A SITUATIONAL APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

WALTER HILL [1]

Department of Management, University of Florida

Fiedler's contingency model suggests that task-oriented leaders are more effective where the leadership situation is either very favorable or very unfavorable and that relations-oriented leaders are more effective in situations of intermediate favorability. This model was tested among supervisors in both interacting and coacting groups in two organizations Results in the hypothesized direction were attained although they were not generally significant.

One of the most perplexing problems confronting managers has been to determine the leadership style most conducive to promoting effective work groups. Empirical studies directed toward finding that style which is most effective have yielded inconclusive and often contradictory results (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Fiedler, 1958; Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939; Likert, 1961; Shaw, 1955). Although some theoreticians have been perplexed by the difficulty in identifying the one best leadership style, many practical supervisors have viewed the leadership literature with amusement as they have long recognized that both the directive, authoritarian, task-oriented leader and his counterpart, the democratic, human relations leader have proved effective in countless situations. The Contingency Theory of Leadership Effectiveness recently advanced by Fiedler (1964) suggests a theoretical explanation for both the confusion which now exists in the literature and the practical insights of many managers.

This theory suggests that leadership is an influence process where the ease or difficulty of exerting influence is a function of the favorableness of the group task situation for the leader. Although it has been recognized that the favorableness of each group task situation may depend on different variables, the three most commonly acknowledged determinants stated in their order of importance are leader-member relations, task structure, and position power. Once these variables have been measured, they can be ordered into

eight cells along a continuum to illustrate the relative degree of favorableness in a task situation as shown in Figure 1.

The most favorable situation exists when the leader enjoys good leader-member relations, is supervising a structured task, and possesses strong position power (Cell 1). The favorableness of the group task situation decreases as leader-member relations change from good to moderately poor; the most unfavorable situation is one where the leader-member relations are moderately poor, the task is unstructured, and position power is weak (Cell 8). The theory predicts that the task-oriented leader will be more effective in those situations which are either very favorable (Cells 1, 2, 3) or very unfavorable (Cell 8) and that the relations-oriented leader will be more effective in situations intermediate in favorableness (Cells 4, 5, 6, 7).

The empirical basis from which the contingency theory was induced is impressive: over 50 studies of 21 different types of groups. Recent studies (Blanchard, 1967; Fiedler, 1966; Hunt, 1967; Shaw & Blum, 1966) have tended to support this theory in interacting groups and have suggested that it may also be applicable in coacting groups (Hunt, 1967). The purpose of this study is to provide additional tests of the contingency model in interacting and coacting groups in real life organizations.

METHOD

An empirical test of the contingency model requires the following information: a measure of the supervisors' leadership styles, the classification of group supervisors into cells on the basis of leader-member relations, task structure and position power,

High LPC:
Relationship-
oriented

Low LPC:
Task-oriented

Correlations Between Leader LPC and Group Performance

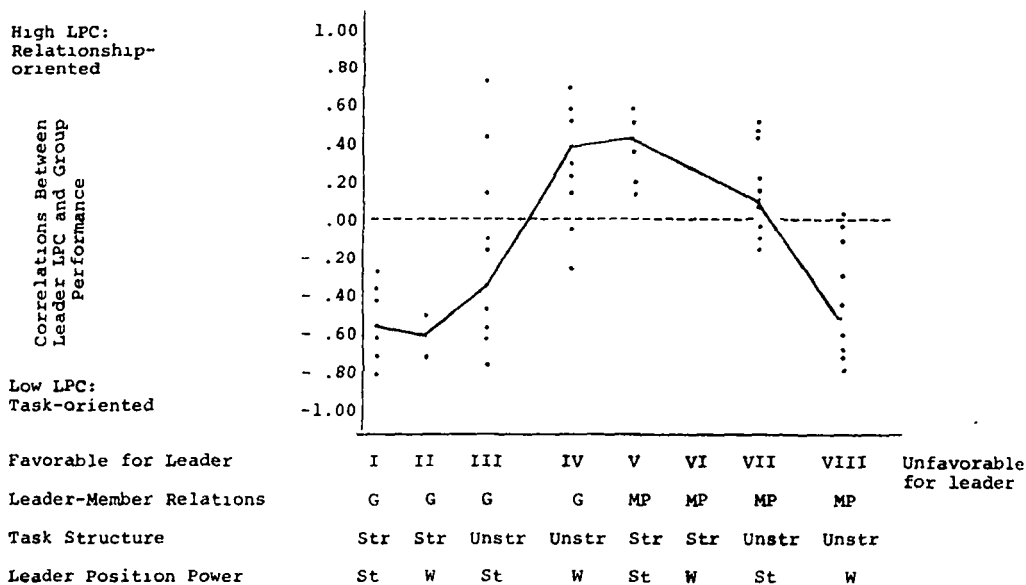| Favorable for Leader	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	Unfavorable for leader
Leader-Member Relations	G	G	G	G	MP	MP	MP	MP	
Task Structure	Str	Str	Unstr	Unstr	Str	Str	Unstr	Unstr	
Leader Position Power	St	W	St	W	St	W	St	W	

FIG. 1. Correlations between leaders' Least Preferred Co-worker scores and group effectiveness.

a measure of leadership effectiveness, and the determination of the correlations between leadership style and managerial effectiveness in each cell to be tested.

Supervisors were classified as task-oriented or relations-oriented on the basis of Fiedler's (1966) Least Preferred Co-worker (LPC) score. Leader-member relations were classified as good or moderately poor as a result of the leaders' perceptions of group atmosphere which were indicated by their responses to 10 semantic differential statements describing the group atmosphere (Fiedler, 1967). These responses were aggregated and divided into high and low group atmospheres (good and moderately poor leader-member relations) by taking the top and bottom third of the scores. Tasks were classified as structured or unstructured, and position power was defined as strong or weak by three judges completing questionnaires adapted by Hunt (1967). Leadership effectiveness was measured by asking Ss' immediate supervisors to rate their performance on relevant job duties and personal characteristics considered essential to job performance. Spearman's rank order correlation was employed to measure the relationship between leadership style scores and performance.

Subjects

The main consideration in the selection of organizations to be included in this study was that a sufficient number of supervised groups could be found performing both structured and unstructured tasks. This criterion was met in an electronics firm and a teaching hospital. The existing level of activity in the electronics firm enabled the author to investigate 28 groups performing unstructured state of the arts engineering tasks and 28 groups performing

structured assembly line operations. Since the nature of these tasks required a high degree of interdependency, the groups were judged to be interacting The hospital afforded an opportunity to study 23 nursing groups whose tasks were judged to be unstructured and 25 groups performing structured tasks such as accounting, housekeeping, and routine maintenance. Since the hospital groups performed their work without a high degree of interdependency, they were judged to be coacting groups. The researcher met with the supervisors of these groups, explained that he was attempting to predict leadership effectiveness, and that the results of the study would be confidential. Twenty-eight assembly line foremen, 26 engineering supervisors, 23 nursing supervisors, and 25 managers from patient-support activities agreed to participate in the study and completed the required questionnaires.

RESULTS

Since the contingency model was tested in both interacting and coacting groups, results are reported and discussed separately.

Interacting Groups

Questionnaire returns from the electronics firm enabled the analysis of 28 structured and 26 unstructured task groups. Since supervisors of structured groups (assembly line foremen) were judged to have weak position power, a separation of these Ss into those having good and moderately poor leader-member relations allowed tests of the contingency

model in Cells 2 and 6. Since supervisors of unstructured groups (Engineering supervisors) were judged to have strong position power, a separation of these Ss into those having good and moderately poor leader-member relations enabled tests of the model in Cells 3 and 7. The calculation of Spearman's rho shown in Table 1 indicated correlations in the predicted direction for Cells 2, 3, and 7, although none of them reached an acceptable significance level. Cell 6 revealed a correlation in the opposite direction from that predicted by the model although it was not significant.

Coacting Groups

Questionnaire returns enabled the analysis of 25 structured and 23 unstructured task groups in the hospital. Since all supervisory positions were judged to have strong position power, the separation of managers of structured task groups (patient-supporting activities) into those having good and moderately poor leader-member relations allowed a test of the contingency model in Cells 1 and 5 while the division of unstructured task groups (nursing supervisors) enabled tests of the model in Cells 3 and 7. The calculation of Spearman's rho shown in Table 2 indicated that all correlations were in the hypothesized direction although only Cell 5 reached a significance level of .05.

DISCUSSION

Before the contingency model can be accepted as a valid theory of leadership effectiveness, many successful replications must be performed. Each cell in the model should be

TABLE 1

SPEARMAN RANK ORDER CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SUPERVISORS' LEAST PREFERRED CO-WORKER SCORES AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN AN ELECTRONICS FIRM

Cell tested	N^a	Spearman's rho
2	9	−.097
3	8	−.291
6	9	−.238
7	8	+.619

ᵃ Since the number of structured and unstructured groups was not divisible equally into three groups, the remaining groups were assigned to the middle set and not included in the calculations.

TABLE 2

SPEARMAN RANK ORDER CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SUPERVISORS' LEAST PREFERRED CO-WORKER SCORES AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN HOSPITAL STUDY

Cell tested	N^a	Spearman's rho
1	7	−.321
3	8	−.214
5	7	+.872*
7	8	+.529

ᵃ Since the number of structured and unstructured groups was not divisible equally into three groups, the remaining groups were assigned to the middle set and not included in the calculations.
* $p < .05$.

treated as a separate hypothesis and all studies pertaining to a specific cell should be combined for purposes of ascertaining whether or not a correlation does exist. Only after it has been established that a correlation does exist will it prove fruitful to study the nature of the relationship through means of regression models. Thus, the studies reported in this paper can do no more than provide additional information concerning specific cells in the model.

Interacting Groups

The electronics firm investigation provided tests of the contingency model in Cells 2, 3, 6, and 7 in interacting groups as shown in Table 1. A comparison of the split-group correlations obtained in this study with the contingency model predictions indicates that the correlations in Cells 2, 3, and 7 support the hypothesis although none of the correlations reached a significance level of .05. The correlation obtained from Cell 6 was in the direction opposite to that predicted by the model.

Although none of the correlations in Cells 2, 3, and 7 reached an acceptable level of significance, they do fit generally into the results reported by Fiedler as shown in Figure 1, and thus a partial confirmation appears warranted. The discrepancies between the correlations reported in this work and those of Fiedler may be explained by several factors. First, the number of groups subjected to investigation in this study were smaller than those utilized by Fiedler. An acquaintance-

ship with statistical inference indicates that it is easier to reach a higher significance level if the sample size is greater. Thus, if more groups had been investigated, significant correlations might have been attained. Second, group effectiveness in Fiedler's original studies was always defined as measured performance stated in terms of such things as physical output, contest outcomes, and deviations from an intended target. The measures of group effectiveness employed in the studies reported in this article were based on effectiveness ratings by higher echelon superiors of the supervisors whose groups were studied. This procedure may introduce factors other than the actual performance of the group such as the bias of the evaluator. There was no way to measure this possibility. Thus, the method of effectiveness rating could account for some of the discrepancies between the correlations reported here and those discovered by Fiedler. Third, the definition of favorability used in the studies reported here was that originally espoused by Fiedler; that is, leader-member relations, task structure, and position power. Since the work performed was of a highly technical nature, it may be that the technical ability of the supervisor should have been a factor in the definition of the favorability dimension. The design of the study did not provide an opportunity to include this condition.

The negative correlation in Cell 6 can be explained much easier. An inspection of Fiedler's model in Figure 1 shows that no actual studies had ever been performed in this cell; the curve had merely been extended from Cell 5 to Cell 7. This extrapolation resulted in a prediction that high LPC leaders would be more effective than low LPC leaders where moderately poor leader-member relations existed, the task was structured, and position power was weak.

Since this study is the first to measure such conditions, it may be that the extrapolation of the model was unwarranted. There obviously is no reason why the curve cannot dip below the line in Cell 6 and rise again in Cell 7. In fact, it may be argued that the existence of moderately poor leader-member relations raises the anxiety level of the high LPC leader since good relations are of primary importance to him and his reactions intended to develop better relationships actually interfered with the performance of a task which was basically well structured and required better direction. On the other hand, a low LPC leader is not as alarmed by the existence of moderately poor leader-member relations and continues focusing his attention on task performance improvements in the structure which may lead to greater effectiveness.

It must be remembered that this model suggests only that one type of leader tends to be more effective than another type in a given cell on the favorability continuum. This implies that special conditions may enable the latter type of supervisor also to be effective. Thus, the model only suggests that, *ceteris paribus*, one type is more likely to succeed than another.

Coacting Groups

The study conducted in the hospital provided tests of the contingency model in Cells 1, 3, 5, and 7, in coacting groups. The results from the hospital study indicate that all correlations are in the predicted direction although a significance level of .05 was attained only in Cell 5 as shown in Table 2. This suggests that when leader-member relations are moderately poor, the task is unstructured, and position power is strong that high LPC leaders are more effective than low LPC leaders. This conclusion is consistent with the literature which generally holds that a supervisor dealing with professional people who perform unstructured tasks should adopt a democratic rather than an authoritarian leadership style.

Although correlations in cells other than Cell 5 did not reach an acceptable level of significance, it may be that the reasons advanced previously can account for the lack of significance. Certainly, the model has intuitive appeal and warrants further replication.

REFERENCES

BLAKE, R. B., & MOUTON, J. S. The Managerial Grid. Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1964.

BLANCHARD, K. H. College boards of trustees: A need for directive leadership. *Academy of Management Journal*, 1967, 10, 409–417.

FIEDLER, F. E. Leader attitudes and group effectiveness. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958.

FIEDLER, F. E. A contingency model of leadership effectiveness. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology.* Vol. 1, New York: Academic Press, 1964.

FIEDLER, F. E. The effect of leadership and cultural heterogeneity on group performance: A test of the contingency model *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 1966, 2, 237–264.

FIEDLER, F. E. A theory of leadership effectiveness. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.

HUNT, J. G. A test of the contingency model in three organizations: Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967.

LIKERT, R. New patterns of management McGraw-Hill, 1961.

LEWIN, K., LIPPITT, R., & WHITE, R. K. Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created "social climates." *Journal of Social Psychology,* 1939, 10, 271–299.

SHAW, M. A comparison of two types of leadership in various communication nets *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology,* 1955, 50, 127–134.

SHAW, M., & BLUM, J. M Effects of leadership style upon group performance as a function of task structure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 1966, 3, 233–242.