TRAIT APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

The trait approach to leadership was one of the earliest theories of leadership. Although it is not a fully articulated theory with well-developed hypotheses, the trait approach formed the basis of most early leadership research. This approach focuses on the personal attributes (or traits) of leaders, such as physical and personality characteristics, competencies, and values. It views leadership solely from the perspective of the individual leader. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that traits produce patterns of behavior that are consistent across situations. That is, leadership traits are considered to be enduring characteristics that people are born with and that remain relatively stable over time.

EARLY RESEARCH ON THE TRAIT APPROACH

Early trait researchers studied the personality attributes that they believed were related to leadership effectiveness, rather than researching exceptional historical figures (i.e., the *great man* approach to leadership). Many early researchers viewed leadership as a unidimensional personality trait that could be reliably measured and was distributed normally throughout the population (i.e., an individual difference variable).

Most of the early empirical work on the trait approach focused on the systematic investigation of the differences between leaders and followers. It was reasonable to assume that individuals in higher-level positions would possess more leadership traits than those in lower-level positions. Concurrently, a large number of studies were conducted in an attempt to develop reliable and valid measures of leadership traits.

Researchers discovered, however, that only a few traits appeared to distinguish between leaders and followers. Leaders tended to be slightly higher on traits such as height, intelligence, extraversion, adjustment, dominance, and self-confidence as compared with nonleaders. The small differences between leaders and nonleaders were attributed to errors in leader selection, errors in measuring leadership traits, or the failure to measure critical attributes.

Many early trait researchers had assumed that, no matter what the situation, there was a set of characteristics that made a leader successful. These researchers believed that the same leadership traits would be effective, for example, in both the boardroom and on the battlefield. However, the differences between leaders and followers were found to vary widely across different situations—researchers had underestimated the impact of situational variables on leadership effectiveness.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS

Trait researchers often developed lists of characteristics that they believed were related to successful leadership. In creating such lists, some researchers mixed together very different attributes. For example, lists included some leadership traits that were aspects of behaviors and skills, in addition to other traits that were related to temperament and intellectual ability. These lists of traits typically included characteristics such as self-confidence, intelligence, ambition, perseverance, assertiveness, emotional stability, creativity, and motivation. The lists, however, were not exhaustive and typically omitted some important leadership attributes.

Today, many popular books on leadership continue the tradition of providing lists of traits that are thought to be central to effective leadership. The basic idea remains that if an individual possesses such traits, she or he will be a successful leader in any situation. In 1989, John W. Gardner published a study of a large number of leaders and concluded that there are some attributes that appear to make a leader successful in any situation. These traits included the following:

- Physical vitality and stamina
- Intelligence and action-oriented judgment
- Eagerness to accept responsibility
- Task competence
- Understanding of followers and their needs
- Skill in dealing with people
- Need for achievement
- Capacity to motivate people
- Courage and resolution
- Trustworthiness
- Decisiveness
- Self-confidence
- Assertiveness
- Adaptability/flexibility

One of the concerns about such lists is that the attributes typically associated with successful leaders are often perceived as "male" traits. Reportedly, when men and women are asked about the other gender's characteristics and leadership qualities, significant patterns emerge, with both men and women tending to see successful leaders as male.

PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE TRAIT APPROACH

As discussed previously, many early researchers found no differences between leaders and followers with respect to their leadership characteristics—some even found that individuals who possessed these traits were less likely to become leaders. Researchers also found very small relationships between these traits and leadership effectiveness. Because so few of the traits clearly differentiated between effective and ineffective leaders, their efficacy in selecting individuals for leadership positions was severely limited. There were too many leadership variables with low reliabilities, and no rationale for selecting specific variables to include in a study. This approach has been called "dustbowl empiricism" at its worst.

Additionally, there has been little systematic research on the processes by which individuals acquire the capacity for leadership. If leadership is indeed an individual difference variable, then very little is known about the origin of these differences.

RECENT RESEARCH ON THE TRAIT APPROACH

As the trait approach fell out of favor in industrial/organizational psychology, researchers began to develop new situational approaches to leadership. They also began to focus their attention on leader behaviors, which led to the emergence of behavioral theories of leadership. Many modern researchers adopted a contingency approach to leadership, which posits that leaders who posses certain traits will be more effective in some situations than in others.

Recently, however, there has been somewhat of a resurgence in research on the trait approach to leadership, especially with the emergence of the five-factor model of personality. Recent research has attempted to correct some of the methodological shortcomings of the earlier research on leadership traits. For example, researchers have developed conceptual models linking leadership attributes to organizational performance. Additionally, they have begun to highlight consistent patterns of relationships between traits and performance measures. Rather than simply studying what combinations of traits would be successful in a particular situation, researchers are now linking clusters of personality traits to success in different situations.

SUMMARY

In general, the trait and situational approaches have resulted in only limited advances in the understanding of leadership. Although early studies highlighted the

importance of situational considerations in leadership, there still is no situational theory of leadership. Most leadership researchers, therefore, have abandoned the pure situationist approach.

Researchers have concluded that successful leadership is the result of the interaction between the traits of the leader and the situation itself (i.e., the contingency approach to leadership). They have realized that the interaction between the leader and the situation is key to understanding leadership, along with the specification of important trait and situational variables.

—*John W. Fleenor*

See also Behavioral Approach to Leadership; Leadership and Supervision; Situational Approach to Leadership

FURTHER READING

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