

Leadership Theory Simplified

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“Pop leadership” philosophy abounds in our culture today. Book stores have shelves full of books on leadership. Leaders and leadership are discussed daily on television, radio, newspapers, magazines and on the web. As a result, many mixed messages about leadership are expressed. So – how do you decide what is accurate?



Write your definition of leadership:

Read the inside cover of a leadership book and you may find that the book is more about management and business than leadership. A magazine or newspaper may just express the opinion of a famous person about leadership. While the perspective of a well-known leader or the insight offered in a book may be valuable, you may want to ask – is this information supported by research? An understanding of the existing leadership research may help you shape your own opinion about what is good leadership. Once you determine what is good leadership, you can begin to develop your own leadership approach.

What is leadership? There are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are books and opinions about leadership. You may want to define leadership for yourself.

A commonly accepted definition of leadership is a process used by an individual to influence a group of members toward a common goal (Bass, 1990; Howell and Costley, 2001). Maxwell (1993) simply states that leadership is influence.

The following overview of leadership theories is intended to provide a synopsis of some of the research conducted on leadership in the last 50 years. There is a list of suggested reading (page 4) to help you learn more about the theories that appeal to you.

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Seven Common Views of Leadership



There are some common beliefs, which include both fact and fiction, about leadership that can be summarized into seven views of leadership (Lee and King, 2001).

1. *The Genetic View* – Some people are born with leadership talents and others are not. Only certain people can learn to lead effectively; they are naturals. If you do not have this inborn talent, there is nothing you can do.
2. *The Learned View* – If you study leadership carefully and practice, you can learn to be an effective leader, no matter whom you are. In a sense, this is the opposite of the genetic view. This view is common in the military and among leadership development professionals.
3. *The Heroic View* – The only good leaders are those who perform courageous, wise and compassionate feats that the rest of us can't. Think of the movie roles played by Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart and John Wayne. The perception is that this is the type of leaders who get the rest of us out of trouble.
4. *The Top-Only View* – Leadership only happens at or close to the top of an organization. Everyone else “just follows orders.” If you are not the boss, you are nothing. If you are the boss, you are everything anyone could wish for. Being “the boss” is the ultimate goal.
5. *The Social Script View* – When it is your proper turn to be the leader, you will be asked. When asked, you should accept and be grateful. After all, not everyone is asked. This approach is common in professional associations and civic or community organizations.
6. *The Position View* – If you are in the job and have the title, you are a leader. This idea is traditional in bureaucracies and highly structured organizations and carries some validity even in the most effective systems. If your title is phrased “director of...” or “head of...,” your leadership virtues are assumed.
7. *The Calling View* – Although not necessarily a religious experience, a “call” to lead can be quite compelling. This concept suggests that leaders have a sense of mission or purpose.

Do any of these sound familiar to you? Which one of these viewpoints have you experienced?

Describe below:

Every leader is different, and no single theory works for all leaders. Begin to develop your own leadership approach by learning more about the following leadership theories.

- Great man
- Trait
- Behavioral
- Contingency
- Transactional
- Transformational



Great Man. Researchers who support the Great Man theory believe that people are born to leadership. This may include members of royalty, high-ranking military officers and industry heads. Today, many people still hold this traditional belief, and even though this theory may sound old-fashioned, research suggests that some people have personality traits, behaviors and knowledge that lend themselves to leadership (Yaverbaum and Sherman, 2008). Studying famous royal, military or industry leaders may provide you with some tools that help you develop your own leadership abilities.

Trait Theory. Similar to the Great Man theory, Trait theory suggests that the characteristics or the personality of a person may make them an effective leader. Several academics believe that potential leaders can be spotted by studying the personality traits of the individual and matching them to the characteristics of actual leaders. Trait theory was almost abandoned by leadership practitioners as leadership research evolved, but in the past few years, there has been a renewed interest and more research related to Trait theory.

Leadership traits include physical or background traits, personal or ability traits and/or task or social traits such as:

- Articulate
- Committed
- Decisive
- Determined

- Educated
- Energetic
- Integrity
- Intelligence
- Persistence
- Responsible
- Social
- Social Status
- Self-Confident

James Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of *The Leadership Challenge*, interviewed 75,000 people to identify the top ten characteristics needed in a leader. Their list includes the following characteristics:

- Broad-minded
- Competent
- Dependable
- Fair-minded
- Forward-looking
- Honest
- Inspiring
- Intelligent
- Supportive
- Straightforward

All of these characteristics are not personality traits. Many researchers say you don't have to be born with all of these traits. In fact, you can develop some of these characteristics as part of your personal leadership approach.

Behavioral Theory. Behavior theory focuses on what an effective leader "does." Leadership is not something you are born with, nor do you need a set of commonly accepted traits. However, effective leadership is dependent on the right behavior. Researchers proposed that for a leader to be effective, their behavior must vary with the situation. In other words, you can learn how to act like a leader.

Behavior theories are based on categories of behavior and leadership types. The myth in this thinking is that outward behavior is enough to establish leadership. In the 1970s, research found most of the Behavior theory research to be invalid (Howell and Costley, 2001; Yaverbaum and Sherman, 2008); however, leadership behavior is still frequently discussed.

Contingency Theory. In a more progressive approach to leadership, Contingency theory recommends matching a leader's style to the right situation, which involves matching to the team of people and goals. Two common Contingency theories are Path-Goal theory and Situational theory.

- **Path-Goal Theory** proposes that effective leaders help followers reach goals through motivation by involving them in fulfilling and meaningful tasks

that match their ability. The leader provides coaching, direction, motivation and rewards for the followers.

- **Situational Theory** recommends that different situations call for different kinds of leadership. This calls for the leader to change their style to the abilities of their followers.

Transactional Theory. Transactional leadership requires that the leader and follower agree to a contract. The follower is responsible for following orders to perform a task. The leader, in turn, gives rewards for following orders in completing the task. Transactional leadership suggests that people only complete tasks when there are external rewards. However, many people accomplish tasks and reach goals because of their own internal motivation.

Transformational Theory. Transformational leadership is a process in which the leader engages others, builds trust and creates a connection that increases the motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. (Northouse, 2001). A transformational leader focuses on others and their needs in order to help them reach their potential. In many ways, transformational leadership is about a leader's ability to create a vision related to a goal that has meaning for both the leader and follower.

Personalizing Leadership

Which of these theories has the most appeal to you? Write a description about how and when you would use the theory, with whom, where and what skills you may need to learn to be more effective.

What theory?

How do you plan to use what you have learned?

When will you use what you learned?

With whom do you plan to use what you learned?

Where do you plan to use what you have learned?

What else do you need to learn to be more effective in this area?

References and Suggested Reading

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