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# CONTINGENCY THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP AND TEACHING ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR: ADDITIONAL REASONS WHY THEY DO NOT WORK

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Like Bartolome, I too have moved from a rather participative, experiential course in organizational behavior (OB), to one that is directive, demanding, and time consuming for the students. The change came after an acknowledgement that it was mentally unhealthy for me to have organizational behavior continually ranked last in order of importance out of the five courses the students were taking during a semester. Moreover, like Bartolome it forced me to reassess where we as OB instructors were coming from. In order to help think through some of the relevant issues, my scholarly predispositions sent me back to the literature to help and understand the problem.

First, much of our thinking about a contingency theory of management is rooted in McGregor (1966) *The Human Side of Enterprise*, which describes Theory X and Theory Y type managers and the assumptions each make about what motivates employees. We recall that Theory Y assumptions include the notions of demanding self-direction, and that work is intrinsically rewarding so that individuals could be responsible for “charting their own course.” Unlike what Theory Y has come to mean, it was not intended by McGregor to be “soft.” As Schein (1974) notes, the person who operates under a set of Theory Y assumptions, may use the entire range of leadership styles depending on the situation, i.e. basically a contingency approach. He further states that Theory Y managers *only* are successful in a Theory Y context, and are not successful when: (1) there are too many Theory X managers, or (2) a culture of autocratic management or paternalism in the organization. Thus, if OB instructors teach in a context of finance, marketing, statistics, production/operations and accounting, all of which tend to be directive, autocratic sorts of courses, then when the “going gets tough” for the students, they will ease off on the course that operates under the assumption that the students are better off taking responsibility for their own course of learning, since autocratic behavior tends to drive out other kinds of behavior.

Second is the issue of power. If one is to believe the work by Pfeffer (1981), areas such as finance, accounting, marketing, production and business policy, have more power than organizational behavior. They are

perceived to be more central to the field of management, the areas are perceived to more adequately solve the critical uncertainties in management, thus they have gained more value and power than OB. Even though some older research suggests that alumni who are ten years out of college, regard organizational behavior and strategy/policy as the two most important courses in their college curriculum, it is clear that these courses are not perceived to be as important as the “main stream business courses” while students are attending college. If the number of majors in a given area is any indication of how important the area is, it is not too difficult to understand why there are fewer majors in organizational behavior/human resources management than in other business majors; further, a greater proportion of the majors are usually women. Subtle sexism still exists in management education as well as management.

Two other threads of research that suggest that an autocratic, paternalistic view is more effective are found in both our Skinnerian tradition and the goal setting research by Locke (1968). In the case of Skinner, reinforcement (usually extrinsic) is deemed to be important, in the other, stated goals enable greater amounts of productive work to be accomplished. In both cases, it is suggested that the reward or goal contingencies are ultimately controlled by an outside agent, one who sets the reinforcement schedule, and/or the goals, although if we are to believe McGregor, both reward and goal contingencies could be internal to the individual. Yet internally based reinforcements are likely to be driven out by extrinsic rewards according to the principle of oversufficient justification (Staw, 1976). One reason why management by objectives has fallen on hard times is that in many cases it is nothing more than goal setting by the supervisor—not the way it was intended—but clearly the way it works in many organizations.

Finally, some of our own research on the culture and counterculture of organizations (Buono & Bowditch, 1987) suggests that both can be powerful influences on persons in the particular domain, and that expectations about what particular outcomes may be, affect attitudes and behavior (Bowditch & Buono, 1987).

Thus, it is clear that OB is caught in an autocratic, controlling, paternalistic culture that exists in most business schools. There are papers to write, problems to complete, cases to analyze and exams to take. Since virtually all of the *other* courses a student is likely to be in while also in OB will be of this sort of culture, our courses get “tarred by the same brush.” Accordingly, (sadly) I have reluctantly concluded, like Bartolome, that if we really want students to learn something about organizational behavior, we must make the course fit the culture to which they are accustomed. Anything different from this will be countercultural; regarded as illegitimate or “hokey,” and it will not be taken seriously by most students. Over time, my course has evolved into a more and more autocratic, content oriented approach to OB, i.e., there are three exams of varying types, students read our *Primer* (Bowditch & Buono, 1985) at the beginning of the course, and they read a heavy-duty, rather research-oriented reader in conjunction with using a full blown text comprised of narrative, readings, cases and exercises. Additionally, students individually conduct an organizational analysis on

an organization they know, weaving the concepts and readings into their papers to support their positions. Thus, they have approximately 800 pages of reading for a three-credit hour semester course—demanding, yes; but also quite popular: my course and instructor ratings are fine, and I can sleep at night, knowing that students have covered the material seriously.

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