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FORGET CONTINGENCY THEORIES IN THE CLASSROOM, OR WHY STUDENTS LIKE DIRECTIVE LEADERSHIP

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I enjoy reading Bartolome's experiences with leadership theories in the classroom. However, I have to admit I found nothing surprising in his findings. I concluded years ago that our contingency theories of leadership have little application in the classroom. Taking a college course is not a "job" and students are not "employees." Given this reality, why should we expect students to respond to less directive leadership or more enriched experiences? The following observations suggest why Professor Bartolome's Gulag method met with such success.

(1) College curriculums are designed to break the unity of command. The typical full-time student has five bosses — one for each class. Each "boss" has a unique set of expectations and tends to be oblivious to demands created by the other bosses (Do you check with your colleagues to insure your exam dates don't conflict with theirs?). This structural relationship puts students under pressures that differ from most real jobs. As a result, students try to "scope-out" what each boss wants and they then do that which is minimally required. When the student says, "you need to keep the pressure *on* to motivate us," I interpret that to mean that if a faculty member wants more productivity, he or she has to demand more. It's my impression that the existence of multiple bosses encourages students to engage in satisficing behavior.

(2) *All* students, those taking OB as well as accounting or statistics, abhor ambiguity. The situation described in the previous paragraph creates a strong need for structure. Students want the course's goals clearly stated. They also want clarity surrounding grading criteria and the weights assigned to those criteria. How many tests will there be, Professor Robbins? On what dates will they be? What material will be covered on each? How much are the tests going to count toward the final grade? (Do these questions sound familiar?) Regardless of what we think students should have, they *want* and *expect* a reasonably high degree of directive leadership from their instructor. Moreover, my experience on personnel review committees (which includes reading hundreds of faculty evaluation forms) suggests that lack of structure is related to low evaluations.

(3) The learning process for most students is composed of tasks that score low in motivating potential on the job characteristics model. Students view

their tasks as more akin to a bolt tightener on an assembly-line than to a vice-president for research and development. They go through the standardized routine of reading texts, taking notes in lectures, analyzing cases, memorizing facts, and regurgitating those facts on exams. Isn't this a job that rates low on skill variety, task significance, and autonomy? It's my impression that many students satisfy their needs for growth and self-actualization "off-the-job" on the tennis court, ski slopes, or at weekend parties. Maybe even more merely hold these needs in abeyance for when they get out of school and into "the real world."

(4) Most of our students today also have a paid job outside of school. They don't have the time to find intrinsic satisfaction in the learning process. Nor do they have the commitment to academics that their counterparts, who were full-time students, had 20 years ago. I propose that the type of institution where we teach (maybe commuter versus residential or urban versus rural) moderates the teacher/leader - student performance relationship. Forty-five percent of my undergraduate students carry 12 or more units and work at least 20 hours a week. I don't think this is unusual. The growth in business programs over the past 15 years has been predominantly focused at the urban, commuter-type campuses. It's no coincidence that some of the largest business schools and the ones that have grown the fastest (e.g., Arizona State, UT-Austin, Northeastern University, Georgia State, San Diego State) are in large metropolitan areas. I suggest that our students are increasingly working full or part-time and are overcommitted. In Hersey and Blanchard's terms, they are low in psychological maturity. Our "learning opportunities" are competing against students' work and social commitments. And unlike employees in real jobs, where work is a high priority, I think working students often relegate academics to third on their priority list.

In summary, I've argued that contingency theories developed to apply to employees at work may not be applicable to students in the classroom. And if they are, the individuals we deal with and the situational context they're in seems to dictate that an instructor will be most effective if he or she uses a directive leadership style.