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Matthew P. Earnhardt
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, earnharm@erau.edu

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Practical Application of Five Leadership Theories on a U.S. Naval Vessel

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by Matthew Paul Earnhardt

On a United States naval vessel, task accomplishment and leadership decisions are vital to personnel survival and mission success (Phillips, 2007). The United States Navy relies on leadership decisions made from admiral to seaman, and as a result, invests heavily in leadership development.

Admiral Rickover stated, “Subordinates must be given authority and responsibility early in their careers” (1982). The Navy requires leaders to develop their leadership skills continuously in order to prepare them for both their everyday leadership roles and for unique situations.

There are a myriad of leadership theories applicable on a naval vessel and personnel are taught many of them (Reed, Bullis, Collins & Paparone, 2004). Some of the most tried-and-tested theories include:

- The situational approach to leadership;
- Contingency theory;
- Leader-member exchange (LMX);
- Team leadership;
- Path-goal theory.

This article explores these theories and looks at how they can be applied to pertinent situations on board a naval vessel in an effort to increase leadership effectiveness.

Situational Leadership and the Work Center Supervisor

Hersey and Blanchard (1996) developed the situational approach to leadership, originally called the life-cycle approach in 1969. This theory postulates that leadership has a directive and supportive dimension that has application in different situations. Taylor asserts that, “directive behaviour [*sic*] involves one-way communication between leaders and staff, as leaders focus on what should be done, and how, and who should do it” (2007, p. 33). Conversely, the supportive behaviors are behaviors “to which a leader is likely to maintain personal relationships between himself and the members of his group (followers) by opening up channels of communication, delegating responsibility and giving subordinates an opportunity to use their potential” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1981, p. 35). In the situational approach to leadership, the leader must ascertain the situation and adapt his or her leadership style to fit the prescribed task, understanding that the approach may not necessarily work in a different scenario.

On a naval vessel, the situational approach is applicable in several situations, including the role of work center supervisors (WCS) because “the straightforward nature of situational leadership makes it practical for managers to use” (Northouse, 2001, p. 64). Considered the first line supervisor of a work center, the work center supervisor needs to accomplish several tasks and often works with a diverse group of sailors, from seasoned professionals with 15 years experience to new recruits fresh out of boot camp (Dyson, 2007). Given the diverse nature of the work center, it is imperative for the WCS to identify the leadership style necessary for each subordinate and to apply different styles and techniques to a variety of situations. For example, an E-6 with 12 years of service may require a delegating approach because of his or her experience; conversely, a new check in with little sea time may require a directing style until he or she acquires the necessary skills. The WCS recognizes the changing nature of the subordinates and adapts his or her style as the new seaman gains more experience, responsibility and rank.

Contingency Theory and the Tactical Action Officer

Fielder’s contingency theory matches the leader to the setting by using the Least Preferred Co-Worker (LPC) questionnaire. The basic premise of the theory is that, “the performance of interacting groups is contingent upon the interaction of leadership styles and the favorability of the situation for the leader” (Mitchell, 1970, p. 253). Therefore, a leader can perform effectively in certain roles and exhibit weakness in different situations based on three variables:

- Leader-member relations: referring to the confidence of followers in the leader;
- Task structure: referring to the clarity of the tasks;
- Position power: referring to the authority the leader possesses.

These factors predict the favorability of the situation, while the leader's LPC score determines the ability to function in the required task (Fiedler, 1979).

On board a naval vessel, the tactical action officer (TAO) plays a vital role in the defense of the ship by making tactical and weapon employment decisions during combat operations. Decisions employed by the TAO require decisiveness, moral character and discipline as split second decisions made may thrust the United States into war with foreign entities (Calfee, 2003). It is incumbent upon the commanding officer (CO) to select the right officer for the role of TAO. The CO can make use of the contingency theory to determine the best fit and effectiveness in the role. A military officer may function extremely well as a department head or division officer, but may be unable to make time-critical decisions, therefore negating the effectiveness of the officer as a TAO. A commanding officer that effectively employs the contingency theory can save time, resources and lives by fitting the correct military officer with the job of tactical action officer.

Leader-Member Exchange and the Chief Petty Officer

The dyadic relationship between the leader and follower is an important theme in the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. The theory postulates that certain members of a group chosen for a variety of reasons, known as the in-group, are more willing to go beyond formal job descriptions and, as a result, receive preferential treatment (Liden & Graen, 1980). The theory asserts the importance of the leader and subordinates building a dynamic relationship. This is a departure from most leadership theories (Scandura, Graen, & Novak, 1986). The theory has practical application in a variety of organizational settings, explaining why certain employees receive preferential treatment and are given the majority of operational tasks.

The leadership and responsibility of a chief petty officer are unique and separate from leadership at any other rank, including officers. The chief is an expert in their rate and "ask the chief" is a phrase commonly used within the U.S. Navy. "In the United States Navy, the title 'Chief Petty Officer' carries with it responsibilities and privileges no other armed force in the world grants enlisted people"

(Kelso, 1993). Chiefs do not all prescribe to the same leadership style, however, the leader-member exchange theory has shown a positive correlation between leadership style and job satisfaction among military members (Gutknecht, 2004). Higher job satisfaction increases the desire to explore beyond traditional roles and complete tasks in a more efficient manner (Yukl, 2002). Chief petty officers frequently apply the LMX theory within their work center by allowing “hard charging” enlisted members to determine the leader-follower relationship and explore beyond traditional work center roles, increasing work center success. On a ship, this relationship is a vital part of the success of the mission. Chiefs who successfully employ the LMX theory to their work center, experience organizational success through the in-group by giving them more responsibility and opportunities to excel.

Team Leadership and Underway Replenishment

In the changing environments of organizations, team leadership has gained significant ground within the organizational structure as teams are filling roles previously held by individual managers (Johnson & Hollenbeck, 2006). As a team leader, it is important to focus on the internal and external problems associated with the group dynamic, as well as to direct the group in task completion. A leader must be willing to adapt and change with the organizational and task environment to manage the team dynamic successfully (Nadler & Tushman, 1999). The leader’s ability to communicate effectively is a major key to improving the team and ensuring individual and group success (Barge & Oliver, 2003).

“For a variety of reasons, the use of teams in business, military and medical contexts is on the rise” (Hollenbeck, Ilgen, Lepine, & Colquitt, 1998, p. 269). On a naval vessel, the use of teams is integral to the completion of numerous missions including underway replenishments (UNREPs). Underway replenishments require several structured and skilled teams to ensure fuel and stores arrive safely and efficiently from one vessel to another. As teams complete specific tasks, team leaders must provide direction, communicate effectively and ensure that all the tools necessary for task completion are available. The team model provides a valuable tool for leaders to evaluate performance of the team. Leaders can adequately measure success within the team environment through evaluation of processes, procedures and effectiveness of his or her team’s completion of the objectives.

Path-Goal Theory and the Relationship between the Commanding Officer and Surface Warfare Junior Officers

The path-goal theory is a derivative of the path-goal hypothesis advanced by Georgopoulos and the expectancy theory. The central concept of the expectancy theory is that employees are motivated by what they perceive of their situation (Mastrofski, Ritti, & Snipes, 1994). This theory contends that employees' motivation develops from:

- Their ability to complete given tasks;
- The support they receive in completing these tasks;
- The barriers to work accomplishment; and
- The rewards they receive for completing goals.

The leader is an important variable in this theory as he or she determines extrinsic rewards for goal completion, the clarity of the reward for task accomplishment, the support increasing the chance for work accomplishment, reduction of frustrating barriers and the intrinsic valences for goal accomplishment through task assignment (House, 1971). In addition to a leader choosing the correct environment for followers, the leader must choose the correct leadership technique to match the situation (Yukl, 2002).

An example of the path-goal theory in the naval organizational setting is the commanding officer's relationship with surface warfare junior officers (JO). The commanding officer (CO) that successfully applies the path-goal theory, will match a JO's individual needs to the needs of the vessel. Additionally, the CO will adjust his or her leadership style to match the junior officer's tasks, personality and leadership characteristics (Yukl, 2002). It is important that the commanding officer develops clear career paths and goals for junior officers to enhance the JO's motivation toward task completion (Guo, Ye, & Liang, 2007). The junior officer that is intrinsically and extrinsically motivated will likely experience higher job satisfaction, benefiting the entire organization and setting a positive example for subordinates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a naval vessel is a complex microcosm that utilizes a variety of leadership methods to complete tasks. The theories discussed here were only some of the leadership applications available

to leaders on board a naval vessel. As the military continues to invest in the leadership development of employees and as leaders seek to improve the moral, welfare and productivity of those they lead, a clear understanding of leadership theory and practical application is necessary.

About the Author

Matthew Earnhardt is a doctoral student at Regent University's School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship. He currently works for Lockheed Martin Corporation in the Mission Services Division and is a military veteran.

E-mail: mattear@regent.edu

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