

LEADERSHIP STYLES AND THEORY

Contingency and Situational Theories

Fiedler · Hersey & Blanchard · House · Vroom–Yetton

PAPER 02 / 04

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

If there is no single best style, effectiveness must depend on the situation. This paper covers the contingency and situational theories – those that match leadership to circumstance, follower and task. The question it answers: on what, exactly, does the right leadership approach depend?

Fiedler matches a fixed style to situational favourableness – by changing the situation. Hersey and Blanchard flex style to follower readiness. House frames the leader as clearing the path to goals. Vroom and Yetton prescribe how much to involve the team in a given decision.

Fred Fiedler Contingency Model, 1967*Leadership · style-situation match***CORE THESIS**

A leader's style is relatively **fixed** – either task- or relationship-motivated – so effectiveness depends on matching the leader to a situation that suits them. When the fit is wrong, change the **situation**, not the leader.

FRAMEWORK

Element	Meaning
LPC score	Least-preferred-coworker rating reveals task vs relationship motivation
Situational control	Leader-member relations, task structure, position power
Task-motivated leaders	Best when control is very high or very low
Relationship-motivated	Best when control is moderate

METHODOLOGY

Empirical studies relating leader style and situational control to group performance.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The first true contingency model, and distinctive in telling organisations to fit the situation to the leader. The critique: the LPC measure is contested, and the theory can be awkward to apply.

Hersey & Blanchard Situational Leadership, 1969*Leadership development · follower readiness***CORE THESIS**

The right style depends on the follower's **readiness** – their competence and commitment for the specific task. Effective leaders **flex** across four styles as readiness changes.

FRAMEWORK

Follower readiness	Leader style
Low competence, low commitment	Directing – tell and instruct
Some competence, low commitment	Coaching – explain and persuade
High competence, variable commitment	Supporting – encourage and involve
High competence, high commitment	Delegating – hand over

METHODOLOGY

A practitioner model, widely delivered through leadership training programmes.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Intuitive, flexible and enormously popular in practice. The critique: empirical support is weak and the core constructs are ambiguous – its influence outruns its evidence.

Robert House Path-Goal Theory, 1971

Leadership · motivation and the path to goals

CORE THESIS

The leader's job is to **clear the path** to valued goals and raise the rewards along it – a motivational view drawn from expectancy theory. The right style is the one that **compensates** for what the follower and situation lack.

FRAMEWORK

Style	Fits when...
Directive	The task is ambiguous or complex
Supportive	The task is stressful or tedious
Participative	Followers want involvement and have expertise
Achievement-oriented	Followers respond to challenge and high standards

METHODOLOGY

A formal theory grounded in expectancy motivation, tested empirically.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Theoretically grounded and motivational rather than merely descriptive. The critique: the model is complex, and empirical support is mixed. House later turned to charismatic leadership, taken up in the next paper.

Vroom & Yetton Normative Decision Model, 1973

Leadership · how much to involve the team

CORE THESIS

The right amount of **participation** in a decision is itself contingent. A decision tree prescribes how much to involve the team, based on the need for decision quality, follower commitment, available information and time.

FRAMEWORK

Decision style	Degree of involvement
Autocratic (AI, AII)	Leader decides, alone or after gathering facts
Consultative (CI, CII)	Leader consults individuals or the group, then decides
Group (GII)	Leader and group decide together, by consensus

METHODOLOGY

A normative model with explicit decision rules, supported by validation studies.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

A rare prescriptive, decision-focused contingency model that reasonably predicts effective involvement. The critique: it is cumbersome to apply in real time.

Synthesis

Theorist	Depends on...	Response	Evidence
Fiedler	Situational control	Fit the situation to the leader	Mixed; LPC contested
Hersey & Blanchard	Follower readiness	Flex across four styles	Weak; very popular
House	Task and follower needs	Clear the path; compensate	Grounded; mixed support
Vroom-Yetton	The decision itself	Right degree of participation	Reasonable; complex

FOR THE OPERATOR

Contingency theory replaces the one best style with a conditional one: match leadership to situational control (Fiedler), to follower readiness (Hersey & Blanchard), to the path and follower needs (House), or to the decision at hand (Vroom-Yetton). For the operator: diagnose before you lead, and flex style to context and follower rather than defaulting to a signature approach. The next paper turns from fit to inspiration – transformational and emotional leadership.