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An Exploration of Traditional Approaches to Leadership: Traits, Behaviours and Contingency

In this article, we explore the traditional theories of leadership, namely the trait, behavioural and contingency approaches. Our aim is to understand the practice of leadership research and the applicability of leadership theory approaches. To achieve this, we devise an interview questionnaire to explore leadership traits, behaviours and contingency variables. We then pilot the questionnaire by conducting an interview. We find that the traditional approaches to leadership studies are relevant to understand leadership. However, we note that the distinction between trait, behaviour and contingency approaches is not as clear cut as presented in core leadership textbooks. The piloting process establishes that the interview questionnaire is suitable for exploring leadership and can be applied in bachelor's and master's theses.

Keywords: management, leadership, contingency, behaviour, traits, student research

Raziskovanje vodenja s tradicionalnimi modeli in teorijami: model osebne značilnosti, vedenjska teorija in situacijska teorija vodenja

Članek obravnava tradicionalne modele in teorije vodenja, in sicer model osebne značilnosti, vedenjsko teorijo ter situacijsko teorijo. Članek razvije razumevanje o raziskovalni praksi vodenja z aplikacijo tradicionalnih modelov in teorij vodenja. V ta namen oblikujemo vprašalnik za raziskovanje osebnih značilnosti, vodenja in situacijskih spremenljivk vodenja. Vprašalnik nato preizkusimo z izvedbo pilotnega intervjuja. Ugotavljamo, da so tradicionalni pristopi še vedno pomembni in aktualni za razumevanje vodenja. Hkrati ugotavljamo, da se teme prepletajo in da je včasih težko razmejiti tematike tradicionalnih modelov ter teorij. V diskusiji zaključimo, da je vprašalnik primeren za raziskovanje vodenja na diplomski in magistrski ravni.

Ključne besede: management, vodenje, situacijska teorija, vedenjska teorija, osebne značilnosti, študentsko raziskovanje



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Introduction

Leadership is a skill and competence with universal importance in people's lives. Anybody who finds themselves in a position to guide and reward others, exercises leadership to some degree. Manifesting itself in various forms, whether at home, at the workplace, or in people's free time, leadership has universal significance. Therefore, it is not surprising it is taught in various courses

around the world, including the Master's degree of Management at the University of Primorska in Slovenia.

The purpose of this article is to explore the traditional approaches to leadership studies, namely the trait approach, the behavioural approach, and the contingency approach (Lussier and Achua 2016; Yukl 2010). These three approaches are often referred to as the mainstream approaches to

leadership, being the first and, consequently, the longest in use for understanding leadership (Crevani et al. 2010).

Trait approaches help us comprehend how personality affects leadership, while behavioural approaches shed light on actions that drive leadership success. Contingency theories emphasize the importance of adapting leadership styles to various situations, enabling leaders to make informed decisions that suit the needs of their teams and organizations. While collaborative work and digitalization are reshaping the landscape of leadership studies and practice, these three approaches serve as the foundation for understanding newer approaches to leadership and developing competent and adaptable leaders in today's diverse and dynamic work environments.

The aim of this article is to deepen our understanding of traditional leadership approaches by developing an interview questionnaire. A secondary aim is to pilot the questionnaire through an interview and observe how well it captures information about leaders' ways of thinking about leadership. In doing so, we provide an interview protocol for bachelor's and master's students interested in researching leadership from the standpoint of trait, behaviour, and contingency theories.

The first part of the article is a review and analytical framework where we describe how leadership has been defined and outline the traditional approaches for studying leadership based on two main leadership textbooks (Lussier and Achua 2016; Yukl 2010). The second part of the article is an application where we devise a qualitative questionnaire based on the theory presented and then apply it in practice through a pilot interview. Finally, in the conclusion, we provide a reflection on the exercise. These steps allow us to understand the applicability of leadership theory approaches, and deepen comprehension of those approaches to leadership studies.

Theoretical Framework: Leadership Approaches

In leadership research, there are various approaches and definitions. Leadership can be understood as 'the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization' (House et al. 1999, 184). It involves an individual, referred to as the leader, and others, known as followers. The leader guides, influ-

ences, motivates, and inspires the followers to achieve a common goal effectively and efficiently. Following Burns (1978), leadership can also be understood as an engagement action between people and across all spheres and levels of society. As such, leadership and leaders cannot be separated from followers and the context in which leadership is situated.

Following Lussier and Achua, leadership is defined as 'the influencing process of leaders and followers to achieve organizational objectives through change' (Lussier and Achua 2010, 6). Leadership encompasses the relationships between leaders and followers, as well as individuals and groups. It also involves influencing others, achieving organizational objectives such as goals and visions, and facilitating change. These objectives are known as the five key elements of leadership: influence, organizational objectives, people, change, and leaders-followers (Lussier and Achua 2010, chap. 1).

Trait Approach

The trait approach encompasses the traits, skills, and values of individual leaders (Yukl 2010, chap. 6). Since the early 1990s, significant progress has been made in the development of personality theory and traits. One notable development is the refinement of the 'big five' personality model, which distinguishes between the following dimensions: surgency, agreeableness, adjustment, conscientiousness, and openness. Each personality dimension encompasses various traits, manifested with varying degrees of intensity among individuals. The model correlates with leadership, as certain traits are often particularly pronounced in leaders. For instance, research shows that dominance or the desire to assert oneself increases the likelihood of someone becoming a leader (Lips and Keener 2007).

It is essential to note that not all leaders possess the same traits. Nevertheless, there are specific traits that could indicate effective leadership. According to research, these traits include dominance, high energy, internal locus of control, integrity, flexibility, self-confidence, stability, intelligence, and sensitivity to others (Lussier and Achua 2010, chap. 2). McClelland developed the achievement motivation theory (1987, chap. 7), which identifies three primary needs. The theory aims to explain or predict the behaviours of leaders based on their needs for achievement, power, and affiliation (Lussier and Achua 2010, chap. 1). In addition, the following skills are

associated with effective leadership: technical skills, interpersonal skills, and conceptual skills (Yukl 2010, chap. 6). Technical skills involve knowledge of methods, processes, and relevant tools. Interpersonal skills refer to understanding the feelings of others, knowing their motives, and communicating clearly and effectively. Conceptual skills encompass logical thinking, creativity for generating new ideas and problem-solving, anticipating changes and events, and analysing trends to identify opportunities.

Behavioural Approach

Another leadership approach is the behaviour approach, which was proposed by researchers in the 1950s as a response to the traits approach. This approach proposes focusing on observing and analysing how leaders actually manage their activities and how they behave (Yukl 2010, chap. 1). Behaviours are often connected and based on specific traits which make up leadership style (Lussier and Achua 2010, chap. 1).

The behavioural approach aims to identify categories of behaviours important for effective leadership and measures them based on how often managers or leaders use them. Various categories of effective leadership behaviours exist (Yukl 2010, chap. 3; Burns 1978; Bass 1985). Differently-oriented behaviours are usually described as (Yukl 2010, chap. 3):

- Task-Oriented (or Job-Oriented) – contains those behaviours that relate to ensuring that the work is done in an appropriate way.
- Relations-Oriented – consists of behaviours connected with relationships with employees such as helping with solving problems, consulting, considering their opinions and treating them equally.
- Change-Oriented – focuses on the environment and understanding its conditions to be able to adapt to ongoing changes. It requires openness to innovations and applying changes in the company's strategies, processes and products.
- External Leadership – encompasses activities and behaviours of leaders in contact with people outside of the organization, such as networking, environmental/external scanning and representing.

Contingency Approach

Both trait and behavioural leadership theories attempt to find an optimal leadership style in

all situations. Therefore, they are called universal theories. In the 1960s, it became clear that there was no one best leadership style that suited all situations (Lussier and Achua 2016, chap 2). The most effective leadership behaviour often depends on the situation. As a result, the leadership paradigm shifted toward contingency theory. Contingency leadership theory attempts to explain appropriate leadership styles based on the leader, followers, and the situation. In other words, given situational variables, what characteristics and/or behaviours will lead to leadership success?

Yukl (2010) illustrates various models of contingency leadership theories. These include:

- Leader Effectiveness – this model suggests that the effectiveness of a leader can be evaluated by considering the performance of employees.
- Leadership Continuum Theory – according to this theory, leadership styles are placed on a continuum, taking into account the authority and freedom existing between the leader and subordinates.
- Path-Goal Theory – this theory proposes that leaders should influence employees' perceptions of their goals and guide them along the paths toward goal attainment.
- Normative Theory – this theory provides guidance on when a manager should take charge or delegate decision-making authority to the group.

The contingency theory paradigm emphasizes the importance of situational factors, including the type of work performed, the external environment, and characteristics of followers. One aspect of this research is to find out the extent to which leadership efforts are the same or different given various organizations, management levels and cultures.

Method

The traditional approaches to leadership outlined in the previous section are part of many university leadership courses worldwide. The first three co-authors of this article are master's Erasmus students at the Faculty of Management of the University of Primorska, where we followed the course Leadership for 8 weeks, between October and November 2023. As part of this course, we decided to strengthen our knowledge of traditional approaches by developing an interview questionnaire probing into leadership approaches.

Table 1: Interview Questions

Question(s) and sub questions	Approach	Explanation
In your opinion, what traits are important for a person to be considered a good leader?	Trait	Trait approach is about traits and personalities; general question to get the discussion on traits going (Lussier and Achua 2016, chap. 2)
Did you always want to be a leader?	Trait	Testing dominance; studies show that those wanting to become leaders are more likely to become ones (Lips and Keener 2007)
Do you consider yourself an easy-going person (meaning for instance that you like to meet new people)?	Trait	Extraversion is one of the big five personality traits, which research has shown has a strong correlation with leaderlike behaviour (Judge et al. 2002). Being easy-going is a trait of the extrovert personality.
To what extent do you have the drive to work hard?	Trait	Extraversion is one of the big five personality traits, which research has shown has a strong correlation with leaderlike behaviour (Judge et al. 2002). Working hard is a trait of the extrovert personality.
Have you tried to change your behaviours as a leader? If yes, which ones?	Behavioural	Behavioural approach – to get the discussion on behaviours going (Lussier and Achua 2016, chap. 3)
To what extent is networking important for your job?	Behavioural	Probing the importance of networking as a behaviour that is emphasized for leadership success (Lussier and Achua 2016, chap. 3)
How do you ensure that work is accomplished in your organization (i.e. that people understand what the task/goal is)?	Behavioural	Probing into job-orientated behaviours (Lussier and Achua 2016, chap. 3)
How do you support and develop the people that you work with?	Behavioural	Probing into employee-orientation behaviours (Lussier and Achua 2016, chap. 3)
Do you behave differently while heading a company compared to heading an NGO?	Contingency	The basic premise of the contingency approach is that leadership is situational – what works for one situation might not work for another (Lussier and Achua 2016, chap. 2)
What personality traits of yours come in handy when heading an NGO compared to your private company?	Contingency	The basic premise of the contingency approach is that leadership is situational – what works for one situation might not work for another (Lussier and Achua 2016, chap. 2)

The course teacher dedicated four-hour sessions to discuss leadership approaches, totalling eight sessions. These sessions, which also included student presentations, extended beyond traditional approaches to leadership. They covered topics such as followership, transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, adaptive leadership, and collaborative leadership. However, we decided to focus on traditional approaches, as these were presented earlier in the course. This decision allowed us to spend more time reflecting on their relevance and gaining confidence in their application. After each session, we formulated a set of questions to probe the content of each leadership approach. Table 1 provides the list of questions we devised under the supervision of the course teacher.

The formulation of interview questions was a good exercise to actively reflect on the traditional approaches. Yet we also wanted to test how well the questionnaire worked. Therefore, we decided to pilot the interview questionnaire. The teacher of the course suggested that we invite Marilo

Meta, an intern at the Faculty of Management, to pilot the questionnaire.¹ The interview took place on 14 November 2023 and was recorded with Zoom and transcribed using Microsoft Word AI tools. The respondent agreed to go on the record with his full name. No other personal data than name, surname and email were collected. The research data is stored under a password-protected folder in a university account with access only by the authors of this article.

Marilo Meta has an interesting leadership profile. Meta leads an NGO and a private firm, both of which are based in Albania. He studied computer science and worked in IT as a first job. He then moved to work for the Albanian State Police. In 2016, disillusioned with the state of corruption in Albania, he left the police and founded the NGO LDA Europe. The respondent recalled: ‘I wanted

¹ Marilo Meta visited the University of Primorska under the AI-NURECC PLUS Transnational Mobility Experience (<https://www.uniadri.net/portfolio/ai-nurecc-plus/>).

to give more to the community, [...] to give more opportunities.² In the NGO there are at least 18 volunteers. LDA Europe provides a variety of programmes, trainings, workshops and conferences to develop young people and give them work opportunities. After founding the NGO, he moved to the USA, working for Open Government Partnership. Based on this experience he founded his own business, the consultancy LDA Digital Solutions. There are five employees in the firm, which crafts customer relationship management (CRM) transformations and supports the implementation of Salesforce technologies.

Interview Observations and Findings

First, we discussed traits and personality. On the questions of traits, the interviewee stressed the importance of vision, empathy, and inclusiveness in effective leadership. A visionary approach that includes the team's ideas is crucial for success. In his view, empathy and inclusiveness contribute to a positive work environment, considering team members' needs and fostering creativity. Charisma and creativity were also noted as essential, creating motivation and a dynamic workplace culture.

When asked about personal aspirations towards leadership, the interviewee shared an anecdote. As a young person, the interviewee had dreamt of becoming an astronaut or a president and making impactful changes in the world. This anecdote supports the theory that dominance, or the assertiveness of a person, is a relevant trait in predicting someone becoming a leader (Lips and Keener 2007).

In terms of personality, the interviewee admitted that his inclination towards being easy-going and sociable changed over time. While working in the USA, a more extroverted persona developed through constant engagement with different people and networks, and under the influence of the American culture. Despite not being a born extrovert, the interviewee acknowledged the value of networking in professional growth, expressing a wish to have embraced it earlier. Based on this answer we can conclude that traits (e.g. extroversion) and behaviours (e.g. networking) are connected as postulated in leadership approaches.

The discussion then delved into the importance of hard work and accomplishments. The

interviewee underscored the transformation in motivation when transitioning from an employee to a leader and owner. As a leader, every goal achieved brings the individual closer to their vision, serving as a self-rewarding mechanism. The drive to work hard was emphasized, portraying the leader's commitment to realizing their goals and creating a meaningful impact.

Next, we asked about leadership behaviours. According to the answers, we found it is difficult to change behaviour as a leader. For instance, according to the interviewee, different behaviours are expected from the leader of an NGO than from the leader of a private company. The interviewee described how when he opened his private company, he adopted the same leadership style (openness) as in the NGO. This did not work very well because when he behaved similarly to how he did in the NGO, it was taken as a weakness by the employees. This shows the connection between behaviour and contingency approaches, namely, that context (contingency approaches) informs effective leadership behaviours, as described in the literature.

Another relevant case the interviewee presented to us was the importance of networking in his business and NGO because that is the way to get new ideas, opportunities, and a chance to create cooperative relationships, personal growth, or growing confidence. This example shows that some behaviours, notably networking, are effective in both the firm and non-profit working environments.

To ensure that the work is accomplished in the organization the interviewee drew attention to such aspects as defining tasks, using SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) goals, and properly dedicating the tasks to the right person based on their qualifications or even their interests. These descriptions broadly meet the commonly discussed behaviours in the literature as described in the theoretical section.

When it comes to supporting and developing people, the interviewee mentioned that the most important thing is to communicate effectively. Furthermore, he suggested creating a bond with employees and organizing social activities to increase collaboration.

Additionally, our interviewee described paying a lot of attention to the motivation of his employees, which we did not include in the interview questionnaire. He presented the difference between motivating employees in a private

² Interview with Marilo Meta, Koper, 9 November, 2023.

company and NGO members. In the NGO, it is easier to motivate members because the members join with the wish to contribute to the activities of a non-profit. Nonetheless, he explained that motivation is also needed in NGOs as it can grow its reach. For this purpose, the members of the NGOs are given opportunities to attend trainings and conferences. In the private company the leader needs to be more decisive and make employees feel their responsibilities, which means even letting people go if they do not perform their job properly.

The respondent's answers highlight the challenges of adapting leadership behaviours in different organizational contexts. In addition, they underscore the difficulty of changing leadership styles, as evidenced by the interviewee's experience transitioning from leading an NGO to a private company. The discussion emphasizes the influence of context, with the interviewee finding that certain behaviours, such as networking, are effective across both business and non-profit environments. The importance of effective communication, task definition, and employee motivation are also highlighted, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of leadership behaviours and the need for adaptability based on specific organizational requirements and circumstances.

Having explored the intricacies of leadership behaviour within the context of the interviewee's responses, the transition to the contingency approach became the subsequent focus. While the initial discussions shed light on aspects related to the broader context of leadership, the final section of the interview protocol was specifically dedicated to probing the contingency approach. During this phase, the interviewee reiterated that leadership manifests differently in the NGO when compared to the private firm. In the realm of NGOs, the emphasis shifts towards a more open leadership behaviour, fostering greater flexibility and independent action among NGO members. The leaders within these organizations rely to a greater extent on the motivation of their members, drawing empowerment from the overarching mission and activities. Overall, these questions underline that leaders have to engage in many different behaviours and that the exercise of some of these behaviours will depend on the situation at hand.

Discussion

Our investigation provided us with several insights and lessons on how to explore leadership in organizations. We found that the leadership

approaches – as described in core leadership textbooks (e.g. Yukl 2010; Lussier and Achua 2010), are relevant to understanding how leaders think about their leadership behaviour. However, distinguishing traits from behaviours and context proved to be tricky at times. For instance, the pilot of our interview questionnaire revealed that respondents are likely to link specific traits to behaviours and behaviours to specific situations. Leadership research, therefore, needs to align trait, behaviour and context approaches.

Our interview questionnaire included 13 questions to operationalize the traditional approaches to leadership. The concepts underlying these approaches are complex, have many dimensions and would require a much more elaborate interview questionnaire than the one applied here. For instance, we have measured extraversion with two questions, but the extrovert personality has more than two traits and these traits would require a more detailed questionnaire, for instance also using a survey. Alternatively, one could focus on writing an article and conducting research only on a selected personality (for instance, extraversion) or a selected behaviour (for instance, networking). However, the purpose here was to apply our knowledge from the lectures to improve our understanding of the leadership theories. We do not make any new knowledge claims. In fact, we only interviewed one person, which even for qualitative studies, is an insufficient number to uncover patterns from the data. For more general findings, we would need to replicate our interview in more instances.

Moreover, anybody who wishes to use our interview protocol should be aware that it is not a comprehensive tool. For instance, in our pilot, the interview respondent talked about motivating followers (employees and NGO members/volunteers) and his relationship (exchanges) with followers. None of our interview questions specifically probed these aspects. Hence, we would recommend adding at least one additional section that deals with followers and how they can be motivated.

Conclusion

The approaches operationalized here for studying leadership are traditional approaches, used since the early days of leadership studies. They are based on an understanding of leadership as the traits and behaviours of leaders as individuals. As seen in the article, these traditional approaches can be easily applied to describe some basic

features of leadership and to conduct research. However, leadership is also far more complex than traits and behaviours. More and more emphasis is given to followers and how they interact with leaders to drive organizational change.

Finally, today, leadership is increasingly performed in teams and on digital platforms, which has given rise to terms such as collaborative or distributed leadership (Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff 2010) and digital leadership (Sheninger 2019). Neither the collaborative, followership, nor digital approaches to leadership have been studied in this article. However, modern organizations often work collaboratively, consider the role of followers and operate in digital spaces. Therefore, we see followership approaches and approaches giving emphasis to collaboration and digitalization as fruitful areas for further research.

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