

Trait Theory

Trait theory represents researchers' earliest attempts to investigate leadership. Around the turn of the twentieth century, researchers sought to identify traits that effective leaders possessed by examining leaders who had achieved a level of greatness. These preliminary attempts to identify traits of leaders focused on wellknown historical figures who were men, which is why this theory is often called the "great man" approach.

Early proponents of the classic trait perspective suggested that certain individuals have special innate characteristics or qualities that make them leaders and it is these qualities that differentiate them from nonleaders. Fundamental to this theory was the idea that some people are born with traits that make them natural leaders. Influenced by the interest in mental testing and the functionalism that characterized the time, psychologists began to correlate specific individual differences, in particular intelligence and mental ability, with performance in leadership positions.

An ambiguous term, trait theory has been used to refer to personality, temperaments, dispositions, and abilities, as well as to physical and demographic attributes. One of the first systematic attempts to review trait leadership research was conducted by Ralph Stogdill. This seminal research study analyzed over one hundred trait studies that took place over a period of four decades. His results showed that a person who holds a position of leadership surpasses the average member of the group in several ways, including intelligence, scholarship, dependability, and sociability. Though Stogdill determined that there was indeed a high consistency in the relationship between intelligence and being a leader, he concluded that it is difficult to isolate a set of traits that are characteristic of leadership without factoring situational effects into the equation. A leader in some situations might not be a leader in other situations. Several researchers during this era substantiated this point.

Based on numerous research studies conducted between 1940 and 1960, trait theory lost its appeal as a premise for understanding leaders. One problem highlighted by the studies was the lack of consensus on the definitive traits that set great leaders apart from each other. The only point on which theorists agreed was that great leaders were special; they had qualities that were born within them. Another criticism of trait theory was the fact that it overlooked the importance of situations and the relationship to leadership.

Despite these criticisms, interest in trait theory resurged in the 1980s. Numerous meta-analytic reviews of earlier leader-trait research were conducted. Based on a reexamination of the original data, several researchers concluded that traits are indeed associated with leadership. Another line of research related to trait theory is the study of charismatic leadership. These researchers postulate that specific leader qualities are linked to charismatic leaders who act in special ways to influence and inspire their followers. Recent studies on leader attributes focus on five categories of traits or qualities: cognitive abilities, personality, motivation, social appraisal, and leader expertise. Still another aspect of the examination of the traits of leaders regards their gender roles and the manner in which the public perception of gender has had an enormous impact on who is selected to become and remain an educational leader. The impact of trait theory is evident in its continued influence on leadership theories and research.

—Susan R. Wynn

Further Readings and References

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