Traditional and modern theories of leadership

Lesson 6.2.1 | Organisational psychology

Core ideas

Universalist theories assume some leadership qualities or patterns can work across many situations.

Great person theories treat leadership as linked to special personal qualities, while charismatic leadership focuses on influence through vision, confidence and emotional appeal.

Transformational leaders try to inspire followers to go beyond routine performance by creating vision, intellectual challenge and commitment to shared goals.

Behavioural theories shift attention from who the leader is to what the leader does, such as structuring tasks or showing concern for people.

Ohio University and Michigan University explanations both studied leader behaviour, including task-focused and relationship-focused patterns.

Heifetz's adaptive leadership focuses on helping people face complex challenges, learn, share responsibility and adjust when old solutions are not enough.

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Key terms

Universalist theory: A theory suggesting that some leadership qualities or behaviours work across many situations.

Great person theory: The idea that leaders have special personal qualities that set them apart.

Charismatic leader: A leader who influences others through personal appeal, confidence and vision.

Transformational leader: A leader who inspires change, commitment and higher levels of performance.

Behavioural theory: An explanation that focuses on what leaders do rather than fixed traits.

Task-focused behaviour: Leader behaviour aimed at organising work, goals and procedures.

Relationship-focused behaviour: Leader behaviour aimed at support, trust and concern for people.

Adaptive leadership: Leadership that helps people respond to complex challenges by learning and adjusting.

Further detail and evidence

Great person accounts emphasise exceptional personal qualities; charismatic leaders influence through vision and emotional appeal; transformational leaders develop commitment through inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration and a shared purpose. These approaches differ from explaining leadership entirely through a job title.

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Ohio studies distinguish initiating structure (organising tasks/roles) and consideration (support/trust); these can both be high. Michigan studies contrast employee-centred and production-centred behaviour. Behavioural approaches suggest actions can be learned rather than only inherited.

Heifetz's six principles: get on the balcony (see the wider pattern); identify the adaptive challenge; regulate distress; maintain disciplined attention; give the work back to people; protect voices from below. Adaptive challenges require learning and value change, not merely an expert's existing technical solution.

Adaptive responsibilities include providing direction while exposing real challenges, regulating the pace, maintaining a workable setting, addressing conflict and encouraging learning. Protecting dissent helps the group hear information that established authority might suppress.

Applying the ideas

Installing familiar software can be a technical task; changing a team's habits and values around collaboration is adaptive. A leader can clarify the problem and regulate pressure while allowing employees to develop solutions. High consideration can coexist with clear task structure.

Evaluation and connections

Universal traits may overlook followers and context. Behavioural measures are more observable but ratings can reflect success after the event. Charisma may inspire or encourage uncritical dependence. Evaluate which approach predicts performance in a particular setting and whether evidence generalises across cultures.