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# Foreword

The Strategic Centre for Leadership, Learning and Development (the Strategic Centre) at the Australian Public Service Commission aims to improve talent management and expand and strengthen learning and development across the Australian Public Service (APS).

The *APS Leadership Development Strategy*, launched in 2011, observed that approaches to developing leadership capability are inevitably informed by the underpinning leadership theory. This paper is designed as a practitioner resource, providing readers with background information on key leadership theories preceding and including those underpinning the *APS Leadership Development Strategy* (2011) and the *APS Leadership and Core Skills Strategy* (2012-13).

Our APS colleagues have a wealth of expertise in the areas of leadership, learning and development, and we welcome your feedback, comments and suggestions.

A note on sources:

The National Library of Australia contains almost 12,000 items on leadership (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013); the Amazon catalogue includes over 45,000 paperback and 20,000 hardback volumes on the topic (Amazon.com, 2013); the journal articles and books on leadership identified by Google Scholar numbers almost 1.8 million (Google Scholar, 2013). With such huge numbers it is unfeasible to review even a small percentage of these sources, and unreasonable given others have completed extensive reviews covering much of this material. Citing approximately 8500 sources, the *Bass Handbook of Leadership* has been particularly useful in completing this paper. Heavy use has been made of this source, although effort has been made to extend and complement Bass’ work where necessary and appropriate.

# Introduction

Thinking about leadership has been a popular pastime for many centuries. This paper traces the development of leadership thought from the nineteenth century to the present day in two parts. The first section spans the period 1840 to 1980, while the second looks at contemporary thinking from approximately 1980 to the present.

The modern study of leadership is generally accepted as beginning around 1840 with Thomas Carlyle’s lecture series and subsequent publication of *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History.* Carlyle’s leaders were born, not made, and the ‘great man’ theory of leadership was born. Francis Galton extended Carlyle’s work, investigating the hereditary background of leaders and assessing the probability of ‘great’ men having ‘great’ relatives. Challenged as unscientific, great man theory evolved into trait theory, which sought to identify those characteristics and attributes which leaders were either born with, or developed.

With the number of studies multiplying and traits including height and birth order being posited as indicators of leadership ability, R M Stogdill’s 1948 critique demonstrated the need to consider factors external to the leader in the formulation of leadership theories. In recognition of this, situational leadership and contingency theories developed through the mid-twentieth century, offering leaders advice on how best to adapt either their own leadership approach or other situational variables respectively, to achieve optimal outcomes.

Approaching leadership through the study of political leaders, in 1978 James MacGregor Burns described two contrasting two modes of leadership – transactional and transformational. At its most simple transactional leadership is the promise of reward for work, while transformational leaders approach their work from a more altruistic perspective, seeking to truly engage their followers and motivate them to higher levels of performance.

Leadership thought has evolved in a less linear manner over the past thirty or so years. Rather than seeking ‘one true theory’ of leadership, work has explored the idea of leadership from different perspectives. These perspectives have included the person-centred idea of authentic leadership as well as the types of leadership approaches needed to work successfully with complexity and ambiguity, and within systems.

Proponents of ‘adaptive leadership’ approach leadership as a practice rather than a hierarchical position, while researchers into complexity leadership explore the operation of complex adaptive systems within bureaucratic organisations. The term ‘neuroleadership’ has been coined to describe the application of the science of neurology to the practice of leadership. These recent perspectives inform the *APS Leadership Development Strategy* (2011) and resulting talent and leadership development activities.

# Theories of leadership – 1840 to 1980

## Trait-based leadership

* Nineteenth century ‘great man’ theories argued that great leaders are born, not made.
* Trait theory argues certain characteristics and attributes are peculiar to leaders.

Trait-based leadership theories comprise two major schools – the ‘great man’ theories of leadership, that great leaders are born and not made, and trait theory– that certain traits (whether inherited or developed) are preconditions for effective leadership.

‘Great man’ theorists saw history as shaped by the leadership of great men (Bass & Bass, 2008). Key writers include Thomas Carlyle and Francis Galton. Carlyle’s 1840 lecture series and subsequent essay *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* painted the great man as possessed of divinely given features from which the masses in his proximity profited (Carlyle, 1841), while Galton studied the hereditary background of great men to determine ‘whether and in what degree natural ability was hereditarily transmitted’ to the extent that he was able to identify the probability of an eminent person having eminent relatives (Galton, 1869). The lasting impact of great man or hero leadership can still be observed over a century later, where responsibility for having the answer to some of the world’s most complex problems are placed on the shoulders of individuals, such as presidents and prime ministers and CEOs.

Subsequent to the ‘great man’ theorists, researchers from the early to mid-twentieth century focussed on traits of personality and character to explain leadership and sought to identify those characteristics peculiar to leaders. Bird’s 1940 list of 79 relevant traits, taken from 20 psychologically oriented studies demonstrates the extent to which traits were considered quantifiable and predictable (Bass & Bass, 2008). Intelligence, drive, integrity and sociability were central to the lists of almost all the researchers studying trait leadership (Khan, 2013).

### Criticisms and challenges

While ‘great man’ theories were criticised for their lack of scientific basis in the nineteenth century, the examination of traits individually and in combination did not fall into general disfavour until the middle of the twentieth century. Stogdill’s 1948 critique reviewing 128 published studies on the traits and characteristics of leaders contributed to this. Paving the way for later researchers, Stogdill concluded that the qualities, characteristics, and skills required of a leader are determined to a large extent by the demands of the situation and that ‘an adequate analysis of leadership involves a study not only of leaders but also of situations’ (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 95).

Stogdill also touched on the relevance of followers to a leader’s emergence and effectiveness, concluding that ‘a person does not become a leader by virtue of some combination of traits; but the pattern of personal characteristics of the leader must bear some relevant relationship to the characteristics, activities, and goals of the followers’. The connection between leaders and their followers would also form part of later thinking.

### Further reading

Thomas Carlyle (1841). *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History.*

R M Stogdill (1948). ‘Personal factors associated with leadership: A survey of the literature’, *The Journal of Psychology*, 25: 35-71.

## Situational leadership

* The Hersey-Blanchard situational leadership theory matches leadership style with employee experience.
* The Vroom-Yetton contingency model recommends decision-making styles based on situational variables.

The relationship between leaders and followers was central to the situational leadership theories which emerged as trait theory fell into disfavour. The most prominent of these are the Hersey-Blanchard situational leadership theory and the Vroom-Yetton contingency model of decision making.

Hersey and Blanchard’s 1969 life cycle theory of leadership (later renamed situational leadership theory) was based on an interpretation of existing empirical research. They propose that different leadership styles be employed depending on the situation, as defined by both the orientation of the manager (either task or relations focussed) and the maturity (or experience) of the employee. In this model the most effective leadership matches the leader’s orientation with the subordinate’s maturity, beginning with ‘telling’ or directing newly appointed or less experienced employees in their tasks, to ‘selling’ or coaching employees with more experience, through to ‘participating’ or supporting, where managers engage employees’ maturity and knowledge to complete tasks. The final style, ‘delegating’, recognises that ‘fully mature subordinates work best when leaders delegate what needs to be done’ (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 517).

In the mid-1970s Vroom and Yetton used rigorous deduction and support from controlled empirical studies and experiments to develop a model to assist leaders to determine the most effective approach to decision making. Their model suggests the leadership decision style most conducive to effectiveness depends on the characteristics of the situation, and on whether a high-quality decision or subordinate acceptance of the decision is the leader’s primary goal. Leaders work through a series of questions resulting in a recommended decision-making style ranging from directive to consultative, and on to participative decision making. A final style, delegative, was added later. Later revisions also encouraged reflection on past decisions as part of the process (Bass & Bass, 2008).

### Criticisms and challenges

The dominant situational leadership models have been challenged on a variety of fronts. The Hersey-Blanchard model is criticized because of the lack of internal consistency of its measures, its conceptual contradictions, and its ambiguities. Graeff argues that the model appears to have no theoretical or logical justification, while Blake and Mouton maintain that Hersey and Blanchard misinterpreted the initial empirical evidence (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Studies have found that in certain situations the leadership behaviour prescribed by both the Hersey-Blanchard and Vroom-Yetton models can be detrimental to a group’s efficiency and subordinates’ satisfaction (Bass & Bass, 2008). In a practical sense, the Vroom-Yetton model is less a cohesive leadership theory than a potentially useful tool for weighing up situational factors to find an appropriate decision making approach, while the Hersey-Blanchard model assumes a direct and individual relationship between a leader and a follower, a rare situation in modern organisations.

### Further reading

Paul Hersey, Kenneth H Blanchard & Dewey E Johnson (2012 [1977]). *Management of Organizational Behaviour*.

Victor H Vroom and Philip W Yetton (1973). *Leadership and Decision-Making*.

## Contingency theory

* Contingency theory focusses on adapting situational variables to better suit a leader’s style.

Contingency theorists agree that leadership theories must take into account the situation in which leaders operate. The best known contingency theory, Fred Fiedler’s ‘Contingency Model’, assumes a leader’s preferred style is effectively set, and suggests adapting situational elements to achieve better outcomes.

Tested through a variety of field studies, the model’s basic premise is that ‘the performance of interacting groups is contingent upon the interaction of leadership styles and the favourability of the situation for the leader’ (Mitchell, et al., 1970). The leader’s style (defined as either task or relations oriented) is measured using a scale called the ‘Least Preferred Co-worker Scale’ (LPC) in which leaders rate the co-worker they have least enjoyed working with on a variety of factors. A high score indicates a relations-orientated leader, a low score indicates a leader more concerned with task performance (Mitchell, et al., 1970). The rationale behind this is that relations oriented leaders are more inclined to view individuals with whom they least enjoyed working in more positive terms than task oriented leaders (Bass & Bass, 2008). The second element of the model is the ‘situational favourableness dimension’, which takes into account three factors: the degree of support and cooperation offered by the followers; whether the task is structured or unstructured; and the leader’s formal authority to direct or reward followers (Chemers, 2000). In combination, these factors result in eight types of situation which, according to the contingency model, differ in the degree to which a leader can influence and control group members (Mitchell, et al., 1970).

According to Fiedler’s model a situation is favourable to the leader if the leader is esteemed by the group; if the task is structured; and if the leader has legitimacy and power by virtue of his or her position. The *task oriented* leader is most likely to be effective in situations that are *most* favourable or *most* unfavourable to him or her. The *relations oriented* leader is most likely to be effective in situations between the two extremes. Fiedler’s research and theory suggests that instead of developing adaptable leaders, the leader ought to be placed situations best suited to them, and failing that, situations ought to be manipulated to suit a leader’s orientation (Bass & Bass, 2008). Possible changes include varying the structure of the task or work to improve leader-member relations. Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the eight situations and the most effective leader for each.

| Situation | Leader-Member Relations | Task Structure | Leader's Position Power | Most Effective Leader |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Good | Structured | Strong | Task-oriented |
| 2 | Good | Structured | Weak | Task-oriented |
| 3 | Good | Unstructured | Strong | Task-oriented |
| 4 | Good | Unstructured | Weak | Relations-oriented |
| 5 | Poor | Structured | Strong | Relations-oriented |
| 6 | Poor | Structured | Weak | Relations-oriented |
| 7 | Poor | Unstructured | Strong | Relations-oriented |
| 8 | Poor | Unstructured | Weak | Task-oriented |

Figure 2: Breakdown of situations and most effective leader style for each

### Criticisms and challenges

Fiedler’s model has been criticised for assuming leadership style is fixed and for suggesting that situations be manipulated rather than leaders adapting their natural style. In terms of the model itself, Mitchell et al cite a number of studies querying the interpretation of high and low LPC scores correlating with people versus task orientation and note that even under the best circumstances, the LPC scale has only about a 50 per cent reliable variance (Mitchell, et al., 1970).

### Further reading

Fred Fiedler (1967). *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness*.

## Transactional leadership and transformational leadership

* Transactional leadership views leadership in terms of an exchange between leader and follower. At its most basic this transaction involves the exchange of reward for work.
* Transformational leaders seek to raise followers’ consciousness about issues of consequence and subsequently transform followers into leaders themselves.

Based on his observations of political leaders; JM Burns’ 1978 book, *Leadership*, contrasts transactional leadership with transformational leadership. Transactional leadership describes a relationship in which the leader initiates an exchange of ‘valued things’ which motivate and bind followers to the leader (Goethals, 2005). At its most basic, transactional leadership is the exchange of reward for work – rewards could be psychological or material in nature (Bass & Bass, 2008). Transactional leadership also promotes compliance through threat of punishment. Sims and Lorenzi comment that ‘effective leadership reinforces desired followers’ behaviour and eliminates undesired follower behaviour through providing or denying social, symbolic or material rewards and punishments’ (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 366).

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, ‘originates in the personal values and beliefs of leaders, not in an exchange of commodities between leaders and followers’ (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987, pp. 649-650). A transforming leader:

1. raises the followers’ level of consciousness about the importance and value of designated outcomes and ways of reaching them;
2. gets the followers to transcend their own self-interests for the sake of the team, organisation or the larger polity; and
3. raises the followers’ level of need from lower-level concerns for safety and security to higher-level needs for achievement and self-actualisation (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 619).

Rather than operate in one style or the other, Bass proposes that transformational leadership can augment the effects of transactional leadership, citing Presidents Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy as examples of leaders comfortable swapping between styles (Bass & Bass, 2008).

### Criticisms and challenges

Critics of transactional leadership point out that rewards motivate only at a base level and produce poorer results where higher level thinking is needed (Bass & Bass, 2008). While exchanges of higher quality goods (i.e. emotional resources) may improve outcomes, approaching leader-follower relationships from a purely transactional perspective is likely to be limiting in the long term.

The main challenge for transformational leadership is that despite being conceived as morally positive, the intentions of transformational leaders cannot be guaranteed which could lead to abuse of power in the hands of a skilled operator. The suggestion that ‘there are pseudo versus authentic transformational leaders’ led to research into authentic leadership (Avolio, et al., 2009, p. 423).

### Further reading

James MacGregor Burns (1978). *Leadership*.

# Contemporary thinking on leadership

The last thirty years has seen leadership thought evolve in a less linear manner. Rather than seeking ‘one true theory’ of leadership, contemporary thinking has explored the idea of leadership from different perspectives. These contemporary concepts of leadership inform the *APS Leadership Development Strategy* (2011) and resulting talent and leadership development activities.

## Authentic leadership

* Authentic leadership focuses on transparent and ethical leader behaviour and encourages open sharing of information needed to make decisions while accepting followers’ inputs (Avolio, et al., 2009).

Broad interest in authentic leadership was prompted by the release of Bill George’s *Authentic Leadership* in 2003. For George ‘authentic leadership results from knowing yourself - your strengths and weaknesses – by understanding your unique life story and the crucibles you have experienced’ (George, 2012, p. 313). While various definitions of authentic leadership have been developed, Avolio, et al, suggest there is general agreement that the following are key components of authentic leadership:

* *Balanced processing*—that is, ‘objectively analysing relevant data before making a decision’.
* *Internalized moral perspective—* that is, ‘being guided by internal moral standards, which are used to self-regulate one’s behaviour’.
* *Relational transparency*—that is, ‘presenting one’s authentic self through openly sharing information and feelings as appropriate for situations’.
* *Self-awareness*—that is, a ‘demonstrated understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses, and the way one makes sense of the world’ (2009).

### Criticisms and challenges

As a relatively recent addition to leadership’s theoretical landscape, significant criticisms of authentic leadership have not yet arisen. Proponents of authentic leadership do agree that additional work on defining and measuring authentic leadership is necessary. To discover whether authentic leadership is a foundation for good leadership, researchers suggest there is a need to ‘to examine how authentic leadership is viewed across situations and cultures’ (Avolio, et al., 2009, p. 424).

### Further reading

Bruce Avolio, Fred Walumbwa & Todd Weber, (2009). ‘Leadership: Current Theories, Research and Future Directions’ in *Annual Review of Psychology,* Volume 60.

Bill George, (2003). *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the secrets to creating lasting value*.

## Adaptive leadership

* For proponents of adaptive leadership, leadership is a practice, not a position.
* Adaptive leadership focuses on leadership as a practice to be used in situations without known solutions.

Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues argue that adaptive leadership is a practice not a theory, defining it as the ‘practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive’ (Heifetz, et al., 2009, p. 14). It is a ‘distributed leadership’ model, which means leadership can be displayed by people across an organisation, not only by those in senior positions or management roles.

Heifetz et al view leadership and management as distinct but important behaviours that complement each other as part of a broader system of action. Management (authority) is best used for technical challenges, problems – routine and complex – where the solution can be found provided you have access to people with the appropriate expertise. Management is about coping with complexity, while leadership is about coping with adaptive challenges that require adaptive change.

Adaptive challenges are those where there is ‘a gap between aspirations and operational capacity that cannot be closed by the expertise and procedures currently in place’ (Creelman, 2009, p. 1), they are systemic and have no ready answers. Adaptive change is uncomfortable; it challenges our most deeply held beliefs and suggests that deeply held values are losing relevance, bringing to the surface legitimate but competing perspectives or commitments. This means that adaptive challenges require a different form of leadership behaviour: adaptive leaders do not provide the answers (and do not equate leadership with expertise) and accept that a degree of disequilibrium is needed to sustain adaptive change (rather than minimising conflict and discomfort).

Core to adaptive work are three activities:

1. Observing events and patterns, taking in this information as data without forming judgements or making assumptions about the data’s meaning;
2. Tentatively interpreting observations by developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on, and at the same time, recognising that hypotheses are simply that - hypotheses; and
3. Designing interventions based on your observations and interpretations in the service of making progress on the adaptive challenge. (Heifetz, et al., 2009)

*The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Heifetz, et al., 2009) was published as a ‘field guide’ for learning and developing adaptive leadership skills. The authors suggest that ‘practicing adaptive leadership is difficult on the one hand and profoundly meaningful on the other’, while warning that ‘it is not something you should enter into casually’ (Heifetz, et al., 2009, p. 41). “*Leadership, when seen in this light, requires a learning strategy … The adaptive demands of our time require leaders who take responsibility without waiting for revelation or request. One can lead with no more than a question in hand.”* (Heifetz & Laurie, 2011, p. 78).

### Criticisms and challenges

Adaptive leadership has been criticised for failing to conform to traditional views of ‘the leader’, with suggestions that it would be better described as facilitation or catalysing rather than ‘leading’ (McCrimmon, n.d.). McCrimmon (n.d.) also argues that not all leadership occurs in the context of a problem; that leadership can occur without leaders and followers necessarily working together to solve a problem (i.e. action taken by one person can influence others); and that change can sometimes be easily made without confronting an adaptive challenge.

The disconnect between what has come to be expected of a leadership theory versus the principles adaptive leadership promotes appears to arise from a failure to appreciate that Heifetz is not advocating the use of adaptive leadership at all times and is instead offering a set of tools and principles that can be applied to work through specific challenges and periods of change.

### Further reading

Ronald Heifetz (1994). *Leadership without Easy Answers*.

Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow & Marty Linsky, (2009). *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership; Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World.*

Ronald Heifetz & Donald Laurie (2011). The Work of Leadership. In *HBR’s 10 Must Reads: On Leadership*, (pp57-78).

## Neuroleadership

* Neuroleadership applies neuroscientific findings to the field of leadership.

Neuroleadership aims to ‘improve leadership effectiveness … by developing a science for leadership and leadership development that directly takes into account the physiology of the mind and the brain’ (Ringleb & Rock, 2008). Advances in imaging techniques are enabling scientists to understand how different parts of the brain activate in response to certain stimuli. As an example, awareness of physiological reasons why change processes are so often unsuccessful (due, in part, to the fact that change provokes sensations of physiological discomfort) means approaches to change can be developed taking into account these reactions (Rock & Schwartz, 2006).

There is ongoing work to apply findings from neuroscience to leadership, especially in the areas of decision making and problem solving, emotional regulation, collaborating with others and facilitating change (Ringleb, et al., 2012).

### Criticisms and challenges

In the context of leadership thought, neuroleadership stands apart as a tool rather than a theory. Presented as a subfield within the general field of leadership study, advocates suggest reframing traditional leadership and leadership development theories through the lens of neuroscience (Ringleb & Rock, 2008; Rock & Ringleb, 2009).

### Further reading

David Rock & Jeffrey Schwartz ( 2006). ‘The Neuroscience of Leadership’ in *Strategy + Business,* Issue 43.

## Complexity leadership

* Complexity leadership applies concepts of complexity theory to the study of leadership.

Complexity leadership responds to the suggestion that many twentieth century models of leadership fail to capture the leadership dynamic of organisations operating in today’s knowledge driven economy, having been designed to accommodate more traditional hierarchical structures (Lichtenstein, et al., 2006). Complexity leadership applies the concepts of complexity theory to the study of leadership, and considers leadership within the framework of a complex adaptive system (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007). A complex adaptive system is composed of ‘interdependent agents who are bonded in a cooperative dynamic by common goals, outlook, need, etc. They are changeable structures with multiple, overlapping hierarchies, and … are linked with one another in a dynamic, interactive network’ (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007).

Complexity leadership theory explains how complex adaptive systems operate within bureaucratic organisations and identifies three leadership roles to explore: adaptive (e.g., engaging others in brainstorming to overcome a challenge), administrative (e.g., formal planning according to doctrine), and enabling (e.g., minimizing the constraints of an organizational bureaucracy to enhance follower potential) (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007). These three leadership functions are intertwined, with the enabling leadership function helping ameliorate the tensions between adaptive and administrative leadership (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2007). Importantly, complexity leadership theory suggests that effective leadership does not necessarily reside within a leader’s actions and proposes that ‘leadership is an emergent event, an outcome of relational interactions among agents’ (Lichtenstein, et al., 2006).

### Criticisms and challenges

The challenge for complexity leadership theory is that the level of analysis is different to other leadership thinking. As noted by Avolio, et al ‘one of the core propositions of complexity leadership theory is that “much of leadership thinking has failed to recognize that leadership is not merely the influential act of an individual or individuals but rather is embedded in a complex interplay of numerous interacting forces” (Uhl-Bien et al. 2007, p. 302)’ (2009, p. 431). This complexity makes the study of this form of leadership particularly difficult, and poses challenges for the individual seeking to apply this thinking to their own leadership practice.

### Further reading

Mary Uhl-Bien, Russ Marion & Bill McKelvey, (2007). ‘Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era’ in *The Leadership Quarterly* 18:4.

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Ringleb, A. H., Rock, D. & Ancona, C., 2012. NeuroLeadership in 2011 and 2012. *NeuroLeadership Journal,* Volume 4.

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