The Evolution of Leadership Theory

Although the practice of leadership has changed considerably over time, the need for leaders and leadership has not (Bass, 1990a; Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Already in 1990, Bass (1990a) found a proliferation of leadership books (over 3,300). Since the publication of Burns’s (1978) seminal work on transforming leadership the number of leadership programs at various higher education institutions has grown to over 900 (Mangan, 2002). Clearly, interest in the field remains high. This review, although not exhaustive, traces the historical evolution of leadership theory from its initial focus on Great Man and trait theory to the contemporary study of transformational leadership theory offered by Bass. Although the theoretical underpinnings of leadership theory have changed over time, in many ways the basic functions of leadership—providing direction, decision making, establishing goals, communicating, resolving conflict—have not (K. E. Clark & Clark, 1990). Examining the historical development of leadership theories provides some necessary perspective as well as context within which to appreciate the increasing interest in transformational leadership (Bennis, 1976).

Leadership Traits

The historical evolution of the study of leaders and leadership derives from Galton’s Great Man theory (K. E. Clark & Clark, 1990). Royalty, battlefield heroes, and other wealthy and successful individuals were thought to possess inherent talents and abilities that set them apart from the population at large and
which enabled them to achieve great success. Great Man theory subsequently gave rise to trait theory in the 1920s and 1930s, which generally unsuccessfully attempted to identify traits that made leaders different from other individuals. The underlying assumption of the theory was that leaders surely had to possess some universal characteristics that made them leaders. For the most part, traits were viewed as “givens”—something that was there at birth—inborn, fixed, and applicable to, and in, any circumstance. The shortcomings of the theory though, were that it did not take into account the myriad different circumstances faced by leaders nor the vast differences in the types of individuals being led. Likewise, no attempt was made to actually measure the leader’s performance (Hollander & Offermann, 1990). Researchers in the field subsequently refocused their efforts away from who a leader was to what leaders did and attempted to identify observable leader behaviors (Sashkin & Burke, 1990).

*Leadership Behaviors*

The behavioral approach makes an effort to identify exactly what good leaders do on the job and then draws correlations between those specific behaviors and their leadership effectiveness (Yukl, 2002). Research in this area basically identified two different dimensions of leadership behavior (although labeled differently depending on the study)—one focused on the task and the other on the people or interpersonal dimension (Yukl, Gordon, & Taber, 2002; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1982).
The task aspect of the leader’s behavior focuses on job accomplishment or goal achievement. Leader behaviors here would demonstrate concerns regarding production, the exercise of directive leadership, efforts to initiate structure and supervision or oversight. The people focus or relationship behavior would be demonstrated by concern for people, offering supportive leadership, focusing on the feelings of individuals, their comfort, showing appropriate appreciation and making efforts to reduce stress. Leaders demonstrate these behaviors in an effort to promote satisfaction among group members, facilitate the development and maintenance of harmonious relations in the work place, and retain the social stability of the group.

*Situational Leadership*

As investigation into leadership behaviors evolved, it became clear that the situation or context within which leadership is exercised is important as well. The work of Stogdill (1948; 1974) and Mann (1959) resulted in a general reorientation of the field in the 1950s to what was referred to as situational leadership. Stogdill (1948), for example, reviewed and synthesized some 25 years of leadership research results in the literature and determined that he could find no specific traits or personal characteristics that could clearly be identified as absolute indications of leadership. However, both Stogdill and Mann did identify some specific personal characteristics that were associated with leadership in the studies they examined–extroversion, dominance, etc. As a result of their work, they determined that diverse situations could place decidedly different burdens on leaders. Thus,
leader traits, for example, were relevant only to the degree that they pertained to the task under consideration. Consequently, they concluded that there were no specific set of characteristics that could distinguish leaders from followers, nor were there characteristics that could predict leader success.

Yukl (2002) noted that researchers began to consider that the effectiveness of a leader’s behavior could be dependent on a number of situational factors—the extent of the leader’s authority and discretion, the nature of the work performed by the organization, the attributes of the subordinates, and the nature of the external environment. This view was consistent with what Westburg (1931) had found—that a leader’s success was tied to his ability to understand both his followers as well as the environment, and then respond to both as required by changing circumstances. Situational leadership theories can be categorized as trait or behavioral depending on the researcher’s judgment as to whether the leader’s actions reflect either innate skills (traits) or simply the leader behaving in a way in response to the demands of a specific situation. This reorientation of the field paved the way for consideration of other approaches to the leader-follower relationship (Hollander & Offermann, 1990).

**Contingency and Transactional Leader Models**

In the mid-1960s, two new approaches to leadership theory were spawned from the situational approach—the contingency and transactional leadership models. Fiedler (1961) identified what he referred to as leadership effectiveness traits which related to those qualities individuals in leadership roles had to perform
well as opposed to identifying any specific traits needed. Situational elements as well as the characteristics of both the leader and followers greatly impacted the leadership process. Specific considerations included the nature of the activity or task, any associated history, the availability of resources and the nature of the relationship between the leader and followers. Fiedler’s work continued the movement of the field away from traits and toward continued interest and emphasis on those attributes of leaders that resulted in a more positive response by followers. The contingency and transactional models (discussed in greater detail below) contributed to the understanding of leadership complexity by migration away from trait or situational approaches to leadership (Hollander & Offermann, 1990).

*Contingency Leadership*

The Contingency models offered by Fiedler (1964), House (1971), as well as Vroom and Yetton (1973) contended that leadership effectiveness was the combined result of both the qualities of the leader and the demands of the situation. These requirements interact to ensure leader qualities are consistent with the encountered task. Fiedler’s (1961) Contingency Leadership Model was based on the idea that effective leadership was situation dependent. The leader had to be prepared to address effectively a host of situational variables in order to make intelligent decisions regarding his actions. House’s (1971) Path-Goal Model was predicated on the idea that both worker performance and satisfaction were influenced by the behavior of the leader. The leader’s task was to ensure workers
understood the goals, reduce or eliminate any impediments to goal accomplishment, and work to increase the employee’s satisfaction while achieving the goals. The Decision Making Model of Vroom and Yetton (1973) noted that it was important for the leader to determine how much participation subordinates would have in the decision making process. The model was predicated on the idea that there was a direct link between subordinate acceptance of decisions and worker productivity.

Hersey and Blanchard (1982) also offered a theory that integrated task and relationship behaviors contingent on the situational context. However, their model emphasized leader behaviors not traits and introduced the idea of the leader being concerned for follower development. Matching the leadership style to the ability of the followers to actually perform the task was an important new dimension of this theory (Anderson, 1992).

*Transactional Leadership*

Transactional leadership models derived initially from a social exchange perspective that focused on the implicit social contract between leaders and followers and its relationship to effectiveness. Typically, transactional models focus on exchange theory\(^1\) and the perceptions and expectations followers have regarding the actions and motives of leaders. The follower’s perception regarding fairness and equity of the exchange with the leader is paramount (Hollander &

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\(^1\) The theory’s premise is that the leader and subordinate develop a separate exchange relationship as they mutually define the role of the subordinate (i.e., in return for performing a specific task, there is an expectation of some agreed-upon reward on the part of the subordinate).
Offermann, 1990; T. O. Jacobs, 2002; McClelland, 1975; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2002; Yukl, 2002).

**Charismatic Leadership**

In the latter part of the 1970s and early 1980s, the field showed renewed interest in the idea of the “charismatic leader,” a concept first introduced by Max Weber (Hollander & Offermann, 1990). Charismatic leaders are typically thought to exert enormous influence and power over their followers as a result of their emotional appeal, especially in crisis-type situations where conventional wisdom suggests strong leadership is sought out (House, 1977). House’s theory of charismatic leadership included several key points—how they behaved, how they differed from other leadership behaviors, and the conditions under which they were most successful. In terms of traits, House offered that charismatic leaders had a strong need for power, had high self-confidence, and very strong convictions. Impression management, articulation of an appealing vision, communicating high expectations, and expressing confidence in the ability of their followers were all key behaviors of charismatic leaders. The behaviors of the charismatic leader were aimed at influencing their followers’ attitudes and perceptions about the leader.

There are, however, decidedly different views in the field regarding the attributes of charismatic leadership. Burns (1978) noted charisma was a phenomenon often associated with political leaders, and articulated the positive characteristics associated with that style—inspire trust, confidence, unquestioning acceptance, willful obedience, emotional investment, affection for the leader, and
garner higher performance from their followers. Bass (1985), however, offered a potential negative side to charismatic leader behavior that Burns had not.

While largely concurring with Burns that a charismatic leader could put aside self-interest for the larger collective good of the organization or society, Bass suggested that some charismatic leaders put their own self-interests first. In such instances, leaders used their charismatic qualities to influence others to promote the leader’s best interests. Bass labeled this behavior as pseudo-transformational, noting that some leaders often manufactured crises in order to continue the dependency of their followers (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Promoting unquestioning follower obedience and dependence, pseudo-transformational leaders employ symbols of authority and exploit hierarchical differences to advance their own interests and agendas. They also inappropriately use their transactional skills and behaviors to threaten, coerce, demand compliance, and manipulate follower behavior (Bass, 1985).

**Transformational Leadership**

Transformative leadership evolved as a discernible trend in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Bass, 1990a; Hickman, 1990). First introduced as a concept by Burns in *Leadership* (1978), and subsequently expanded upon in his new work *Transforming Leadership* (Burns, 2003), Burns began the process of reformulating how the field looked at and understood leadership (Kellerman, 1999). Burns’s efforts established much of the framework for the constructs of the transactional and transformational leadership paradigm. He noted a decided
difference between those leaders whose exchanges with followers were transactional and those whose interactions with followers were transformational (Burns, 1978; Kellerman, 1999).

Burns (1978) viewed transformational-type leadership as potentially the more powerful of the two approaches since it “occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 4). While transactional leaders focused on the exchange between leader and follower, transformational leaders, still cognizant of the needs of followers, appealed to higher order needs as identified by Maslow’s hierarchy (Maslow, 1970), thus engaging the follower across every dimension (Burns, 1978).

Building on the early work of Burns, Bass is given credit for helping bridge the gap between transactional and transformational leadership (Sashkin & Rosenbach, 1998). Transformational leadership did not replace transactional leadership so much as build on it. The two theories are neither inconsistent nor incompatible. In fact, leaders typically use both approaches although transformational leadership is often more powerful in its effect (Avolio & Bass, 1988; Bass, 1985).

*Defining Transformational Leadership*

The concept of transformational leadership is basically defined as leadership that involves change as contrasted with leadership that retains the status quo (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Tichy &
Devanna, 1986; Yukl, 2002). Or, put another way, transactional leaders operate within the framework of the interests of their followers as opposed to transformational leaders who seek to change the framework altogether (Bass, 1985, 1990b; Sashkin & Burke, 1990). It is important to note that although Burns’s (1978) initial work was important for establishing the new transformational paradigm, he really did not develop his concept into a coherent theory per se (Sashkin & Rosenbach, 1998). It was through the subsequent efforts of Bass that Burns’s concept on transforming leadership was fleshed out and turned into a cogent measurable theory for the field (Bass, 1985; Sashkin & Rosenbach, 1998).