

# CONTINGENCY THEORY IS OF LITTLE VALUE IN HELPING LEADERS OR POTENTIAL LEADERS TO PERFORM SUCCESSFULLY

Mr Eric Cheng

**Keywords:** Leaders; Contingency theory; Maturity of Subordinates; Task Motivated; Relationship Motivated; Taxonomy of Decision Process

**Abstract:** Contingency Theory does not provide a recipe to problems, but some argue that it could provide an action list. I am going to discuss the Contingency Theory of leadership in the light of whether it enhances performance. Contingency Theory is one that if we know which particular leadership style in a particular situation is more appropriate, the leader will adjust his behaviour to the situation in order to enhance performance, subordinate's job satisfaction, etc. The beginning section of the essay will be devoted to a literature review and a discussion on the theoretical framework on the three approaches of the Contingent Theory. Later cases indicate how Contingency Theory was applied, or was ostensibly applied to the administration of an academic section in a university in Hong Kong. The essay concludes by identifying practices which might enhance performance of contingent leaders.

## INTRODUCTION

Contingency Theory does not provide a recipe for solving problems, but some argue that it could provide an action list. I am going to discuss the Contingency Theory of leadership in the light of whether it enhances performance. The beginning section of the essay will be devoted to a literature review and a discussion on the theoretical framework on the three approaches of Contingency Theory. Later cases indicate how Contingency Theory was applied, or was ostensibly applied to the administration of a university in Hong Kong. The essay concludes by identifying practices which might enhance performance of contingent leaders.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Definition of Leadership

Although Bryman (1986) refuses to list in his book a wide range of definitions for leadership, he nevertheless gives one after his literature review. Surprisingly enough, the definitions from different authors seem to have converged to one definition from Stogdill (1950), which is quoted below as my starting point for subsequent discussion:

*Leadership may be considered as the process of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement.*

### Contingency Theory

Different leadership styles are appropriate to different problematic situations. Bryman (1986:158) concludes from the approaches of Fiedler, Hersey-Blanchard and Vroom-Yetton, that Contingency Theory is one that if we know which particular leadership style in a particular situation is more

appropriate, the leader will adjust his behaviour to the situation in order to enhance performance, subordinate job satisfaction, etc.

Firstly, I would like to quote Hersey and Blanchard's model as follows, basing on Beare et al's (1989:104) interpretation:

*Hersey and Blanchard (1982) proposed in their situational theory that leadership behaviour should be varied according to the maturity of subordinates or followers. The situation in this theory is thus defined by maturity, with two dimensions proposed: professional maturity and psychological maturity. There are also two dimensions of leadership behaviour: task behaviour, in which the leader emphasises or specifies the tasks; and relationship behaviour, in which the leader invests time in developing good interpersonal relationships with and among the group. The theory proposes four general types of leadership behaviour, each of which is appropriate to a particular level of maturity. With increasing maturity, the leader should move through styles designed 'telling' (high task, low relationship); 'selling' (high task, high relationship); 'participating' (low task, high relationship); and 'delegating' (low task, low relationship).*

Secondly, I would like to quote Fiedler's theory from Beare et al's (1989:105) again as follows:

*Fiedler found that task-motivated leaders (those whose primary, driving motivation is to ensure that the task at hand is addressed) tend to be best suited to situations which are either highly favourable or highly unfavourable according to the extent to which tasks are structured, where there are good leader-member relations and when the leader has position power. Relationship-motivated leaders (those whose primary, driving motivation is to ensure that there are good relations with and among members of the work group) are best suited to situations which are moderately favourable on these dimensions. The Fiedler theory has implications for matching leaders to situations and for encouraging leaders to modify their situation where possible to ensure consistency with style.*

The former identifies both directive and supportive behaviour in a leader, which can be modified according to the level of development, experience and commitment of the subordinate. Intuitively it is credible but it relies on leaders being knowledgeable about the development of their employees and sophisticated in switching behaviour when appropriate.

The latter theory has shown that when the situation is particularly favourable or unfavourable to the leader a task-orientated leader is more effective. When the situation is neither particularly favourable nor unfavourable a people-orientated leader is more effective.

Further, I would quote Vroom-Yetton contingency model which places emphasis on participativeness from Bryman (1986). The theory is normative and it sets out standards and rules for others to follow, it is now stated thus:

*The aim of the approach is to enable the leader to enhance both the quality of the decisions that he or she makes and also their acceptability to subordinates. A good quality means a good performance while a high acceptance by the subordinates means a good implementation of decision and the guaranteeing of a good outcome. Bryman (1986: 151) sets out Vroom's 'Taxonomy of decision processes' which lists out the Autocratic AI and AII, the Consultative CI and CII, and the Group Decision GII. These five approaches to leadership are on a continuum of participativeness with AI and GII at the extremes. Vroom's model further proposes seven 'rules' which allow the leader to eliminate step-by-step those styles which are not feasible. Bryman suggests that the idea is for the leader to follow through each rule in order to discover appropriate styles in view of the circumstances.*

*According to the Vroom-Yetton model, a leader should be both autocratic and participative, varying his style according to various situational factors.*

Vroom's approach differs from Fiedler's in respect of how the matching should be achieved. Fiedler's emphasis is upon changing the situation; Vroom's is on making the leader more aware of the implications of the situation for his behaviour.

The Managerial Grid Schema is quoted by Bryman (1986:75). It is not directly related to Contingency Theory but is part of the leadership style theory. He quotes thus:

*The infrastructure to their approach is a contrast between two approaches to the managerial role: concern for production and concern for people. Both concerns are essential ingredients of effective management.*

Imagine a square grid with five sets of co-ordinates, with x-and y- axes in a scale of 9. (1,1) is called impoverished management with conflict likely to be rife. (1,9) is country club management and people are not pushed to produce. (9,1) is task management, where management sees its job primarily in terms of controlling and directing subordinates and planning their work. (5,5) is a middle-of-the-road position, with emphasis on both dimensions. (9,9) is called team management, which is a participative system, since people responsible for the production are also supposed to be involved in work planning and execution.

According to the research results found, managers often oscillate between (9,1) and (1,9) styles: the former in response to a need to enhance output, the latter when interpersonal relationships suffer.

It would have been a reason for the Contingent Managers to oscillate in styles for the sake of the two dimensions of concern.

## **PERCEIVED WEAKNESSES OF THE ABOVE MODELS**

A number of criticisms and concerns have been identified by critics. Hanson (1996:172) has summarised the weaknesses for the models as follows:

1. The contingency variables are complex and difficult to assess. It is often difficult to assess the quantity of the leader member relationship, degree of structure of the task and the position power a leader has;
2. The model gives little attention to the characteristics of the subordinates.
3. No attention is given to varying technical competencies of the leader or the subordinates. The model assumes that both the leader and subordinates have adequate technical competence.
4. The correlations Fiedler presents in defence of the model are often low and statistically non-significant.
5. The Least Preferred Co-worker (LPC) instrument is open to question. The logic underlying the LPC is not well understood and studies have shown that the respondent's LPC scores are not stable.
6. There are other situational variables that can be important in determining the favourableness of the leadership situation; for example, stress, linguistic or cultural heterogeneity, organizational climate, and level of training.
7. It is doubtful whether a leader can switch leadership styles in the face of different types of problematic situations.

8. It is not understood what causes some people to become task-motivated and others relations-motivated.

The weaknesses pointed out in the above arise from the quantitative aspect of the Contingency Theory. It is paradoxical to note that the wider the application a theory is, the greater the uncertainty it will produce. The philosophical phenomenon that even our most successful theories cannot be said to be confirmed or verified, only corroborated or as yet unfalsified, still holds true. As leadership styles need adjusting to the changing situations, the theory is useful in certain situations, but not in all. This is illustrated by the following examples.

## **WHY IS CONTINGENCY THEORY OF LITTLE VALUE? - EXAMPLES**

It is obvious that most of the leaders seemed to have been masters at selecting, synthesizing, and articulating an appropriate vision of the future. It is a common quality of leaders down through the ages. For example, a contemporary biographer of Napoleon, Louis Madelin, describes him:

*He would deal with three or four alternatives at the same time and endeavour to conjure up every possible eventuality- preferably the worst. This foresight, the fruit of meditation, generally enabled him to be ready for any setback; nothing ever took him by surprise... His vision, as I have said, was capable of both breadth and depth. Perhaps the most astonishing characteristic of his intellect was the combination of idealism and realism which enabled him to face the most exalted visions at the same time as the most insignificant realities. And, indeed, he was in a sense of visionary, a dreamer of dreams.*

Napoleon was able to imagine the full spectrum of alternatives, from the best to the worst. No wonder nothing could surprise him.

The eminent journalist Dr. Cha Liang-Rong (Mingpao, 2000:12) has spoken about the changing of leadership should situation changes. In a forum delivered to "Journalism Revamping and Management Conference" at the University of Jia Jiang in China, he insisted that:

*The Communist Party of China sets fundamental policy for the well being of the people. Liberty of expression (including the press) also treats peoples' interest as the top priority, as such the Press must obey the leadership of the Communist Party. However, it might be contingent on the situations. For example, should idiosyncratic policies like the " Great Leap Forward", or the "Cultural Revolution" (human disasters) be started again by the Communist Party, journalists and the press should readjust their attitude and direction to defend people's interest and to reflect the opposite views of the people to the Party Leader rather than to follow blindly.*

Dr. Cha had been the No. 1 target denounced by the Communist Party during the 60s in China. He changed his style of leadership since China dropped the hostile attitude after the Open Door Policy. The above quotation shows how he applied the Contingency Theory to cope with different political situations.

I would like to quote application examples of the Contingency Theory in a university in Hong Kong. Within the university there is a College providing education and training to sub-degree programmes with 36% of the overall university student numbers. The Principal is the leader. There has been a change in style of leadership initiated by two consecutive Principals, two examples illustrate how Contingency Theory has been or should have been applied:

## **The Staff Performance Appraisal**

The teaching feedback for staff performance has been a controversy. Imrie (1995:26) writes that the concepts of assessment, appraisal and evaluation as a form of staff performance need to be clearly understood by the staff.

Indeed in the College, the use of staff appraisal has never been a culture. Any attempt to introduce this idea is to be interpreted as offensive and intrusive into the individual's territory and dignity. In one occasion there was heated disgruntlement expressed by the majority of staff in a staff meeting provoked by a tentative suggestion for using student feedback to appraise staff. The rebellious staff showed their dissatisfaction toward the idea of appraising performance. Some even took an analogy as to express that a defendant is presumed guilty before the trial and which is contrary to common law.

In Hersey and Blanchard's terms, the College staff has not reached the degree of maturity both psychologically and professionally. Any leader wanting to instigate a new concept without surveying the degree of acceptability of his subordinates, in Vroom's terms, is doomed to fail. The fruit is just not ripe and the former Principal has not been forceful enough to push forward the performance appraisal.

However, by a swift turnabout, instead the Principal has emphasised the importance of portfolio approach for staff performance instead of the judgmental appraisal system. Contingency Theory is adopted here, the emphasis on change on the use of appraisal tools is something that should be avoided. According to Hersey and Blanchard's theory, a leader needs to gauge the maturity of his or her subordinates before deciding which pattern of leadership behaviour is required. Therefore as the level of maturity changes, a different leadership style is required.

The latter Principal tends to be a relationship-motivated leader. When he first took up the Principalship he put the appraisal issue aside. He set up work groups to monitor this problem. At that time, university culture favoured assessment of performance. The personnel office has made it a rule that all staff in the university would have to submit their appraisal based on a performance plan as agreed beforehand with an appraiser. When the Principal saw the chance, he made it mandatory to include the student feedback appraisal as part of the performance. Surprisingly, the resistance to the inclusion has been less pronounced. Therefore, as culture further develops, staff become more matured in relation to appraisal and accept the system with which they previously sought to resist. So this suggests that as situation changes, it requires a different leadership style.

A scale is developed to rate the maturity level of each subordinate and the leader. According to Hersey and Blanchard, leadership styles may be negotiated by leader and subordinate. Bryman (1986:150) quotes Graelf and Yukl as suggesting that the main contribution of the Situational Leadership is that leaders need to be flexible in their behaviour.

## **Shortening of Programme Duration**

All along, the College has been running programmes which are of a 3-year duration. Although the other university has been running some programmes which are of a year shorter, nevertheless, such programmes only form a minority and as long as they remain in a joint admission system, there are no comparative advantages when recruiting students.

However, last year that university finally decided to withdraw from the joint admission scheme, to make way for upgrading to closer to a university status and to save money, perhaps. A big change seems approaching.

The latter Principal has set goals for the College. He has seen the impending change in the higher vocational studies in Hong Kong. Like in many previous occasions, he set up task forces, work groups and sub-committees to combat problems. A task force has been set up to address the

question of whether to keep the same duration for the programmes in the College. SWOT exercises have been conducted to analyse the programmes, and the result is that the programmes are under no great threat. Since the latter Principal is a relationship-motivated leader, if there is no consensus for change, then he would see it to be illogical not to keep the status quo, especially when the shortening of programme duration may mean a reduction of resources from the Government.

Apart from the withdrawal of a partner university from the joint admission organization, the Government has recently published a report by the Education Commission advocating the establishment of a community college which may be of a two-year duration study. In order to be the first community college in Hong Kong to be set up by this university, the College received a mandate to shorten the programmes from 3-year to 2-year duration, making the College fitting into the Government's requirement, so an immediate change is necessary.

The change to a shorter duration meant a lot of hard work for the staff team. The College staff have been extremely busy in trying to adapt to the new academic system implemented by the university. Fortunately they have just got to the shore but then the mandate to reduce length may mean a complete revamp of the document and some of the previous hard work might have gone down the drain. Besides, the quality for squeezing a 3-year programme into a 2-year duration may be sacrificed. Had this need been identified much earlier on and earlier start instigated, such productivity loss might have been avoided.

Too much concern for the people might jeopardize performance. If a leader changes the style of leadership early enough he may still be able to take the opportunity to keep the same quality of performance no matter how hard a relationship-motivated leader tries to raise the morale, the effectiveness is still contingent on the future changes. Thus Contingency Theory has little value.

## CONCLUSION

Contingency Theory is not to be seen as a specific guideline. It is a useful metaphor to help leaders to think and to reflect. The theory can be used to reflect on their usefulness. Contingency emphasizes congruencies and matching of the internal system with external environments.

Leaders tend to have good ideas but they are swamped by external events and cannot always immediately implement them, resulting in a blocking of these views. For example, positioning the enterprise is an external event. In order to produce the best result, therefore Contingency Theory in leadership style can be reinforced by the theory in organizational structure. Some useful practices might be used for leaders to position their enterprises:

1. Reactive. With this approach, the organization waits for changes and reacts - after realisation;
2. Change the internal environment. Instead of waiting for change to happen to them, leaders can develop effective forecasting procedures to anticipate change and then pro-act rather than react;
3. Change the external environment. The approach needs that the organization anticipating change acts upon the environment itself to make the change congenial to its requirements; and
4. Establish a new linkage between the external and internal environments. Using this mechanism, an organization anticipating change will attempt to establish a new relationship between its internal environments and the anticipated external environments.

As a reflective practitioner, Schon (1983:300) writes, " I am presumed to know, but I am not the only one in the situation to have relevant and important knowledge. My uncertainties may be a source of learning for me and for them". There is no need to put on the professional facade to pretend to know everything, the uncertainties could be a title for the next round of new knowledge.

Though Contingent Theory is unable to resolve these uncertainties, I find consolation that Vroom's Model provides a useful step by step approach in determining by elimination those styles which are not feasible. From this approach, a decision-tree structure emerges through which the leader follows the implications of each of the seven rules for his style of leadership. This approach reduces the arbitrary nature of the system that is inherent in Contingent Theory and is therefore to be favoured.

## REFERENCES

- Beare, H, Caldwell, B and Millikan, R (1989) *Creating an Excellent School Some new management techniques*, London, Routledge
- Bennis, W, and Nanus, B. (1985) *Leaders Strategies for Taking Charge* Harper Business
- Bryman, A. (1986) *Leadership and Organizations*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc
- Hanson, E (1996) *Educational Administration and Organizational Behaviour*, Massachusetts, Simon & Schuster Co
- Immegart, G. (1988) 'Leadership and Leader Behavior' in Boyan, N. (ed) *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration*, White Plains: Longman
- Imrie, B, Lau, A and Lau, C (1995) *Commitment to Higher Vocational Education*, Hong Kong, College of Higher Vocational Studies
- Mingpao (2000), article entitled *Journalism in two Types of Societies*, Hong Kong
- Schon, D (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner How Professionals Think in Action*: Arena

## CORRESPONDENCE

Mr Eric Cheng  
Flat A, 2/F, 10, Marigold Road  
Yau Yat Chuen  
Kowloon  
Hong Kong SAR, P.R.C.