Workshop 3: Challenge the Process

Leadership Theory: Contingency Theory

Some believe that leadership isn’t just about the leader, but how a leader acts in a given situation. Leaders challenge the status quo, and learn to adapt to changing environments. Please take the LPC test and read the page on Contingency Theory.
Questions

1. According to Figure 6.1, what category does this situation fall into?
2. Will Bill be successful in his efforts to run the holiday program?
3. Should the school administration make any changes regarding Bill's position?

CASE 6.3

What's the Best Leader Match?

Universal Drugs is a family-owned pharmaceutical company that manufactures generic drugs such as aspirin and vitamin pills. The owners of the company have expressed a strong interest in making the management of the company, which traditionally has been very authoritarian, more teamwork oriented.

To design and implement the new management structure, the owners have decided to create a new position. The person in this position would report directly to the owners and have complete freedom to conduct performance reviews of all managers directly involved in the new system. Two employees from within the company have applied for the new position.

Martha Lee has been with Universal for 15 years and has been voted by her peers “most outstanding manager” on three different occasions. She is friendly, honest, and extremely conscientious about reaching short-term and long-term goals. When given the LPC scale by the personnel department, Martha received a score of 52.

Bill Washington came to Universal 5 years ago with an advanced degree in organizational development. He is director of training, where all of his subordinates say he is the most caring manager they have ever had. While at Universal, Bill has built a reputation for being a real people person. Reflecting his reputation is his score on the LPC scale, an 89.

LEADERSHIP INSTRUMENT

The LPC scale is used in contingency theory to measure a person's leadership style. For example, it measures your style by having you describe a coworker with whom you had difficulty completing a job. This need not be a coworker you disliked a great deal but rather someone with whom you least liked to work. After you have selected this person, the LPC instrument asks you to describe your coworker on 18 sets of adjectives.

Low LPCs are task motivated. Their primary needs are to accomplish tasks, and their secondary needs are focused on getting along with people. In a work setting, they are concerned with achieving success on assigned tasks, even at the cost of poor interpersonal relationships with coworkers. Low LPCs gain self-esteem by achieving their goals. They may attend to interpersonal relationships, but only after they first have directed themselves toward the tasks of the group.

Middle LPCs are socioindependent. In the context of work, they are self-directed and not overly concerned with the task or with how others view them. They are more removed from the situation and act more independently than low or high LPCs.

High LPCs are motivated by relationships. These people derive their major satisfaction in an organization from interpersonal relationships. A high LPC sees positive qualities even in the coworker she or he least prefers, and even if the high LPC does not work well with that person. In an organizational setting, the high LPC tends to tasks, but only after she or he is certain that the relationships between people are in good shape.
Least Preferred Coworker (LPC) Measure

Instructions: Think of the person with whom you can work least well. He or she may be someone you work with now or someone you knew in the past. That person does not have to be the person you like the least but should be the person with whom you had the most difficulty in getting a job done. Describe this person as he or she appears to you by circling the appropriate number for each of the following items.

1. Pleasant 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Unpleasant
2. Friendly 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Unfriendly
3. Rejecting 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Accepting
4. Tense 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Relaxed
5. Distant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Close
6. Cold 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Warm
7. Supportive 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Hostile
8. Boring 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Interesting
9. Quarrelsome 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Harmonious
10. Gloomy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Cheerful
11. Open 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Closed
12. Backbiting 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Loyal
13. Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Trustworthy
14. Considerate 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Inconsiderate
15. Nasty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Nice
16. Agreeable 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Disagreeable
17. Insincere 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Sincere
18. Kind 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Unkind


Scoring Interpretation

Your final LPC score is the sum of the numbers you circled on the 18 scales. If your score is 57 or below, you are a low LPC, which suggests that you are task motivated. If your score is within the range of 58 to 63, you are a middle LPC, which means you are independent. People who score 64 or above are called high LPCs, and they are thought to be more relationship motivated.

Because the LPC is a personality measure, the score you get on the LPC scale is believed to be quite stable over time and not easily changed. Low LPCs tend to remain low, moderate LPCs tend to remain moderate, and high LPCs tend to remain high. As was pointed out earlier in the chapter, research shows that the test-retest reliability of the LPC is very strong (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987).

SUMMARY

Contingency theory represents a shift in leadership research from focusing on only the leader to focusing on the leader in conjunction with the situation in which the leader works. It is a leader–match theory that emphasizes the importance of matching a leader’s style with the demands of a situation.

To measure leadership style, a personality-like measure called the Least Preferred Coworker (LPC) scale is used. It delineates people who are highly task motivated (low LPCs), those who are socioindependent (middle LPCs), and those who are relationship motivated (high LPCs).

To measure situations, three variables are assessed: leader-member relations, task structure, and position power. Taken together, these variables point to the style of leadership that has the best chance of being successful. In general, contingency theory suggests that low LPCs are effective in extremes and that high LPCs are effective in moderately favorable situations.

The strengths of contingency theory include these: It is backed by a large amount of research, it is the first leadership theory to emphasize the impact of situations on leaders, it is predictive of leadership effectiveness, it allows leaders not to be effective in all situations, and it can provide useful leadership profile data.

On the negative side, contingency theory can be criticized because it has not adequately explained the link between styles and situations, and it relies heavily on the LPC scale, which has been questioned for its face validity and workability. Contingency theory is not easily used in ongoing organizations. Finally, it does not fully explain how organizations can use the results of this theory in situational engineering. Regardless of these criticisms, contingency theory has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of the leadership process.

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