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CONTINGENCY THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP AND THE TEACHING OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR: A CASE IN POINT

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These days most of us teach about contingency theories of leadership. A basic tenet of these theories is that the leader or manager should choose his/her leadership style depending on a number of variables. And one crucial variable is what Hersey and Blanchard call the maturity of the employees or subordinates. Other things being equal, the more mature the subordinate, the less control is called for.

Advocates of such prescription rarely examine the question of whether the manager or leader is choosing a leadership style to apply to a group or to single individuals. And whether in managing a group he/she should choose a constant style to apply to all individuals or adapt his/her style in dealing with specific individuals.

Advocates have also ignored another important issue, namely how to make compatible the prescription of adaptability with strong expectations on the part of subordinates for consistency of behavior, equality of treatment, firmness, and authenticity. In other words, managers who would adapt to their subordinates to the extent that seems to be required by the adaptability prescription risk being labeled by their subordinates political “chameleons” (unless they are true chameleons and people do not realize when they change their colors).

As teachers we are in the position of “managing” groups of students engaged in a learning task, and we find very often extremely different levels of motivation and skill among the individuals that we are trying to “manage.” Besides, as teachers of OB, we operate within a given professional culture that tends to value and favor participative and low control approaches and biases our stylistic choices in that direction. Our leadership style, our managerial approach is usually reflected in our syllabus, grading procedures and class behavior.

Two central indicators of our leadership style are our syllabus and grading method. Syllabi can be classified along a spectrum from highly vague, unspecific and flexible to highly focused, specific and rigid. Examining syllabi I find most of them to be biased toward the focused end of the spectrum. Thus they reveal a controlling — *I know what’s best for you, I can’t trust you to shape your learning process*, — attitude.

Grading tends to show even stronger controlling tendencies and negative

assumptions about students' motivation. Most grading systems seem designed to force students to do the work.

After three years of teaching undergraduates, I found my "managerial style" moving progressively in the direction of control.

Let me start by being honest and acknowledging that from the beginning I was more on the control side of the spectrum than on the "free flowing learning experience" side of it. That is to say that I believe it to be the responsibility of the teacher to have a certain model about the concepts that may be useful to the students and a logical and progressive sequence to introduce those concepts.

This belief is accompanied by strong feelings of frustration and anger when I feel that I am failing in my job of helping students learn. I do not agree with those that say that you can help only those who want to help themselves, or teach those who want to learn. I believe that the ultimate test of my teaching skill is my ability to awaken the need to learn and eventually the pleasure of learning among those who are less inclined in that direction.

I also believe that for those who do not have a natural inclination to learn or a particularly strong desire to learn about a given subject the learning process, particularly at the start, tends to be extremely painful. And human beings tend to avoid pain. But if you help people go through the initial pain of learning, let's say a language, then, as their skill starts to develop, the learning impulse tends to be suddenly re-awakened and the willingness to work increases.

I believe that with many undergraduate students our most difficult job is to get them through that difficult passage that the French so aptly call *la traversee du desert*. And that such process often requires exercising a great deal of control over them.

I felt that I was not accomplishing enough with gentler, less directive methods. While some students seemed to thrive under them, there were a lot of them that, in my opinion, were not working and learning enough. My evidence of this was what I perceived as poor preparation on the part of the students, plus low level of class participation and low quality written reports. I finally decided to use more directive and controlling methods.

My increasing control seemed to fit contingency theory prescriptions. Since only 30 percent to 40 percent of the students attending my required course would have taken that course if it were an elective (these numbers are the result of polls conducted in classes at the start of the semester), low motivation could be assumed and a high control style was called for.

I arrived at the extreme of the controlling spectrum this last semester when I established the following rules in my course on The Dynamics of Leadership: Five or more unjustified absences would mean an automatic F in the course. The syllabus specified daily assignments. Students were required every day to come to class with one or two pages of written analyses of one or two of the questions in the daily assignments. Failure to deliver the daily written assignment was the equivalent of being absent on that particular day. I told students that I would grade randomly three of the 20 short papers due in the course and these grades would count for 30 percent of the total individual grade. Two longer written papers account for 50

percent of the grade. The remaining 20 percent was attributed to class participation.

Under this Gulag system, class preparation and participation improved beyond my wildest dreams. The sessions were much more animated and fun. The learning, in my opinion, based on the quality of the students' written output, seemed to improve substantially.

Contingency theories of motivation state that as your subordinates' motivation increases, you should lower the control level. Thus, nine sessions into the course I thought that it would be appropriate to lower the control exercised over those students who seemed to have demonstrated high motivation and maturity, in Hersey and Blanchard terms, by writing excellent papers. I therefore proposed to the students as a group to eliminate the daily paper requirement for any student which at any given time would achieve an average grade of B+ or more in papers written to that date. I asked students for a vote on this proposal. The rejection was unanimous. To my surprise, even the top students rejected it. I asked them why.

Their answer: "Yours is only one of the courses I am taking. Others put pressure on us. If you lower the pressure, we'll lower our work. We don't want to do that. But you need to keep the pressure to motivate us."

I was both surprised and disappointed. I hoped that my best students worked hard because of their intense interest in the subject matter, the fun of our work together when they were well prepared and maybe also because they liked me and wanted to make me happy. Instead, their performance seemed to be mostly linked to pressure and grades and their motivation to perform well seemed to be based on those extrinsic incentives.

The paradox is that since these top students were already almost guaranteed to get a decent grade in my course, what they were asking me for was pressure to continue working and learning. Some may argue that their behavior was the consequence of my managerial style: a classical example of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Since I chose to motivate them with extrinsic incentives, their inner motivation decreased, and they were afraid that once extrinsic incentives and controls were lowered, their performance would decline.

The solution, therefore, seems to be to use intrinsic motivation. But there are two problems with this approach. First, when I tried it, it didn't work very well with the majority of students, and it didn't seem to motivate the good students to produce as much as the constraining method. Second, the motivational effect of a given method depends on the motivational methods that my colleagues use. When intrinsic motivation competes with a dominant culture of high control and extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation tends to lose out in most cases.

This is a lesson, in my opinion, for any professor in any institution where different teachers ask for individual work, but also for every manager who operates in a matrix organization. Whenever employees work for different bosses "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" or those who put most pressure often get the most work from their "subordinates."

Many students won't work most for the professor they like more or on

the subject matter that they prefer. The reality of our “organizational practices” leads them to work most for those who demand most in the most coercive manner. As a matter of fact, my experience has been that to some extent the more students like me and feel liked by me, the less seriously they take me and the less work they do for me. They have fun, but they don’t learn as much, or at least their learning is not apparent in the work they do for me.

A fundamental question can be raised: What is our objective? To encourage our students to be autonomous, independent and responsible individuals on their own and simply punish them if they do not deliver as expected or let them suffer the consequences of their own low learning and poor performance, or to create constraining environments which will force a larger number of people to work harder, and perhaps to learn more, but may encourage attitudes of subservience and dependence?

I don’t know. As a teacher, I know that high control strategies among moderately motivated people seem to lead to more work on their part and more fun and learning in the classroom. And that my students prefer it when I do something that they don’t like, i.e., control them more tightly. I hope that my control will lead them, paradoxically, to feel more competent and autonomous and more able to stand their own ground. And I reward them instantly in class when they show that behavior. (On the other hand, perhaps I should stop rewarding that behavior and let them get their own internal kicks.)

I was disappointed when the best students asked me to keep controlling them. But they taught me a lesson and left me with some important questions.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, my Gulag method itself has provided wonderful material for analysis in the course. I have used it to help students examine the assumptions that I have about them; to talk about contingency theories of leadership; and to help them examine their own behavior and preferences as “subordinates.” When students acknowledge that they approve of a managerial behavior on my part that they say they hate, they are learning something important about their true values and personalities. They may also learn why tyranny could be established quite easily in many of the best educated countries in the Western World.