

Major Differences Between Behavioral and Contingency Leadership Theories

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Introduction

Leadership theories help explain why some leaders succeed while others struggle to influence their followers or accomplish organizational objectives. Two important approaches are behavioral leadership theory and contingency leadership theory. Although the theories are related, they examine leadership effectiveness from different perspectives.

Behavioral leadership theory focuses mainly on what leaders do. It examines the observable actions leaders use when assigning work, communicating expectations, motivating employees, resolving problems, and developing relationships. Its central assumption is that leadership effectiveness can be understood by studying patterns of behavior rather than concentrating only on inherited personality traits.

Contingency leadership theory focuses on the relationship between a leader's style and the situation in which leadership occurs. It argues that no single leadership style is equally effective in every circumstance. A style that succeeds with an experienced and highly motivated team may fail with inexperienced employees facing an unclear or urgent task. Leadership effectiveness therefore depends on the fit among the leader, the followers, the nature of the task, the leader's authority, and the organizational environment.

The behavioral theory highlights the nature of the work a leader performs and examines whether the leader uses effective task-oriented and people-oriented behaviors. Contingency theory extends this analysis by asking whether those behaviors or leadership styles are appropriate for a particular situation. In this sense, behavioral theory identifies important leadership actions, while contingency theory explains when and under what conditions those actions are most likely to produce successful outcomes.

This paper examines the major differences between behavioral and contingency leadership theories. It also discusses task-oriented and people-oriented behaviors, situational variables, the practical applications and limitations of each approach, and the contribution of behavioral theory to the development of contingency leadership models.

Understanding Behavioral Leadership Theory

Behavioral leadership theory developed partly as a response to earlier trait theories. Trait approaches attempted to identify the personal characteristics that distinguished effective leaders from ineffective ones. Researchers examined qualities such as intelligence, confidence, determination, sociability, and physical appearance.

However, no single set of traits consistently explained successful leadership in every organization or situation. Researchers therefore began focusing more closely on observable behavior. Instead of asking only what kind of person becomes a leader, they asked what effective leaders actually do.

Behavioral theory assumes that leadership can be examined through actions such as:

- Organizing work.
- Establishing goals.
- Clarifying responsibilities.
- Monitoring performance.
- Communicating with followers.
- Providing support.
- Listening to employee concerns.
- Recognizing achievement.
- Encouraging participation.
- Training and developing employees.

One of the strengths of this approach is that behavior can be observed, assessed, and developed. A personality characteristic may be difficult to change, but a leader may learn to provide clearer instructions, listen more carefully, delegate responsibilities, or offer more useful feedback.

Behavioral theory does not primarily evaluate an entire organization by dividing it into separate compartments. That description is more closely related to systems analysis or organizational design. Behavioral leadership theory focuses specifically on patterns of leader behavior and the effects those behaviors have on followers and organizational outcomes.

The Ohio State Leadership Studies

The Ohio State leadership studies were among the most influential behavioral investigations. Researchers developed the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire to examine how followers perceived the actions of their leaders. The studies identified two especially important dimensions: initiating structure and consideration. The Ohio State University continues to make the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire and its manual available as part of its leadership resources.

Initiating Structure

Initiating structure refers to the degree to which a leader defines roles, organizes tasks, sets performance expectations, establishes procedures, and directs the group toward its objectives.

A leader displaying high initiating structure may:

- Define the responsibilities of every employee.
- Set deadlines and work schedules.
- Establish performance standards.
- Explain how tasks should be completed.
- Monitor progress.
- Coordinate the work of different employees.
- Correct deviations from established procedures.
- Emphasize productivity and goal achievement.

This behavior is particularly useful when tasks are unclear, employees require direction, deadlines are strict, or the organization must coordinate complex activities.

Consideration

Consideration refers to the degree to which a leader shows concern for followers, builds trust, listens to employees, respects their ideas, and supports their welfare.

A leader displaying high consideration may:

- Listen to employee concerns.
- Treat followers with respect.
- Show appreciation for good work.
- Provide encouragement.
- Support employee development.
- Maintain open communication.
- Consider the personal needs of team members.
- Create a trusting work environment.

The two dimensions are not necessarily opposites. A leader can display both high initiating structure and high consideration. For example, a manager may establish clear deadlines while also listening to employees and providing support.

A major meta-analysis by Judge et al. (2004) examined more than 150 independent correlations for each of these behavioral dimensions. The study found that both consideration and initiating structure were meaningfully related to leadership outcomes, although the strength of their relationships varied

according to the outcome being examined.

This evidence suggests that effective leadership often requires attention to both task accomplishment and human relationships.

Task-Oriented Leadership Behavior

The behavioral theory identifies task-oriented leadership as one of the major categories of leader behavior. Task-oriented leaders concentrate on completing work efficiently and ensuring that organizational objectives are achieved.

The original discussion correctly emphasizes behaviors related to initiating work, organizing tasks, collecting information, and applying standard operating procedures. However, task-oriented leadership is not mainly concerned with motivating employees through personal relationships. Its primary focus is the structure and completion of work.

A task-oriented leader may:

- Establish specific objectives.
- Divide work into manageable activities.
- Assign responsibilities according to employees' skills.
- Develop procedures and schedules.
- Monitor productivity.
- Collect performance data.
- Identify errors or delays.
- Coordinate resources.
- Enforce quality standards.
- Evaluate results.

Task-oriented leadership can be highly effective when employees need clear direction, when a project is technically complicated, or when the organization is facing an emergency. For example, a hospital leader responding to a major disaster may need to assign responsibilities quickly, establish communication channels, and ensure strict compliance with emergency procedures.

Nevertheless, task-oriented leadership can create problems when used without sufficient consideration for employees. A leader who focuses only on deadlines and output may overlook burnout, conflict, low morale, professional development, or legitimate concerns about working conditions.

Therefore, task-oriented behavior should not automatically be treated as authoritarian or negative. Its value depends on the manner in which it is used and the needs of the situation.

People-Oriented Leadership Behavior

People-oriented leaders focus primarily on relationships, communication, employee development, motivation, and the psychological environment of the group.

The original discussion identifies several appropriate people-oriented behaviors, including encouraging staff, listening to concerns, observing employee needs, and providing training. A people-oriented leader may also:

- Build trust among team members.
- Recognize individual contributions.
- Invite employees to participate in decisions.
- Resolve interpersonal conflict.
- Support professional growth.
- Encourage cooperation.
- Communicate with empathy.
- Provide constructive feedback.
- Protect employee well-being.
- Create a sense of belonging.

People-oriented leadership may strengthen job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust, cooperation, and employee retention. It is especially valuable when work requires creativity, collaboration, professional judgment, or emotional commitment.

However, people-oriented behavior also has limitations when it is not balanced with task direction. A leader may maintain positive relationships but fail to establish clear objectives or hold employees accountable. Followers may appreciate the leader personally while remaining uncertain about what work must be completed.

Behavioral leadership theory therefore helps organizations examine whether leaders are providing both necessary structure and appropriate relational support.

Understanding Contingency Leadership Theory

Contingency leadership theory argues that leadership effectiveness depends on the interaction between a leadership style and the conditions surrounding the leader. The term *contingency* means that the effectiveness of an action is conditional upon particular circumstances.

The theory does not state that leadership is random or that every style is equally effective. Instead, it states that a leadership approach must fit the demands of the situation.

Important situational factors may include:

- The nature and complexity of the task.
- The knowledge and experience of followers.
- The quality of leader-member relationships.
- The level of time pressure.
- The authority available to the leader.
- Organizational culture.
- Environmental uncertainty.
- The seriousness of the consequences.
- The need for creativity or innovation.
- The level of conflict within the group.

Contingency theory therefore examines the leader, followers, task, and environment together. Newcastle University summarizes the general contingency position as the rejection of a one-size-fits-all approach to management; different circumstances may require different strategies.

The original statement that contingency theory says there is “no compatible leadership style for any situation” requires correction. The theory states that there is no single best leadership style for every situation. A particular style may be highly compatible with one situation but poorly suited to another.

Fiedler's Contingency Model

Fred Fiedler developed one of the earliest and most influential contingency models of leadership. His model proposes that group performance depends on the fit between a leader's motivational orientation and the leader's degree of control over the situation.

Fiedler distinguished primarily between task-motivated and relationship-motivated leaders. He used the Least Preferred Coworker scale to estimate a leader's orientation. Leaders who described their least preferred coworker relatively positively were interpreted as relationship-motivated, while leaders who described that person less positively were interpreted as task-motivated.

Unlike some later situational models, Fiedler's theory assumes that a leader's basic orientation is relatively stable and difficult to change. Therefore, effectiveness may be improved by placing the leader in a compatible situation or by altering the situation to fit the leader.

Fiedler identified three major situational variables.

Leader-Member Relations

Leader-member relations refer to the degree of trust, confidence, respect, and acceptance between the leader and followers.

Good relations increase the leader's influence because employees are more willing to cooperate. Poor

relations reduce situational control because the leader must spend more effort dealing with conflict, distrust, or resistance.

Task Structure

Task structure refers to how clearly the work is defined. A highly structured task has clear goals, procedures, standards, and correct solutions. An unstructured task is more ambiguous and may permit several possible approaches.

For example, processing standard financial transactions is relatively structured. Developing an original advertising campaign is less structured because creativity and judgment are required.

Position Power

Position power refers to the formal authority attached to the leader's role. A leader has strong position power when the role permits the allocation of rewards, promotion, discipline, assignments, or other organizational resources.

A project coordinator who cannot hire, reward, or discipline team members may have weaker position power than a departmental director with formal managerial authority.

In Fiedler's model, these variables determine whether a situation is highly favorable, moderately favorable, or unfavorable to the leader. Task-oriented leaders were expected to perform better in situations with very high or very low control, while relationship-oriented leaders were expected to perform better in moderately favorable conditions.

Other Contingency Approaches

Contingency theory is broader than Fiedler's model. Other approaches include path-goal theory, situational leadership, decision models, and leadership-substitutes theory.

Path-Goal Theory

Robert House's path-goal theory proposes that leaders improve follower motivation and performance by clarifying the path between effort and valued goals. The leader may provide direction, remove obstacles, offer support, or involve employees in decisions depending on follower and task characteristics.

House identified several leadership behaviors, including:

- Directive leadership.

- Supportive leadership.
- Participative leadership.
- Achievement-oriented leadership.

The usefulness of each behavior depends on the task, work environment, and needs of followers. For example, directive leadership may help when employees face an unclear task, while supportive leadership may be valuable when work is stressful or repetitive. House's original model linked leadership behavior to follower motivation, satisfaction, and performance.

This model demonstrates how contingency theory can build directly upon behavioral categories. The leader's behavior remains important, but its effectiveness depends on situational conditions.

Major Differences Between the Theories

The major differences between behavioral and contingency leadership theories can be summarized as follows.

Area of comparison	Behavioral leadership theory	Contingency leadership theory
Primary focus	Observable actions of the leader	Fit between leadership style and situation
Main question	What do effective leaders do?	Under what conditions is a leadership style effective?
Unit of analysis	Leader behavior and its effects	Leader, followers, task, authority, and environment
Main categories	Task-oriented and people-oriented behavior	Leadership style combined with situational variables
View of effectiveness	Certain behaviors may be associated with effective leadership	Effectiveness varies according to situational fit
Approach to development	Leaders may learn and improve behaviors	Leaders may adapt behavior, change the situation, or be matched with an appropriate context, depending on the model

Area of comparison	Behavioral leadership theory	Contingency leadership theory
Role of followers	Followers respond to the leader's behavior	Follower ability, needs, trust, and motivation are central situational variables
Role of the environment	Usually secondary in early behavioral models	Essential to determining the appropriate approach
Main strength	Identifies observable and trainable leadership practices	Explains why one style does not work in every context
Main limitation	May not explain when a behavior will succeed	May be complex and difficult to apply consistently

Difference in the Focus of Analysis

Behavioral theory concentrates on leadership action. It evaluates how a leader plans, communicates, motivates, delegates, supports, and supervises.

Contingency theory concentrates on the compatibility between those actions or styles and the demands of a situation. It examines whether a task-oriented, supportive, participative, or directive approach is appropriate under current conditions.

For example, behavioral theory may identify that a manager frequently gives detailed instructions. Contingency theory asks whether detailed instructions are appropriate for the followers and task.

If the followers are inexperienced and the task is dangerous, detailed direction may improve safety. If the followers are highly qualified researchers working on a creative project, excessive direction may restrict innovation.

Difference in the Search for the Best Style

The original paper states that behavioral leadership theory attempts to identify the best leadership style for all situations. This description reflects part of the early motivation behind behavioral research, but it requires some qualification.

Early behavioral studies sought patterns associated with effective leadership. However, the Ohio State findings did not establish one universally superior style. They showed that consideration and

initiating structure are separate dimensions and that leaders may display different combinations of both.

Contingency theory made the situational problem more explicit. It rejected the assumption that one combination would always succeed. Instead, the appropriate style depends on factors such as task structure, follower experience, time pressure, and leader authority.

Therefore, the most accurate distinction is that behavioral theory identifies potentially effective behaviors, while contingency theory emphasizes that the value of those behaviors changes across situations.

Difference in the Treatment of Followers

Behavioral theory considers followers mainly through their reactions to leader behavior. Researchers may examine whether a people-oriented leader increases satisfaction or whether task-oriented behavior improves productivity.

Contingency theory treats follower characteristics as part of the explanation for effectiveness. Followers may differ in competence, confidence, experience, motivation, independence, expectations, and willingness to accept authority.

For instance, new employees may need clear instruction and frequent feedback. Experienced professionals may respond more positively to participation and autonomy. A contingency approach requires the leader to consider these differences.

Difference in the Treatment of the Environment

The environment has a limited role in some early behavioral models. The main concern is whether the leader demonstrates task-oriented or relationship-oriented behavior.

Contingency models give the environment a central position. Economic uncertainty, organizational culture, competition, technology, regulation, and crisis conditions can affect which leadership approach is appropriate.

A leader managing a stable administrative department may use participative decision-making extensively. During a sudden cybersecurity attack, the same organization may temporarily require centralized decisions, rapid communication, and strict task coordination.

Difference in Leadership Flexibility

Behavioral theory generally suggests that leaders can learn and improve useful behaviors. Leadership development programs can teach communication, delegation, coaching, conflict management, and goal-setting skills.

Contingency theories differ in how much flexibility they expect from leaders. Fiedler viewed basic leadership orientation as relatively stable and recommended matching leaders to suitable situations or modifying situational control. Path-goal and situational approaches allow more behavioral adjustment.

It is therefore inaccurate to say that every contingency theory requires leaders simply to change their personalities. Some models emphasize adaptation, while Fiedler's model emphasizes fit and situational redesign.

Behavioral Contribution to Contingency Theory

Behavioral theory makes a major contribution to contingency theory because contingency models rely on identifiable leadership behaviors or styles.

The element of behaviorism is involved whenever a contingency model asks whether a leader should be directive, supportive, participative, task-oriented, or relationship-oriented. Without behavioral categories, it would be difficult to specify what the leader should do differently.

Behavioral theory provides the vocabulary of leadership action. It identifies behaviors such as:

- Defining tasks.
- Setting goals.
- Supporting followers.
- Inviting participation.
- Monitoring performance.
- Clarifying expectations.
- Recognizing employees.
- Developing relationships.

Contingency theory then connects those behaviors to situational variables. It asks:

- When is direction necessary?
- When should employees participate?
- When is relationship building especially important?
- When should the leader restructure the task?
- When should authority be centralized?

- When can followers work independently?

The theories are therefore integrative rather than completely opposed. Behavioral theory explains the content of leadership, while contingency theory explains the conditions under which that content becomes effective.

For example, initiating structure is a behavioral concept. Path-goal theory uses similar directive behavior when followers face ambiguous work. Consideration is also a behavioral concept. Contingency models recommend supportive or relationship-oriented behavior when followers face stress, low confidence, or interpersonal difficulties.

Practical Example

Consider a hospital department introducing a new electronic medication system.

A behavioral analysis would examine whether the department leader:

- Explains the system clearly.
- Establishes training schedules.
- Defines employee responsibilities.
- Monitors medication errors.
- Answers questions.
- Listens to staff concerns.
- Encourages employees.
- Provides additional training.

These actions represent a combination of task-oriented and people-oriented behavior.

A contingency analysis would go further by examining:

- Whether nurses have previous experience with the technology.
- Whether the system must be implemented immediately.
- Whether errors could threaten patient safety.
- Whether employees trust the department leader.
- Whether the leader has authority to change work schedules.
- Whether the vendor provides technical support.
- Whether staff members are anxious or resistant.

If the system is unfamiliar and patient safety is at risk, the leader may initially require strong task structure, detailed instructions, and close monitoring. After employees become competent, the leader may reduce direct supervision and increase employee participation in system improvement.

The behaviors are important, but their timing and intensity depend on the situation.

Strengths of Behavioral Leadership Theory

Behavioral leadership theory has several important strengths.

First, it focuses on observable actions rather than vague personal qualities. Organizations can examine whether leaders communicate clearly, support followers, organize work, and provide feedback.

Second, behaviors can often be learned. Leadership development can help managers strengthen weak areas.

Third, the theory recognizes that effective leadership includes both task achievement and relationships. A leader must accomplish organizational objectives without ignoring the people responsible for the work.

Fourth, the theory provided measurable categories and instruments that supported later leadership research. The Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire is one example.

Limitations of Behavioral Leadership Theory

The main limitation is that the theory does not always specify which behavior will be effective in a particular context.

A highly supportive approach may succeed in one team and create uncertainty in another. Strong task direction may improve performance during a crisis but reduce creativity in a research group.

Behavioral categories may also oversimplify leadership. Actual leaders display complex combinations of communication, decision-making, ethics, expertise, emotional regulation, and political skill.

Finally, identifying a behavior does not prove that the behavior caused an organizational outcome. Successful teams may encourage leaders to become more supportive, just as supportive leadership may improve team success.

Strengths of Contingency Leadership Theory

Contingency theory recognizes the complexity of organizations. It acknowledges that leadership occurs within a changing system rather than in isolation.

The approach encourages leaders to diagnose a situation before acting. This reduces the temptation to use the same method with every follower and every task.

It also explains why a leader may succeed in one role but struggle in another. The problem may not

be that the individual is universally ineffective. The person's style may not fit the new environment.

Finally, contingency thinking promotes organizational flexibility. Leaders can modify tasks, authority, communication, staffing, or team structure to create a better fit.

Limitations of Contingency Leadership Theory

Contingency theory can be difficult to apply because leaders must assess several variables at once. They may incorrectly judge follower readiness, task structure, or their own leadership style.

Some contingency models also provide conflicting recommendations. Fiedler emphasizes relatively stable orientations, while other models assume that leaders can change behavior according to follower needs.

The Least Preferred Coworker measure used in Fiedler's model has also attracted criticism because its interpretation is not always intuitive. A leader's description of a difficult coworker may not provide a complete or stable assessment of leadership orientation.

Finally, rapidly changing conditions may require leaders to reassess the situation repeatedly. A style that fits during the first stage of a project may become unsuitable later.

Conclusion

Behavioral and contingency leadership theories offer different but complementary explanations of leadership effectiveness.

Behavioral theory focuses on what leaders do. It identifies important task-oriented and people-oriented behaviors, including organizing work, establishing procedures, motivating employees, listening to concerns, providing training, and building relationships. The Ohio State studies described these broad dimensions as initiating structure and consideration.

Contingency theory focuses on whether a leader's style fits the situation. It examines variables such as leader-member relations, task structure, position power, follower characteristics, environmental uncertainty, and time pressure. Its central argument is that there is no single leadership style that is best in every situation.

The behavioral approach does not simply divide an entire organization into compartments, and contingency theory does not state that no style is compatible with any situation. Behavioral theory examines observable leadership actions, while contingency theory explains that different circumstances require different actions or different matches between leaders and situations.

Task-oriented leadership can provide clarity, coordination, and accountability. People-oriented

leadership can build trust, motivation, communication, and employee development. Neither orientation is automatically superior. Their effectiveness depends on how they are combined and where they are applied.

Behavioral theory contributes directly to contingency theory by identifying the behaviors that contingency models later connect to particular conditions. Behavioral theory explains the available leadership approaches, while contingency theory explains when each approach is likely to be useful.

The two theories should therefore not be viewed as entirely separate or competing explanations. Together, they provide a more complete understanding of leadership. Effective leaders need a range of constructive behaviors, but they must also understand the followers, task, authority structure, and environment before deciding how those behaviors should be applied.

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