

6.3: Leadership Theories

Learning Objectives

1. Define and describe traits, situational, context-based, and transformative leadership theories

There are many perspectives on leadership, but they generally fall into four main categories: leadership traits, situational or context-based leadership, functional leadership, and transformational leadership. Let's examine each in turn.

The first approach we'll consider is the oldest of all: universal leadership traits, or the view that there are inherent traits, that may be part of a person from birth as in talents, or acquired skills that express those in-born traits, that are somehow universal or constant across contexts and cultures. It is a significant challenge to even begin to consider the many contexts where leadership might be displayed, and so instead of focusing on the context, in this view, we focus on the individual and his or her traits. Some studies, (Bass, B. (1981). *Traits of Leadership: A follow-up to 1970*. In R.M. Stogdill (ed.), *Handbook of Leadership*. New York: Free Press, pp. 73–96. Baker, D. (1990). A qualitative and quantitative analysis of verbal style and the elimination of potential leaders in small groups. *Small Group Research*, 38, pp. 13–26) have indicated that people in leadership possess the following ten traits as shown in Table 6.3.1.

Table 6.3.1 Universal Leadership Traits

	Trait	Explanation	Example
1	Achievement Orientation	A clear focus on achievement	She consistently makes time in her busy schedule for her school work. She is focused on completing her degree.
2	Adaptability	The ability to adapt to the context, including constraints or resources, to be successful	She understands the challenges of running a household and raising children on a budget, and still makes her studies a priority.
3	Energy	The ability to devote time, concentration, and effort to a challenge	Even though she is tired in the evening she makes time, after the children have gone to bed, to complete her studies each night.
4	Intelligence	The ability to perceive, understand, formulate a response to, and implement a plan of action to solve a challenge	There are never enough hours in the day, but she understands the challenges, sets priorities, and consistently gets the job done.
5	Innovation	The ability to perceive alternate plans of action to achieve similar or improved results	She understands the challenge and finds a faster, more efficient way to get the job done.
6	Persistence	The ability to persevere, or to stick with a challenge until it is solved.	She consistently completes her work on time, has completed all of her classes to date successfully, and is on track to graduate as planned.

	Trait	Explanation	Example
7	Responsibility	The ability to respond and the awareness of duty, obligation, or commitment to solve a challenge	She knows she has the ability to respond to the many challenges, recognizes the importance of a university degree to herself and her children, and completed her obligations.
8	Self-confidence	The confidence in one's ability to solve a challenge	She knows she can do it.
9	Sociability	The ability to interact with others effectively	She can work in groups effectively, even with challenging members.
10	Verbal Communication Ability	The ability to articulate effectively, or express one's thoughts, ideas, or opinions in ways that others can understand them with minimal or no miscommunication	She can express herself effectively. People understand her when she speaks.

As we review these terms we can observe many of them in ourselves and others in daily life. Are leaders those who possess all ten traits? Are these ten traits the only traits that represent leadership? No on both counts. Leaders may possess or exhibit some or all of these traits, but not all the time in every context. In addition, what we consider leadership in one context might be considered insubordination in another. Cultures vary as to their expectations for leaders and what traits they must possess, and we learn culture from each other. We are not born with it. We learn to communicate from and with each other. We are not built with an innate ability to communicate and our surroundings, including those who model behaviors for us, influence how we communicate with ourselves and others. If we are raised in a community where people take responsibility for their challenges and work together to solve them, we are more likely to model that behavior. If we are raised in a community that looks to an institution or an individual to solve problems for them, we are more likely to expect our problems to be solved for us. Since we can see that our environment influences our communication, our culture, and these traits, let's examine alternatives as we continue to explore the concept of leadership.

Our second approach to leadership shifts the focus or attention from the individual to the context, or situation. As we discussed previously, this makes for a significant challenge. How can we assess the myriad of situation factors at any given moment in time? In reality, we cannot, but we can make the concerted effort to limit the factors we consider and explore the influence of context on our behaviors, including those associated with leadership within a specific cultural framework.

Situational leadership, or leadership in context, means that leadership itself depends on the situation at hand. In sharp contrast to the "natural born leader," "universal leadership traits" model of leadership we previously discussed, this viewpoint is relativist. Leadership is relative or varies, based on the context. There is no one "universal trait" to which we can point or principle to which we can observe in action. There is no style of leadership that is more or less effective than another unless we consider the context. Then our challenge presents itself: how to match the most effective leadership strategy with the current context?

In order to match leadership strategies and context we first need to discuss the range of strategies as well as the range of contexts. While the strategies list may not be as long as we might imagine, the context list could go on forever. If we were able to accurately describe each context, and discuss each factor, we would quickly find the task led to more questions, more information, and the complexity would increase, making an accurate description or discussion impossible. Instead, we can focus our efforts on factors that each context contains and look for patterns, or common trends, that help us make generalizations about our observations.

For example, an emergency situation may require a leader to be direct, giving specific order to each person. Since each second counts the quick thinking and actions at the direction of a leader may be the most effective strategy. To stop and discuss, vote, or check everyone's feelings on the current emergency situation may waste valuable time. That same approach applied to common governance or law-making may indicate a dictator is in charge, and that individuals and their vote are of no consequence. Instead an effective leader in a democratic process may ask questions, gather viewpoints, and seek common ground as lawmakers craft a law that applies to everyone equally.

Hersey and Blanchard, (Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K. H. (1977). *Management of Organizational Behavior 3rd Edition—Utilizing Human Resources*. New Jersey/Prentice Hall) take the situational framework and apply to an organizational perspective that reflects our emphasis on group communication. They assert that, in order to be an effective manager, one needs to change their leadership style based on the context, including the maturity of the people they are leading and the task details. Hersey and Blanchard (Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K. H. (1977). *Management of Organizational Behavior 3rd Edition—Utilizing Human Resources*. New Jersey/Prentice Hall) focus on two key issues: tasks and relationships, and present the idea that we can to a greater or lesser degree focus on one or the other to achieve effective leadership in a given context. They offer four distinct leadership styles or strategies (abbreviated with an “S”):

1. Telling (S1). Leaders tell people what to do and how to do it.
2. Selling (S2). Leaders provide direction, information, and guidance, but sell their message to gain compliance among group members.
3. Participating (S3). Leaders focus on the relationships with group members and shares decision-making responsibilities with them.
4. Delegating (S4). Leaders focus on relationships, rely on professional expertise or group member skills, and monitor progress. They allow group members to more directly responsible for individual decisions but may still participate in the process.

Telling and selling strategies are all about getting the task done. Participating and delegating styles are about developing relationships and empowering group members to get the job done. Each style or approach is best suited, according to Hersey and Blanchard, (Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K. H. (1977). *Management of Organizational Behavior 3rd Edition—Utilizing Human Resources*. New Jersey/Prentice Hall) to a specific context. Again, assessing a context can be a challenging task but they indicate the focus should be on the maturity of the group members. It is the responsibility of the leader to assess the group members and the degree to which they possess the maturity to work independently or together effective, including whether they have the right combination of skills and abilities that the task requires. Once again, they offer us four distinct levels (abbreviated with “M” for maturity):

1. M1, or level one. This is the most basic level where group members lack the skills, prior knowledge, skills, or self-confidence to accomplish the task effectively. They need specific directions, and systems of rewards and punishment (for failure) may be featured. They will need external motivation from the leader to accomplish the task.
2. M2, or level two. At this level the group members may possess the motivation, or the skills and abilities, but not both. They may need specific, additional instructions or may require external motivation to accomplish the task.
3. M3, or level three. In this level we can observe group members who are ready to accomplish the task, are willing to participate, but may lack confidence or direct experience, requiring external reinforcement and some supervision.
4. M4, or level four. Finally, we can observe group members that are ready, prepared, willing, and confident in their ability to solve the challenge or complete the task. They require little supervision.

Now it is our task to match the style or leadership strategy to the maturity level of the group members as shown in Table 6.3.2.

Table 6.3.2 Situational Leadership: Leadership Style and Maturity Level

Leadership Style (S)	Maturity Level (M)
S1	M1
S2	M2
S3	M3
S4	M4

This is one approach to situational leadership that applies to our exploration of group communication, but it doesn’t represent all approaches. What other factors might you consider other than style and maturity? How might we assess diversity, for example, in this approach? We might have a skilled professional who speaks English as their second language, and who comes from a culture where constant supervision is viewed as controlling or domineering, and if a leader takes a S1 approach to provide leadership, we can anticipate miscommunication and even frustration. There is no “One Size Fits All” leadership approach that works for every context, but the situational leadership viewpoint reminds us of the importance of being in the moment and assessing our surroundings, including our group members and their relative strengths and areas of emerging skill. The effective group communicator recognizes the Hersey-Blanchard, (Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K. H. (1977). *Management of Organizational Behavior*

3rd Edition—Utilizing Human Resources. New Jersey/Prentice Hall) approach provides insight and possible solutions to consider, but also keeps the complexity of the context in mind when considering a course of action.

Our third approach to consider is called functional leadership, or leadership that focused on behaviors that address needs and help the group achieve its goals. (Hackman, J. R., & Walton, R. E. (1986). Leading groups in organizations. In P. S. Goodman (Ed.), Designing effective work groups (pp. 72–119). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. McGrath, J. E. (1962). Leadership behavior: Some requirements for leadership training. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Civil Service Commission. Adair, J. (1988). Effective Leadership. London. Pan Books. Kouzes, J. M. and Posner, B. Z. (2002). *The leadership challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass). The leader needs to assess needs, including task, team, and individual group member needs. Balance and performance are emphasized, and the time the leader spends on a specific approach varies based on their assessment of the area of need. The highest priority is completion of the task in this approach, but it is balanced against team and individual group member needs. Each activity or approach targets each area of need, and the leader focuses on it emphasize the area, alternating their time on any given activity based on the existing needs.

Table 6.3.3 Functional Leadership

	Task Need	Team Need	Individual Need
1	Assessing the situation	Training	Training and Coaching
2	Understanding the task	Building team spirit	Recognizing individual skills and abilities; leveraging them on the task
3	Preparing the plan to address the task	Focus on the mission; sense of purpose	Focus on the mission; sense of purpose
4	Implementing the plan addressing the task	Motivation, praise, and rewards	Motivation, praise, and rewards
5	Allocating time and resources to the task	Focus on the tempo or pace of performance	Fostering interdependence while respecting individual performance, including roles and tasks
6	Re-evaluating the plan and making adjustments	Status recognition or performance acknowledgement	Status recognition or performance acknowledgement
7	Understanding Quality Standards	Discipline, including sanctions and punishment	Attending to personal problems
8	Quality control	Quality Control	Individual output
9	Evaluating outcomes	Redirection, review of the action plan	Individual role and task review
10	Sharing the outcomes (Communication)	Facilitating group interactions (Communication)	Individual interaction (Communication)

As we can see in Table 6.3.3, the functional leader focuses on the short and long term needs of the group. If the group is lost, perhaps time invested in re-evaluating the plan and making adjustments, meeting a task and a team need at the same time, might prove effective. If an individual group member is struggling, perhaps supportive coaching and even additional training might yield results. Based on the leader's assessment of the needs, they will select the appropriate action and maintain a priority order. They will also be constantly attuned to change, ready to adapt and meet the ever-changing needs of the task, team, or individual.

Our final approach to consider, called transformational leadership, emphasizes the vision, mission, motivations, and goals of a group or team and motivates them to accomplish the task or achieve the result. This model of leadership asserts that people will follow a person who inspires them, who clearly communicates their vision with passion, and helps get things done with energy and enthusiasm.

James MacGregor Burns, a presidential biographer, first introduced the concept, discussing the dynamic relationship between the leader and the followers, as they together motivate and advance towards the goal or objective. (Burns, J. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row). Bernard Bass, (Bass, B. (1985). *Leadership and Performance*. New York: Free Press) contributed to his theory, suggesting there are four key components of transformational leadership, as shown in Table 6.3.4.

Table 6.3.4 Four Key Components of Transformational Leadership

	Component of Transformational Leadership	Explanation
1	Intellectual Stimulation	Transformational leaders encourage creativity and ingenuity, challenging the status quo and encouraging followers to explore new approaches and opportunities.
2	Individualized Consideration	Transformational Leaders recognize and celebrate each follower's unique contributions to the group.
3	Inspirational Motivation	Transformational Leaders communicate a clear vision, helping followers understand the individual steps necessary to accomplish the task or objective while sharing in the anticipation of completion.
4	Idealized Influence	Transformational Leaders serve as role models, demonstrating expertise, skills, and talent that others seek to emulate, inspiring positive actions while reinforcing trust and respect.

The leader conveys the group's goals and aspirations, displays passion for the challenge that lies ahead, and demonstrates a contagious enthusiasm that motivates group members to succeed. This approach focuses on the positive changes that need to occur in order for the group to be successful, and requires the leader to be energetic and involved with the process, even helping individual members complete their respective roles or tasks.

In this section, we have discussed leadership traits, situational leadership, functional leadership, and finally transformative leadership theories. We can recognize that there are no universal traits associated with leadership, but there are traits that are associated with it that we develop across time through our experiences. We can also recognize that the context or situation makes a significant impact on leadership, and matching the situation to the leadership approach requires skill and expertise. Every challenge is unique in some way, and the effective leader can recognize that aligning their actions and support with the needs of the group makes sense. The functional perspective requires a leader to assess task needs, group needs, and individual needs, and then devote time, energy, and resources to them in priority order. Finally, a transformative leadership approach involves an articulate leader with a clear vision that is shared with energy and enthusiasm with followers, encouraging them to embrace the steps required as well as the end goal, objective, or mission result. Each approach offers us a viewpoint to consider as we approach leadership in teams, and all serve as important insights into how to better lead an effective group.

Key Takeaway

Leadership traits, situational leadership, functional leadership, and transformative leadership comprise four key approaches to leadership theory.

Exercise 6.3.1

1. Do you think natural leaders exist? Why or why not? Discuss your thoughts with your classmates.
2. Describe a transformative leader that you know or have known in the past. How did they act and what did they do that was inspirational? Write a 2–3 paragraph discussion of your experience and share it with a classmate.

3. Think of a leader you admire and respect. Which approach do they best represent (traits, situational, functional, or transformative) and why? How would you characterize this leader's style and why? Please share your observations with your classmates.

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