



# LEADERSHIP: OUR EVER-EVOLVING UNDERSTANDING

## Executive Briefing: Part One

Leadership research shows us that there is no one best way to manage. Even within the same work unit, good leadership is not static. Leaders must adapt to the situation and people involved. There are a few generally-accepted truths:

- *Certain traits help leaders become more effective.*
- *Laissez-faire leadership is ineffective.*
- *Over-focusing on tasks at the expense of relationships can be both ineffective and costly.*
- *Micromanagement is usually counterproductive.*
- *Those for whom the leader is responsible have expectations of their leaders, and a leader's effectiveness is proportional to meeting those expectations.*

Your own leadership style develops throughout your career. A solid understanding of what has been written in this field will help you move through the early stages of this process more quickly. In this Executive Briefing, we distill modern leadership scholarship, which began in 1840, and has been the focus of ever-increasing attention since the early 1900's. In turn, this scholarship builds on work that has occupied the minds and hearts of poets, authors, scholars, and societies since perhaps the dawn of humanity. There are well over 100 different scholarly attempts to describe and define leadership. While no single theory or approach can describe leadership completely, many provide valuable concepts and takeaways for academic leaders.

## Trait-Based Approaches

### An Ongoing Search for What Makes a 'Leader

Your personality affects your leadership. Originally scholars looked for a “best” collection of traits for good leaders. In the 1940's, modern scholarly consensus rejected the concept that there is “one best way” or “one best person” for leadership. More recent research, conducted with better methods, suggests that there are, in fact, some general guidelines about desirable and helpful traits for leaders.

The same research suggests that traits influencing leader effectiveness are different from those influencing leader likability. The personality trait agreeableness (avoiding conflict) is the most obvious case, because agreeableness is very strongly related to perceived satisfaction with a leader, and almost inconsequentially related to measures of leader effectiveness.

Current research shows that the most effective group leaders are emotionally stable,

demonstrate a high degree of conscientiousness and a moderate amount of agreeableness. Leader extroversion, openness (being inventive and curious), and agreeableness are related to how well leaders intellectually stimulate their unit members—a key desirable outcome for academic leaders.

The challenge in applying trait-based leadership is that traits, by definition, are relatively stable over time in adults. Self-knowledge is key for developing your own habits to reinforce areas in which you are less strong in leadership traits. For example, if you know you tend to be less conscientiousness than yields the best work, purposefully cultivating habits like careful calendaring, maintaining to-do lists, and selecting colleagues or collaborators with complementary skills (think: proofreaders, assistants) can counteract results your personality traits might





otherwise yield.

The key takeaways from trait research are:

- 1) *Select the right people for leadership positions—some traits tend to make for better leaders;*
- ▶ 2) *“Know thyself”: Some traits do make for better leaders, but self-awareness of your natural strengths and weaknesses with respect to leadership can help you become the best leader you can be; and*
- 3) *Playing to your strengths can produce good outcomes, and help you become a stronger leader.*

## Behavioral Leadership Theory

Leadership is more than just personality. What leaders do is important, not just who they are. Dissatisfied with trait-based leadership approaches, and still looking for the “one right way,” leadership researchers in the 1950’s and 1960’s searched for behaviors that make for good leadership.

Researchers reached a consensus that leaders can follow one of four approaches:

- 1) do nothing (known as *laissez-faire* leadership, from the French for “let people do as they will” or “let it go,” adapted by economists, meaning to leave people or markets to their own devices),
- 2) focus on task- or work-related issues,
- 3) focus on people and relationships, or
- 4) focus on both tasks and people.

Research suggests that *laissez-faire* is usually bad—the leader must do something or those around them generally become frustrated.

Overall, balance is the best policy. This means focusing on both the task and the people for highest group performance. There is some research that suggests employees have different needs at different times; behaviors that address these needs are good; behaviors that do not are not, and can be seen as micromanaging.

Academic leaders, especially those in technical fields, may underestimate the importance of attending to relationships.

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Research suggests this is problematic. Both member and leader job satisfaction, as well as leader effectiveness, correlate strongly with leader behaviors that attend to their people, not just task-related aspects of their work.

The key takeaways from decades of behavioral research: leaders can and

should focus on both tasks and relationships. Balance is important.

## Contingency-Based Approaches

While both task- and people-oriented leadership behaviors are important, they are not equally important in all situations. Situationally-contingent leadership theories seek to understand the differences.

### 1. Leader-Preferred Coworker (LPC)

Leaders are not universally effective in all situations. Fred Fiedler combined the trait and behavioral (task vs. relationship) approaches in attempt to explain why. He and his colleagues identified a personality trait they called “least-preferred coworker” (LPC).

The LPC theory defines three aspects of the work environment that must be evaluated in order to know what kind of leader will be most effective in that situation: position power, task structure, and work unit climate. From the trait standpoint, Fiedler and colleagues believed that leaders’ styles are static and that they would only be effective in situations in which their behaviors were appropriate. Leaders who find they generally describe the person with whom they least prefer to work in a positive way are high-LPC leaders. These leaders are considered relationship-oriented. Conversely, those leaders who describe their least-preferred coworker in a negative light are low-LPC leaders. These leaders are considered task-focused.





## Matching Style to Situation

### Key in the Academic Environment: Low Position Power

Academic units tend to be environments where the leader (e.g., department chair or head) has low position power (for example, cannot hire and fire or provide raises at will), and unit member tasks are generally poorly defined, by the very nature of academic life.

LPC theory suggests that leaders who are relationship-oriented (that is, high-LPC) should be selected to lead departments with a friendly, frictionless climates where people generally get along. Conversely, task-oriented leaders (low-LPC) should be selected to lead less friendly work units where the climate is negative. This results in a conundrum: from a long-term perspective, this pairing is likely to perpetuate negative climates within the academic units where such climates exist. LPC theory does not address how to engage in the social engineering necessary to make the high-LPC leader fit, that is, changing the work unit climate into a positive one. We know from subsequent organizational research that this job most often belongs to the unit leader.

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The takeaway from this theory is that you are likely to be more effective in some situations than others, that is, you are more effective in those in which you are more comfortable. This is normal. However, in uncomfortable situations, you may, according to LPC theory, experience stress and anxiety, which can then reduce your coping skills, yielding reduced decision-making quality and increased negative social interactions. In turn, these outcomes can have negative ripple effects throughout the workplace. Knowing this in advance can help you purposefully adopt strategies to compensate.

The leader sets the tone for the unit.

When you are negative, it can and will ripple through your unit. If you are a high-LPC leader trying to improve a difficult work climate, be aware that the stress of doing so can affect your leadership in ways that could undermine your efforts.

The good news is that the leader is the key to transforming and maintaining a positive work climate and this change can be achieved by purposeful adopting relationship-oriented behaviors. Your lack of positional power and control over task structures should not according to LPC, limit your ability to lead this change.

## 2. Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Approach

A one-size-fits-all leadership style is more likely to fail than one that accounts for individual needs of those for whom the leader is responsible. Hersey and Blanchard emphasize that a good leader should be aware of the readiness (also known as development level) of those in the work group to be led, that is, a combination of competence and commitment. Though this awareness, leaders would be more able to apply task- and/or relationship-focused leadership behaviors in the correct situation. The takeaway from their theory in the academic leadership setting is that academic leaders have different responsibilities when leading PhD students vs. junior faculty vs. senior faculty. New additions to academic units have different needs than veteran members. Successful academic leaders are aware of their unit members' developmental levels and adapt their leadership to those varied needs.

## 3. Path-Goal

Leaders have the responsibility to lead, guide, and coach their group members along clear paths to reach their goals, solving situational obstacles, providing support, and helping to refining goals. Junior unit members rely on the leader to fulfill these responsibilities even more



than senior members. This idea may seem foreign to some academic unit leaders, as completing research and earning tenure are often seen as individual enterprises.

Building a collaborative environment is the job of an academic leader. This kind of leadership requires an awareness of those in the surrounding environment and task characteristics, which is especially difficult if the academic unit contains researchers with different areas of inquiry who use methods foreign to the leader.

Like other theories, path-goal includes task- and relationship-oriented leadership behaviors. It also identifies two other important leadership behaviors: participative leadership and achievement orientation—a groundbreaking addition beyond prior leadership theories—both of which are relevant to leaders of academic units.

Path-goal theory suggests practicing clear directive leadership, especially for new additions to the unit, about teaching load and preps, tenure and service expectations, and bureaucratic processes (e.g., reimbursement).

It also suggests:

- *implementing supportive leadership by being friendly, respectful, approachable, and treating unit members as equals;*
- *implementing participative leadership by allowing the unit members to share in decisions that affect the unit; and*
- *implementing achievement-oriented behaviors by establishing a high standard of performance, encouraging continuous improvement, and showing confidence in unit member's abilities to meet these standards.*

The characteristics of unit members can amplify the need for the application of one or more of these. The abilities and experience will influence the level of directive leadership that is helpful. New unit members may need more direction about policies and procedures, for example. Unit members will differ in their desire for input and guidance. Those with a high need for affiliation benefit more from supportive leadership than

others. For example, some will want more voice than others in hiring decisions and curriculum choices. The takeaway for path-goal is that the key purpose of leadership is to support, guide, and coach, and this is likely to be more necessary with more junior members than those with more experience.

## Contingency-Based Summary

The key takeaway from contingency-based approaches is that the situation is important for finding the most effective way to lead. The situation includes many elements: leader default modes of operation, the needs and differences of unit members, and environmental support or obstacles. For leaders to be as successful as possible, they must take all of these into account. In the academic setting, tenure and unit member experience are critical for shaping the most effective leadership behaviors.

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## Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)

Necessarily, leaders must treat those around them differently. From a practical standpoint, especially as span of control increases, leaders can find it impossible to marshal the time and emotional energy to form close relationships with all for whom they are responsible.

People also tend to be drawn to some and more naturally form close relationships with them than with others. While members of departments do not all need, and may not even want, the same level of relationship with their leaders, differential treatment can cause serious workplace issues, especially in perceptions of fairness.

Leaders tend to extend high-quality relationship opportunities in hopes of increasing the productivity of those in their units. Most leaders tend to have an “inner circle“ of more trusted confidants and advisors. These individuals, called high-LMX followers, receive more attention



and resources than other unit members who are low-LMX followers. High-LMX followers tend to perform better, like the leader more, and enjoy their jobs. Low-LMX followers are less likely to experience these positive workplace experiences.

Unit members are aware of how the leader treats others in the unit from both their own observations and shared stories among them. Transparency in the application of differing treatment is key for the success of what is a natural tendency for leaders. Thus, it is

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important for a leader to acknowledge differences in access and relationships, and to reach out to low-LMX members of the unit in appropriate ways to offer them at least some of the benefits of high-quality relationships.

The takeaway from LMX research is that relationships with followers are naturally different and an important aspect of leadership and leaders must be careful to form the right differing relationships and to do so in an open, transparent way.

### Implicit Leadership Theory

Being the wrong kind of leader for a given situation can have negative consequences for both leader and unit member.s Humans have innate beliefs about right and wrong. Communities and societies define “proper” behavior for extraordinary (ethics, morality, what constitutes criminal behavior) and everyday things (e.g., the “right“ dinner for a holiday). These expectations come from social learning and, at least in adults, are relatively stable over time. People tend to observe what society and leaders of society do, and to adopt those behaviors to fit in: we are influenced by what we see around us. Thus, unit members may hold

firm conscious and unconscious views about the “correct” traits and actions for their leaders. While there are some common themes, there is also an idiosyncratic aspect to these notions. For a supervisor to be recognized as a leader, those observing the leader must discern at least some of the characteristics that they ascribe to leadership.

Among expected characteristics are sensitivity, understanding, helpfulness, sincerity, intelligence, knowledge, education, cleverness, dedication, motivation, a hardworking ethic, energy, strength, and a dynamic personality. Unit members are more likely to enjoy high-quality relationships with their leaders to the extent that they exhibit the expected characteristics and behaviors. Some of these qualities have to do with the efficacy of achieving goals; some have to do with the moral status of pursuing goals; and have to do with both.

It can be a trap to prioritize short-term task achievement over the sustained legitimacy and support for one's leadership over time. Unit members with a leader who matches their expectations may experience increased organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and well-being. They tend not to want people in leadership roles who they perceive are tyrannical, domineering, manipulative, pushy, loud, selfish, or conceited.

It is important to understand the expectations your unit members have for the role you hold as an academic leader, as deviating from those expectations can harm your relationships and effectiveness.

The takeaway from implicit leadership research is that unit members have expectations for leaders, which supervisors should attempt to understand and match, or at least acknowledge and address, because while good things happen when leaders match expectations and bad things happen when they do not.





## Theory Lays the Foundation for Your Leadership Style

Leadership research shows us that there are many ways to manage. Leadership is a complex interaction of traits, behaviors, and situational elements. Even within the same work unit, you must enact leadership differently depending on the situation and unit members involved. Learn from the fundamental principles that have developed through the years of leadership scholarship.

