

What is leadership theories

- ▶ What is it that makes some people excel in leadership roles? Leadership theories seek to explain how and why certain people become leaders. Such theories often focus on the characteristics of leaders, but some attempt to identify the behaviors that people can adopt to improve their own leadership abilities in different situations.
- ▶ Early debates on the psychology of leadership often suggested that such skills were simply abilities that people were born with. In other words, these theories proposed that certain people were simply "born leaders." Some more recent theories propose that possessing certain traits may help make people nature leaders, but that experience and situational variables also play a critical role.¹

A Closer Look at Leadership Theories

As interest in the psychology of leadership has increased over the last 100 years, a number of different leadership theories have been introduced to explain exactly how and why certain people become great leaders. Early leadership theories focused on what qualities distinguished between leaders and followers, while subsequent theories looked at other variables such as situational factors and skill levels. While many different leadership theories have emerged, most can be classified as one of eight major types¹.

"Great Man" Theories

- ▶ Have you ever heard someone described as "born to lead?" According to this point of view, great leaders are simply born with the necessary internal characteristics such as charisma, confidence, intelligence, and social skills that make them natural-born leaders.
- ▶ Great man theories assume that the capacity for leadership is inherent—that great leaders are born, not made. These theories often portray great leaders as heroic, mythic, and destined to rise to leadership when needed. The term "Great Man" was used because, at the time, leadership was thought of primarily as a male quality, especially in terms of military leadership.

Trait Theories

- ▶ Similar in some ways to Great Man theories, trait theories assume that people inherit certain qualities and traits that make them better suited to leadership. Trait theories often identify a particular personality or behavioral characteristics shared by leaders. For example, traits like extroversion, self-confidence, and courage are all traits that could potentially be linked to great leaders.³ There are plenty of people who possess the personality traits associated with leadership, yet many of these people never seek out positions of leadership. There are also people who lack some of the key traits often associated with effective leadership yet still excel at leading groups.⁴

Contingency theory

- ▶ Contingency theories of leadership focus on particular variables related to the environment that might determine which particular style of leadership is best suited for the situation. According to this theory, no leadership style is best in all situations.⁵
- ▶ Leadership researchers White and Hodgson suggest that truly effective leadership is not just about the qualities of the leader, it is about striking the right balance between behaviors, needs, and context.⁶
- ▶ Good leaders are able to assess the needs of their followers, take stock of the situation, and then adjust their behaviors accordingly. Success depends on a number of variables including the leadership style, qualities of the followers, and aspects of the situation.⁵

Situational Theories

- ▶ Situational theories propose that leaders choose the best course of action based upon situational variables. Different styles of leadership may be more appropriate for certain types of decision-making.
- ▶ For example, in a situation where the leader is the most knowledgeable and experienced member of a group, an authoritarian style might be most appropriate. In other instances where group members are skilled experts, a democratic style would be more effective.⁷

Behavioral Theories

- ▶ Behavioral theories of leadership are based upon the belief that great leaders are made, not born. Consider it the flip-side of the Great Man theories. Rooted in behaviorism, this leadership theory focuses on the actions of leaders, not on mental qualities or internal states. According to this theory, people can learn to become leaders through teaching and observation.⁸

Participative Theories

- ▶ Participative leadership theories suggest that the ideal leadership style is one that takes the input of others into account. These leaders encourage participation and contributions from group members and help group members feel more relevant and committed to the decision-making process. In participative theories, however, the leader retains the right to allow the input of others.

Management Theories

- ▶ Management theories, also known as transactional theories, focus on the role of supervision, organization, and group performance. These theories base leadership on a system of rewards and punishments. Managerial theories are often used in business; when employees are successful, they are rewarded and when they fail, they are reprimanded or punished.

Relationship Theories

- ▶ Relationship theories, also known as transformational theories, focus upon the connections formed between leaders and followers. Transformational leaders motivate and inspire people by helping group members see the importance and higher good of the task.
- ▶ These leaders are focused on the performance of group members, but also want every person to fulfill their potential. Leaders with this style often have high ethical and moral standards.⁹ □

conclusion

- ▶ There are many different ways of thinking about leadership, ranging from focusing on the personality traits of great leadership to emphasizing aspects of the situation that help determine how people lead.
- ▶ Like most things, leadership is a highly multi-faceted subject and it is a mixture of many factors that help determine why some people become great leaders. Learn more about some of the things that make people strong leaders is one way of potentially improving your own skills.

References

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