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Leadership Research and Theory

Abstract Leadership theories are plagued by the absence of a definitional consensus among scholars. Many theories have emerged about leadership over the years. This chapter examines and evaluates the different early theories of leadership. The Great Man theory focuses on heroic individuals, implying that only a selected few can achieve greatness. The trait theory conceptualises leadership on the universality of some given attributes. The skill theory focuses on the abilities of a leader. Behavioural theory views leaders based on their actions and behaviour, while the contingency theory concerns the context of leadership. The shortcomings and limitations of these different theories, which have led to newer approaches to leadership, are also examined. Case studies are available to assess the reader's understanding of the relevant approaches in this chapter.

Keywords Leadership theories · Great Man theory · Trait theory
Behavioural theory · Skill theory · Contingency theory

Introduction

Leadership theories are plagued by the absence of a definitional consensus among scholars. Many theories have emerged about leadership over the years, and it might even be said that there are as many theories of leadership as there are leaders (Gill 2011). According to House and Aditya (1997, pp. 409–410),

Almost all of the prevailing theories of leadership, and about 98% of the empirical evidence at hand, are rather distinctly American in character: individualistic rather than collectivistic, stressing follower responsibilities rather than rights, assuming hedonism rather than commitment to duty or altruistic motivation, assuming centrality of work and democratic value orientation, and emphasizing assumptions of rationality rather than asceticism, religion, or superstition.

This suggests that leadership research over time has developed a bias towards the outlooks of the developed world; hence, more research is required, especially from a developing economy perspective, to better understand this phenomenon.

Many approaches to leadership have emerged over the years. The main theories which can be identified are the Great Man, trait, skill, behaviour, contingency, implicit leadership, leader–member exchange, servant, charismatic, transactional, transformational, distributed, authentic and entrepreneurial leadership. Of these theories, entrepreneurial leadership is the least developed in terms of research and theory (Dinh et al. 2014). The timeline during which these leadership theories¹ emerged is illustrated in Fig. 2.1:

In this chapter, a critical overview of the early theories (i.e. Great Man, trait, skill, behaviour and contingency) is therefore presented.

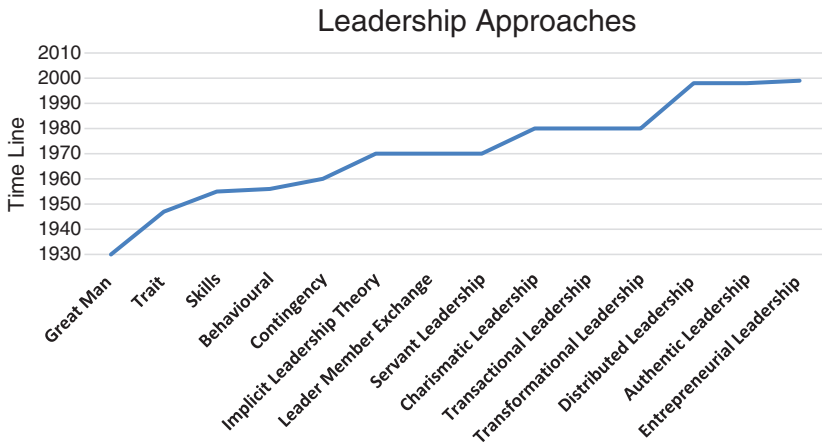


Fig. 2.1 Timeline showing the approaches to leadership

Great Man Theory

The Great Man theory of leadership can be traced to the nineteenth century and before. One of the major proponents of this theory was Carlyle in 1866, whose ‘...fascination with great men of history effectively reduced the role of mere mortals to extras’ (Grint 2011, p. 8). Successful leaders who had shown greatness were examined; hence, the theories were called ‘Great Man theories’. The lives and achievements of political leaders such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Indira Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others have been studied to explain the difference between people who are leaders and those who are non-leaders or followers. A fundamental notion of the Great Man theory is that people are born with traits that make them natural leaders, and only great individuals possess such traits. As stated by Bass and Bass (2009, p. 49), ‘Without Moses, according to these theorists, the Jews would have remained in Egypt; without Winston Churchill, the British would have given up in 1940; without Bill Gates, there would have been no firm like Microsoft’. However, this theory is based on fascination with great men of history and has been criticised for its failure to explore the role of leadership in ensuring business and organisational coherence (Grint 2011).

In addition, this theory presents a gender bias as is seen in its name Great Man theory. This theory holds that history is attributed to men and great men actually change the shape and direction of history (Van Wart 2003). Leadership is irredeemably masculine, and the Great Man is indeed a man (Grint 2011; Spector 2016). Its basic premise is built on the fact that leadership is biologically determined, behaviourally demonstrated and innate to the male gender (Appelbaum et al. 2003). As a result, effective leadership can only be demonstrated by males. Surprisingly, during the period that the Great Man theory was proposed, there were notable female personalities who had shaped history but were overlooked. Typical examples such as Queen Elizabeth and Joan of Arc were heroes in their own rights. By ignoring gender, the scholars in this field created many blanks in theoretical and research designs (Denmark 1993). The exclusion of women in these studies may have been due to the limited number of women in that era that occupied leadership positions. However, times have changed and we now have more women in seats of power and are focal points in many businesses.

There has now been a plethora of studies that have focused on females in positions of authority. Successful female leaders such as Emma Walmsley of Glaxo SmithKline, Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook, Alison Brittain of Whitbread group, Carolyn McCall of EasyJet, Moya Green of Royal Mail, Veronique Laury of King Fisher, Alison Cooper of Imperial Tobacco and Liv Garfield of Seven Trent have formed the bulk of these studies. Studies have also shown that not only are men and women similar, women may be equally effective leaders (Kolb 1999; Shimanoff and Jenkins 1991). Nevertheless, despite studies such as Powell and Graves (2003) and Oakley (2000) that have shown that innate abilities of male and female managers are similar, stereotypes still persist that women are less capable and effective leaders than men (Appelbaum et al. 2003).

The Great Man theory, despite its lack of scientific rigour and veracity, remains relevant. In the world of business, the search for a hero to save failing companies still has a universal appeal (Spector 2016), and occasionally, this saviour is a woman.

Trait Theory

The Great Man theory, which attributed innate qualities to special people, resulted in research into leadership that focused on the personality characteristics of the leader (Wright 1996). Researchers and scholars sought to determine the specific traits that differentiated leaders from followers (Bass 1990).

This theory led to an accumulation of a long list of traits. As stated by Wright (1996, p. 34), 'The problem was not the fact that the research failed to find any relationship between personality and leadership, but that relationships found were inconsistent'. One of the most influential studies on traits was carried out by Stogdill (1948), which changed the course of this approach. In his study, he analysed 124 trait studies conducted between 1904 and 1947 and identified eight traits that differentiate a leader from a non-leader. These are as follows:

- Intelligence
- Alertness to the needs of others
- Insight
- Initiative
- Responsibility
- Persistence in dealing with problems
- Self-confidence
- Sociability

Stogdill proposed that the making of a successful leader is not determined by some particular traits but, rather, the traits possessed must be relevant to the situation in which a leader finds him or herself. Therefore, a successful leader in a particular situation might be ineffective in another. The results of Stogdill's work led many scholars to re-examine their approach in the search for universal traits. House and Aditya (1997, p. 410) point out that, 'It should be noted, however, that the most influential author to address this issue (Stogdill 1948) did not call for an abandonment of the study of traits, but rather for an interactional approach in which traits would be considered as interacting

with situational demands facing leaders'. Mann (1959) went a stage further by examining more than 1400 findings regarding personality and leadership. He drew up a list of traits such as intelligence, masculinity, adjustment, extraversion, conservatism and dominance, all of which had been considered as important, but then pointed out that there were inconsistencies in results of studies showing relationships between leadership and some of the traits such as dominance, extraversion and intelligence.

Many more scholars undertook further studies into traits, and endless lists of traits emerged. Traits such as dominance, high energy, achievement orientation, the need for power, a moderately low need for affiliation, internal locus of control, integrity, flexibility, self-confidence, stability, intelligence, sensitivity to others and narcissism have been deemed as being important to leadership, according to researchers (Bass and Bass 2009; Lord et al. 1986; Lussier and Achua 2001; McClelland 1965, 1975, 1985; Northouse 2010; Yukl 2010). Despite this long list of personality traits, the picture of personal qualities of leadership is still not complete (Gill 2011). There is no evidence to prove that leaders who possess all the identified traits mentioned in prior studies will be effective. In addition, how realistic is it for a leader to possess all traits that have been associated with effective leadership? House and Aditya (1997, p. 410) suggest that, 'One of the problems with early trait research was there was little empirically substantiated personality theory to guide the search for leadership'. The broad range of traits has made them susceptible to various subjective interpretations, and the origin of these lists is not based on strong empirical research. Moreover, the trait approach does not effectively justify the role of leadership in entrepreneurial settings. However, in recent years, the trait approach has re-emerged in the form of charismatic and transformational leadership (that will be discussed later in this book). Despite the aforementioned criticisms, the trait theory still remains a popular theory of leadership due to its intuitive appeal and its use of benchmarks for identifying effective leaders (Northouse 2010).

Skill Theory

Although leadership studies began with the concept of the ‘Great Man’, in which a leader is seen as born and not made, Katz (1955) proposed a shift from a focus on personality traits to an emphasis on skills and abilities of individuals that can be learned and developed (Northouse 2010). Therefore, the major difference between the trait approach and the skill approach was that, unlike the traits (which were said to be innate and cannot be learned), skills or competencies could be developed. Katz (1955) put forward three skills which he argued were essential to being an effective administrator—technical, human and conceptual skills.

More recently, Mumford et al. (2000a) advanced three key leadership competencies, which are problem-solving, social judgement and knowledge skills. The skill approach, unlike the trait approach, provides a broader perspective on leadership. It shifts the focus on leadership being just for a selected few but to a new mindset that everybody can be a leader if they so desire and are ready to acquire the necessary skills and competencies. But although it claims to be quite different from the trait perspective, the major component of Mumford et al.’s (2000a) research on leadership skills was individual attributes which are trait-like; hence, the skill-based approach is still trait driven (Northouse 2010). In addition, most of the skills originated from research in the army neglecting the entrepreneurial context (Mumford et al. 2000a, b). The skill perspective is discussed in more detail in Chap. 4.

Case Study 2.1

Skill Perspective—Apollo 13

Apollo 13 was the third intended mission in the American space programme to land on the Moon. On 11 April 1970, astronauts Jim Lovell, Fred Haise and Jack Swigert blasted-off towards the moon. After almost three days of smooth operations, an oxygen tank on board the

craft blew up, sending the crews on board and at National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Houston-based command centre into overdrive to get the spacecraft back to earth with its inhabitants alive. The explosion triggered a series of dilemmas, one following another, that lasted several more days. They quickly lose oxygen, run out of power and got exposed to dangerously high amounts of carbon dioxide. Intensifying the situation is the fact that these mishaps caught the scientists and technicians at Mission Control by surprise, and they are not sure how to remedy the situation.

Considerable ingenuity under extreme pressure was required from the crew, flight controllers and support personnel for the safe return. However, many people agree that the leadership of Gene Kranz, the NASA flight director who served during the Apollo 13 crisis, was invaluable in ensuring that the crew were able to return to earth safely.

A movie (Grazer and Howard 1995) has been made to portray what happened in space and some quotes found below show some of the leadership displayed by Gene Kranz while in crisis:

Work the problem people

We have never lost an American in space; we are sure as (heck) not going to lose one on my watch. Failure is not an option

I don't care what anything was designed to do. I care about what it can do

With all due respect sir, I think this is going to be our finest hour

As the scientists tried to figure out the solution to the problems, Kranz made them think outside the box. He always believed in the ability of his team. They broke down systems and used different parts to create new tools and systems that saved the lives of the crew. According to NASA (2009), 'The most remarkable achievement of mission control was quickly developing procedures for powering up the command module (CM) after its long, cold sleep. Flight controllers wrote the documents for this innovation in three days, instead of the usual three months'.

Though the mission never achieved its core objective of landing on the moon, many still believe it was successful. Its success is attributed to the fact that the crew members arrived safely, and most importantly every single person at Mission Control was instrumental in showing how team-work and effective leadership averted the greatest space disaster that may have occurred in 1970.

Questions

- Using the skill approach, evaluate the leadership of Gene Kranz?
- What was the most important leadership skill required for his success and why?

Behavioural Theory

The inconsistencies in the evidence for the trait theory led researchers to pay attention to what leaders actually do and not what they inherently possess. The focus of behavioural theory is on how leaders behave towards their subordinates in various contexts (Northouse 2010; Wright 1996).

There have been four pivotal studies on the behavioural theory on leadership. The first one was carried out in the early 1930s at Iowa State University by Kurt Lewin and his associates, which focused on the leadership style of managers (Lewin et al. 1939). In their study, they identified three leadership styles: the autocratic leadership style (which involves telling the employees what to do), the democratic leadership style (which encourages participation in decision-making) and the laissez-faire leadership style (which is a hands-off approach). The second group of studies were carried out at Ohio State University, which were done concurrently with the third group of studies at the University of Michigan (Kahn 1956). Based on the 'fruitlessness' (Northouse 2010, p. 70) of the results of trait studies, the Ohio State researchers decided to analyse how individuals acted when they led organisations. Using questionnaires, they identified behaviours that they grouped into two categories: initiating

structure and consideration (Stogdill 1974). Initiating structure behaviour ‘...involves [a] leader’s concern for accomplishing the task. The leader defines and structures his or her own role and the role of subordinates towards attainment of task goals’ (Yukl 2010, p. 104), while consideration behaviours are ‘...essentially relationship behaviours and include camaraderie, respect, trust, and like between leaders and followers’ (Northouse 2010, p. 70). The Ohio State University researchers viewed these two behaviours as being independent and distinct; hence, a leader could be competent both in terms of consideration and initiating structure behaviours. Their views contrasted with the findings of the University of Michigan researchers, who identified two types of leadership behaviour: employee orientation and production orientation (Northouse 2010). The University of Michigan researchers proposed that both behaviours were of the same continuum and not opposite forms, making the measurement one-dimensional (Lussier and Achua 2001; Northouse 2010); hence, leaders who are more oriented towards production will care less about the needs of their employees, and vice versa.

Studies carried out at the Ohio and Michigan universities laid the foundation for perhaps the most popular model of leadership behaviour, known as the Blake and Mouton managerial grid, and also referred to as the leadership grid (Daft 1999; Northouse 2010). Using the two-dimensional axes of concern for people and concern for tasks or results, leaders are grouped into five leadership styles: authority compliance (9, 1), country club management (1, 9), impoverished management (1, 1), middle of the road management (5, 5) and team management (9, 9). These different styles are described below:

- Authority Compliance (9, 1): This leader has a high concern for production and low concern for people. The emphasis is on getting work done at the expense of building good working relationships.
- Country Club Management (1, 9): This leader has a high concern for people and low concern for production. There is a good working environment but getting the task done is always secondary.
- Impoverished Management (1, 1): This leader has a low concern for people and production. There is a hands-off attitude and minimal effort on building relationships or getting the tasks completed.

- Middle of the Road Management (5, 5): This leader has a middle concern for production and people. There is a moderate effort to accomplish the tasks by creating a good working environment. However, the result is not optimum. It is more like a Jack of all Trades and master of none approach!
- Team Management (9, 9): This leader has a high concern for people and production. There is a very good working environment and relationship between the leaders and the employees but the focus still remains on achieving the organisational goals. It could be termed the Jack of all Trades and master of all approach!

Blake and Mouton (1985) argued that the most effective leader is the team manager who shows high concern for both tasks and people. However, the empirical basis for the grid has been criticised by various researchers (Gill 2011; Northouse 2010; Yukl 1999). As stated by Yukl (1999, p. 34), ‘Studies on the implications of the two behaviours for leadership have not yielded consistent results. Survey studies using behaviour description questionnaires failed to provide much support for the idea that effective leaders have high scores on both dimensions’. In some situations, it may be necessary to adopt a more people-oriented perspective, while in other situations a task-oriented approach may be more effective.

Generally, studies into behavioural theory have failed to consider the situational contingencies associated with leadership. As with the trait research, the behavioural theory is limited on the basis of theory building and orientation (House and Aditya 1997; Yukl 1999). The task and relationship-based categories proposed in earlier studies do not include all types of leadership behaviour. Important behaviours that are relevant to understanding leadership (such as envisioning, leading by example, management of meaning and values) are absent (Gill 2011; Yukl 1999).

In conclusion, the behavioural theory has marked a major shift of focus in leadership research. However, as with the trait approach, it is plagued by inconsistencies in research results, and researchers have not been able to prove exactly how leadership styles are associated with performance outcomes (Gill 2011; Northouse 2010; Yukl 1999). The knowledge of the impact of situation and context in leadership, together

with the inability of researchers to identify universal behaviours associated with effective leadership, led to the evolution of contingency theory.

Case Study 2.2

Leadership Style

Michael O'Leary is the CEO of Ryanair. He built a multibillion pound business and has shaped the airline industry. Budget airlines were not popular until O'Leary took the helm of affairs in 1994 from Tony Ryan who he served as an accountant.

The early Ryanair was not profitable and was run with the ideologies of the typical traditional airline. However, based on the Southwest airline model, he was able to create a new chapter for Ryanair. There was no longer business class. They stopped serving free meals and employees were made to work harder. Even the planes worked more by being used for more flights per day. This low-cost model was new in Europe. In order to reduce their cost, Ryanair uses small and isolated airports. They have been able to develop secondary airports that have not had significant traffic in the past. As a result, they are even able to rename those airports since they are almost the sole users. A good example is the Glasgow Prestwick Airport which used to be known as Prestwick Airport.

Ryanair has been profitable by ensuring that their planes are used to full capacity. They aggressively target customers by offering a price nobody in the industry can match. However, this has come at a cost. According to BBC (2013), employees are not even given pens for free, and O'Leary encourages his staff to go to hotels to get pens. Allegedly, his meetings with senior management are a war zone, and employees have even been reduced to tears. O'Leary denies this in his interview with the BBC (2013) but agrees that there is no 'hand-holding' in his meetings. Despite the aggression and tears, managers still work for him and many believe they have developed better under his leadership.

In ensuring that Ryanair keeps up with its low-cost and low-fare model, Michael O'Leary does not use advertising agencies. He is very

media frenzy and uses any opportunity to get publicity. He seeks controversy as a form of advertising. For him, all publicity is good publicity. Even detrimental court cases are considered good news by O’Leary. BBC News (2009) quotes that O’Leary has said that he wants to charge a higher fare for fat people. He is also quoted to have said he intends to charge for the use of toilets in the plane. However, it is arguable that he uses all these comments to generate free publicity.

Unlike other airlines, Michael O’Leary does not believe that friendliness to the customer is important. His vision is to achieve the lowest fare possible no matter the cost, and so it is not surprising that customers repeatedly complain about the service rendered. Despite all the controversy and complaints, Ryanair is doing very well and is worth 14 billion euros (Independent 2015). Customers are able to fly at very cheap rates compared to some years ago. Family ties are now stronger, and secluded cities are now more popular thanks to Ryanair and of course Michael O’Leary.

Questions

- What is the leadership style of Michael O’Leary?
- What could be the consequence of taking his style too far?

Contingency Theory

Due to weaknesses in past research findings concerning leader behaviours and effectiveness, scholars moved towards a contingency theory in an effort to redress the shortcomings of the behavioural theory (Cogliser and Brigham 2004). The contingency theory proposes that there is no optimum style of leadership. Effective leaders will use different styles based on the contingencies of the situation; hence, a style of leadership which was ideal in the past might not be of great use in the present. This model to leadership has appealed to many researchers, the most prominent of whom is Fiedler, who proposed the contingency theory in the late 1960s (Gill 2011). Fiedler’s (1978) theory suggests that leadership effectiveness depends on how well the personality of the leader

fits the situation or context. Fiedler proposed the least preferred co-worker (LPC) scale, with which the personality of the leader could be measured as being relationship-motivated or task-motivated. Fiedler (1978) suggested that situational favourableness can be characterised by leader–member relations, task structure and position power. A situation is highly favourable when there is a good relationship between the leader and the group, a clear-cut structure, and when the leader has strong position power. On the other hand, a situation is least favourable when there are poor leader–member relations, unstructured tasks and weak leader position power (Fiedler 1997; Gill 2011; Northouse 2010). Based on their findings, it is said that people who are task-motivated (i.e. low LPC score) will be suited for highly favourable and unfavourable conditions, while those that are relationship-motivated (i.e. high LPC score) will be more effective in moderately favourable situations (Fiedler 1978, 1997). The contingency theory proposed by Fiedler does not require that leaders be effective in every situation; instead, only those who are ideal for that situation should be allowed to lead, and a leader with the wrong attributes could cause an operation to fail.

The contingency theory-based research carried out by Fiedler has also been criticised for inconsistent results (Gill 2011; Northouse 2010; Wright 1996; Yukl 2010). It is difficult to validate the findings of the Fiedler model (Yukl 2010), as they are built on the measurement of leadership style using the LPC scale, which itself has not been validated. Although Fiedler's model has broadened scholars' knowledge and understanding of leadership by bringing situation into perspective, it fails to explain why people with certain leadership styles are more effective in particular contexts than others (Northouse 2010). Fiedler's approach concerned task-oriented and relationship-oriented leaders while later research has shown that most leaders have a balance of both behaviours. As stated by Yukl (2010, p. 168), 'The model (and most of the research) neglects medium LPC leaders, who probably outnumber the high and low LPC leaders. Research suggests that medium LPC leaders are more effective than high or low LPC leaders in a majority of situations (five of the eight octants), presumably because they balance concern for the tasks and concern for relationships more successfully'.

In conclusion, the contingency theory has highlighted that situation needs to be considered when assessing leadership behaviour. In a world plagued with change, the idea that leaders in organisations must be able to adapt their behaviour to meet different situations is important. Despite their contribution, early contingency theories possessed many conceptual weaknesses that made these theories difficult to validate and use (Yukl 2011). The ambiguity of findings in relation to the early contingency theories led to a wane in scholarly interest (House and Aditya 1997; Yukl 2011). Scholars turned their attention to other approaches, and these approaches are the emerging paradigms which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter examined and evaluated the different early approaches and theories of leadership. The Great Man theory focuses on heroic individuals, implying that only a selected few can achieve greatness. The trait theory conceptualises leadership on the universality of some given attributes. The skill theory focuses on the abilities of a leader. Behavioural theory views leaders based on their actions and behaviour, while the contingency theory concerns the context of leadership. The shortcomings and limitations of these different theories, which have led to newer approaches to leadership, were also examined.

Note

1. A theory is a "...statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and/or why a phenomenon occurs" (Corley and Gioia 2011, p. 12).

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A Critical Approach to New and Existing Paradigms

Harrison, C.

2018, XIX, 109 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-68671-4