



Is Leadership the Next Great Training Robbery?

Thomas J. Sergiovanni

Most leadership training programs oversimplify complex matters and emphasize style rather than substance.

Pierce, Barlow, and the mysterious Miss Mirian were never heard from again. In 1862, it was reported that they were living in Paris. In 1868, they were said to be residing in "splendid circumstances" in New York. Neither report has ever been confirmed. The money from The Great Train Robbery was never recovered.¹

In recent months ASCD and its members have shown considerable interest in the topics of leadership behavior, leadership styles, and leadership effectiveness.² With this interest, they've joined their counterparts in educational administration who were equally enamored of the concept of leadership a decade or so ago.

This leadership mania in education mimics a similar movement in business administration, which, having peaked in the 1960s, seems also to have run its course. In those settings, as is now

the case in supervision and curriculum administration, a variety of leadership models were developed for and prescribed to practitioners. Hard-sell methods were common, and typically the models promised more than they could deliver.

In this article I intend to examine critically

¹ Michael Crichton. *The Great Train Robbery*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975. pp. 265-66.

² Leadership was the theme of the February 1976 issue of *Educational Leadership* and is scheduled again as the theme this month. Leadership workshops are advertised in *Educational Leadership*, and recently the association produced a leadership training package entitled "Selecting Appropriate Leadership Styles for Instructional Improvement." This author has also provided leadership effectiveness seminars for ASCD through its National Curriculum Study Institutes. The topic gets increasing attention in sessions of the Association's annual conference.

the concept of leadership and the viability of leadership training. Though my comments apply to popular leadership models and training programs in general, I will use as illustrations those recently offered by ASCD through its publications and staff development efforts. For brevity, I will not explicate the models themselves because readers who are not already familiar with them can easily become so through association publications. I will argue that the leadership models themselves are too simple, the claims of most leadership trainers are unrealistic, and the assumptions basic to the models and to training programs are conceptually flawed on the one hand, and emphasize instrumental and mechanistic aspects of leadership at the acute expense of the substantive on the other. Leadership trainers, for example, over-emphasize *how* one accomplishes something, seriously neglecting questions of value, mission, and worth.

The Situational Approach

Leadership models have been refined over the years from simple constructs such as McGregor's Theories X and Y to more multidimensional offerings. Recent models usually deal with several possible leadership styles and disclaim the notion that one or another style is best in all situations. Most are contingency theories which prescribe that effectiveness results from the appropriate matching of a particular style to the idiosyncratic characteristics of a given situation. As situations change, the trainers tell us, styles too must change.

In an article in *Educational Leadership*, Gates, Blanchard, and Hersey counsel us that "successful leaders are those who can adapt their behavior to meet the demands of their own unique environment."³ In a more recent article, Sexton and Switzer instruct us that "... there is no categorically 'correct' style. Instead, the modern educational leader should know which style is better in which situations and should be able to draw from both poles at will."⁴ By poles, the authors refer to a leadership style continuum with task styles at one end and relationship at the other.⁵

This contingency or situational approach to training represents a definite improvement over those of the past that tended to prescribe a best

approach to leadership suitable to all situations. This approach to training falls short, however, by oversimplifying the situational constructs that must be considered and by overestimating the ability of leaders to adjust leadership styles at will.

Oversimplification

Let us consider the oversimplification issue first. Gates, Blanchard, and Hersey use level of maturity of the follower as the construct around which to classify situations. Maturity is the ca-

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capacity to set high but attainable goals, willingness and ability to take responsibility, and education and/or experience. They remind us that maturity should be considered only in relation to a specific task to be performed. According to their model, as the maturity of followers increases with regard to a specific task, leaders should begin to reduce their task-oriented behavior and increase their

³ Philip E. Gates, Kenneth H. Blanchard, and Paul Hersey. "Diagnosing Educational Leadership Problems: A Situational Approach." *Educational Leadership* 33(5):348; February 1976. Blanchard and Hersey are the "originators" of the leadership model discussed. For a fuller explication of the model, see: P. Hersey and K. Blanchard. *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*, Third edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977.

⁴ Michael J. Sexton and Karen Dawn Dill Switzer. "Educational Leadership: No Longer a Potpourri." *Educational Leadership* 35(1):24; October 1977.

⁵ Though most proffers of leadership training models have abandoned the two-style continuum in favor of a double axis quadrant view of leadership styles containing four general styles (high task-low relationship, high relationship-low task, high both, low both) these authors propose only two dimensions: authoritarian (high task-low relationship); and developmental (high relationship). For an example of the "entrepreneurial" style, see footnote 1 of the Sexton and Switzer article.

relationship-oriented behavior. Further, as followers reach above-average levels of maturity, "it becomes appropriate for leaders to decrease not only task behavior, but relationship behavior as well."⁶

ASCD's videotape training program, "Selecting Appropriate Leadership Styles for Instructional Improvement," relies heavily on the Hersey and Blanchard leadership model.⁷ The concept of maturity is developed through use of Maslow's

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theory of motivation and through Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory. Through role play, four leadership styles are illustrated, each presumably matched to the correct level of maturity. Quoting from an *Educational Leadership* advertisement for the training package:⁸ "This three-part program provides a synthesis of studies on leader behavior and develops the Situational Leadership Model, which shows how to choose an appropriate leadership style based on the maturity level of the followers."⁹

If maturity levels of followers is indeed an appropriate variable to be considered in defining a leadership situation, is this the only variable to be considered? Do other factors exist that alter the importance of or override maturity level when seeking a match between style and situation? A review of the scholarly literature on leadership suggests that maturity level in itself is insufficient in defining a leadership situation. This literature suggests that situational determiners of leadership style effectiveness are difficult to identify entirely and even more difficult for the leader to read completely and to catalog accurately. Warren Bennis observes, "Of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination and ironically, probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than any other topic in the be-

havioral sciences."¹⁰ This is the sort of modesty needed by leadership trainers. With Bennis' sobering comment in mind, let me briefly review a sampling of variables other than maturity that should also be considered in defining a leadership situation.

Ability to Influence Followers

Fred Fiedler's Contingency Theory of Leadership suggests that the key factor in determining style effectiveness is the extent to which the leader can or cannot influence followers.¹¹ Fiedler's rather extensive and impressive research spanning over 30 years strongly suggests that in

⁶Gates, Blanchard, and Hersey, *op. cit.*, p. 349. Hersey and Blanchard acknowledge that situational variables other than maturity must be considered but choose nevertheless to emphasize primarily (and in their *Educational Leadership* article exclusively) maturity. See, for example, their book, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁷This program is available from the Association for about \$200. The program suffers from a number of shortcomings. For example, in one videotape sequence designed to depict the use of the high task-high relationship style, what is actually seen are short episodes alternating between high task-low relationship and high relationship-low task. The two are not integrated or developed into a single style as intended by virtually every four quadrant leadership model of which I am aware.

⁸See, for example: *Educational Leadership* 35(8):C-4; May 1978.

⁹Particularly alarming as one reads articles prepared by trainers, reviews training materials (such as the ASCD package), or witnesses training (as I did at the ASCD annual conference in San Francisco) is the tendency of trainers to forget that the models, as expressions of theoretical constructs, represent hypotheses about leadership, not facts about leadership. Theories and models, therefore, are not intended to "show how" to select a particular style but are instead designed to speculate about, raise questions, stimulate thinking, and suggest possible relationships.

¹⁰Warren Bennis. "Leadership Theory and Administrative Behavior." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 4:259-60; December 1959.

¹¹See, for example: Fred E. Fiedler. *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967; for a rather heavy presentation of the theory and an array of impressive research studies that Fiedler offers as evidence that the theory is worth further consideration. For a more popular treatment, see: Fred Fiedler and Martin Chemers. *Leadership and Effective Management*. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1974.

situations where leaders are either very influential or not influential, task styles are more effective. In situations of moderate influence, his evidence suggests that relationship styles tend to be more effective. He recommends that leaders consider at least three variables (none of which includes follower maturity) in defining and classifying leadership situations; leader-member relationships, the leader's position power, and the structure of goals and tasks. Fiedler's research and the corroborative research of others provide strong indications that leaders have more influence when relationships with followers are very good, and thus leaders are more effective in using the task style. Further, leaders have more influence when they enjoy more power and authority derived from their position in the hierarchy (or from superior expert knowledge or both), and thus situations of this sort favor the task style over relationship. And finally, highly structured situations where objectives are known and easily specified, where job requirements are detailed, and where agreement exists as to method provide the leader with greater influence, and this favors the task style. By the same token, only average leader-member relations, weak position power, and unstructured or varied tasks create situations where Fiedler's research suggests that relationship styles are more effective than task.

Job Characteristics

An additional set of concerns for persons interested in selecting leadership strategies in a manner consistent with contingency thinking are the unique but highly diversified characteristics that define the job at hand. Some of these characteristics are listed in Figure 1. As you review the list, note that task structures as suggested by Fiedler and follower maturity as suggested by Hersey and Blanchard are certainly included but are not the only, and frequently not the most important, considerations.

Many other characteristics exist that should be considered in defining situations for appropriate style matching. We could have discussed role expectations of followers, peers, and superordinates;¹² personality characteristics (other than "maturity") of leaders and followers;¹³ time constraints in achieving objectives, political consider-

Figure 1. Examples of Job Concerns to be Considered in Matching Leadership Styles*

As a *general* rule, if situations involve the following job characteristics, then the low task-high relationship style will *probably* be more effective:

- Teachers have high expertness or unusual technical skills.
- Teacher identification and commitment are necessary for success.
- The job is arranged so that teachers can largely decide how tasks will be accomplished.
- It is difficult to evaluate performance outcomes precisely.
- Teachers need to be creative and inventive in their work.

As a *general* rule, if the situation involves the following job characteristics then the low task-low relationship style will *probably* be most effective:

- The teacher's job is programmed routinely and requires the following of established procedures, curriculum formats, teaching strategies.
- The teacher's job is simple, easy to perform, and easy to regulate.
- Automatic feedback is provided so that the teacher can readily note his/her progress.
- Intellectual privacy and thinking are much more important than the teacher being actively involved in something.

As a *general* rule, if the situation involves the following job characteristics, then the high task-high relationship style will *probably* be most effective:

- Teachers need to interact with each other in order to complete their tasks.
- Teachers are interdependent; the success of one depends upon the help of others.
- Successful completion requires that the supervisor must interact with teachers as a group.
- Several solutions are possible, and the number of solutions proposed and evaluated are improved by interaction among group members.
- Teachers can set their own pace as the group pursues its tasks.

As a *general* rule, if the situation involves the following job characteristics then the high task-low relationship style will *probably* be most effective:

- The supervisor knows more about the task or problems at hand than teachers.
- Numerous unplanned and unanticipated events are likely to occur, requiring attention from the supervisor.
- Teachers need frequent direction in order to complete their task.
- The teacher's performance is readily measurable and corrective action by the supervisor is visible and can be easily evaluated.

* Figure 1 is constructed from material developed by: W. J. Reddin, *Managerial Effectiveness*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970, pp. 64-88. This adaptation is from: T. J. Sergiovanni, *Handbook for Effective Department Leadership in the Secondary Schools*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1977, pp. 151-52.

ations¹⁴ and interpersonal tension within the group.¹⁵ Maturity of followers (or any other sin-

¹² See, for example: Reddin, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-112; J. W. Getzels, "Psycho-Sociological Framework for the Study of Educational Administration." *Harvard Educational Review* 22:235-41; Fall 1952; and Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966.

¹³ See, for example: Victor Vroom, *Some Personality Determinants of the Effects of Participation*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1960.

¹⁴ See, for example: M. D. Cohen and J. G. March, *Leadership and Ambiguity*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.

¹⁵ See, for example: Fred Fiedler, *op. cit.*

gle factor of which I am aware) is too simple a construct around which to build a contingency theory of leadership.

Can Leaders Change Styles?

Of equal concern to me is the assumption of trainers that leaders can change styles at will.¹⁶ This thermostat hypothesis needs further investigation. What evidence we have at this count is not as encouraging as trainers would lead us to believe. Leadership styles are manifestations of personality, and personalities are difficult to change.¹⁷ Fiedler, for example, is discouraged enough with the difficulty in altering styles that he advocates *changing situations* to fit the leaders' style.¹⁸ Job rotation in military and industry, for example, is a practice that reflects this belief.

As a result of his investigations conducted at the Columbia University Center for Policy Research, Etzioni reports, "We found that persons have deep-seated preferences in their work behavior that are very difficult to change, and we conclude that it may be unethical to try to change them."¹⁹ He also recommends that situations be altered rather than people, or that people be matched to compatible jobs without altering either.

Almost as a second thought, Sexton and Switzer²⁰ admit to the very likely possibility that leadership styles, being linked to personality, are very difficult to change. But they see the problem as being artificial in trying to use a style that rubs one's personality the wrong way. "The danger of attempting to misrepresent . . . is that in today's era, dishonesty in leadership is pathetically transparent."²¹ Now they have us on the horns of a dilemma. We are told by the authors to use the contingency principle of style flexibility to match various situations, but since some of us may not be able to display an array of styles our leadership will be "pathetically transparent." Some leaders are able to change styles with ease, but great variability exists in this ability. Trainers overestimate style flexibility and do not account sufficiently for those of us (perhaps the majority of us) with more limited style ranges.

I agree with Gerald Firth that there are two significant limitations to much of the research on leadership in education. "First, it has focused on

the practices of leadership on the questionable premise that what is done corresponds to what should be done. Second, it has attempted to build general theory from specific isolated and idiosyncratic studies."²² At the moment, I am interested primarily in the first limitation. Leadership training is instrumental. The intent is to help individuals become more proficient in achieving objectives. In this sense leadership training is designed to increase one's managerial skills rather than one's educational leadership skills. In a managerial sense, professional administration and supervision is the science and art of achieving objectives in a fashion that is cost-effective on the one hand, and that obtains sufficient teacher and consumer satisfaction on the other to ensure continued participation and support. Educational leadership, by contrast, is a more expansive concept that includes concern for the worth of objectives and their impact on school and society. I wouldn't want to have to choose between the two emphases, but one consequence nevertheless of focusing on the managerial or behavioral aspects of leadership is that the substance of leadership decisions can be slighted. Leadership skills are important, but they cannot bring genuine leadership if the leader does not have a sense of purpose and direction. In Starratt's words,

¹⁶ Though omitted in the *Educational Leadership* article, Hersey and Blanchard do acknowledge in their book that style flexibility varies with individuals (*op. cit.*, pp. 233-36). I get the feeling in reading this section that being limited in style flexibility is considered a defect to be corrected, rather than a variable to be accepted and worked with.

¹⁷ See, for example: Bernard Bass. *Leadership, Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. New York: Harper & Row, 1960. chapters 8, 9, and 10.

¹⁸ See, for example: Fred D. Fiedler. "Style or Circumstances: The Leadership Enigma." *Psychology Today* 2(10); 1964; and Fred D. Fiedler. "The Trouble with Leadership Training is that it Doesn't Train Leaders." *Psychology Today*, February 1973.

¹⁹ Amitai Etzioni. "Human Beings Are Not Very Easy to Change After All." *Saturday Review*, June 3, 1972. p. 47.

²⁰ Sexton and Switzer, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Gerald Firth. "Theories of Leadership: Where Do We Stand?" *Educational Leadership* 33(5):331; February 1976.

Leaders tend to live with this more intense consciousness of the drama inherent in the human condition, of the significance of human choices, of the exciting possibilities challenging human imagination. This kind of dramatic consciousness illumines and suffuses his technical performance of his management or administrative tasks. He dwells on the significance of the task, appreciates the inherent drama in the accomplishment of the task, and communicates an appreciation and sense of excitement about the task to the group.

Supervisory leadership behavior in education, then, involves not only the supervisor's appreciation of the considerable human resources of subordinates, but it also involves the supervisor's own beliefs about and vision of the dramatic possibilities inherent in all educational activity. This vision or set of beliefs provides the substance of supervisory leadership. The forms of supervisory leadership will vary frequently depending on the situation, but the substance or content of that leadership behavior will steadily flow out of this vision.²³

What Trainers Should Do

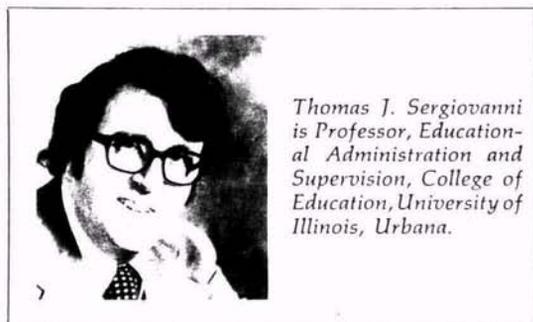
That leadership effectiveness models, materials, and workshops can be helpful I do not deny. But trainers need to be more "up front" with consumers. They need to help us understand that they are sharing leadership theories, not leadership facts. They need to exert a greater effort in capturing more fully the complexities of leadership effectiveness, and they must resist providing us with easy solutions and elixirs that can lead us astray. They need to be more accepting of the

very real likelihood that many of us will be able to adjust our leadership styles only modestly. Finally, they need to help us better link the valuable instrumental or managerial aspects of leadership they bring us with the more substantive aspects of leadership we refer to in our association community as educational leadership. We need a shift of emphasis from leadership training to leadership exploration. Perhaps better days are ahead.

By October, 1955, The Great Train Robbery was no longer of interest to anyone in England. It had come full circle, from a topic of universal and endless fascination to a confused and embarrassing incident that nearly everyone wished very much to forget.²⁴

²³ Thomas J. Sergiovanni and Robert J. Starratt. *Supervision: Human Perspectives*. Second edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979. p. 128-29.

²⁴ Crichton, *op. cit.*, p. 233.



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Responses to Sergiovanni

Fred E. Fiedler

I would like to comment on two issues that are raised by Sergiovanni's paper: (a) The evidence on whether or not leaders are able to "choose" or modify their basic leadership style at will; and (b) the feasibility of a leadership training program that does not depend on the leader's voluntary choice of a leadership style.

Can individuals change their leadership style? Leadership style, as used in the literature, is frequently defined by two major leader behaviors—consideration and structuring. These behaviors, identified by the Ohio State University group (Stogdill, 1974) are measured by asking subordinates to rate leader behaviors on such

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