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Group Organization Management 1989; 14; 446
DOI: 10.1177/105960118901400406

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Situational Leadership Theory

A TEST OF LEADERSHIP PRESCRIPTIONS

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The purpose of this study was to test the prescriptions for effective leadership as specified in Hersey and Blanchard's (1969, 1982, 1988) Situational Leadership Theory (SLT). The interaction between leader behavior (initiating structure and consideration) and follower readiness hypothesized by the SLT was not supported. In addition, no support was found for Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) most recent predictions regarding the Best, Second Best, Third Best, and Worst leadership styles for given readiness levels. In fact, the findings were more consistent with results obtained in traditional leadership research. Implications for use in management training are discussed.

The proliferation of contingency theories of leadership in the organizational literature has resulted in considerable empirical testing. However, one contingency theory, the Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) or Life Cycle Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 1982), has remained aloof from the mainstream of leadership research. The sparsity of empirical testing of the SLT is particularly alarming given its rather extensive history as a training and teaching tool. The purpose of this study is to provide an empirical test of the specific SLT prescriptions derived from Hersey and Blanchard's 1988 work.

The SLT is similar to most other contingency theories in its assumption that effective leadership depends upon the ability of the leader to accurately diagnose situational conditions and to respond with appropriate combinations of behaviors. The areas of divergence of the SLT from other contingency theories are its inclusion of a single situational factor, and its specific recommendations regarding appropriate leadership-situation matches.

Hersey and Blanchard (1988) stated that "situational leadership is based on an interplay among (1) the amount of guidance and direction (task behavior) a leader gives, (2) the amount of socioemotional support (relationship behavior) a leader provides, and (3) the readiness level that followers exhibit in performing a specific task, function or objective" (p. 170). Thus the critical situational factor that purportedly determines preferred leadership style is the task-related readiness of followers (labeled employee maturity in earlier descriptions of the SLT). According to Hersey and Blanchard (1988), readiness "is defined as the extent to which a follower has the ability and willingness to accomplish a specific task" (p. 174). Subordinate readiness encompasses two components: (a) ability and technical skills needed to do a task (job maturity), and (b) self-confidence in one's abilities (psychological maturity). In essence, employee readiness reflects the capacity for independence of action at work. The SLT suggests that each of four specific combinations of leader behaviors (i.e., high or low on structure and consideration) is uniquely suited for particular levels of follower readiness.

Using the four leadership styles (S1-S4) and four readiness levels (R1-R4), Hersey and Blanchard (1982, 1988) made several specific behavioral recommendations for leaders. The most effective leadership style-readiness level combinations are believed to be as follows: (a) high structure/low consideration (Telling) for low subordinate readiness (R1), (b) high structure/high consideration (Selling) for moderately low readiness (R2), (c) low structure/high consideration (Participating) for moderately high readiness (R3), and (d) low structure/low consideration (Delegating) for high follower readiness (R4). Because the SLT specifies a fit among all three factors (structure, consideration, and readiness), its major propositions can be tested most appropriately with a three-way interaction.

Hersey and Blanchard (1988) recently expanded upon their general prescriptions regarding leadership-readiness match. They stated that "situational leadership not only suggests the high probability leadership styles for various readiness levels but also indicates the probability of success of the other styles if the leader is unwilling or unable to use the 'desired' style" (p. 274). If subordinates are at the lowest level of readiness, Telling is the best leadership style, Selling is second-best, Participating is third-best, and Delegating is the least effective style. At the two moderate levels of follower readiness, there is a style designated as most effective (Selling for R2, and Participating for R3), but two styles are considered to be second-best (Telling or Participating for R2, and Selling or Delegating for R3). The particular choice in each case depends on a dynamic characteristic of the situation, that is, whether it is improving or worsening. Hersey and Blanchard (1988) stated that if the

situation is improving, Participating would be second-best for R2 followers, while Delegating would be second-best for R3 level subordinates. However, if the situation is deteriorating, the second-best leadership styles would be Telling (for R2) and Selling (for R3). Finally, for subordinates at the highest level of readiness (R4), the best to worst leadership styles are as follows: Delegating, Participating, Selling, and Telling.

Although the SLT offers very specific prescriptions for effective leadership, remarkably little attention has been devoted to testing the theory. The few studies that have empirically examined the interactions between leadership style and subordinate readiness implied by the SLT, or have tested the effectiveness of its recommended matches, have yielded mixed results (Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982; Blank, Wietzel, & Green, 1986; Vecchio, 1987). A recent study by Vecchio (1987) provided the most comprehensive test of the theory to date. Vecchio reported that his results strongly supported the theory's prescriptions at low levels of follower readiness, but the recommended matches were not confirmed for high readiness subordinates. He argued that further research is needed to clarify the conditions under which SLT is best suited for making predictions. Vecchio's (1987) study tested the general interactions and best matches only; he did not test the specific hypotheses regarding second-best, third-best, and worst that were developed in Hersey and Blanchard's 1988 work. Furthermore, Vecchio grouped employees into three maturity levels (low, moderate, and high) rather than into the four levels usually associated with the SLT.

The purpose of the present study was to provide an empirical test of Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) SLT prescriptions. In this study, interactive effects of leadership style and follower readiness on employee perceptions and attitudes were examined. Also, the specific prescriptions offered by the SLT regarding best, second-best, third-best, and least effective styles were tested for all four levels of subordinate readiness. Since this study was cross-sectional, no information was available concerning situational change. Thus no specific choice could be made between the two possible second-best styles for the moderate levels of readiness (R2 and R3). For this analysis, the two second-best styles were combined into a single category.

Based on recommendations from the SLT and from previous studies (e.g., Vecchio, 1987), the following employee attitudes and perceptions were chosen as criterion variables: (a) role ambiguity, (b) satisfaction with supervision, (c) satisfaction with communication, (d) general job satisfaction, and (e) organizational commitment. Several outcome variables were needed because the SLT does not specify any particular subset of outcomes as uniquely appropriate. In addition, previous leadership research has shown

relationships between leader behavior and each of the selected criterion variables.

METHOD

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 459 employees from more than 100 stores in a national retail chain. Included were 85 store managers (59% male; age, $M = 26.1$, $SD = 3.06$), 56 assistant managers (69% male; age, $M = 24.8$, $SD = 3.41$), and 318 sales clerks (52% male; age, $M = 22.3$, $SD = 3.89$). A questionnaire and a letter from the company president encouraging participation and ensuring anonymity were delivered to employees by their regional supervisors. Questionnaires were returned directly to the researchers to ensure confidentiality. Follow-up letters, urging employees to complete the questionnaire, were sent to all employees approximately three weeks after initial disbursement of the questionnaires. This procedure resulted in a 62% response rate. Comparisons of demographic characteristics indicated that the usable sample adequately represented the population sampled.

MEASURES

Each measure will be identified and discussed briefly. Coefficients alpha (Cronbach's alpha) for each scale are reported in Table 1.

The independent measures used to examine the SLT included the traditional dimensions of leader behavior, Consideration and Initiating Structure, measured by the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire-Form XII (LBDQ; Stogdill, 1963), and a measure of employee readiness. Since Hersey and Blanchard (1988) rely heavily on the work of the Ohio State researchers in defining the two dimensions of leadership, the LBDQ-Form XII would seem to be an adequate measure of leader behavior. Further, it is a more strongly supported measure of leader behavior than the Leader Effectiveness and Adaptability Description (LEAD) instrument developed by Hersey and Blanchard (Graeff, 1983; Lueder, 1985; Vecchio, 1987).

The 23-item Sense of Competence Scale (Wagner & Morse, 1975) was used to operationalize the concept of follower readiness. This scale appears to tap both the technical (ability) and psychological (willingness) dimensions of maturity defined in the SLT. According to Wagner and Morse (1975), this measure assesses an individual's own feelings about his or her abilities, as

TABLE 1
Correlations Among Predictors and Criteria

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Structure	[.94]							
2. Consideration	.62	[.88]						
3. Readiness	.37	.47	[.82]					
4. Role ambiguity	-.47	-.40	-.60	[.78]				
5. Satisfaction with supervision	.60	.64	.53	-.53	[.86]			
6. Satisfaction with communication	.46	.49	.47	-.51	.60	[.88]		
7. Overall job satisfaction	.30	.42	.67	-.39	.42	.42	[.82]	
8. Organizational commitment	.29	.36	.56	-.41	.31	.39	.70	[.90]

NOTE: All correlations are significant beyond the .05 level. Numbers in brackets represent reliability coefficients.

well as the confidence and motivation that may arise from mastery of the work environment. The high coefficient alpha found for the Sense of Competence Scale indicates that the two dimensions of readiness combine in some fashion to produce the measurement of a single construct. This scale has demonstrated reliability (.84 to .96 in previous studies) and criterion validity (Wagner & Morse, 1975). Its major deficiency for the SLT may be its lack of specificity, since Hersey and Blanchard (1982) suggested that task specificity is important when settings require a wide variety of complex skills. It may be ideal, however, in less varied and relatively simple skill-demand situations, such as the one studied here.

Both general job attitudes and attitudes regarding specific aspects of the work situation were assessed. Two facets of satisfaction, supervision and communication, were factor-analytically derived from items developed specifically for this research. Although alphas derived from factor analysis often are overestimated, the high alphas found for these two scales would seem to support their reliability. The 6-item measure of satisfaction with supervision assessed the extent to which employees are satisfied with the help given to them by their supervisors in learning their jobs. A 7-item scale assessed the extent to which employees are satisfied with the quality and timeliness of the

information they receive from their supervisors. Overall job satisfaction was measured with Hoppock's (1935) 4-item scale. In addition, the 9-item Organizational Commitment Scale (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974) was used to assess the extent to which employees possess a strong belief in and acceptance of the values and goals of the organization. Finally, employees' perceptions of role ambiguity were assessed with the scale developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970).

ANALYSES

The propositions stated in the SLT were tested with several statistical techniques. First, hierarchical regression analysis was used as an overall test to determine whether or not the interaction between leadership and readiness that is suggested by the SLT actually existed in this sample. In this analysis, a three-way interaction term (Readiness \times Consideration \times Structuring) was created and entered into a regression equation following inclusion of main and two-way interaction terms. A significant increment in R^2 beyond that accounted for by main and two-way effects indicates support for a three-way interaction (Cohen & Cohen, 1975).

To examine SLT predictions regarding the designated order in which leadership style-readiness combinations would be effective, subgroups were created for the Best, Second Best, Third Best, and Worst conditions. First, each dimension of the LBDQ-Form XII was split at the median and then combined to produce the four SLT leadership conditions (Telling = High Structure/Low Consideration; Selling = High Structure/High Consideration; Participating = Low Structure/High Consideration; and Delegating = Low Structure/Low Consideration). On the structuring dimension, the cut was made at the median value of 39, while the split for consideration was made at the value of 38. Then, follower readiness was divided into quartiles, with splits made at the values of 76, 82, and 88. Leadership style and readiness levels were combined according to SLT prescriptions (see Table 2 for specific leadership styles regarded as Best, Second Best, Third Best, and Worst for each readiness level).

Comparisons between groups designated as Best ($N = 88$), Second Best ($N = 138$), Third Best ($N = 73$), and Worst ($N = 160$) were made using oneway analysis of variance. Scheffé's technique was used to determine where specific differences existed among the groups.

Because the validity of SLT predictions may vary depending upon the follower's readiness level (e.g., Vecchio, 1987), leadership predictions within each readiness level also were examined. Using oneway analysis of variance,

TABLE 2
Test of Ordered Predictions Using Analysis of Variance

	Best Style (<i>n</i> = 88)	Second Best Style (<i>n</i> = 138)	Third Best Style (<i>n</i> = 73)	Worst Style (<i>n</i> = 160)
Readiness Level				
Low				
Low/Moderate	Telling	Selling	Participating	Delegating
Moderate/High	Selling	Telling/Participating		Delegating
High	Participating	Selling/Delegating		Telling
	Delegating	Participating		Telling
Outcomes				
Role ambiguity	12.27 ^{3,4}	12.44 ^{3,4}	10.42 ^{1,2,4}	14.24 ^{1,2,3}
Satisfaction with supervision	22.06 ^{3,4}	23.12 ^{3,4}	24.81 ^{1,2,4}	19.23 ^{1,2,3}
Satisfaction with communication	24.76 ^{3,4}	25.28 ^{3,4}	27.51 ^{1,2,4}	22.13 ^{1,2,3}
Overall job satisfaction	22.24 ^{3,4}	22.64 ⁴	24.68 ^{1,4}	20.61 ^{1,2,3}
Organizational commitment	35.07 ^{3,4}	35.67 ^{3,4}	38.67 ^{1,2,4}	32.92 ^{2,3}

1. Indicates a significant difference between this group and group 1, *p* < .05.

2. Indicates a significant difference between this group and group 2, *p* < .05.

3. Indicates a significant difference between this group and group 3, *p* < .05.

4. Indicates a significant difference between this group and group 4, *p* < .05.

comparisons among the prescribed Best, Second Best, Third Best, and Worst leadership styles were made within each readiness level.

RESULTS

Zero-order correlations among the predictor and criterion variables, shown in Table 1, indicate that all variables are at least moderately associated. Although main effects are not the focus of SLT predictions, these correlations are relevant for subsequent analyses. Correlations of this magnitude should ensure a strict test of the SLT's interaction hypothesis by making it difficult for the 3-way interaction term to enter the regression equation as a significant predictor. This is important since the 3-way interaction is the critical test of the accuracy of the four hypotheses central to the SLT.

INTERACTIONS PREDICTED BY THE SLT

Hierarchical regression analyses for the five criterion variables (role ambiguity, satisfaction with supervision, satisfaction with communication, overall job satisfaction, and organizational commitment) produced consistent results. No support for a 3-way interaction was found for any of these outcomes. Further examination of these equations showed, in fact, that main effects dominated. Follower readiness contributed uniquely to the explained variance in each outcome variable, beyond that provided by the leader behavior variables. Both leadership styles, consideration and structuring, contributed uniquely to explained variance in satisfaction with supervision and satisfaction with communication; however, only consideration added significantly to explained variance in organizational commitment and overall job satisfaction. Only initiating structure made a significant contribution to explained variance in role ambiguity. Finally, significant 2-way interactions between initiating structure and consideration were found for satisfaction with supervision, satisfaction with communication, overall job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

SLT PRESCRIBED MATCHES (BEST TO WORST) FOR TOTAL SUBJECT GROUP

The results of the oneway analysis of variance, which tested the ordered predictions of the SLT, are provided in Table 2. Contrary to SLT predictions, individuals in the designated Best group reported significantly less satisfaction with supervision, communication, and the job, lower organizational

commitment, and greater role ambiguity than those in the Third Best group. In addition, with one exception (i.e., overall job satisfaction), the Second Best group reported significantly less favorable outcomes than the Third Best group. The only result consistent with SLT predictions was that, in every case, the designated Worst group reported more negative outcomes than any other group.

SLT PRESCRIBED MATCHES BY READINESS LEVEL

Combining all prescribed leadership style-readiness possibilities for the four subordinate groups precludes an examination of the SLT's validity for subordinates at particular readiness levels. According to Vecchio (1987), a more comprehensive test of the SLT necessitates the examination of its theoretical predictions for each specific level of follower readiness.

Oneway analysis of variance results comparing the Best, Second Best, Third Best, and Worst predictions at each level of follower readiness are presented in Table 3. Several interesting patterns are notable in these results. First, individuals in the Best group reported more favorable outcomes only when the prescribed leadership style included high consideration. This result was observed for the low to moderate readiness group, where Selling is prescribed, and for the moderate to high readiness group, where Participating is recommended. For subordinates in the low to moderate readiness group, significant differences between Best and Worst styles were found for three outcomes (role ambiguity, satisfaction with supervision, and satisfaction with communication). Second, for subordinates at all readiness levels, leadership styles with low structuring (i.e., Participating and Delegating) were associated with greater perceived role ambiguity. Third, regardless of the style predicted to be Best, Second Best, Third Best, and Worst at any given level of follower readiness, Selling and Participating were consistently associated with higher levels of satisfaction, while Telling and Delegating were associated with lower satisfaction.

The diametrically opposed leadership predictions that SLT makes for subordinates at low and high readiness levels suggests an interesting comparison between these two groups. According to SLT predictions, the order of Best to Worst styles is exactly reversed for low and high readiness followers. In direct contrast to those predictions, our results indicated that Best and Worst styles were almost identical for the two groups. At both readiness levels, Selling was associated with the highest levels of satisfaction with supervision and satisfaction with communication; Delegating was associated with the least amount of satisfaction in these two areas. For these

TABLE 3
Test of Ordered Predictions By Readiness Levels

	Low Readiness			
	Best Style (Telling; n = 18)	Second Best Style (Selling; n = 14)	Third Best Style (Participating; n = 13)	Worst Style (Delegating; n = 79)
Outcomes				
Role ambiguity	14.67	13.14	15.38	15.89
Satisfaction with supervision	18.94	22.86 ⁴	19.77	17.32 ²
Satisfaction with communication	22.39	25.07 ⁴	22.62	20.80 ²
Overall job satisfaction	18.61	20.07	20.15	19.25
Organizational commitment	30.17	32.07	31.38	30.68

(continued)

TABLE 3 Continued

Outcomes	Low to Moderate Readiness			Worst Style (Delegating; n = 51)
	Best Style (Selling; n = 34)	Second Best Style (Telling; n = 35)	Third Best Style None	
Role ambiguity	11.85 ⁴	13.20		13.82 ¹
Satisfaction with supervision	23.82 ⁴	23.03 ⁴		19.75 ^{1,2}
Satisfaction with communication	25.53 ⁴	25.00 ⁴		22.47 ^{1,2}
Overall job satisfaction	22.35	21.63		21.24
Organizational commitment	34.38	33.60		34.25
Outcomes	Moderate to High Readiness			Worst Style (Telling; n = 13)
	Best Style (Participating; n = 19)	Second Best Style (Selling/Delegations, n = 73)	Third Best Style None	
Role ambiguity	12.74	12.37		12.08
Satisfaction with supervision	23.37	22.89		21.64

	High Readiness			
	Best Style (Delegating; n = 17)	Second Best Style (Participating; n = 16)	Third Best Style (Selling; n = 60)	Worst Style (Telling; n = 17)
Satisfaction with communication	25.53	25.07		24.15
Overall job satisfaction	23.53	22.99		23.00
Organizational commitment	37.58	36.32		36.54
Outcomes				
Role ambiguity	10.06	10.33	9.32	9.47
Satisfaction with supervision	20.35 ^{2,3,4}	24.56 ¹	25.90 ¹	24.71 ¹
Satisfaction with communication	24.88 ³	27.00	28.57 ¹	25.71
Overall job satisfaction	24.41	25.50 ⁴	24.45	23.38 ²
Organizational commitment	38.82	40.38	40.25	37.12

1. Indicates a significant difference between this group and group 1, p < .05.
2. Indicates a significant difference between this group and group 2, p < .05.
3. Indicates a significant difference between this group and group 3, p < .05.
4. Indicates a significant difference between this group and group 4, p < .05.

two outcomes, in fact, a Delegating style was significantly worse than a Selling style. Both high and low readiness subordinates reported the lowest level of overall job satisfaction with Telling as the leadership style, and the highest level of overall job satisfaction with Participating as the leadership style. Telling also was the least effective leadership style for both low and high readiness subordinates with respect to organizational commitment (with Selling as most effective for low readiness and Participating most effective for high readiness employees). Finally, at both readiness levels, Selling was associated with the lowest perceived role ambiguity.

CONCLUSIONS

Before discussing the implications of the foregoing findings, certain caveats should be noted. First, sample sizes were quite small in some subgroups when analyses were done by readiness level. However, the general consistency of the ANOVA results for the total sample and for the four readiness subgroups suggests that there were no serious adverse consequences due to the small cell sizes. Second, a single scale such as the Sense of Competence Scale may not adequately capture the dual emphases on follower ability and willingness specified by Hersey and Blanchard (1982, 1988). However, since competence was a significant, direct predictor of each of the five outcomes, it obviously does have utility for predicting work outcomes in studies of leadership. The scale also has considerable face validity for measuring the critical aspects of readiness; however, further research using this scale is needed to establish its usefulness for this particular purpose. Third, identification of readiness levels through median and quartile splits clearly is somewhat subjective. Unfortunately, no absolute standard of readiness or maturity exists (using the competence scale or any other traditional operationalization). Therefore, standardization is needed in order to clarify which subordinate populations should be considered "ready" and which should not. Finally, the implications drawn from this study are unique to our particular sample (i.e., employees of small, retail outlets). These results may or may not apply to employees in other types of organizations.

Overall, our results were quite stable across the total subject group, readiness level subgroups, and when different types of analyses were used. According to all analyses, neither the SLT's major proposition (i.e., the leader behavior-readiness interaction) nor the ordered predictions specified in Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) latest work were supported. In fact, results across analyses clearly showed the predominance of main rather than inter-

active effects. The leadership variables that contributed uniquely to explained variance in specific outcomes in the regression analyses were associated with the same outcomes in the ANOVA. Also, follower readiness (competence) consistently predicted work-related outcomes across all analyses.

Our results indicated that styles involving high consideration (Selling and Participating) were associated consistently with higher levels of employee satisfaction, a finding that closely parallels the results of several decades of leadership research (e.g., Fleishman & Harris, 1962; Yukl, 1981). Both regression and ANOVA results suggested that high consideration (Participating) was important for enhancing general job attitudes, while high consideration with high structure (Selling) contributed positively to the development of more role-specific attitudes (i.e., satisfaction with supervision, satisfaction with communication, and reduced role ambiguity). Structure, when combined with consideration, may direct the attention of superiors and subordinates to work-related issues, leading to more open communication, less ambiguity regarding task expectations, and better superior-subordinate relationships.

The leadership styles that were found to be "Worst" at each level of readiness in our study also supported traditional leadership research. Telling (high structure and low consideration) typically was associated with more undesirable general job attitudes (lower overall job satisfaction and lower organizational commitment). Delegating (low consideration and low structure) was associated with the poorest work-specific attitudes (satisfaction with supervision and with communication).

According to Yukl (1981), "Hersey and Blanchard provide little evidence in support of their theory" (p. 143). Unfortunately, this study, which provided a comprehensive test of the SLT, also failed to support its use as a prescriptive tool for management training.

Contrary to the SLT's prescriptions that consideration would be inappropriate at low and high levels of follower readiness, this study makes a strong case for the leader's use of supportive behaviors at all levels of subordinate readiness. Yukl (1981) noted that one convergent finding from the diverse array of situational leadership research "is the advantage of establishing generally harmonious and cooperative relationships with subordinates" (p. 274). Recommendations that evolve from our study seem to support the majority of past research, as opposed to the SLT. Leadership training that focuses on the legitimate improvement of interpersonal skills (e.g., feedback, communication, and sensitivity to others' feelings and needs) generally should yield improvements in certain employee attitudes (e.g., overall job satisfaction).

Our results also failed to confirm SLT's training prescriptions regarding leader structuring behavior. The favorable outcomes associated with Selling in our study demonstrated the positive contribution that structure, when combined with consideration, can make to specific role-related outcomes for employees at any level of readiness. Schriesheim and Murphy (1976) reported that structure had a positive effect on performance when accompanied by high consideration, but a negative effect when combined with low consideration. This pattern occurred for employees at all levels within the organization. Hence SLT's recommendation that leaders be taught to use high structure and low consideration (Telling) with low readiness subordinates appears to be unwarranted.

Yukl (1981) suggested that the most valuable contribution which evolved from the SLT is its emphasis on leader flexibility or adaptability. Our results (particularly when viewed against the results of previous leadership research) indicate that training leaders to develop adaptive skills is a more promising approach than training leaders to adopt one particular style (i.e., 9-9 as advocated by Managerial Grid leadership training; Blake & Mouton, 1978). While our results underscore the importance of adaptability, they also suggest that the SLT's sole reliance on leader readiness as a "diagnostic" factor is an oversimplification. Accurate situational diagnosis by the leader clearly must include factors such as the nature of the task and the task environment, as well as subordinate characteristics.

In summary, our results caution managers to consider carefully the positive role played by each dimension of leader behavior in the enhancement of employee attitudes, despite the presence or absence of various contingency factors. In particular, managers should avoid making definitive judgments regarding appropriate leader behaviors that are based on the unsupported prescriptions of a largely untested leadership theory.

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