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Career developmentGuide To 6 Top Leadership Theories and How To Apply ThemBy Indeed Editorial TeamUpdated June 13, 2022 | Published October 7, 2019Updated June 13, 2022Published October 7, 2019This article has been approved by an Indeed Career Coach Understanding leadership theories and styles can help you be more effective in your role, particularly if you frequently collaborate with or manage others. Also, during the job search process, interviewers may assess your leadership potential, so it can be helpful to understand your preferred leadership practice. In this article, we define leadership theory, explore six main leadership theories and explain how you can define your leadership approach.Related: Top 8 Leadership Styles - Definitions & ExamplesJenn, an Indeed Career Coach, explains the top leadership styles in management and how to identify the one that's right for you and your team.What are leadership theory and leadership style?Leadership theory studies the qualities of good leaders. Psychologists analyze and develop leadership theory, and researchers try to discover the common qualities or behavioral patterns of strong leaders. Some leadership aspects they consider include:Personality traitsActionsEnvironmentSituationDecision-making processesHow input is receivedHow relationships are maintainedLeadership style is the way a leader approaches managing team members. These styles were formally developed as a result of studies on leadership theory, and each style includes distinct qualities. Common leadership styles include:Coach: Recognizes strengths and weaknesses, helps people set goals and provides a lot of feedback.Visionary: Manages through inspiration and confidence.Servant: Focuses on helping team members feel fulfilled.Autocratic or authoritarian: Makes decisions with little or no input from others.Laissez-faire or hands-off: Delegates tasks and provides little supervision.Democratic: Considers the opinions of others before making a decision.Pacesetter: Sets high standards and focuses on performance.Bureaucratic: Follows a strict hierarchy and expects team members to follow procedure.6 main leadership theoriesPrimary leadership theories include:Great man theoryThe great man theory of leadership states that great leaders are born with all the right personality traits such as intelligence, courage, confidence, intuition and charm. A popular concept in the 19th century, this theory asserts that you can't develop leadership abilities—you either have them or you don't. Opponents of this theory claim it's unrealistic in its basic assumption. Trait theoryThe trait theory of leadership states that certain natural qualities tend to create good leaders. Having such qualities, however, does not necessarily mean someone has strong leadership skills. Some leaders may be good listeners or communicators, but not every listener or communicator makes a good leader. Behavioral theoryThe behavioral theory of leadership focuses on how a person's environment, not natural abilities, forms him or her into a leader. One of the key concepts is conditioning. It asserts that a person will be more likely to act or lead in a certain style as a result of environmental responses to behavior. The theory states that anyone can be a leader if they behave the way other leaders do.Transactional or management theoryThe transactional theory of leadership, also called "management theory," states that leadership is a system of rewards and penalties. It views effective leadership as results-focused and hierarchical. Transactional leaders prioritize order and structure over creativity by rewarding someone who meets a goal and penalizing someone who doesn't.Transactional or relationship theoryThe transformational theory of leadership, also called "relationship theory," asserts that effective leadership is the result of a positive relationship between leaders and team members. Transformational leaders motivate and inspire through their enthusiasm and passion. They are a model for their teams, emphasizing a collaborative work environment, diplomatic communication skills, and efficient delegation. Read more: Transformational Leadership: Definition and ExamplesSituational theoryThe situational theory of leadership does not relate to a certain type of leader or claim that any one style is best. Instead, it asserts that the best kind of leader is one who can adapt their style based on the situation. They may respond to a situation by commanding, coaching, persuading, participating, delegating or however they think is necessary. Situational leaders are defined by their flexibility.Image descriptionCommon leadership styles:Coach (motivational)Visionary (progress-focused and inspirational)Servant (humble and protective)Autocratic (authoritarian and result-focused)Laissez-faire or hands-off (autocratic and delegatory)Democratic (supportive and innovative)Pacesetter (helpful and motivational)Transformational (challenging and communicative)Transactional (performance-focused)Bureaucratic (hierarchical and duty-focused)Why you should identify your leadership theory and styleConsidering your thoughts about and practices of leadership can help you identify your areas of strength and weakness and take action to become a better leader. Try to think about what qualities you possess and what ones you could develop. Ask yourself what leadership theory you agree with or would like to follow. By evaluating your skills, you can understand how to better lead your group.Some theories and styles of leadership are better for certain work environments than others. You can practice a single style or try a mix based on your needs. Schools of thought explaining how and why certain individuals become leaders Leadership theories are schools of thought brought forward to explain how and why certain individuals become leaders. The theories emphasize the traits and behaviors that individuals can adopt to boost their own leadership abilities. Early studies on the psychology of leadership pointed to the fact that leadership skills are inherent abilities that people are born with. It was not until recently that formal leadership theories emerged, despite leadership becoming a concept of interest at the beginning of time. Leadership at a Glance A leader is crucial to the success of every team. Take an orchestra, for instance, one that consists of all the best musicians in the world but lacks a conductor. Even though every member of the orchestra can play perfectly by themselves, they will only produce an incompatible melody in the absence of a conductor. The same concept applies to communities, companies, and countries. Without a leader, nothing will ever run smoothly. So, what makes leaders who they are? Why are some people elected as managers and presidents while the rest remain followers? Leadership theories were developed to find answers to these questions. Key Leadership Theories 1. Great Man Theory According to the Great Man Theory (which should perhaps be called the Great Person Theory), leaders are born with just the right traits and abilities for leading – charisma, intellect, confidence, communication skills, and social skills. The theory suggests that the ability to lead is inherent – that the best leaders are born, not made. It defines leaders as valiant, mythic, and ordained to rise to leadership when the situation arises. The term “Great Man” was adopted at the time because leadership was reserved for males, particularly in military leadership. 2. Trait Theory The Trait Theory is very similar to the Great Man Theory. It is founded on the characteristics of different leaders – both the successful and unsuccessful ones. The theory is used to predict effective leadership. Usually, the identified characteristics are compared to those of potential leaders to determine their likelihood of leading effectively. Scholars researching the trait theory try to identify leadership characteristics from different perspectives. They focus on the physiological attributes such as appearance, weight, and height; demographics such as age, education, and familial background; and intelligence, which encompasses decisiveness, judgment, and knowledge. 3. Contingency Theory The Contingency Theory emphasizes different variables in a specific setting that determine the style of leadership best suited for the said situation. It is founded on the principle that no one leadership style is applicable to all situations. Renowned leadership researchers Hodgson and White believe that the best form of leadership is one that finds the perfect balance between behaviors, needs, and context. Good leaders not only possess the right qualities but they're also able to evaluate the needs of their followers and the situation at hand. In summary, the contingency theory suggests that great leadership is a combination of many key variables. 4. Situational Theory The Situational Theory is similar to the Contingency Theory as it also proposes that no one leadership style supersedes others. As its name suggests, the theory implies that leadership depends on the situation at hand. Put simply, leaders should always correspond their leadership to the respective situation by assessing certain variables such as the type of task, nature of followers, and more. As proposed by US professor Paul Hersey and leadership guru Ken Blanchard, the situational theory blends two key elements: the leadership style and the followers' maturity levels. Hersey and Blanchard classified maturity into four different degrees: M1 – Team members do not possess the motivation or tactical skills to complete necessary jobs. M2 – Team members are willing and ambitious to achieve something, but they lack the necessary ability. M3 – Team members possess the skills and capacity to accomplish tasks, but they're not willing to take accountability. M4 – Team members possess all the right talents and are motivated to complete projects. According to situational theory, a leader exercises a particular form of leadership based on the maturity level of his or her team. 5. Behavioral Theory In Behavioral Theory, the focus is on the specific behaviors and actions of leaders rather than their traits or characteristics. The theory suggests that effective leadership is the result of many learned skills. Individuals need three primary skills to lead their followers – technical, human, and conceptual skills. Technical skills refer to a leader's knowledge of the process or technique; human skills means that one is able to interact with other individuals; while conceptual skills enable the leader to come up with ideas for running the organization or society smoothly. Applying Leadership Theories at the Workplace To a great extent, leadership theories have helped form and shape the kind of governance that exists today. Many aspects of these theories can be applied to help one improve his or her leadership skills. 1. Maximize Your Strengths As proposed by the Trait Theory, effective leadership depends on the traits that one possesses. Leaders should strive to focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. The strengths vary from one leader to another and may include: A strong will is crucial to staying resilient and seeing leaders through difficult times. No matter how challenging the situation may be, a strong-willed leader is able to find inner strength and carry on until he or she overcomes all challenges. A decisive nature is another strength that some leaders possess. Decisiveness means that when others may be perplexed, a leader can calmly assess the situation and choose one action to unite everyone. But, since they may not always make the right decisions, they must also be willing to learn from their mistakes. 2. Be Inclusive Leaders Some of the more complex situational theories emphasize focusing on people. It means that they acknowledge individual people to be their greatest assets and not just mere numbers in their workforce. Being an inclusive leader requires that one constantly involves other people in their leadership, whether it is by always welcoming the feedback of others or delegating more responsibility to others than other forms of leadership. Key Takeaways There are numerous ways of defining leadership. Some leadership theories attempt to explain what differentiates a leader, while some explain how great leaders come to be. The Great Man Theory believes that the inherent traits that one is born with contribute to great leadership. Situational Theory recommends leaders to adopt a leadership style depending on the situation at hand, while the Behavioral Theory is all about the learning the skills necessary to become a good leader. Leadership theories don't only exist in history. They are concepts with actionable advice that can be adopted by many, from executive managers to community leaders and government officials. Related Readings Thank you for reading CFI's guide on Leadership Theories. To keep learning and advancing your career, the following resources will be helpful:



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