Workshop 4: Enable Others to Act

Leadership Theory: Path-goal Theory

Sometimes, leadership isn’t about the leader, but about the follower. Many believe a leader is only as effective as his or her weakest follower. Path-goal theory deals with how we motivate our subordinates to act. For the assessment, think of a time you led a person/group. If you haven’t, use a younger sibling or another person whom with you have influence.
LEADERSHIP INSTRUMENT

Because the path-goal theory was developed as a complex set of theoretical assumptions to direct researchers in developing new leadership theory, it has used many different instruments to measure the leadership process. The Path-Goal Leadership Questionnaire has been useful in measuring and learning about important aspects of path-goal leadership (Indvik, 1985, 1988). This questionnaire provides information for respondents about four different leadership styles: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement oriented. Respondents' scores on each of the different styles provide them with information on their strong and weak styles and the relative importance they place on each of the styles.

To understand the path-goal questionnaire better, it may be useful to analyze a hypothetical set of scores. For example, hypothesize that your scores on the questionnaire were 29 for directive, which is high; 22 for supportive, which is low; 21 for participative, which is average; and 25 for achievement, which is high. These scores suggest that you are a leader who is typically more directive and achievement oriented than most other leaders, less supportive than other leaders, and quite similar to other leaders in the degree to which you act participatively.

According to the principles of path-goal theory, if your scores matched these hypothetical scores, you would be effective in situations where the tasks and procedures are unclear and your subordinates have a need for certainty. You would be less effective in work settings that are structured and unchallenging. In addition, you would be moderately effective in ambiguous situations with subordinates who want control. Last, you would do very well in uncertain situations where you could set high standards, challenge subordinates to meet these standards, and help them feel confident in their abilities.

In addition to the Path-Goal Leadership Questionnaire, leadership researchers have commonly used multiple instruments to study path-goal theory, including measures of task structure, locus of control, employee expectancies, and employee satisfaction. Although the primary use of these instruments has been for theory building, many of the instruments offer valuable information related to practical leadership issues.

Path-Goal Leadership Questionnaire

**Instructions:** This questionnaire contains questions about different styles of path-goal leadership. Indicate how often each statement is true of your own behavior.

**Key:** 1 = Never 2 = Hardly ever 3 = Seldom 4 = Occasionally 5 = Often 6 = Usually 7 = Always

1. I let subordinates know what is expected of them. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. I maintain a friendly working relationship with subordinates. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. I consult with subordinates when facing a problem. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. I listen receptively to subordinates' ideas and suggestions. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. I inform subordinates about what needs to be done and how it needs to be done. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. I let subordinates know that I expect them to perform at their highest level. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. I act without consulting my subordinates. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. I do little things to make it pleasant to be a member of the group. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. I ask subordinates to follow standard rules and regulations. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10. I set goals for subordinates' performance that are quite challenging. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
11. I say things that hurt subordinates' personal feelings. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
12. I ask for suggestions from subordinates concerning how to carry out assignments. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
13. I encourage continual improvement in subordinates' performance. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
14. I explain the level of performance that is expected of subordinates. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
15. I help subordinates overcome problems that stop them from carrying out their tasks. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
16. I show that I have doubts about subordinates' ability to meet most objectives. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
17. I ask subordinates for suggestions on what assignments should be made. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
18. I give vague explanations of what is expected of subordinates on the job.

19. I consistently set challenging goals for subordinates to attain.

20. I behave in a manner that is thoughtful of subordinates' personal needs.

Scoring

1. Reverse the scores for Items 7, 11, 16, and 18.

2. Directive style: Sum of scores on Items 1, 5, 9, 14, and 18.

3. Supportive style: Sum of scores on Items 2, 8, 11, 15, and 20.

4. Participative style: Sum of scores on Items 3, 4, 7, 12, and 17.

5. Achievement-oriented style: Sum of scores on Items 6, 10, 13, 16, and 19.

Scoring Interpretation

- Directive style: A common score is 23; scores above 28 are considered high, and scores below 18 are considered low.
- Supportive style: A common score is 28; scores above 33 are considered high, and scores below 23 are considered low.
- Participative style: A common score is 21; scores above 26 are considered high, and scores below 16 are considered low.
- Achievement-oriented style: A common score is 19; scores above 24 are considered high, and scores below 14 are considered low.

The scores you received on the path-goal questionnaire provide information about which style of leadership you use most often and which you use less often. In addition, you can use these scores to assess your use of each style relative to your use of the other styles.


SUMMARY

Path-goal theory was developed to explain how leaders motivate subordinates to be productive and satisfied with their work. It is a contingency approach to leadership because effectiveness depends on the fit between the leader's behavior and the characteristics of subordinates and the task.

The basic principles of path-goal theory are derived from expectancy theory, which suggests that employees will be motivated if they feel competent, if they think their efforts will be rewarded, and if they find the payoff for their work valuable. A leader can help subordinates by selecting a style of leadership (directive, supportive, participative, or achievement oriented) that provides what is missing for subordinates in a particular work setting. In simple terms, it is the leader's responsibility to help subordinates reach their goals by directing, guiding, and coaching them along the way.

Path-goal theory offers a large set of predictions for how a leader's style interacts with subordinates' needs and the nature of the task. Among other things, it predicts that directive leadership is effective with ambiguous tasks, that supportive leadership is effective for repetitive tasks, that participative leadership is effective when tasks are unclear and subordinates are autonomous, and that achievement-oriented leadership is effective for challenging tasks.

Path-goal theory has three major strengths. First, it provides a theoretical framework that is useful for understanding how directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented styles of leadership affect the productivity and satisfaction of subordinates. Second, path-goal theory is unique in that it integrates the motivation principles of expectancy theory into a theory of leadership. Third, it provides a practical model that under- scores the important ways in which leaders help subordinates.

On the negative side, four criticisms can be leveled at path-goal theory. First, the scope of path-goal theory encompasses many interrelated sets of assumptions that it is hard to use this theory in a given organizational setting. Second, research findings to date do not support a full and consistent picture of the claims of the theory. Furthermore, path-goal theory does not show in a clear way how leader behaviors directly
affect subordinate motivation levels. Last, path-goal theory is very leader oriented and fails to recognize the transactional nature of leadership. It does not promote subordinate involvement in the leadership process.

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REFERENCES


