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ree Newsletter

Core Leadership Theories

Learning the Foundations of Leadership

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Why are some leaders successful, while others fail?

The truth is that there is no "magic combination" of characteristics that makes a leader successful, and different characteristics matter in different circumstances.

This doesn't mean, however, that you can't learn to be an effective leader. You just need to understand the various approaches to leadership, so that you can use the right approach for your own situation.

One way of doing this is to learn about the core leadership theories that provide the backbone of our current understanding of leadership. We explore these in this article.

Tip:

Our article on **Leadership Styles** ⊕ explores common leadership styles that have emerged from these core theories. These include the "transformational leadership" style, which is often the most effective approach to use in business situations.

The Four Core Theory Groups

Let's look at each of the four core groups of theory, and explore some of the tools and models that apply with each. (Keep in mind that there are many other theories out there.)

1. Trait Theories – What Type of Person Makes a Good Leader?

Trait theories argue that effective leaders share a number of common personality characteristics, or "traits."

Early trait theories said that leadership is an innate, instinctive quality that you do or don't have. Thankfully, we've moved on from this idea, and we're learning more about what we can do to develop leadership qualities within ourselves and others.

Trait theories help us identify traits and qualities (for example, integrity, empathy, assertiveness, good decision-making skills, and likability) that are helpful when leading others.

However, none of these traits, nor any specific combination of them, will guarantee success as a leader.

Traits are external behaviors that emerge from the things going on within our minds – and it's these internal beliefs and processes that are important for effective leadership.

We explore some of the traits and skills that you need to be a good leader in our articles **What a Real Leader Knows** ⊕, **Level 5 Leadership** ⊕, and **What is Leadership?** ⊕

2. Behavioral Theories – What Does a Good Leader Do?

Behavioral theories focus on how leaders behave. For instance, do leaders dictate what needs to be done and expect cooperation? Or do they involve their teams in decision-making to encourage acceptance and support?

In the 1930s, Kurt Lewin developed a framework based on a leader's behavior. He argued that there are three types of leaders:

1. **Autocratic leaders** make decisions without consulting their teams. This style of leadership is considered appropriate when decisions need to be made quickly, when there's no need for input, and when team agreement isn't necessary for a successful outcome.

2. **Democratic leaders** allow the team to provide input before making a decision, although the degree of input can vary from leader to leader. This style is important when team agreement matters, but it can be difficult to manage when there are lots of different perspectives and ideas.

3. **Laissez-faire leaders** don't interfere; they allow people within the team to make many of the decisions. This works well when the team is highly capable, is motivated, and doesn't need close supervision. However, this behavior can arise because the leader is lazy or distracted; and this is where this style of leadership can fail.

Clearly, how leaders behave affects their performance. Researchers have realized, though, that many of these leadership behaviors are appropriate at different times. The best leaders are those who can use many different behavioral styles, and choose the right style for each situation.

Our article **"Laissez Faire" versus Micromanagement** ⊕ looks at how you can find the right balance between autocratic and laissez-faire styles of leadership, while our article on the **Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid** ⊕ helps you decide how to behave as a leader, depending on your concerns for people and for production.

3. Contingency Theories – How Does the Situation Influence Good Leadership?

The realization that there is no one correct type of leader led to theories that the best leadership style depends on the situation. These theories try to predict which style is best in which circumstance.

For instance, when you need to make quick decisions, which style is best? When you need the full support of your team, is there a more effective way to lead? Should a leader be more people-oriented or task-oriented? These are all questions that contingency leadership theories try to address.

Popular contingency-based models include House's **Path-Goal Theory** ⊕ and **Fiedler's Contingency Model** ⊕.

You can also use the **Leadership Process Model** ⊕ to understand how your situation affects other factors that are important for effective leadership, and how, in turn, these affect your leadership.

4. Power and Influence Theories – What is the Source of the Leader's Power?

Power and influence theories of leadership take an entirely different approach – these are based on the different ways that leaders use power and influence to get things done, and they look at the leadership styles that emerge as a result.

Perhaps the best-known of these theories is **French and Raven's Five Forms of Power** ⊕. This model highlights three types of positional power – legitimate, reward, and coercive – and two sources of personal power – expert and referent (your personal appeal and charm). The model suggests that using personal power is the better alternative, and that you should work on building **expert power** ⊕ (the power that comes with being a real expert in the job) because this is the most legitimate source of personal power.

Another leadership style that uses power and influence is **transactional leadership** ⊕. This approach assumes that people do things for reward and for no other reason. Therefore, it focuses on designing tasks and reward structures. While this may not be the most appealing leadership strategy in terms of building relationships and developing a highly motivating work

environment, it often works, and leaders in most organizations use it on a daily basis to get things done.

Similarly, **leading by example** ⊕ is another highly effective way of influencing your team.

Effective Leadership Styles

As we mentioned above, **transformational leadership** ⊕ is often the best leadership style to use in business.

Transformational leaders show integrity, and they know how to develop a robust and inspiring vision of the future. They motivate people to achieve this vision, they manage its delivery, and they build ever stronger and more successful teams.

However, you'll often need to adapt your style to fit a specific group or situation, and this is why it's useful to gain a thorough understanding of other styles. Our article on **Leadership Styles** ⊕ takes a deeper look at the different styles that you can use.

Key Points

Over time, several core theories about leadership have emerged. These theories fall into four main categories:

1. Trait theories.

2. Behavioral theories.

3. Contingency theories.

4. Power and influence theories.

"Transformational leadership," is the most effective style to use in most business situations. However, you can become a more effective leader by learning about these core leadership theories, and understanding the tools and models associated with each one.

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