Situational (Contingency) Approaches to Leadership

by Sophia

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn to define the situational perspectives on leadership. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Situational Leadership

As early as 1948, Ralph Stogdill stated that "the qualities, characteristics, and skills required in a leader are determined to a large extent by the demands of the situation in which he is to function as a leader"(Stogdill, 1948). In addition, it had been observed that two major leader behaviors, initiating structure and consideration, didn't always lead to equally positive outcomes. That is, there are times when initiating structure results in performance increases and follower satisfaction, and there are times when the results are just the opposite. Contradictory findings such as this lead researchers to ask "Under what conditions are the results positive in nature?" and "When and why are they negative at other times?" Obviously, situational differences and key contingencies are at work.

Several theories have been advanced to address this issue. These are Fiedler's contingency theory of leadership, the path-goal theory of leader effectiveness, Hersey and Blanchard's life cycle theory, cognitive resource theory, the decision tree, and the decision process theory (House & Aditya, 1997). In this lesson, we explore two of the better-known situational theories of leadership, Fred Fiedler's contingency model and Robert J. House's path-goal theory. Victor Vroom, Phillip Yetton, and Arthur Jago's decision tree model also applies.

2. Fiedler's Contingency Model

One of the earliest, best-known, and most controversial situation-contingent leadership theories was set forth by Fred E. Fiedler from the University of Washington (Fiedler & Chemers, 1974). This theory is known as the **contingency theory of leadership**. According to Fiedler, organizations attempting to achieve group effectiveness through leadership must assess the leader according to an underlying trait, assess the situation faced by the leader, and construct a proper match between the two.

🗎 TERM TO KNOW

Contingency Theory of Leadership

A theory advanced by Dr. Fred E. Fiedler that suggests that different leadership styles are effective as a function of the favorableness of the leadership situation least preferred.

2a. The Leader's Trait

In Fiedler's model, leaders are asked about their **least-preferred coworker (LPC)**, the person with whom they *least* like to work. The most popular interpretation of the LPC score is that it reflects a leader's underlying disposition toward others—for example: pleasant/unpleasant, cold/warm, friendly/unfriendly, and untrustworthy/trustworthy. (You can examine your own LPC score by completing the LPC self-assessment on the following page.)

Fiedler states that leaders with high LPC scores are *relationship-oriented*—they need to develop and maintain close interpersonal relationships. They tend to evaluate their least-preferred coworkers in fairly favorable terms. Task accomplishment is a secondary need to this type of leader and becomes important only after the need for relationships is reasonably well-satisfied. In contrast, leaders with low LPC scores tend to evaluate the individuals with whom they least like to work fairly negatively. They are *task-oriented people*, and only after tasks have been accomplished are low-LPC leaders likely to work on establishing good social and interpersonal relations.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Least-preferred Coworker (LPC)
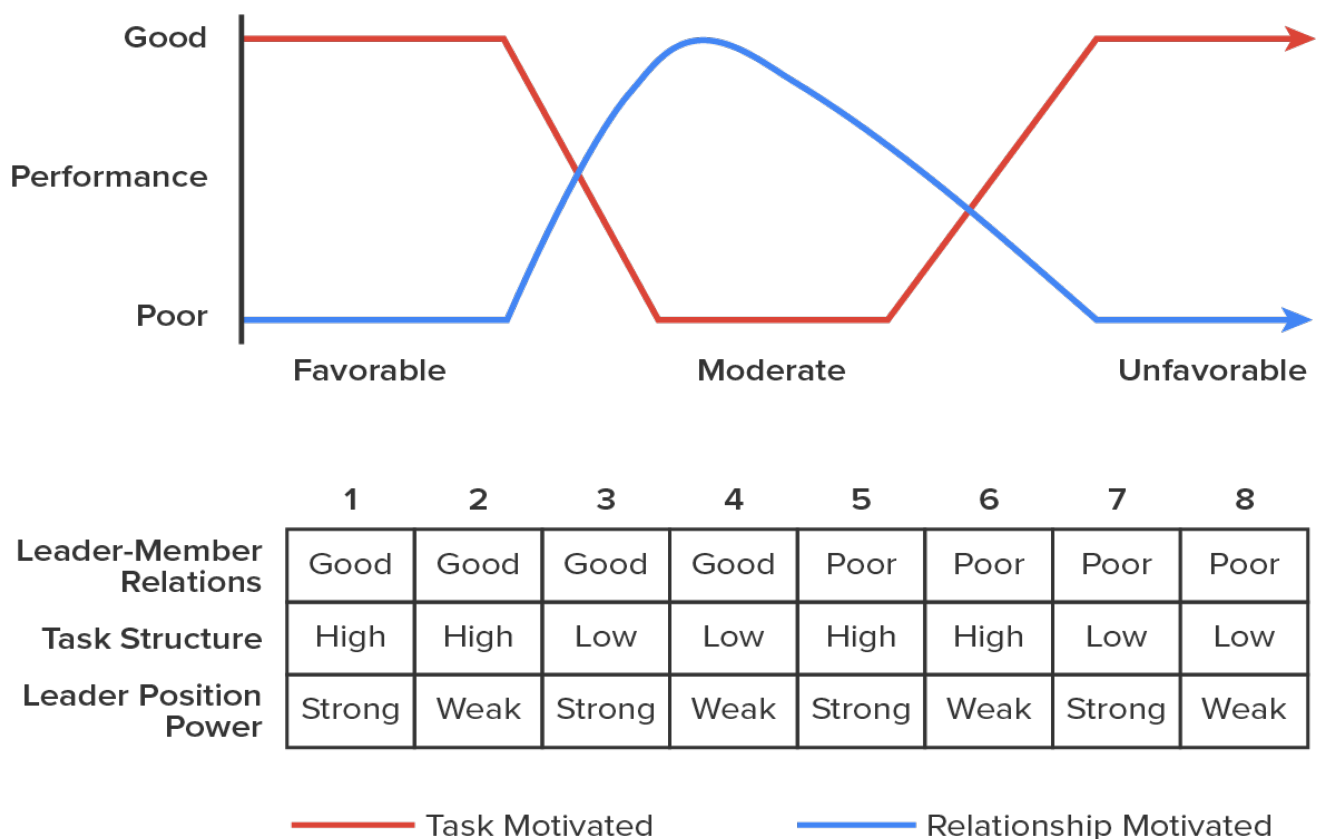
The person with whom the leader least likes to work.

2b. The Situational Factor

Some situations favor leaders more than others do. To Fiedler, situational favorableness is the degree to which leaders have control and influence and therefore feel that they can determine the outcomes of a group interaction (Fiedler, 1976). Several years later, Fiedler changed his situational factor from situational favorability to **situational control**—where situational control essentially refers to the degree to which a leader can influence the group process (House & Aditya, 1997).

Three factors work together to determine how favorable a situation is to a leader. In order of importance, they are:

1. *Leader-member relations*—the degree of the group's acceptance of the leader, their ability to work well together, and members' level of loyalty to the leader.
2. *Task structure*—the degree to which the task specifies a detailed, unambiguous goal and how to achieve it
3. *Position power*—a leader's direct ability to influence group members.

The situation is most favorable for a leader when the relationship between the leader and group members is good, when the task is highly structured, and when the leader's position power is strong (cell 1 in the following diagram). The least favorable situation occurs under poor leader-member relations, an unstructured task, and weak position power (cell 8).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Leader-Member Relations	Good	Good	Good	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor
Task Structure	High	High	Low	Low	High	High	Low	Low
Leader Position Power	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak

Source: Adapted from F. E. Fiedler and M. M. Chemers. 1974. Leadership and effective management. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Situational Control

The degree to which a leader can influence the group process.

2c. Leader-Situation Matches

Some combinations of leaders and situations work well; others do not. In search of the best combinations, Fiedler examined a large number of leadership situations. He argued that most leaders have a relatively unchangeable or dominant style, so organizations need to design job situations to fit the leader (Fiedler, 1965).

While the model has not been fully tested and tests have often produced mixed or contradictory findings (Chemers & Skrzypek, 1972), Fiedler's research indicates that relationship-oriented (high-LPC) leaders are much more effective under conditions of intermediate favorability than under either highly favorable or highly unfavorable situations. Fiedler attributes the success of relationship-oriented leaders in situations with intermediate favorability to the leader's nondirective, permissive attitude; a more directive attitude could lead to anxiety in followers, conflict in the group, and a lack of cooperation.

For highly favorable and unfavorable situations, task-oriented leaders (those with a low LPC) are very effective. As tasks are accomplished, a task-oriented leader allows the group to perform its highly structured tasks without imposing more task-directed behavior. The job gets done without the need for the leader's direction. Under unfavorable conditions, task-oriented behaviors, such as setting goals, detailing work methods, and guiding and controlling work behaviors, move the group toward task accomplishment.

As might be expected, leaders with mid-range LPC scores can be more effective in a wider range of situations than high- or low-LPC leaders (Dunham, 1984). Under conditions of low favorability, for example, a middle-LPC leader can be task-oriented to achieve performance, but show consideration for and allow organizational members to proceed on their own under conditions of high situational favorability.

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3. The Path-Goal Theory

Robert J. House and Martin Evans, while on the faculty at the University of Toronto, developed a useful leadership theory. Like Fiedler's, it asserts that the type of leadership needed to enhance organizational effectiveness depends on the situation in which the leader is placed. Unlike Fiedler, however, House and Evans focus on the leader's observable behavior. Thus, managers can either match the situation to the leader or modify the leader's behavior to fit the situation.

The model of leadership advanced by House and Evans is called the **path-goal theory of leadership** because it suggests that an effective leader provides organizational members with a *path* to a valued *goal*. According to House, the motivational function of the leader consists of increasing personal payoffs to organizational members 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 (House, 1971).

Effective leaders therefore provide rewards that are valued by organizational members. These rewards may be pay, recognition, promotions, or any other item that gives members an incentive to work hard to achieve goals. Effective leaders also give clear instructions so that ambiguities about work are reduced and followers understand how to do their jobs effectively. They provide coaching, guidance, and training so that followers can perform the task expected of them. They also remove barriers to task accomplishment, correcting shortages of materials, inoperative machinery, or interfering policies.

> 🗎 **TERM TO KNOW**
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> **Path-Goal Theory of Leadership**
> A theory that posits that leadership is path- and goal-oriented, suggesting that different leadership styles are effective as a function of the task confronting the group.

3a. An Appropriate Match

According to the path-goal theory, the challenge facing leaders is basically twofold. First, they must analyze situations and identify the most appropriate leadership style.

Second, leaders must be flexible enough to use different leadership styles as appropriate. To be effective, leaders must engage in a wide variety of behaviors. Without an extensive repertoire of behaviors at their disposal, a leader's effectiveness is limited (Hoojiberg, 1996). All team members will not, for example, have the same need for autonomy. The leadership style that motivates organizational members with strong needs for autonomy (participative leadership) is different from that which motivates and satisfies members with weaker autonomy needs (directive leadership). The degree to which leadership behavior matches situational factors will determine members' motivation, satisfaction, and performance as shown in the following diagram.

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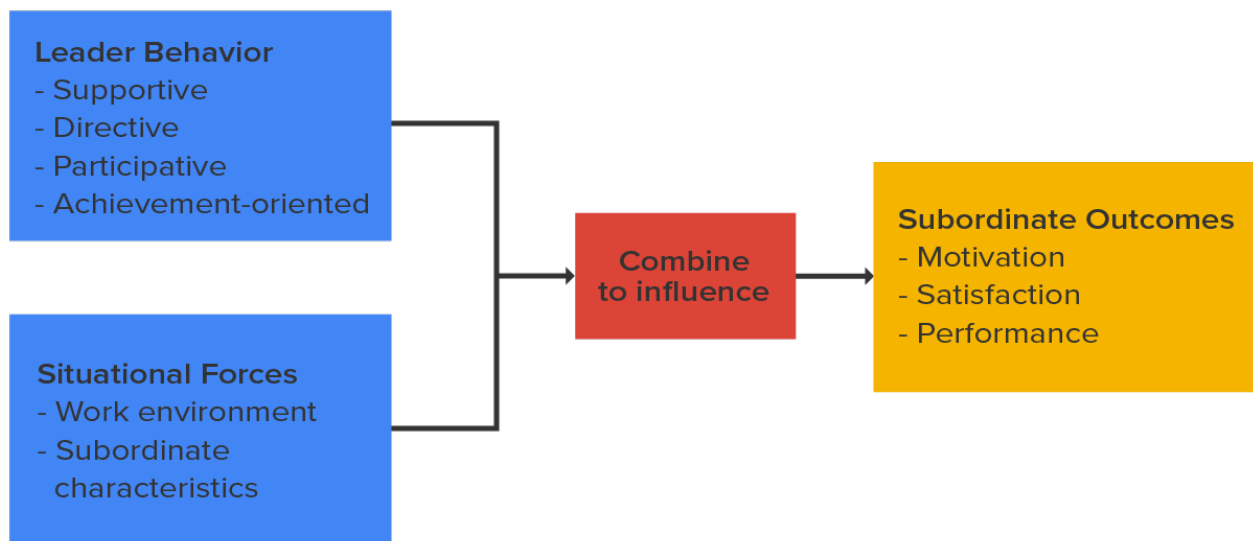
4. Cross-Cultural Context

Gabriel Bristol, the CEO of Intelifluence Live, a full-service customer contact center offering affordable inbound customer service, outbound sales, lead generation and consulting services for small to mid-sized businesses, notes "diversity breeds innovation, which helps businesses achieve goals and tackle new challenges" (Bristol, 2016). *Multiculturalism* is a new reality as today's society and workforce become increasingly diverse. This naturally leads to the question, "Is there a need for a new and different style of leadership?"

The vast majority of contemporary scholarship directed toward understanding leaders and the leadership process has been conducted in North America and Western Europe. Westerners have "developed a highly romanticized, heroic view of leadership" (Meindel et al., 1985). Leaders occupy center stage in organizational life. We use leaders in our attempts to make sense of the performance of our groups, clubs, organizations, and nations. We see them as key to organizational success and profitability, we credit them with organizational competitiveness, and we blame them for organizational failures.

> ↗ EXAMPLE At the national level, recall that President Reagan brought down Soviet Union Communism and the Berlin Wall, President Bush won the Gulf War, and President Clinton brought unprecedented economic prosperity to the United States during the 1990s.

This larger-than-life role ascribed to leaders and the Western romance with successful leaders raise the question, "How representative is our understanding of leaders and leadership across cultures?" That is, do the results that we have examined in this Challenge generalize to other cultures?

Geert Hofstede points out that significant value differences (individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and time orientation) cut across societies. Thus, leaders of culturally diverse groups will encounter belief and value differences among their followers, as well as in their own leader-member exchanges.

There appears to be consensus that a universal approach to leadership and leader effectiveness does not exist. Cultural differences work to enhance and diminish the impact of leadership styles on group effectiveness.

> ↗ EXAMPLE When leaders empower their followers, the effect for job satisfaction in India has been found to be negative, while in the United States, Poland, and Mexico, the effect is positive (Robert et al., 2000). The existing evidence suggests similarities as well as differences in such areas as the effects of leadership styles, the acceptability of influence attempts, and the closeness and formality of relationships.

The distinction between task- and relationship-oriented leader behavior, however, does appear to be meaningful across cultures (Dorfman & Roonen, 1991). Leaders whose behaviors reflect support, kindness, and concern for their followers are valued and effective in Western and Asian cultures. Yet it is also clear that democratic, participative, directive, and contingent-based rewards and punishment do not produce the same results across cultures. The United States is very different from Brazil, Korea, New Zealand, and Nigeria. The effective practice of leadership necessitates a careful look at, and understanding of, the individual differences brought to the leader-follower relationship by cross-cultural contexts (Dorfman et al., 1997).

▣ REFLECT

1. Identify and describe the variables presented in Fiedler's theory of leadership.
2. What are the leadership behaviors in the path-goal theory of leadership?
3. What role does culture have in how leadership is viewed?

▣ SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the situational perspectives on leadership. You learned that contradictory research findings led researchers to explore the nuances of **situational leadership**, whereby leadership characteristics and skill are determined by the demands of the situation in which he or she is to function as a leader. You explored several theories which have been advanced to address this issue, such as **Fiedler's contingency model**, which suggests that different leadership styles are effective as a function of the favorableness of the leadership situation least preferred. According to Fiedler, organizations attempting to achieve group effectiveness through leadership must assess the leader according to an underlying **leader's trait**, assess **the situational factor** faced by the leader, and construct a proper **leader-situation match**. You also learned about a theory developed by Robert J. House and Martin Evans known as **the path-goal theory**, which suggests that an effective leader provides organizational members with a path to a valued goal. According to this theory, leaders must find **an appropriate match** between the situation and the most appropriate leadership style. Lastly, you explored leadership within a **cross-cultural context**, understanding that leaders of culturally diverse groups will encounter belief and value differences among their followers, as well as in their own leader-member exchanges.

Best of luck in your learning!

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📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

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