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Theoretical Alignment

Our understanding of leadership as a process of alignment draws from many disparate theories of leadership. We can identify a dominant cultural narrative of leadership, that is, an informal, often implicit consensus on how leaders should lead, but there is no comprehensive, commonly held formal theory of leadership. Instead, there are many, various, sometimes conflicting theories. Some focus on the archetypal character traits of leaders. Others emphasize the ways in which leaders interact with followers. Still others concern themselves with the circumstances that bring out leadership or that demand different kinds of leadership. Each theory has its explanatory virtues. Each seems cogent. When immersed in reading any one of them, it seems entirely accurate. Yet, by itself, each is incomplete.

Reading through leadership theories, one is reminded of Wallace Stevens's (1965, p. 92) poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and its exploration of multiple perceptions.

> I do not know which to prefer.
> The beauty of inflections
> Or the beauty of innuendoes.
> The blackbird whistling
> Or just after.

Trying to pull together the variety of theories into a single theory of leadership has pitfalls. Two contemporary books, by Northouse (2001) and Rost (1991), summarize and categorize the many and divergent theories that are currently influential. Their descriptive efforts have provided a great service to the study of leadership. But their efforts to create meta-theories—really meta-definitions—end up being so abstract that they miss the liveliness and muscularity of the particular theories. Northouse, for example, says, "Leadership is a

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process by which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve common goals" (Northouse, 2001, p. 4).

The question we asked is this: Could there be an overarching conceptual framework that brings the theories together, or at least describes how the theories relate to one another, that maintains the vividness and distinctness of each? Alignment theory makes this integration possible. It brings together the psychological approaches to leadership that focus on character and style with those that emphasize the more active interpersonal aspects of leadership, then places both within the context of organizational systems and community systems. Alignment theory represents a meta-theory that preserves the power of these individual views and emphasizes the way that they interact with one another.

Since our work draws from many other theories of leadership, which we don't want to make abstract, we want to sketch the major theories and to indicate how ours relates to each. So what follows in this chapter is a brief survey of ways to understand leadership's inflections and innuendoes—we describe eight—with a view toward shedding a general light on our theory of alignment and on the specific, concrete life of Casa Myrna Vazquez. Our own sketches owe much to excellent compendiums created by both Rost and Northouse.

Trait Theory

Trait theory identifies the characteristics that distinguish leaders from others. This approach has a long history; no matter how many times it is challenged, it continues to surface and often dominate the field. Trait theory was given its classic formulation by Abraham Zaleznik (1977) and may be seen in the current romance with charismatic and visionary leadership, exemplified in the writing of Bennis and Nanus (1985) and Nadler and Tushman (1989, pp. 135–139). There is no mystery why trait theory is so compelling. It is simple and straightforward, following the dictates of common sense, and it joins person, role, function, and character. Perhaps most important, trait theory lends itself to good storytelling. Throughout history, the stories of great men (trait theory is often called "great man theory") have been told and retold to admiring crowds in speeches, novels, plays, and newspaper articles.

According to empirical research, the observations of management consultants, and the memoirs of CEOs themselves, leaders are said to be intelligent, self-confident, persistent, and sociable. They communicate well, and they have great drive and originality. They accept responsibility for their decisions. While they urgently advocate change, they are patient and strong enough to tolerate delays and ambiguous situations. They are masterful strategists, who are able to structure situations and rally people to achieve their objectives. Finally, they are said to have integrity, which is what makes them credible with their followers.

There is little doubt that leaders, like Scott Fitzgerald's upper class, are "different than you and me." There may well be some more-or-less universal qualities, such as the ability to influence others and to identify with the people who are led. But the qualities emphasized in the literature are partial and perhaps serve better as a portrait of white male leadership than of all leadership. These lists, for example, do not focus on nurture, or the ability to bring out the best in others, or the quality of embodying the story and struggle of a particular people. Furthermore, the theory implicitly suggests that selecting the right leader will solve any organizational problem, ignoring questions of fit, alignment, support, and resources.

We would agree that the character of the leader—skills, personality, and values—are key elements of leadership, particularly when aligned with the organization, cause, or culture, but they are only part of the leadership puzzle.

Shiela Moore of Casa Myrna fits very well with the conventional trait theorists. She is very intelligent, and she has seen herself in this light since elementary school. This adds to the quiet confidence she exudes. While not abundantly creative, she has spearheaded important innovations, such as the program for mothers and their teenage sons. Her courage stands out. She is a constant advocate for her cause and her organization, speaking to larger and larger audiences. She is patient with her employees—for a while—yet very clear in what she demands. She structures work so that her employees can succeed if they have what it takes. If not, by mutual agreement, they will recede and Shiela will select others. She is both a tactician and a strategist to the bone, priding herself on the intentionality of her leadership, in matters small and large. Finally, as all who know her say, she has an unshakable integrity.

Moore conforms to the trait theorist's description (expanded beyond the typical list for great white males), but her success has to do with much more. Furthermore, while exemplary, she is part of a cadre of extraordinarily talented nonprofit leaders.

Style

Today, people frequently discuss leadership style, which shifts the emphasis from character, which is internal and, to a large extent, inborn, to behavior, which is external and learnable. Some leaders, for example, initiate action, and formulate plans that others carry out. Others gather information and mediate among subordinates. Some are charismatic and inspiring, others cautious, intentional, and methodical. Some tend to coach and encourage; others bark out orders and emphasize accountability in subordinates. Currently, the servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) style, which emphasizes the support and empowerment of others, tends to share the stage, however quietly, with the great man style.[1]

Surely behavioral style and a distinctive voice are key components of what we think of as leadership. The emphasis on behavior brings leadership outside the leader's skin so that it is observable, changeable, and subject to influence by others. It is one thing to say that a person is strong or determined, but it is much more graphic and testable to describe how that person acts with strength and determination in a particular context. Style is more contextual than trait theory.

The distinction between character traits and behavioral style has immense implications for the way we relate to leadership. If leadership is inherent, for example, then the emphasis is on selection: Find the best person and let her do her thing. If leadership is behavioral, then it can be modified by circumstance and by training. In this light, organizations can breed leaders—the basis for leadership training programs. Bringing the two ideas together, leadership development programs identify those with the right traits, then mold them by providing appropriate experience, resources, and training.

When we say that a leader is aligned with her organization, we can see how her style fits, and how it calls forth or fails to call forth effective behavior on the part of followers. Style means behavior—behavior is interactive, reinforcing behavior in others and being reinforced by others. We can imagine an organization as having a leadership style. A style that did not fit would not be supported or reinforced, and a style that fit would be reinforced.

Where an emphasis on traits leads to the selection of leaders based on constant criteria, style leads the selection and training of leaders in the direction of alignment.

Shiela Moore's leadership style sometimes looks like that of a servant leader. She listens a good deal. She is comfortable with silence, and she waits until others express their opinions before contributing her own. Once the organization is aligned, she is happy for others to make the decisions they will carry out, while she provides resources and removes obstacles. If people head in directions she can't countenance, however, she will intervene. Early in her tenure, in order to align strategy and clarify what kinds of people acting in what kinds of ways would fit with the new Casa Myrna style, she would listen carefully but take much stronger stands.

Her leadership depends a good deal on her character and the confidence she has to listen, delegate, and let others take credit, but it is also situational. It shifts according to the needs of her organization, her staff as a whole, and individual staff members and clients.

Situational Leadership

Ken Blanchard has popularized the situational approach in such best sellers as *Leadership and the One Minute Manager* (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1985).

Its premise is that different situations demand different kinds of leadership. To be effective in this style, leaders must be flexible; they must adapt their styles to the challenges presented by a variety of different situations.

In Blanchard's view, leaders need to match their actions to the competence, commitment, and independence of subordinates, according to a developmental continuum consisting of four leadership styles. New situations, where employees have not yet got their feet under themselves, mostly require directive behavior on the leader's part. At the next stage, leaders can move to a dual emphasis on direction and support—like a firm but appreciative coach. Then, as employees grow more knowledgeable, competent, and confident, leaders would do well to emphasize supportive behaviors. The fourth stage requires minimum direction and support—employees have developed the capacity for independent decision making and action. Now the leader can delegate extensively and concern herself with broad strategic directions.

The situational leadership approach is compelling primarily because it tells what to do when, and it implies that many can do it. In contrast to trait theory, which suggests you have it or you don't, one can learn to be a better situational leader. So conceiving leadership in this situational manner is attractive to human resource departments, who can build training sessions around it.

From our perspective, situational leadership leads us in the direction of developmental systems theory. It suggests that the relationship between leaders and followers evolves over time and varies according to context. Blanchard's definition of situations is narrow, however, and other situations bear on the appropriate leadership style. Different stages in organizational life, for example, demand different kinds of leadership—entrepreneurial or managerial, to name two. Furthermore, different stages in the life and career of the leader influence how she will be able to match up with different organizational situations. There are also cultural, ethnic, or racial contexts that can make specific demands, as well as strategic objectives. A strategy of rapid growth requires a different leadership style, for instance, than a strategy of slow and sustained growth.

Shiela Moore moved through phases that resemble Blanchard's four quadrants. At first, she herself bought into the strategy that had emerged from the planning process prior to her arrival at Casa Myrna, and she helped give it shape. Then she was directive and supportive to those who had the talent and who bought into the organizational culture she was trying to build. As people got on board and new people arrived, and professionalism took root, Moore increasingly backed off. She delegated broadly and focused on issues of policy, strategy, and funding in the larger community.

From another perspective, Shiela Moore entered Casa Myrna as it struggled to move from a grassroots to a professionally managed organization. She was the ideal leader for that kind of situation, respecting the creativity of

organizational beginnings yet deeply committed to and experienced in the management of more mature organizations. Had she been asked to lead Casa Myrna several years earlier, she would have refused; if she had accepted, she probably would have failed. The situation would not have been right for her character and style. She could not have aligned herself to the organization, nor would she have had the credibility born of organizational match to align the domestic violence programs with Casa Myrna's strategic plan.

Contingency Theory

Contingency theory, associated with Fred Fiedler (1967), brings us closer to the central ideas of alignment. It is based on the belief that leadership effectiveness depends on the quality of match between leadership style and the context. Fiedler focuses on three factors that mediate the match. The first, leader-member relations, describes the degree of attraction, confidence, and loyalty followers feel for their leaders and the general atmosphere created by these feelings. The second, task structure, concerns the clarity of task definition. The third, position power, describes the leader's authority and emphasizes the power to reward and punish followers. Together, these mediating factors predict how "favorable" the situation is.

Contingency theory almost takes the leader out of leadership, because it measures effectiveness according to impact, atmosphere, and formal position. It focuses on the situation even more than situational approaches. Leadership selection here begins with an analysis of the situation and almost assumes that individuals who understand it can succeed within it. While this seems like a good place to begin—search firms, for example, do essentially begin here—it ignores the fact that the character and behavioral styles of leaders may vary according to context but also have considerable continuity and stability. Contingency theory offers an important corrective to the more popular focus on traits; but it is a limited theory of matching, fit, or alignment.

Carmen Rivera and Casa Myrna's board of directors selected Shiela Moore because they believed she would be a good fit with the next phase of Casa Myrna's development. She was professional. She had worked successfully in a larger, more complex organization and had helped implement a formal strategic plan. The fit with strategy and future was good. The long planning process had, in fact, moved the organization partway through the transition from grassroots to professional organization, as had the previous leaders, Kim Cofield and Michelle Drum. But the internal organization was not completely aligned. Contingency theory would note these disjunctions and wonder about Shiela Moore's success. Of course, character—the traits she brought to the table—and her flexibility in adapting to different situations overcame difficulties that

contingency theory might have predicted. In effect, Moore's qualities amplified the strength of fit that contingency theory prescribes.

Path-Goal Theory

Path-goal theory (House, 1971; Schriesheim & Keider, 1996) challenges leaders to adopt styles that best motivate employees. There are three underlying premises: First, motivation depends on the expectation that one can successfully perform tasks; second, one's actions lead to specific outcomes; and third, successful work will be rewarded. Good leaders structure tasks so that employees believe they can do them; they highlight outcomes; and they create a variety of rewards for the realization of those outcomes. Leaders can go about their business in different ways. They can be supportive, directive, participatory, challenging, or some combination of the four, because the choice of leadership style really depends on the characteristics of subordinates. Some particularly need affiliation, some need structure, or control, or appreciation. Those who desire affiliation probably need a good deal of support. Those who work in uncertain situations may need directive leadership. For employees who need to feel internally in control, participatory leadership is effective because they work alongside their leaders instead of taking orders.

Path-goal theory presents the most psychologically oriented idea of leadership—style is matched to the cognitive-emotional profile of the workforce. This is a vital component of alignment. At Casa Myrna, the organization was built around the need to affiliate, which required Shiela Moore to be supportive. At the same time, in order to remedy fiscal uncertainty, she needed to break with Casa Myrna's egalitarian and informal norms. She elevated the financial officer and installed formal reporting processes. Note that at first she listened and listened until a critical mass of staff members felt allied with her, and only then did she introduce these changes. In other words, the alignment required for organizational change included both the emotional atmosphere and the psychological needs of the staff.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader-member exchange theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) focuses on the dyadic interaction between individual leaders and followers, and it encourages leaders to develop customized partnerships with their direct reports. The theory's value is its focus on process; its limitation is that the process is both one-directional—what the leader does to create the partnerships—and outside larger group and organizational contexts. A leader's relation to one person is

seen in isolation from relationships with others and norms built up around the executive team.

Alignment has at least as much to do with the relationships between parts as it does with the parts themselves. The coordination or alignment can have a more powerful impact on effectiveness than the quality of the leader or followers. A close-knit, well-coordinated team of relatively ordinary players can often beat a hastily gathered group of stars.

Shiela Moore's relationship with Jossie Fossas is instructive here. Moore realized that she needed sound financial practices to achieve orderliness, account-ability, and responsibility. Jossie Fossas's efforts had been largely thwarted in the past, and she was on the verge of leaving. During a series of long walks, Moore assured Fossas that she had full confidence in her abilities and made promises to support her work. Moore then continued in this style by establishing personal alliances with each key staff member whom she deemed talented.

There is much more to relationships between leaders and followers than exchange theory covers. In a later chapter, we describe the way such alliances are built and maintained and elaborate on the nature of the leader-follower relationship.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership represents a contemporary version of the great man theory buttressed by a sense of the intense connection of such leaders and their followers. Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the wartime Churchill, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt—these leaders were visionaries, whose leadership was based on ethical and national ideals and communicated in brilliant rhetoric and through acts of individual courage. They embodied their message in ways that immensely magnified their credibility and attractiveness. What is more, they had an intuitive grasp of what their followers would and could do, a strategic empathy, if you will.

James McGregor Burns (1978) introduced and popularized these ideas. Burns first distinguished transactional and transformational leadership. According to Burns, transactional leadership works within the current set of rules to get things done—it is "managerial." Transformational leaders get much more out of their followers by raising their level of consciousness about the importance of their work, by persuading them to subordinate or transcend their self-interest for the good of the organization and its mission, and by set-ting the bar of achievement higher and higher.

Transformational leadership is aligned leadership in two important ways. First, although the focus is not on relationship, transformational leadership is based on relationship. Leaders cannot persuade in such powerful ways without

a powerful, explicit or implicit relationship with followers. Second, the notion of transformation is itself a form of alignment. It generally builds through virtuous cycles. The leader proposes actions in ways that catch the imagination of followers. As followers begin to join the leader, she is encouraged and makes further, bolder proposals, which further capture the imagination of followers, who come on board with greater number and enthusiasm, which spurs the leader to further . . . and so it goes. While this virtual circle is enacted, a seamless and unselfconscious bond builds between leaders and followers. Their every action seems aligned to each other and to their objectives.

When Shiela Moore began at Casa Myrna, many people were uncomfortable with her. She was from the health care world that domestic violence staff did not trust, a woman but not a proven feminist. Within a couple of years, she had helped transform Casa Myrna from a grassroots to a well-funded, better-respected, more professional organization, one with adequate infrastructure and innovative programs, one growing in size, influence, and financial stability. She accomplished this through a combination of making people better and replacing those who did not fit with those who did. In the process, there was a tipping point, when a growing majority believed in her, in the new Casa Myrna approach, and in themselves. The more they believed in her method, the more they succeeded. The more they succeeded, the more they believed in themselves. The more they believed in themselves, the more attached they were to the leader who had helped them feel this way. This was the virtuous circle that led to Casa Myrna's transformation—wonderful morale, smooth operations, and the expectation of continued success pervaded the organization.

Psychological Approach

Psychological approaches (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) represent an application of psychodynamic psychology to the world of leadership. The writers in this group suggest that leaders are more effective when they understand themselves. Accordingly, effective leaders know what they do well and what they do poorly, what upsets them and distorts their ability to reason clearly, and when their confidence shades into narcissism, their enthusiasm into grandiosity—and how to catch their problematic tendencies before they create problems. Similarly, leaders would do well to understand their subordinates, especially what motivates them and what creates resistance in them. Implicit in psychodynamic thinking is the belief that character is deeply etched and very hard to change. Hence, leaders need to know, accept, and work within their own limits and those of their subordinates.

In contrast, family systems theorists note that character is not destined but malleable, particularly as contexts shift. In this view, different contexts bring

out different aspects of individual character and let other aspects fall to the background. One context, for example, might bring out nurturing qualities. Another context might require directive tendencies and bring them out. Some situations bring out confidence, hard work, teamwork, and ethical conduct. Others bring out conflict, lethargy, and selfishness. According to family systems theory, however, people are not infinitely malleable. There is an interaction between their character and the context. Knowing the relationship between the two is the mark of a good leader.

Situational leadership is built on knowledge of this relationship, which varies with the developmental stage of the organization. Although situational leadership focuses on the management of increasing maturity in individuals and teams, that management is based on the manager's ability to recognize stage-by-stage development and to adapt to each new stage. In other words, not only leaders but also the relationship between leaders and followers changes from quadrant to quadrant and from context (situation) to context.

For purposes of alignment, it is important for leaders to know themselves and to know how they typically respond in different situations or contexts, and it is important for them to understand the systemic relationship between themselves and followers: the nature of a dyadic relationship, for example, and how that relationship is affected by the larger system.

Alignment, the Whole

As the story goes, when seven blind men encounter an elephant and describe what they "see," seven descriptions emerge that are accurate in the particulars but misguided in their sense of the whole. One man feels a leg and asserts, with great certainty, that it is a tree trunk. Another feels the body and argues that it is really a mountain. Yet another feels the trunk and argues that it is a great hose. The elephant itself gets lost in the process.

Leadership alignment is the elephant in the story. The leader must have the right character traits for the job, or so contingency theory tells us. This might mean courage and boldness in some organizations, for example, and steadiness in others. That is, character must match up well to organizational style, current organizational needs, strategies, and the like. Character plays out in particular styles. People of considerable ego strength, for example, can lead differently. Some are out front and charismatic; others, secure in themselves, work behind the scenes and satisfy both themselves and organizational needs by empowering others.

According to path-goal theory, leaders motivate followers by aligning expectations, outcomes, and rewards with workers' capacity to succeed. Aside from aligning character, style, and general situation, the successful leader structures

specific situations to align them with the organization's goals and the workers' capabilities. Together, leadership theories begin to tell us how leader and organization fit effectively. Exchange theory tells us that effective leadership depends on more than structure; it requires relationship. It is through relationship that leaders bring followers into alignment with organizational goals and methods— and, as we will show later, it is through relationship that followers bring new leaders into alignment with organizational style and values.

Finally, with all the matching of leaders, followers, character, and capacity, psychological insight becomes the vital, intellectual fuel that permits leaders to align organizations.

If one were to align a leader who is determined and communicates well and whose personality and behavior (style) fit well with the organizational culture, who understands how to structure the organization's future and light up the pathway to success, who communicates frequently with direct reports and makes staff followers feel supported and understood, and who holds high standards in a way that is sensitive to both individual and group psychological needs—if one were to see such alignment, what would be witnessed is effective leadership.

Note

1. The great man theory is so prevalent and so ancient that it is hard to attribute it to any one person, but certainly people like Warren Bennis and Tom Peters have done their share in publicizing the theory in its contemporary form. See Peters and Waterman (1982).

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