) points out that:

> In choosing between a maximal effort and a minimal (or moderate) effort, a person considers the likelihood that a given level of effort will lead to successful completion of the task and the likelihood that task completion will result in desirable outcomes (e.g., higher pay, recognition, promotion, sense of achievement) while avoiding undesirable outcomes (e,g., layoffs, accidents, reprimands, rejection by coworkers, excessive stress).

What this means is that how much effort people decide to expend depends on (a) how complex or simple they expect the task to be, and (b) how desirable the outcomes of successfully completing the task will be. The ability of the leader to ifluence performance comes from the fact that he or she can modify subordinates' perceptions about the task and the outcomes expected upon its completion.

A basic assumption of the path-goal theory is that situations differ and therefore different behaviors are required (House, 1996). There are four major types of leader behaviors: supportive, directive, participative, and achievement-oriented. First, a

supportive leader is one who gives special importance to the needs and preferneces of subordinates, particularly their social and economic well-being, and devotes considerable time and effort for promoting a positive climate in the workplace. Second, a directive leader is one who focuses on setting and communicating high expectations, providing guidance, scheduling and coordinating activities, and insuring compliance with the rules. Third, a participative leader is one who encourages wider involvement in decision making, elicits subordinates' ideas and attitudes about proposed plans of action, and takes into consideration their suggestions and insights. Finally, an achievement-oriented leader is one who seeks to increase subordinates' level of performance through setting challenging goals and emphasizing excellence (House, 1996).

The situations where each of these behaviors works best are outlined consecutively as follows. The situational variables that determine the type of leader behavior most likely to increase subordinate performance and satisfaction consist mainly in the characteristics of the task and subordinates. To start with, supportive leadership is deemed effective when the task is stressful, boring, and tedious. A task with such characteristics causes stress, confusion, and lack of confidence amid subordinates. Consequently, emotional and technical support from the leader is a must in order to lower anxiety and increase confidence among subordinates. When the task is interesting and enjoyable and subordinates are confident, supportive leader behavior has little or no effect on subordinate performance and satisfaction (House and Mitchell, 1974).

Concerning directive leadership, it is required when the task is unstructured and complex, subordinates have limited experience, and the rules and procedures for performing the work are general and vague. Taken together, these characteristics result in

uncertainty and role ambiguity, which cause a decline in the perceived probability of success and subsequently lead to disappointment and low morale among followers. Directive leadership is important in this case because it helps reduce role ambiguity and increase the expectancy of success and eventually subordinates' effort and satisfaction. When the task is structured and subordinates are highly competent, directive leadership is perceived to have little or no effect on subordinate performance and satisfaction. On the contrary, directive behavior in such situations is considered unnecessary and could result in adverse consequences (House and Mitchell, 1974).

On the other hand, participative leadership works well with tasks that are unstructured and subordinates who are independent and self-directed. House (1996: 337) maintains that:

> Individuals with a high preference for independence and self-direction will find participative leadership to be valent. Therefore, when task demands are ambiguous and satisfying, for individuals with a strong preference for independence and self-direction, participative leader behavior will be motivational.

The idea is that participative leadership is useful when subordinates are highly creative and competent, which are conditions that make strong direction from the leader unnecessary and even counterproductive. The participative approach also works well with tasks that involve high levels of complexity, challenge, and ambiguity. Tasks of such nature offer subordinates the opportunity to exercise their judgment and utilize and develop their skills (House, 1996).

Finally, achievement-oriented leadership works well with tasks that are unstructured, i.e. complex and nonrepetitive, and subordinates who are achievement motivated (House and Mitchell, 1974). According to McClelland (1985), achievement

motivation is "a non-conscious concern for personal involvement in competition against some standard of excellence and unique accomplishment" (cited in House, 1996: 338). Achievement motivated subordinates are intrinsically motivated; they find enjoyment in tasks that require considerable personal effort, involve risk, reflect advanced knowledge and skills, and provide opportunities for development and feedback. The importance of achievement-oriented leadership resides in the fact that it nurtures subordinates' strong need for fulfilling their potential and stimulates their energy and motivation. For subordinates who are highly motivated and skilled, challenge and opportunities for self-actualization matter most. Support and direction from the leader are unlikely to make a difference in such situations (House, 1996).

The four leader behaviors discussed above and the conditions in which they are deemed most appropriate are undoubtedly essential for an adequate understanding of the different processes involved in the leadership work. The worth of the theory resides mainly in the fact that it explores in specific terms different leader behaviors and attempts to locate the situations in which each of these behaviors is most effective. Yet, the theory has some weaknesses. The first of these is that it depends heavily on the expectancy theory to explain how leader behavior affects subordinate satisfaction and performance (Behling and Starke, 1973; Mitchell, 1974; Schriesheim and Kerr, 1977). In other words, the effect of leader behavior on subordinate performance is viewed strictly from a rational perspective; the emotional perspective to human behavior is ignored altogether. Another weakness of the theory is the assumption that role ambiguity leads to a low expectancy of success and that reducing ambiguity leads to a high expectancy of success, which is not always the case. Clarifying roles for subordinates may reveal that the task is

more complicated and difficult than initially thought and could, therefore, lower the perceived chances for success (Yukl, 1989). Lastly, the theory deals with each leader behavior separately from others. A likely interaction among these behaviors or their relevance to more than one situation is not considered (Osborn, 1974).

The Situational Leadership Theory

The situational leadership theory, developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1977), explores the interaction between two major variables: leader behavior and the situation. The former is focused either on the achievement of the task (task behavior) or on promoting positive relationships with subordinates (relationship behavior). The latter is concerned mainly with the level of readiness subordinates demonstrate in the performance of a task. There are mostly two levels of readiness: low and high readiness; for each of these, a different leader behavior is required (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988).

To explain why a leader behavior works well with a particular level of readiness but not the other, a careful examination of what each behavior entails is required. According to Hersey and Blanchard (1988: 172), *task behavior* involves "spelling out the duties and responsibilities of an individual or group;" it includes behaviors such as "telling people what to do, how to do it, when to do it, where to do it, and who is to do it." Task behavior, therefore, involves providing all the necessary direction for an effective achievement of the task. It is important, however, not to equate directive behavior with unfriendly or uncaring behavior. For *relationship behavior*, it refers to "the extent to which the leader engages in two-way or multi-way communication. The behaviors include listening, facilitating, and supportive behaviors" (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988: 172). These latter all aim at building strong and productive

relationships with subordinates through providing all the necessary socio-emotional support in order to insure improved individual or group performance.

The effectiveness of these behaviors depends on the extent to which they are compatible with the specific features of the situation, most notably the readiness level of subordinates (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988). As mentioned by Jermier (1996), the importance of any particular leader behavior rests on the extent to which it complements the work environment and supplements it with what is otherwise lacking. By the same token, task or relationship behavior is useful only to the extent that it complements the level of readiness among subordinates. Hersey and Blanchard (1988: 173) describe readiness as:

> The extent to which a follower has the ability and willingness to accomplish a specific task… readiness is not a personal characteristic; it is not an evaluation of a person's traits, values, age, and so on. Readiness is how ready a person is to perform a particular task.

To put it plainly, readiness concerns the level of *ability* and *willingness* one has to perform a task. Ability refers to "the knowledge, experience, and skill that an individual or group brings to a particular task or activity" while willingness signifies "the extent to which an individual or group has the confidence, commitment, and motivation to accomplish a specific task" (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988: 174). What may be inferred here is that willingness and ability are different but interrelated. The level of willingness followers have affects the extent to which they use and develop their abilities. Likewise, the knowledge, experience, and skill subordinates have impact the level of commitment and motivation they demonstrate in performing the task. When combined together, these two interrelated elements, willingness and ability, result in three levels of readiness; each requires a different leader behavior (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988).

According to the theory, subordinates can have either low, moderate, or high levels of readiness. Effective leaders are those who successfully align their behaviors with the requirements of each of these levels. Therefore, with low-readiness subordinates, task-oriented behavior is required. Leaders need to provide direction, define roles, clarify standards and procedures, and monitor progress, which are all behaviors that help communicate *what* subordinates are expected to do and *how* they are expected to do it. However, when followers display moderate levels of readiness, leaders can then reduce task behavior and gradually shift towards relationship behavior by providing appropriate socio-emotional support. For high-readiness subordinates, leaders need to reduce both task and relationship behavior. Such subordinates are highly capable, motivated, and independent; they are likely to interpret strong direction or support from the leader as a lack of confidence in their knowledge and expertise. Important to mention is that subordinates' levels of readiness change over time, i.e. increase or decrease, sometimes in unpredictable ways. As a result, leaders need to be vigilant and keep updated about the changes in these levels in order to make the necessary adjustments in a timely fashion and insure the continuity of success within the organization (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977, 1988).

To sum up, the situational leadership theory is undeniably instrumental for an appropriate understanding of leadership. It highlights a central component of the situation, the readiness levels of subordinates, and the leader behaviors likely to be effective with each of these levels. Subordinates have varying degrees of ability and willingness and, therefore, leaders need to approach them differentially. Nevertheless, the theory fails to explain how the specified leader behaviors affect subordinate performance

(Barrow, 1977). Emphasis is placed on behaviors (task and relationship behavior) and how each fits a different level of readiness, whereas how each affects subordinate performance remains unclear. Also, an accurate identification of subordinates' readiness levels is considered extremely difficult (Barrow, 1977). Readiness is an outcome of many different variables, such as task complexity, confidence, ability, and motivation; to combine these variables together in order to determine followers' readiness levels is a very complicated task and a highly subjective process. It is likely that low-readiness subordinates could be identified as high-readiness subordinates and vice versa, and in such a case leader behavior would be inappropriate and counterproductive. Finally, the theory relies on readiness as the single most important situational characteristic that determines the appropriate pattern of leader behavior. The role of other situational variables, such as the job demands, organization, decision time, and colleagues, remains unaccounted for (Yukl, 2010).

The Leadership Substitutes Theory

The leadership substitutes theory, developed by Kerr and Jermier (1978), postulates that, in some situations, formal leadership has little or no influence on subordinate performance. There are certain individual, task, and organizational characteristics that make formal leadership unnecessary or redundant (these are called substitutes) or nullify its effects on performance (these are labeled neutralizers) (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). Specifically, substitutes "render relationship and/or task-oriented leadership not only impossible but also *unnecessary*" while neutralizers "make it effectively *impossible* for relationship and/or task-oriented leadership to make a difference" (Kerr and Jermier, 1978: 395). To investigate how the characteristics of the

situation can function as either substitutes for or neutralizers of formal leadership, an overview of each situational component (subordinates, task, and organization) and how it interacts with leader behavior is provided.

Concerning the first component, there are features of subordinates that serve as substitutes while others as are neutralizers. The former include cases in which subordinates have high-level knowledge and skills which enable them to perform the tasks they are assigned effectively. With such subordinates, close supervision and strong direction from leaders become unnecessary. Leadership is also unnecessary when subordinates are intrinsically motivated, i.e. motivated by their values, needs, and ethics. Subordinates such as these do not need much socio-emotional support from their leaders in order to perform the designated tasks well. In their case, the support that springs from within is much stronger and supersedes that which comes from without. For the latter type of characteristics, neutralizers, they consist mainly of cases in which subordinates have little or no interest in the rewards offered by the leader. The use of contingent reward behavior, therefore, will make no difference on subordinate performance. The lack of interest in contingent rewards has many reasons, one of which is that subordinates might have a strong preference for spending more time with family and subsequently might not be willing to trade such a privilege for any sort of material gain involving more time and effort on the job (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). The conclusion to be drawn here is that leaders need to be well-informed about their subordinates in order to know when and when not their leadership is likely to make a difference.

With respect to the second component, there are several characteristics of the task that function as substitutes for leadership. For example, tasks that are simple and

repetitive make direction and assistance from the leader unnecessary, mainly because the skills required for performing such tasks are easy to learn. Similarly, tasks that are enjoyable and interesting in nature make it unnecessary for the leader to provide even more emotional support for subordinates. Tasks such as these are themselves a source of motivation and, therefore, attempts to provide even more encouragement are unlikely to make a significant difference. Also considered substitutes for leadership, particularly for close supervision, are those tasks that involve an extensive use of technology and provide subordinates with automatic feedback about the quality of the work being done. Tasks of such nature make supervision and direction from the leader redundant, especially because subordinates can easily identify, based on the automatic results of their work, what needs improvement and take the appropriate measures to enhance quality (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). Thus, it is important that leadership has clear and specific goals, i.e. be purposeful rather than random. Leaders need to calculate the consequences of their actions in terms of their worth to subordinates and the performance of the task.

The last component concerns the organization or group and the characteristics of each that act as either substitutes for or neutralizers of leadership. To begin with substitutes, organizations or groups that have explicit and well communicated policies need not much directive leadership. Such policies, often consisting of specific rules and procedures, enable subordinates to understand their roles very well and provide the necessary guidance for performing such roles in an effective manner. Nevertheless, rules and regulations can act as neutralizers as well. This occurs when the rules are inflexible and provide little room for leaders to create, innovate, and respond in a timely fashion to the emergent needs of the situation. For instance, the employment policies enforced by

labor laws may prevent leaders from using contingent rewards in order to motivate subordinates and eventually increase performance. As far as the characteristics of the group are concerned, they comprise mainly group cohesiveness. A high level of cohesiveness among members of the group functions as a substitute for supportive leadership. Members of such groups can receive all necessary socio-emotional support from one another. However, when members take advantage of the mutual understanding existing among them to make decisions that are detrimental to their organization, cohesiveness then turns out to be a neutralizer rather than a substitute. Disapproval of certain decisions made by the leader, for example, could push members to take actions that aim at failing the plan of action imposed and ultimately proving the decision to be ineffective. Proactive involvement on the part of the members of the group is, therefore, prerequisite for the success of leadership efforts (Kerr and Jermier, 1978).

The three situational components and the characteristics associated with each all emphasize one principal idea, which is that leaders need to intervene only when appropriate. Formal, role-based leadership is deemed valuable only when other sources of leadership (subordinates, task, and organization) fail to provide the direction and support necessary for an effective performance of the tasks at hand. When these other sources can provide direction and support, formal leadership is considered unnecessary. Generally, very few organizations have leadership substitutes so strong that they nullify the need for formal leadership altogether or so weak that they result in a total reliance on the formal leader. In every single organization, there are substitutes for some leadership activities but not for others, and effective leaders are those who can provide leadership only when there is a need for it. It is inadequate, therefore, to argue for a set of predetermined

behaviors that can guarantee improvement when implemented regardless of the situation (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). It is more practical to focus on the situation rather than leadership, per se, because in some instances the former can either cancel the need for or nullify the effect of the latter. Attention needs to be paid to neutralizers and how they can be reduced or removed and substitutes and how they can be consolidated. Doing the first would make the situation more favorable while doing the second would result in increased efficiency. Ultimately, both outcomes will enable the leader to succeed in his or her effort to increase subordinate performance.

By underlining the aspects of the situation that act as either substitutes for or neutralizers of leader behavior, the leadership substitutes theory has come to revolutionize the understanding of leadership. While embracing the idea that there is no single best style of leadership, the theory reveals that leadership itself is sometimes unnecessary. That is, leadership is important only to the extent that it serves the needs of the situation and supplements it with what is otherwise lacking. Yet, the theory has not escaped criticism, among which is the lack of distinction between direct and indirect leader behaviors which eventually achieve the same goal (Yukl, 2010). For example, increasing subordinate performance could be achieved either by personally providing coaching for subordinates (directly) or by arranging for them to acquire the desired skills from experienced coworkers (indirectly). A distinction between direct and indirect leadership is crucial in order to determine what form of leadership is unnecessary and whether all or only some leadership is dispensable.

Conclusion

The contingency theories explored in this paper constitute a major development in the conceptualization of leadership. Emphasis is placed on the extent to which leaders appropriately respond to the needs of the situation rather than on any specific individual qualities. The contingency models identify several important aspects of the situation and specify the leader behaviors likely to work best under such aspects. Although different in some respects, the theories all stress the same concept, which is that the success of leadership depends on the extent to which leaders adapt their behaviors to the specific features of the situation. This is grounded in the idea that situations vary and so need leader behaviors. That is, the situation is dynamic and changing in nature and therefore leaders need to develop an original and flexible approach to leadership, one in which they adjust their behaviors according to the specific needs of the situation. The importance of the contingency theories lies in that they describe specifically how leaders need to behave under what circumstances. That is, whether leaders are to be supportive, directive, participative, or otherwise depends on the specific features of the situation related to subordinates, tasks, and organizations at large. To be effective, leaders do not always have to be task- or relationship-oriented, a strategy that could result in adverse consequences. Instead, they can exhibit any behavior seen as fit for the situation where they function. Adjusting one's behaviors to meet the needs of the situation remains at the heart of the contingency theories of leadership.

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