A STUDY OF SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the research was an analysis in a distribution corporation of supervisors and managers in a third party logistics company. Specific goals of the study were to (1) determine the primary leadership style, (2) to determine the secondary leadership style, (3) to determine the style adaptability levels and compare to the support and operations groups, (4) to determine the style adaptability and compare to the leader vs. the his peers, subordinates and superiors and, (5) to determine style adaptability and compare with subordinates in the two groups, support and operations.

BACKGROUND

Throughout history, people have been captivated with the ways in which leaders sway groups of people, organizations, and even governments to fulfill certain objectives and to meet specific goals. This captivation increased researchers’ desire to understand and improve effective leadership and resulted in a vast amount of literature on the subject. This literature has continually defined and redefined effective leadership in many ways throughout the years (Podsakoff, Niehoff, MacKenzie, & Williams, 1993).

In the 1940s, research on leadership concentrated primarily on the personality characteristics of the individual. Toward the late 1950s and 1960s, physical attributes and the behavior of leaders were also considered as focal points for leadership. This focus on leadership behavior brought about the identification of different dimensions of leadership. These dimensions are examinations of distinguishable behavior, leadership training, reward and punishment, and charismatic and transformational leadership behaviors. In the 1970s and 1980s, the situational and contingency approaches of the 1960s brought about a comprehensive approach in which traits or personality variables, task orientations and structure, leader-follower relationships, and situation contexts were all measurable variables through which a leader’s effectiveness could be examined (Podsakoff, Niehoff, MacKenzie, & Williams, 1993). Contemporary
approaches to leadership research have concentrated on a blend of variables compiled throughout the years. Now, not only does this research emphasize the cognitive effects of leaders on their followers, but also their influence on the organization as a whole through structural, multicultural and performance measures.

For the present study, leadership can be defined as a process of non-coercive social influence, whereby a leader guides the activities and members of a group toward shared objectives and goals in an organization. Simply put, the key to being an efficient manager is effective leadership (Hersey, Blanchard & Johnson 1996). The concepts of behavioral science are well intended, but often fall short of the mark. There are many good ideas but many have had difficulty in putting the ideas into practice. When studying leader influence, the behavior of others should not be thought of as a single event. There is no single formula to apply in every situation; like any other skill, leadership effectiveness increases the more one understands and practices the skills.

Managerial leadership is an interactive relationship between a leader and a follower in which the leader attempts to influence the follower to accomplish an organizational goal or perform a task (Bass, 1990). Leadership is any attempt to influence the behavior of another individual or group according to Hersey et al. (1996). Hersey refers to leadership as accomplishing tasks and reaching goals through the efforts of other people, whereas management is working with and through others to accomplish organizational goals. Leadership is considered a much broader concept than management.

According to Hersey et al. (1996), “one can have a different objective in mind when one attempts to influence other people” (p.229). Since management is a special form of leadership that involves the goals of an organization, consideration should be given to the impact on the people being influenced. Hersey et al. explain that in management the difference between successful and effective leadership attempts often explains why many supervisors can get results when they are right there looking over the worker's shoulder. However, as soon as they leave, output declines and often such things as horseplay and scrap loss increase.

According to Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, (2001) “to bridge the gap between one-time success and long-term effectiveness, one needs to develop three skills in working with people” (p. 124). These three skills often determine whether leadership attempts will be successful or unsuccessful, effective or ineffective. Understanding what motivates people, predicting how they will behave in response to your leadership attempts, and directing their behavior are all necessary for effective leadership. Leadership takes place in an organization or a group of two persons or more. It is a process of interaction. The leader uses a variety of ways to influence group members to devote themselves to a given goal. Overall, effectiveness depends upon understanding, predicting, and influencing the behavior of other people. Purpose of the Study

This research looks at the influence of the match (if any) of manager leadership style and subordinate, associates' perceptions of the leader. The sample for this research consists of managers, supervisors, and their subordinates in a distribution corporation. The sampling process used a stratified random sampling procedure. The study focuses on determining the extent that variances in level of leadership can be explained by the variables historically used by researchers to describe the Situational Leadership Theory constructs,
maturity and readiness. The constructs, maturity and readiness, are often used interchangeably. In explaining the change from maturity to readiness, Hersey et al. (1996), "during the 1960s the term, maturity, in reference to assessing people did not seem offensive; it does now" (p. 585). The role of leadership in business is significant. The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand the impact of leadership style and the adaptability of the leader. The process for achieving this aim includes testing the Situational Leadership Theory. If this is a valid theory that can be used in the distribution organization, it will be a useful tool for other organizations to use to understand the role of leadership in their organizations and to develop strategies to improve leadership style.

THEORY TO BE TESTED

The theory being tested in this study is the Situational Leadership Theory. The original model for this approach was suggested by Reddin (1967) and later adapted by Hersey and Blanchard (1996). Reddin's (1967) 3-Dimensional Management Style Theory attempts to match one of three leadership styles to certain work environments with the goal of increasing employee output. He identifies two leadership orientations, relationship and task orientation. The combination of styles suggests the existence of two different orientations, which are adapted by leaders according to the work environment. Hersey et al. (1996) modify this concept of orientations by suggesting that leadership styles change with a leader's readiness, as well as with the readiness of an organization and its work force. By looking at such components as task and relationship factors and combining the relative importance of task and relationship with the level of readiness, Hersey et al. (1996), developed their four-factor theory of Situational Leadership.

The Hersey et al. (1996) model suggests that effective leaders are those who can accurately diagnose the essential variables in each leadership situation and adjust their leadership style to fit the existing conditions. As the diversity of leadership situations encountered increases, the leader must possess more sophisticated diagnostic skills and a broader range of styles.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study examines the leaders and followers at the group level. Variations in individual levels of readiness and leader behavior may be obscured by the generalized perception of the group's perspective. The LEAD-Self is used to evaluate the leadership behaviors used when the leader is engaged in attempts to influence the actions and attitudes of others. The information gathered with the LEAD-Self provides insight into the current strengths of the leader and areas for his or her leadership skill development. This supplies information about which leadership behaviors one may use and the extent to which those behaviors meet the needs of others.

The LEAD-Other is used to profile the leadership behaviors of a person's perception of the leader. The information gathered with the LEAD-Other provides insight into the perception of a leader’s attempts to influence. It supplies information about which leadership behaviors are used and the extent to which these behaviors match the needs of others.
Preliminary Research Question

The preliminary research questions ask: What is the leader’s primary leadership style and what is his or her leadership adaptability in the distribution corporation. Also questioned, is there a higher leadership style adaptability score among subordinates when there is a match of manager leadership style. Finally, is there a tendency of over-leadership or under-leadership according to the Readiness Matrix in the distribution corporation.

The specific research questions are as follows:
1. What is the primary leadership style in a distribution corporation?
2. What is the secondary leadership style in a distribution corporation?
3. What is the perception of the leader’s leadership style adaptability in the distribution corporation?
4. Is there a difference between the support section and the operations section in their perception of the overall leadership style adaptability in the distribution corporation?
5. Is there a difference in the perception of the followers’ leadership style adaptability between the support section and operations section?

Significance of the Research

The findings of this study further the understanding of organizational leadership in the distribution organization. The research on situational leadership is limited; this study should provide support for the application of the Situational Leadership Theory in identifying effective managers in general and in distribution organization.

This study has special significance in that it focuses on the culture of the organization and can be expected to influence significantly the applicability or non-applicability of the Situational Leadership Theory to organizations. The identification of effective managers is a critical task facing all organizations and any tools that can be identified and used to facilitate this process should apply to other organizations.

The theory is often cited as a basis for decision-making. Efforts to validate the study have been limited in scope and have been, for the most part, largely inconclusive. In accordance with Hersey et al. (2001), "Situational Leadership suggests that the higher the level of task-relevant readiness of an individual or group, the higher the probability that participation will be an effective management technology” (p.371).

FINDINGS

The LEAD Self (Hersey & Blanchard 1996) was used to measure self-perception of four aspects of leader behavior (1) primary style, (2) secondary style, (3) style range, and (4) style adaptability. The LEAD-Others was used to measure the others-perception of four aspects of leader behavior (1) primary style, (2) secondary style, (3) style range, and (4) style adaptability perceives by the leader peers, subordinates, and superiors.
There were 160 LEAD Other surveys issued to subordinates, peers, and superiors. There were Forty-one LEAD Self issued to the leaders (13 managers & 28 supervisors). There were seven managers & eleven supervisors from the support function, and six managers & seventeen supervisors from the operation group. The findings of the survey founded that over 75% of the personnel surveyed fell into the S-2 and S-1 categories.

According to Situational Leadership Theory, Leaders whose scores place the majority of their responses in Style 1 & 2 tend to be able to raise and lower their relationship behavior but often feel uncomfortable unless they are “calling the shots.” These leaders often project in interviews that “no one can do things as well as I can” and this often becomes a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

This leader style profile 1 & 2 makes use of both task and relationship behavior. The style profile 1 & 2 tends to be effective with low-to-moderate levels of readiness. It often is an effective style for people engaged in manufacturing and production where managers have real pressures to produce, as well as with leaders in crisis situations where time is an extremely scarce resource.

In this study, the researcher further supported the Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory. The LEAD-Self and LEAD-Other was used to determine the leadership style and adaptability of the leader. The leaders differ in their ability to vary their style to accommodate different situations. While style range indicates the extent to which the leader is able to vary their style, style adaptability reflects the degree to which they change in styles are appropriate to the level of readiness of the people involved in different situation.

REFERENCES

- Fiedler, Fred. (1967).


