

8 Major Leadership Theories

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Interest in leadership increased during the early part of the twentieth century. Early leadership theories focused on what qualities distinguished between leaders and followers, while subsequent theories looked at other variables such as situational factors and skill level. While many different leadership theories have emerged, most can be classified as one of eight major types:

1. “Great Man” Theories: Great Man theories assume that the capacity for leadership is inherent – that great leaders are born, not made. These theories often portray great leaders as heroic, mythic, and destined to rise to leadership when needed. The term “Great Man” was used because, at the time, leadership was thought of primarily as a male quality, especially in terms of military leadership.

2. Trait Theories: Similar in some ways to “Great Man” theories, trait theory assumes that people inherit certain qualities and traits that make them better suited to leadership. Trait theories often identify particular personality or behavioral characteristics shared by leaders. But if particular traits are key features of leadership, how do we explain people who possess those qualities but are not leaders? This question is one of the difficulties in using trait theories to explain leadership.

3. Contingency Theories: Contingency theories of leadership focus on particular variables related to the environment that might determine which particular style of leadership is best suited for the situation. According to this theory, no leadership style is best in all situations. Success depends upon a number of variables, including the leadership style, qualities of the followers, and aspects of the situation.

4. Situational Theories: Situational theories propose that leaders choose the best course of action based upon situational variable. Different styles of leadership may be more appropriate for certain types of decision-making.

5. Behavioral Theories: Behavioral theories of leadership are based upon the belief that great leaders are made, not born. Rooted in behaviorism, this leadership theory focuses on the actions of leaders, not on mental qualities or internal states. According to this theory, people can *learn* to become leaders through teaching and observation.

6. Participative Theories: Participative leadership theories suggest that the ideal leadership style is one that takes the input of others into account. These leaders encourage participation and contributions from group members and help group members feel more relevant and committed to the decision-making process. In participative theories, however, the leader retains the right to allow the input of others.

7. Management Theories: Management theories (also known as “Transactional theories”) focus on the role of supervision, organization, and group performance. These theories base leadership on a system of reward and punishment. Managerial theories are often used in business; when employees are successful, they are rewarded; when they fail, they are reprimanded or punished.

8. Relationship Theories: Relationship theories (also known as “Transformational theories”) focus upon the connections formed between leaders and followers. These leaders motivate and inspire people by helping group members see the importance and higher good of the task. Transformational leaders are focused on the performance of group members, but also want each person to fulfill his or her potential. These leaders often have high ethical and moral standards.

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