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## Leadership Approaches – a Comparative Analysis

George-Eduard NECULAE<sup>1</sup>, Sofia DAVID<sup>2\*</sup>

### *Abstract*

*In the last several decades, many researchers in the field of human resource management alongside other sociological and psychological studies were interested in finding the most effective leadership approach in one or any given organization. The most common challenge is to take into account all potential variables among a considerably large spectrum of specific organizational situations: from the social and cultural background of the participants – its leader and followers, with their own traits and styles – to circumstantial factors dependent on professional or the given social context as well as on cultural and political environmental influences in each particular context. The purpose of the present paper is to identify a means for HR personnel working in public or private organizations or for their respective leaders to identify and choose a set of three approaches that are believed to be the most applicable in their specific situation. By observing essential particular features existing in each specific environment, the researchers would be able to draw up a tool that would help achieve the desired improvement of leadership skills based on the particular circumstances of their organizational environment. This paper takes into account several existing theoretical studies and builds up a compared analysis of some proposed leadership approaches, the result being a leadership matrix conceived as a tool for increasing leadership effectiveness. Although for practical reasons only three approaches have been taken into account to prove the theory, this can be extended to any applicable combination based on the features observed by the researchers in the respective organization environment.*

**Keywords:** *leadership matrix, organization environment, leader, follower, leader traits.*

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the studies on leadership were aimed to increasing the leadership effectiveness by adopting the appropriate leadership style or by adapting the leadership style to the situation.

There are a lot of definitions of leadership and Bass [3] tried to classify them in a system for a better understanding. Thus, some of definitions view the leadership as the focus of group processes, others conceptualize leadership from a personality perspective, some define leadership in terms of the power relationship that exists between leaders and followers, another set of definition views leadership as a transformational process or a skills perspective.

Northouse defined leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" [12]. Therefore, he identified four common themes for defining leadership: (a) is a process, (b) involves influence, (c) occurs in a group context and (d) involves goal achievement.

The leadership notion has evolved from early stages to nowadays. According to Kolzow "definitions of leadership are influenced by the time in which we live" [9]. Avolio et. al. has noticed that "leadership focuses not only on the leader, but also on followers, peers, supervisors, worksetting/context, and culture ... and ... is no longer simply described as an individual characteristic or difference, but rather is depicted in various models as dyadic, shared, relational, strategic, global, and a complex social dynamic." [2]

## 2. Theoretical Background

According to Rowitz (2014), in order to be effective, many leaders embraced one leadership theory, a combination of theory or their own theory about leadership. Based on the literature review, Rowitz revealed the essential skills of successful leader: (a) ability to identify the most useful information and to use it, (b) ability to motivate and work with others, (c) ability to take risks and follow through, (d) ability to communicate at many different levels and (e) ability to act as systems thinkers with an understanding of how complexity affects their work [13].

The main theories of leadership are briefly described in the following.

The Trait Approach was the first leadership theory. It focused only on the leader and their innate qualities and characteristics needed for being a great leader. Even it is the older leadership theory, it is still a relevant one because the charismatic approach, a recent theory, emphasized the traits that charismatic leaders have, as: self-monitoring, engagement in impression management, motivation to attain social power, and motivation to attain self-actualization [7].

According to the Skill Approach, knowledge and abilities, that can be learned and developed, are needed for effective leadership.

The Style Approach focuses on the behaviour of the leader (what they do and how they act). Researchers considered there are two main leadership behaviours (task behaviour and relationship behaviour), that leaders can combine for influencing the subordinates in their efforts to reach a goal. Leaders can improve their leadership style based on the assessment of their actions.

The Situational Approach is one of the most used theory in organizational leadership training and development. As its name suggests, the situational approach focuses on leadership in situations. The leader must adapt his/her leadership style to the development level of subordinates (competence and commitment level).

Contingency Theory (the most representative being Fiedler's theory) is a leader-match theory, that tries to match leaders to appropriate situation. In order to accomplish this, two options are available: select the leader to fit the situation or change the situation to fit the leader. According to this theory, the leadership style is considered fixed and situations are characterized in terms of three factors: leader-member relations, task structure and position power.

Based the expectancy theory, the Path Goal Theory explains how leaders can help subordinates to achieve the established goals. According to this theory, the leader should adapt his/her leadership style to the subordinates' motivational needs and to the situation in which the subordinates are working.

Leader Member Exchange Theory emphasizes the interaction between leaders and followers. There are two types of relationships: based on expanded and negotiated role responsibilities (named in-group) and based on the formal employment contract (named out-group).

Burns first introduced the term transforming leadership in 1978 and defined it as a process in which "leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation" [5]. According to Bass [3] and Sivanathan et. al. [15], the transformational leadership is characterized by four factors, named the "four I's": (a) Idealized influence;

(b) inspirational motivation; (c) intellectual stimulation and (d) individualized consideration [10]. In contrast with transformational leadership, the transactional leadership is based on the exchanges that occur between leaders and subordinates (effort by followers is exchanged for specified rewards).

The term Servant Leadership was coined by Greenleaf in 1970. According to this theory, the leaders put followers first and help them to grow and succeed by empowering them. The outcomes of this leadership are follower performance and growth and organizational performance, but also the servant leadership has also a societal impact.

Authentic Leadership is the newest theory on leadership and is still in a development phase. The relationship between leaders and follower are built on ethical foundation. In order to increase individual and team performance, authentic leaders build trust and generate enthusiastic support for followers.

Lester drew a leadership – personality theory that leads to increasing the leaders' effectiveness in organization. Based on some personality concepts, he postulated that leadership attitudes and practices in adult life are influenced by personality settings in early stage of individual life, but also "a person's capacity for leadership may change as a function of time and experience". According to Lester, a leader must "improve his effectiveness as a leader by overcoming or compensating for his weak areas". [8]

There are a few papers that tried to compare leadership theories, most of them just reviewed them.

In a research article of Sae [14] an examination of a broad range of theories and conceptualization of leadership was made. In addition, the notion of leadership in different cultures was explored. The author concluded that even effective leadership styles vary among cultures, still there is no cross-cultural theory to explain leadership in reference to cultural differences.

Brown and Treviño [4] emphasized the similarities and differences between ethical leadership and other three leadership theories: transformational, spiritual and authentic leadership and they founded three similarities for all of the compared theories: concern for others (altruism), integrity and role modelling.

In a paper from 2009, Avolio et al. [2] reviewed the theoretical and empirical developments in the leadership literature, recommended some future directions for science of leadership and emphasized the potential implications for leadership practice.

In his book entitled *Leadership - Theory and practice* (2013), Peter G. Northouse from Western Michigan University tackles the intricate and

highly contextual field of leadership viewed from fourteen perspectives/approaches, from the leader himself/herself and his/her employees to the organization structure and its environment and anything in between. The book is supported by extensive research in the field of leadership made by a handful of experienced authors and is a great instrument to use in the assessment and improvement of leadership methods and styles. Due to its contents and case studies alike, it is sure to offer great useful insights and perspectives to all types of leaders in all type of organizational structures.

Northouse also emphasized similarities and differences between leadership theories. These are summarized in the following. Like the trait approach, the skills approach takes a leader-centered perspective on leadership. The skill approach emphasizes on skills and abilities that can be learned and developed, while trait approach focuses on personality characteristics. The style approach distinguishes from trait approach and skills approach by emphasizing on leader's capabilities (what leaders do and how they act). "In contrast to the situational approach, which suggests that a leader must adapt to the development level of subordinates, and unlike contingency theory, which emphasizes the match between the leader's style and specific situational variables, path-goal theory emphasizes the relationship between the leader's style and the characteristics of the subordinates and the work setting." [12] Most of the leadership theories have emphasized leadership from the point of view of the leader (e.g., trait approach, skills approach, and style approach) or the follower and the context (e.g., situational leadership, contingency theory, and path-goal theory), but Leader-Member Exchange Theory conceptualizes leadership as a process that is centered on the interactions between leaders and followers. Similar to skills approach and style approach, servant leadership is an approach that focuses on leadership from the point of view of the leader and his/her behaviours.

McCleskey [11] analysed three leadership approaches, namely Situational, Transformational and Transactional, emphasizing the key differences and similarities, and offered suggestions for future academic studies of leadership and their practical application.

In a recent study Amanchukwu et. al [1] examined the leadership effectiveness towards improving school management and the theories of leadership, principles and styles of leadership. The article concludes that success is certain if the application of the leadership styles, principles and methods is properly and fully applied in school management.

### 3. Leadership Matrix - a tool for improving leadership

If in a position of leader, one may attempt to find a single approach to adopt – if there is any – in order to ensure the improvement of his/her managerial skills and methods in his/her organization in relation to all variables in the organization environment, but this is presumably a cumbersome task. The reason behind it is that there is no consistency in organizational environments, no clear rules which apply globally, no identical internal policies of the group, no similar interests among its members, and the list can continue.

So to answer the question "What is the best approach?" a leader must look very carefully into his/her options and decide accordingly. Some approaches may be similar to others in some areas while others may very well contradict each other. Some approaches have been criticized as being too narrow as they refer to a small number of features, while other dare to tackle too many facets and variables of leadership at the same time. Last, but not least, some approaches seem to be highly theoretical while others are more appealing for their practical value.

However, leaders are known not to have enough time to study, therefore a method of compacting the conclusions and suggestions of most applicable approaches is an ideal and efficient approach in itself.

Therefore, by looking at the most important characteristics of each approach it is easy to extract certain key elements that define the respective approach. For the purpose of simplification, we shall call these elements "descriptors". These may be organized twofold:

- high-rank descriptors, which are based on the general concept they are focusing on. Cases in point may be leader-oriented, follower-oriented or factual-oriented (Appendix 1);
- lower-rank descriptors, which are very concrete in nature and may refer to issues like skills, traits, task, moral, time, etc.

Once all these descriptors have been identified and written down, we can draw up a leadership matrix that will list all approaches and their associated descriptors, crossing the interesting rows and columns where applicable. Such a matrix can be seen in the addendum to this paper (Appendix 2). To add more efficient tools to each approach, two columns will also deal with the strengths and shortcomings of each approach while considering its adjacent descriptors.

The result is a tool that helps the leader identify its weaknesses and improvement areas by looking at a number of three descriptors that he/she may choose to focus on. The number of chosen descriptors may vary depending on the exact context of the leader position and its followers, the

organization environment, its internal structure and policies, its purpose and objectives, a.s.o.

In theory, there are at least two possible methods of selecting the relevant and applicable approaches for any given organization:

Choosing three approaches that are at the same level of high-rank descriptors, therefore having most of these descriptors in common (for instance those approaches which are leader-oriented). An example of this would be to choose the following:

- Trait approach;
- Skills approach;
- Leader-Member Exchange approach.

Choosing three approaches that are at different levels of high-rank descriptors, in which case the particular descriptors cover a higher range of potential improvement areas (for instance they can be simultaneously leader-oriented, follower-oriented and task-oriented or any other combination as such). A case in point may be:

- Situational approach;
- Transformational approach;
- Team approach.

Obviously, there is no definite method of choosing the right mix of approaches, since it depends on the particular organizational context, the position of the leader and its followers, the organization environment, its structure and policies, a.s.o.

Regardless, choosing the applicable approaches is not based on theoretical studies or empirical knowledge made by other authors, but rather on the actual assessment of the respective organization environment. This can be achieved through drawing evaluation questionnaires that are built up from the descriptors which are believed to be of utmost relevance to the organization and given to the chosen respondents who can be the leader themselves, members of the organization or outside participants being in particular relations to the organization (like share-holders, clients, the public, etc.).

Examples of such questionnaires can be found in literature; they can be used as such, if relevant, or others can be built upon them: Leadership Treat Questionnaire (LQT), Style Questionnaire, Least Preferred Coworker (LPC) Measure, The Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire, Path–Goal Leadership Questionnaire, LMX 7 Questionnaire, Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), Servant Leadership Questionnaire.



#### 4. Arguments to support the thesis

For practical considerations, let us suppose the Trait Approach, where obviously the focus is on the leader and the descriptors that define this approach are:

- leader traits
- leader personality
- leader social skills
- moral perspective

In this particular situation, the questionnaire will be centered on the four features above and it should contain at least 2-3 questions for each one. After being filled in by the respondents, a hypothetical conclusion would be that the leader lacks certain personality features or the necessary moral values, for instance, as Stogdill (1974) defined it in his studies, the leader lacks “self-confidence and sense of personal identity”.

The same method will be applied for other approaches that are believed to be essential for leadership improvement, but no more than six approaches.

Once these have been filled in by the respondents, the evaluator will assess those critical areas that need to be addressed for leadership improvement, hence identifying the three approaches that need to be applied for success.

The following analysis is meant to emphasize the similarities, differences, benefits and shortcomings of three random approaches: Styles approach (hereafter called STAP), Situational approach (hereafter called SIAP) and Path-Goal approach (hereafter called PGAP).

In order to understand how these three approaches might be analysed and applied to a given organization, let us define the most relevant descriptors for each of them:

STAP: leader behaviour, task orientation, relationship orientation, level of followers, task structure

SIAP: leader competence, leader social skills, task orientation, relationship orientation, follower characteristics, factual assessment

PGAP: environment influences, leader behaviour, task orientation, relationship orientation, follower characteristics, factual assessment

First of all, it is obvious that all three approaches deal with the leader and how he/she must adopt his/her behaviour depending on: the task and his/her relation towards the followers (STAP), the choice between being directive or supportive in diverse situations (SIAP) and the level of followers and their motivational needs (PGAP).

The similarities between these three approaches go beyond this initial conclusion.

Thus, the STAP and SIAP are very similar in the sense that they both deal with how the leader acts towards his/her followers while considering:

- the tasks and emphasis on the structure/production (STAP) or the directive dimension, also focused on task (SIAP);
- the concern for people, being considerate towards followers and relationship-oriented (STAP) or dealing with the supportive dimension, also typical for a considerate leader (SIAP).

More so, the latter issue of being supportive based on the development level of subordinates (in terms of competence and commitment from the STAP) is a common descriptor for the PGAP, as well, since motivation is in fact based on follower assessment. In fact, one may even consider that the leader adaptation of his/her motivational patterns (typical to the PGAP) is virtually part of the situational S1-S4 leadership grid from the SIAP, i.e. how the leader motivates the followers based on the situational assessment, while not neglecting tasks and structure.

In terms of pragmatism, basically all three approaches are quite practical in their nature and are meant to provide solutions. STAP allows four models for action towards improvement through its Leadership Grid and so does the SIAP by its Situational Leadership chart and the PGAP through its leadership behaviour vs. subordinate and task characteristics chart.

From this point of view, all three approaches provide means of identifying problems and shortcomings in the organization environment (based on factual assessment) and are prescriptive in value due to their ability to provide solutions in several ways:

STAP attempts to draw balance between the two roles of the leader (task-oriented and relationship-oriented)

SIAP may be used for training of followers and may be applicable to diverse organizational environments

PGAP is able to match followers to tasks.

A more detailed description of the three theories (Style Approach, Situational Approach and Path Goal Theory), with an emphasis on their benefits and shortcomings is founded in Appendix 3.

## 5. Arguments to argue the thesis

While trying to get the best of all approaches, this study is highly empirical, built up solely on theoretical data and mere assumptions and has

no proven examples or collected data, as it lacks any actual application in an existing real organization.

Also, the list of descriptors identified in the matrix is simply a minimum set of exemplary features that can be extracted from the leadership theories considered and it certainly needs further analysis and exploration.

Moreover, the matrix has to be supported by conducting thorough research based on practical knowledge in actual organizations and among several types of leadership contexts.

## **6. Dismantling the arguments against**

The purpose of this paper was to identify the potential tools that an HR manager or a leader may extract from several leadership approaches that he/she may consider appropriate for his/her particular context in order to create an evaluation matrix that would help in assessing the means to improve his/her leadership knowledge, skills and abilities.

Thus, this paper was able to achieve its goal by identifying the following main methods and tools: what are the features that define each leadership approach, how to collect data from the respective organization environment, how to build a matrix that compiles all collected data in one single tool.

## **7. Conclusions**

The strength of the present approach is that it renders the possibility for leaders to evaluate key elements in an organization without having to look too deep in all the approaches. With a background of information on the organization, the HR personnel may draw up evaluation criteria and fill in questionnaires that provide the leader with essential suggestions as to the descriptors that he/she needs to focus on, or the leader may devise this analysis himself/herself.

Hence the approach is intended to be practical by identifying areas that need improvement, directing the leader to the respective approaches that best fit the descriptors and conceive methods and procedures to make the respective improvements in the organization.

To conclude, although there is no universal method of choosing applicable approaches, the considerations presented above offer enough initial data and tools for further development of the leadership matrix approach.

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**Appendix 1 High-rank descriptors**

Approaches	MAIN FOCUS						
	Leader	Tasks	Environment	Followers	Actions	Application	Outcome
Trait							
Skills	x	x	x			x	
Style		x		x	x		
Situational	x	x		x	x	x	
Contingency		x		x	x		x
Path-Goal		x	x	x	x		x
Leader-member	x			x			x
Transformational	x			x	x	x	
Servant	x			x			x
Authentic	x		x		x		x
Team				x	x	x	x
Psychodynamic	x			x			

	Leader traits	Leader personality	Leader Skills	Leader competences	Leader social skills	Environmental influences	Leader behaviour	Task orientation	Relationship orientation	Level of follower	Task structure	position of power	Follower characteristics	Group affiliation	Time perspective	Moral perspective	Factual Assessment	Team oriented	Psychological factor
Trait	x	x			x											x			x
Skills			x	x	x	x			x								x	x	x
Style							x	x	x	x	x						x		
Situational		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x		
Contingency							x	x	x		x	x							
Path-Goal						x	x	x	x				x				x		
Leader-member					x		x	x	x	x		x		x	x				x
Transformational	x	x			x		x		x				x	x	x				x
Servant	x	x				x	x		x	x			x	x		x			x
Authentic	x	x	x			x					x						x		
Team			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x			x	x	
Psychodynamic		x											x						x

**Appendix 3 Comparison of three leadership theories: Style, Situational and Path-Goal**

	<b>STYLE</b>	<b>SITUATIONAL</b>	<b>PATH-GOAL</b>
DESCRIPTION	leader behaviour	adaptation of leadership according to situations	integrate consideration and structure (styles)
	action towards followers	two dimensions:	leader motivation of subordinates
	task behaviour/orientation:	- directive dimension/task	similar to situational, but in working environment
	- initiate structure	- supportive dimension/relationship	focused on follower by providing solutions
	- production orientation	development level of subordinates:	only one side of the previous 2 approaches
	- concern for production	- competence	takes tasks in consideration
	relationship behaviour/orientation:	- commitment	takes follower level in consideration
	- considerate	leader personality	similar to initiating structure
	- employee orientation	leader skills	may be overlapped with situational
	- concern for people		
task structure			

**Appendix 3 Comparison of three leadership theories: Style, Situational and Path-Goal (continued)**

	<b>STYLE</b>	<b>SITUATIONAL</b>	<b>PATH-GOAL</b>
<b>STRENGTHS / BENEFITS</b>	focused on actions	focused on actions	focused on follower by providing support
	provides models based on assessment	provides models based on assessment	provides models based on assessment
	highly pragmatic approach	prescriptive value	matches followers to tasks
	very well researched and documented	used for training	practical approach
	looks for balance in the two roles of the leader	applicable to everyone	
		allows identification of problems	

<b>SHORTCOMINGS / CRITICISMS</b>	no predictable performance outcome	subjective	many variables, broad
	no universal set of leadership behaviour	ambiguous method of evaluating subordinates	unbalanced responsibility, dependency on leader
		not well documented	
		difficult to relate to individuals or groups	