Leadership: A Contested Construct

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of leadership theories highlighting current debates. It does not dwell on the difficulty that thinkers have had defining the concept of 'leadership' over the millennia. To do so would be to just repeat the introductions of literally hundreds (possibly thousands) of books on leadership. Instead, this paper tries to categorise the main leadership theories (particularly those that have been commonly used in an organisational context) so that the differences between them may be better understood. It then considers each of the categories of theories and offers a brief explanation of the main theory or theories that it includes. The paper also critically examines each of these theories and describes current issues and debates.

Grint's Divisions of Leadership Theories

When Grint (1997) looked at the leadership literature, he noted that the enormity of it created difficulties seeing the wood for the trees. His first attempt to make sense of leadership had him writing down characteristics of a good leader as advocated in the literature. He quickly gave up this approach because he 'ran out of space on one side of paper after I had passed number 127 on the 'necessary-aspects-of-leadership' list' (p. 3). He then considered 'polarities' or binary opposites of leadership. For example, 'management' vs. 'leadership', 'task-oriented' vs. 'people-oriented', or 'charismatic' vs. 'ordinary'. Such lists are, of course, potentially infinite. But, more critically, by dividing debates into extremes, there is a danger that subtleties and compromises get lost in the clash of polar opposites.

Following these two abortive attempts to capture 'leadership', Grint took another approach. He noticed that two divisions seemed to appear throughout the literature. The first of these debates concerns the significance attributed to the individual or to the situation or context that the individual is in.
Some leadership theories seem to centre solely on the characteristics of leaders regardless of the situation, whereas others do the opposite. Other theories involve an interaction between these two domains. The second of the divisions lies in the traditional split between objective and subjective assumptions about knowledge and data. That is, to what extent is it possible to understand someone or something? Alternatively, to what extent is knowledge divided between the actual and the perceptual? Or, how essential is it that this dimension is taken into account?

Grint does not claim that these divisions fully capture the methodological and epistemological differences of approach, merely that it is a useful heuristic division that helps him to make sense of the leadership literature. Grint prefers to view the two divisions as continuous axes rather than categorical axes as he believes it inappropriate to view the literature in four separate and distinct quadrants. Some of the reasons that were mentioned above regarding polar opposites are relevant here as well. Grint’s model can be produced as a diagram (see Figure 2.1). The four divisions are elaborated in the following pages.

The trait approach encompasses those theories that focus on the individual leader and assume that it is possible to identify and understand the various characteristics that leaders need. In contrast, leadership theories that argue that particular situations and contexts require particular types of leadership action and behaviour are grouped together beneath the situational banner. Both the

![Figure 2.1 Grint’s divisions of leadership theories](image-url)
contingent and constitutive approaches contain a focus on both the individual and the context. They differ in that those theories grouped as contingent assume that both of these two domains are knowable, whereas those theories grouped as constitutive do not.

**Trait**

Of all approaches to leadership, trait theories probably have the longest history. Conceptually, trait theory is the simplest form of leadership theory as it focuses solely on the leader’s characteristics. Traits can be defined as the leader’s distinguishing characteristics. These include intelligence, values, confidence, charisma, and appearance. Early trait theories adopted the ‘Great Man’ approach to understanding leadership and the studies sought to differentiate the characteristics of leaders from those who were not leaders. For example, it was discovered that every American President elected between 1900 and 1968 was taller than his main opponent. It was also found that, generally speaking, leaders were slightly more (but not considerably more) intelligent than their followers (Stogdill, 1974). This approach has the benefit of surfacing the sorts of characteristics that leaders tend to possess, but, as Grint discovered, this list can quickly become unmanageable. Moreover, underpinning this approach is the idea that ‘leaders are born, not bred’ (Daft, 1999, 2001). Consequently, the trait approach offers little help to people wishing to improve their leadership qualities: you’ve either got it, or you haven’t.

Research on trait theory has dwindled since the early 1950s following literature reviews by Mann (1959) and Stogdill (1948) that concluded ‘no traits consistently differentiated leaders from nonleaders across a variety of situations’ (Lord, De Vader and Alliger, 1986, p. 402). However, an interesting exception was the meta-analysis of leadership traits conducted by Lord, et al. (1986). These researchers used validity generalisation procedures to re-examine the review of Mann in light of subsequent studies. Their results showed stronger evidence than Mann’s results that six traits (intelligence, extroversion–introversion, masculinity–femininity, interpersonal sensitivity, dominance, and conservatism) distinguished leaders from others. Their conclusion was that leaders tend to be more intelligent, extrovert, and ‘masculine’ than non-leaders. An alternative review by Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) suggests that six traits distinguish leaders from non-leaders. These traits are drive (achievement, ambition, energy, tenacity, initiative), motivation to be a leader, honesty and integrity, self-confidence (including emotional stability), cognitive ability, and knowledge of the business. Shackleton (1995) concludes thus, ‘the trait approach has undergone a revival. Recent research suggests that traits do matter. Yet the research shows that there are only a handful of traits that distinguish leaders from others, and a clear distinction between effective and ineffective leaders has not yet emerged’ (p. 10).
Following the dismissive reviews of Stogdill and Mann, emphasis swung away from leadership traits and into leader style or behaviour (the two words were used synonymously). Researchers hoped to identify the types of behaviour that accompanied effective leadership. This approach offered the possibility of helping people develop their leadership style so that they might be able to perform more effectively as leaders.

One of the earliest (conducted just before the Second World War and prior to the reviews by Stogdill and Mann) and most influential series of studies conducted under the style theory banner were those carried out by Lewin and his colleagues (e.g. Lewin, 1939; Lewin and Lippett, 1938; Lewin, Lippett and White, 1939). In experimental conditions, an adult leader was placed in control of a group of children. The adult was instructed to be either autocratic (centralised authority with power emanating from control of rewards and coercion) or democratic (delegates authority, encourages participation, relies on others’ knowledge and ability to complete tasks, and influences from follower’s respect) in nature. The group of children performed best under the autocratic conditions, so long as the leader was present. But the children did not enjoy the mode of leadership and there was frequent hostility to it. The children performed almost as well under the democratic conditions, and continued to perform well when the leader was not present. Moreover, these conditions were associated with positive feelings, rather than feelings of hostility. Overall, Lewin and his colleagues concluded that the democratic style of leadership was preferable to an autocratic one.

Tannenbaum and Schmidt’s much cited work (Tannenbaum and Schmidt, 1958) picked up on Lewin et al.’s conclusion that democratic leadership was preferable and studied participative leadership. These researchers produced a continuum that indicates how different amounts of participation are reflected in leadership behaviours. At one end of the continuum is ‘boss-centred leadership’, otherwise known as autocratic leadership. And at the other end of the continuum is ‘subordinate-centred leadership’, otherwise known as democratic leadership. In conditions of ‘boss-centred leadership’, the leader (interestingly termed a ‘manager’) makes and announces decisions. With more participation, the leader has to ‘sell’ a decision. With even more participation, the leader has to present ideas and invite questions. With more, the leader presents a tentative decision that is subject to change. With more, the leader presents the problem, gets suggestions and then makes the decision. With more, the leader defines the limits and asks the group to make the decision. And finally, at the ‘subordinate-centred’ end of the continuum, the leader permits subordinates to function within limits defined by a superior. Tannenbaum and Schmidt argue that the leader should choose an appropriate style of leadership depending on the organisational circumstances, thereby positioning their leadership model as a contingency one. However, the authors do not develop the contextual side of their model and the focus is very much on leadership behaviours, rather than the interaction of individual and environmental factors.
Perhaps the best known theory of leadership style is 'The Managerial Grid' developed by Blake and Mouton (1964). This was later re-titled 'The Leadership Grid' (Blake and McCanse, 1991). These researchers proposed a two-dimensional theory. The two dimensions are a concern for people and a concern for production. The two axes have a minimum (low) score of one and a maximum (high) score of nine. Leaders are observed (or given a questionnaire) and then plotted on the grid. Depending on where they are positioned on the grid, particular descriptions of leadership follow. Someone positioned as a (1,1) leader is involved in 'impoverished management'. Such a person has little concern for people or results. ‘Country club management’ (1,9) is the term used to describe a leader who has a high concern for people, but little concern for results. The opposite form of leadership (9,1) in which the leader's concern is for results with little time for people is called 'authority–compliance management'. In the centre of the grid is 'middle-of-the-road management' (5,5), which denotes moderate concern for people and results. The (9,9) leadership style is termed ‘team management’, which denotes an equally high concern for both people and production. This style relies on interdependence between leaders and followers through a common stake in the organisation's purpose. This interdependence creates relationships based on mutual trust and respect leading to commitment. Blake and Mouton regard 'team management' as the leadership style that is most effective and they recommend it for every situation. Blake and Mouton's Leadership Grid is a simple panacea and as such is easy to refute as a universal theory of leadership. For example, the sort of leadership suited to a co-operative organization is unlikely to be the sort of leadership required in moments of extreme danger. That said, the nature of much work at the start of the twenty-first century with skilled workforces, increased people management legislation, greater measurement of results, and greater closeness to customers makes it an approach with considerable appeal.

Although trait theories have been around for a long time and have a natural appeal (as they are based around what leaders are and do), they are easy to criticise. Bryman (1992) offers a critique of trait and style approaches to leadership. His first criticism relates to the problem of causality. This criticism is the difficulty that researchers have connecting leadership behaviours to outcomes. For example, consider Margaret Thatcher. Most people accept, regardless of their political views or feelings about her policies, that she exhibited some leadership qualities and that she did much to change the country. These changes include a social change towards greater individualism, less altruism, and more greed. But was she the cause? This was a time of considerable technological change. Computers were finding a place in almost every type of gadget. Sony Walkmans were a 'must have' accessory. Cars came with radios and cassette players. In addition, the number of television channels and radio stations dramatically increased. All of these things might be thought of as factors in the greater
individualisation of society and would have happened regardless of who was Prime Minister. How then, can we ascribe causality on to Margaret Thatcher?

Bryman also considers the problem leadership style theories have explaining informal leadership. Informal leadership refers to the everyday influencing that goes on in organisations. Leadership is not just about ‘Great Men’ in positions of power, it is much subtler and occurs everywhere. Theories of leadership traits and styles focus on the designated leader of a group (Shackleton, 1995), that is, formal leadership. Crucially, the formal leader may not be the most influential in the minds of the followers and the styles of formal and informal leaders may be very different. If this is so, then it would be a mistake to use leadership style theories to explain the impact of informal leaders.

Finally, of course, there are the criticisms of Grint (1997). This group of leadership theories largely ignore contextual issues (a behaviour suited to one environment may not be suitable in another environment) and they assume that it is possible to be knowledgeable about the leader, which is not necessarily the case.

Situational

Hersey and Blanchard’s situational leadership theory (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988) is an extension of Blake and Mouton’s Managerial Grid but with the focus reversed so that the situation, or context, is dominant. It contains two dimensions (relationship behaviours and task behaviours). Relationship behaviours are those behaviours associated with support, recognition, and encouragement given by leaders to followers. Task behaviour is concerned with the amount of direction provided by the leader. These dimensions produce a two by two grid containing four styles: structuring (telling), coaching (selling), encouraging (participating), and delegating. Different versions of the theory use different labels for three of the styles. One way in which this theory differs to style approaches is that it does not assume that there is one best style of leadership. Instead, it suggests that leaders should change their styles to suit the demands of the situation. The appropriateness of the style depends on the readiness of followers. When followers are ready (i.e. they are motivated to do the work and have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities), encouraging and delegating styles are appropriate. When followers are less ready, structuring and coaching are more suitable. Hersey and Blanchard argue that as subordinates (followers) become more mature (this refers to the peoples’ ability and motivation to carry out a task), less guidance (i.e. structuring and coaching) is required and instead the leader can focus on encouragement and delegation. Thus, the readiness of followers dictates the sorts of behaviours leaders should adopt. And the emphasis of leaders is a diagnosis of followers’ maturity. Sadly, Hersey and Blanchard’s situational leadership theory has not attracted much research attention. One study by Vecchio (1987) does offer some guarded
support. This researcher studied high school teachers and head teachers in the USA. The results showed that the model fitted best with practice in situations of low maturity (when structuring and coaching was called for), but did not fit at all in high maturity situations.

Hersey and Blanchard’s theory of situational leadership remains a popular approach to leadership in the classroom and it is widely used on management development courses (Shackleton, 1995). Shackleton (1995) suggests that its prescriptive and intuitive appeal strikes a chord with the audience as it appears to echo what managers have learnt from experience. Another reason why a situational approach might be well received by practitioners is that it accords with the human tendency to assign causality to situational factors. A consistent finding in the psychology literature is that people attribute causality for their own actions to situational factors, and causality for other people’s actions to the person (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). Hence, when people are encouraged to think about their own leadership development, an approach that concentrates on situational factors is likely to have considerable appeal. Nevertheless, the situational approach to leadership is a largely ignored domain, with much focus going instead to contingency approaches.

Contingent

One of the earliest, and certainly one of the most cited, contingency theories of leadership was developed by Fiedler (1967). Broadly, his theory suggests that leadership style depends on the needs of the situation. Fiedler’s theory draws upon earlier leadership theories and uses them within a contingency framework. For example, when describing a suitable leadership style, Fiedler says that this has two components, relationship-oriented and task-oriented, which are strongly reminiscent of Blake and Mouton’s approach. The cornerstone of Fiedler’s theory is a questionnaire (containing sixteen bipolar adjectives) that describes the leader’s ‘least preferred coworker’ (LPC). The LPC is the person the leader least liked of all the people he or she has worked with. Someone’s LPC can be scored either high or low, that is, a positive or negative description of the person. A high (positive feeling towards the) LPC indicates that the leader is people-oriented, whereas a low (negative feelings towards the) LPC indicates that the leader is task-oriented. Left like this, the questionnaire would enable the leader to plot his or her leadership style on a two by two grid similar to Blake and Mouton. But Fiedler develops his theory to include three elements of the situation that can be either favourable or unfavourable to the leader. These three elements are ‘group atmosphere’, ‘task structure’, and ‘position power’. Fiedler (1972) combines these three situational factors to produce eight leadership situations. To these octants, Fiedler advocates a suitable fit between the leader’s style and the situation. In summary, task-oriented leaders are predicted to perform better
in situations with a good group atmosphere and structured tasks or when there is a poor group atmosphere and unstructured tasks. People-oriented perform better in the reverse of these situations. In other words, a people-oriented style of leadership is more effective in moderately favourable situations, whereas a task-oriented style of leadership is more effective in extreme situations. The position power situational dimension seems to act as a mediator. An interesting aspect of Fiedler’s theory is that assumes that the LPC preference of the leader is a trait-like quality. As such, it is difficult, if not impossible, to alter or adapt consciously it to suit the needs of the situation.

Fiedler’s contingency theory of leadership has attracted many studies. Meta-analyses of these studies (Peters, Hartke and Pohlmann, 1985; Strube and Garcia, 1981) conclude that the studies have provided data to support the theory, although studies in laboratory conditions yield much better data than studies in the field. Despite these findings, many criticisms can be levelled at the theory. Primarily, the model is relatively simplistic. It contains just one dimension of leadership behaviour (LPC) and just three dimensions of the situation. These dimensions can be deconstructed and shown to be flawed as a universal theory. For example, the measurement of the leader’s perceptions of his or her LPC depends, crucially, on the characteristics of particular LPCs. Some might be technically and socially inept, whereas others might not. The theory also suffers the prescriptive problem that it describes situations, but does not inform the leader of how to change things to improve his or her own leadership. Rather like trait theory, the LPC dimension is not malleable and therefore someone either is or is not the right leader for the situation.

A contingency theory of leadership that argues that leaders can change their style of leadership to suit the situation is known as ‘Path–Goal’ theory. This approach is an offshoot of the expectancy theory of motivation. As a theory of leadership, expectancy theory is most closely associated with the work of House (House, 1971; House and Mitchell, 1974). Expectancy theory is based on the idea that peoples’ actions are determined by their calculation of the expectancy (i.e. the perception that effort will result in performance), instrumentality (i.e. the perception that performance will be rewarded), and valence (the value of the outcome) in the situation. Central to the path–goal theory of leadership is the idea that leaders can (and should) manipulate workers’ perceptions of these dimensions. Echoing earlier theories, leaders can adopt four types of behaviour to achieve this manipulation: instrumental (or directive), supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented. House (1971) argues that the effective leader is the one who can determine which style is the most appropriate in the situation and then adapt his or her own style to suit.

There have been many studies of path–goal theory. By and large, these studies support the theory, especially in situations of low task structure when an instrumental style of leadership is associated with greater worker satisfaction, motivation, and satisfaction with the leader. However, an association between
worker performance and instrumental leadership style was not found in similar situations as would have been predicted by the theory (Indvik, 1986, cited in Shackleton, 1995). Although there have been many studies of this theory, most of these have tended to examine particular pieces of the theory and much of it remains untested. Another criticism of the theory is that of causality (Bryman, 1992). Whilst studies have shown associations between leadership style and follower satisfaction or performance, it is uncertain whether the leadership style causes the outcome, or whether the situation shapes the leadership behaviour. For example, a study by Greene (1979) showed that follower performance caused the leader to act in different ways, rather than vice versa. Finally, as demonstrated earlier, leadership style is a trait-like quality and as such resistant to change. This raises the question of how much leaders might be able to manipulate and alter their style of leadership and the various costs of doing so. There are dangers that the leader who continually changes his or her style might be seen as shifty or dishonest.

Constitutive

Grint’s final division of leadership envisages an approach to leadership in which it is not possible to capture either the person or the place objectively. As we have seen, most of the extant leadership theories simplify these dimensions so severely that the theories become panaceas with limited usefulness. More recent approaches have changed tack and sought to understand why ‘leadership’ eludes objective capture and the implications of this. One approach has been advocated by Wheatley (1992, 1999). Her approach to leadership has its roots in quantum mechanics, complex adaptive systems, living systems theory, and chaos theory. It inquires into the metaphorical links between these scientific perspectives and leadership. She notes that in the quantum world, ‘relationship’ is the key determiner of everything: ‘subatomic particles come into form and are observed only as they are in relationship to something else’ (Wheatley, 1999, p. 11). She then draws on uncertainty, self-regulation, strange attractors, and the wholeness of beings to describe leadership as a dynamic, ‘amorphous phenomenon’ (p.13) in which participation, awareness, relationships, and self-regulation are dilemmas to be resolved.

Grint’s constitutive approach uses social constructivism and linguistic interpretation to provide insight about leadership. He rejects the idea that it is possible to form an objective account of either people or situations. Instead, he argues, as there are as many ‘truths’ about a person or a situation as there are observers; truth emerges from a competition between various accounts and interpretations. He says that these interpretations do not have equal weight. Some are more dominant than others and become the accepted view, regardless of the ‘reality’ of the person or the situation. Hence, ‘we may never know what
the true essence of a leader or the situation actually is and must often base our actions and beliefs on the accounts of others from whom we can (re)constitute our version of events’ (Grint, 1997, p. 6). The practical implications of this approach are not a million miles away from the theories considered earlier in this paper: ‘In terms of leadership development, the approach suggests that the ancient study of rhetoric provides one significant element of leadership training since it may be persuasive powers that hold the key to leadership success. Political networking, interpersonal skills, material wealth, and negotiating skills are the hallmark of this approach’ (p. 6) ... ‘this does not mean that leadership is whatever anyone wants it to be; it is what certain powerful ‘voices’ make it. All voices may be equal but some are more equal than others’ (p. 9).

These approaches offer radical insight into the nature of leadership but, despite the long history of some of the underpinning ideas such as Plato’s rhetorical skill, these are ideas in formation rather than the more fully developed theories examined earlier. Nevertheless, they capture some characteristics of leadership, such as the complexity, multi-dimensional, and individual interpretation of leadership, which previous theories have long struggled to accommodate.

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**Note**

1. Apologies about the inherent sexism in the term ‘Great Men’, but this is a phrase commonly used in the literature to denote the trait approach. As this paper is an introduction to leadership theories and you may want to read more on the subject, one of my goals was to introduce you to the language of the field.

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**References**


