

# The Secret of Successful Leadership—The Critical Match Between the Characteristics of Leaders, the Attributes of Subordinates, and the Circumstances of the Situation

Jan P. Muczyk

Volume 23, Number 1, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071507ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071507ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Management Futures

ISSN

1481-0468 (print)

1718-0864 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Muczyk, J. (2020). The Secret of Successful Leadership—The Critical Match Between the Characteristics of Leaders, the Attributes of Subordinates, and the Circumstances of the Situation. *Journal of Comparative International Management*, 23(1), 27–34. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071507ar>

Article abstract

Seldom has so much been written on such an important topic that has produced so little agreement and so much controversy. It starts with “what is leadership and how does it differ from managership?” It continues with the development of competing big, mid-range, and small leadership theories (Muczyk & Adler, 2002). Most recently, scholars are preoccupied with attempting to develop a leadership theory or model by creating a critical match between leader characteristics, subordinate attributes, and the circumstances of the situation. More and more, the influence of national cultures in this global economic village is taken into consideration. This effort is also an attempt at creating such a match in a cultural context that is perceived to be useful by practitioners, is based on reason, and factors in important variables identified in the accepted leadership theories or models.

# The Secret of Successful Leadership—The Critical Match Between the Characteristics of Leaders, the Attributes of Subordinates, and the Circumstances of the Situation

by

**Jan P. Muczyk**

*Emeritus Professor of Management*

*Cleveland State University and Air Force Institute of Technology, U.S.A.*

*Seldom has so much been written on such an important topic that has produced so little agreement and so much controversy. It starts with “what is leadership and how does it differ from managership?” It continues with the development of competing big, mid-range, and small leadership theories (Muczyk & Adler, 2002). Most recently, scholars are preoccupied with attempting to develop a leadership theory or model by creating a critical match between leader characteristics, subordinate attributes, and the circumstances of the situation. More and more, the influence of national cultures in this global economic village is taken into consideration. This effort is also an attempt at creating such a match in a cultural context that is perceived to be useful by practitioners, is based on reason, and factors in important variables identified in the accepted leadership theories or models.*

## 1. What Is Leadership?

Over time, there have been numerous attempts to define leadership, and to differentiate it from managership (Muczyk & Adler, 2018). Leadership at the very minimum requires setting a direction and influencing subordinates to move in that direction. Direction frequently is provided by goals and objectives generally inspired by organizational plans. Managers have the same mandate. In this effort it will be assumed that both plan, organize, staff, direct, and control (Koonz & O’Donnell, 1959; Muczyk & Adler, 2018). Those who perform these functions well are effective managers and good leaders. Those who execute them poorly are deficient managers and poor leaders. In other words, as Pfeffer (1978) suggested some time ago and Muczyk and Adler (2018) confirmed recently, leadership is little more than a redundancy. Hence, more elaborate distinctions will be neglected.

The classification of leadership into autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939) in a study conducted on ad hoc groups of young boys, and never intended for application to actual organizations, nevertheless established the direction of much of the leadership conceptualization, even though the study neglected to include follow-up as an important dimension of leadership. Logically then, when discussing leadership, one needs to rely on the leadership theory that incorporates both decision-making/goal setting and decision execution/goal attainment.

Many leadership theories and models neglect to recognize follow-up or direction as a key ingredient of leadership. The leadership model that meets this requirement happens to be the Muczyk/Reimann Leadership Model (see Exhibit 1). Thus, it has been selected to illustrate the critical leadership match. These four leadership styles are pure forms, since both participation and direction are continua, thereby creating the possibility of a very large number of combinations.

**Exhibit 1: Types of Leader Behavior**

		Degrees of Participation in Decision Making and Goal Setting	
		Low	High
Amount of Leader Direction	High	Directive Autocrat	Directive Democrat
	Low	Permissive Autocrat	Permissive Democrat

Adapted from Muczyk and Reimann (1987).

Most nascent organizations, in order to stay in business and meet their goals, perforce resort to autocratic/directive leadership, unless they are organizations characterized by a workforce of professional employees. They typically evolve either to autocratic/permissive or democratic/directive stages before arriving at the ideal state, that of democratic/permissive leadership. If they get into trouble, they reverse course until they get a turnaround executive or fail (Muczyk & Reimann, 1987).

It should be kept in mind that leadership complements such as Management by Objectives (MBO) should be aligned with leadership style (Muczyk & Reimann, 1989). Some authors present MBO as an inherently participative and permissive approach, which would make it an unsuitable tool for autocratic or directive leaders.

**2. Transactional Basis of Leadership**

When contemplating leadership, we should not underestimate self-interest. Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, convinced many people of that some time ago. It is at the heart of the leader/subordinate relationship. Leaders provide direction and subordinates comply because there is something in the exchange for both.

**2.1. Substitutes for Formal Leadership**

Formal leadership is not needed in all situations because there are substitutes for it. For example, specialized equipment can be substituted for formal leadership. A night watchman must punch a clock on the hour at prescribed locations. A machine operator must keep up with the speed of the machine. A taxi cab driver is expected to generate a certain amount of revenue, and the meter keeps tab on the driver’s honesty. Pilots are monitored by radar while flying a plane. Some employers install television cameras in certain locations at the work site, etc. Piece rate work serves as an effective motivator, thereby requiring less supervision.

**2.2. Role of Informal Leadership**

In “team work” situations, informal leadership usually provides the requisite direction, coordination, and interpersonal interaction that is supplied in hierarchical organizations by formal leaders. Informal leaders are persons who are seen by colleagues and others as worthy of paying attention to or following because of the respect, confidence, and trust that they evoke in others. While informal leaders are not commonplace, organizational units are not limited to one. Often, the value of informal leaders is recognized with a promotion to a formal leadership position. Perhaps, as far as laypersons are concerned,

it is these inspirational qualities that separate a leader from a manager. When informal leaders fail to assimilate managements' goals, performance suffers, and at times unions result.

### **3. Leader Characteristics**

It is important to point out that an autocratic leader is not an ogre or a misanthrope but an individual who believes that a leader is one who gets paid to make decisions and set goals, while subordinates get paid to execute decisions and attain goals under the guidance of the leader. He or she could be just as friendly and likable as a democratic leader. While certain situations call for an autocratic leader, no situation warrants a tyrant.

A democratic leader, on the other hand, believes in involving subordinates in the decision-making process. Laissez-faire leadership is tantamount to the abdication of the leadership function. Since following up on decision execution and goal attainment is also part and parcel of leadership, the Muczyk/Reimann Model (see Exhibit 1) will be employed for illustrative purposes. Follow-up is crucial because it permits leaders to identify and remove obstacles impeding the performance of subordinates' duties and the attainment of their goals (House, 1971). Naturally, organizational culture is quite influential regarding the choice of leadership styles.

The Ohio State and University of Michigan leadership studies (Likert, 1961; Fleishman, 1953) made it clear that effective supervisors need to be concerned not only with production, but also to be considerate of the people responsible for the work. Blake and Mouton (1991) provided broader exposure to these findings with the publication of their "Managerial Grid."

Among the earliest leadership theories was the "Great Man/Woman" leadership theory, which in reality is just a tautology (i.e., great leaders are impressive achievers and impressive achievers are great leaders). Another of the early attempts to develop a coherent leadership theory focused on the identification of personality traits of successful leaders. Unfortunately, this approach did not bear much fruit. Successful leaders came in a wide variety of personalities. So long as they were free of crippling neurosis and treated subordinates and colleagues with courtesy, dignity, and respect, personality types were unrelated to success (Muczyk & Adler, 2002). In a way this is fortunate since the personalities of adults, unlike behaviors, are difficult to change, if at all possible. Thus, it is advisable for organizations to introduce in their leadership training programs opportunities for leaders to practice the type of leadership style that subordinate attributes and the circumstances of the situation call for. Possessing a reservoir of flexible managers/leaders should be perceived as a valuable organizational asset.

Obviously, national culture plays a significant role, and more will be said about the details a little later.

#### **3.1. Attributes of Subordinates**

Some subordinates expect to be involved in decision-making, and in addition expect considerable latitude regarding the execution of their tasks and responsibilities. Often these are well-educated professionals such as doctors, lawyers, scientists, academics, and engineers. As a rule, the organizations that employ these professionals accommodate these expectations by creating appropriate organizational structures such as the "organic" one. Since many professionals do not wish to go into management positions, their desire for a sense of advancement is satisfied by establishing a technical ladder. The expectation of managers with regard to decision-making involvement and execution latitude typically depends on their position in the organizational hierarchy, e.g., the higher the position, the greater the expectation.

Others, typically less educated blue collar, clerical, and service workers, believe that supervisors are responsible for making decisions and setting goals while they are responsible for executing the decisions and attaining the goals, under supervision of course. These are persons who are likely to form unions which institutionalize the expectations through narrow job classifications negotiated in the labor/Management Agreement. Other subordinate attributes to be considered are: aptitude for the work at hand, relevant training received, experience doing the work, and acceptance of management's goals. These workers prosper in "mechanistic" organizations.

#### **4. Why the Preference for Shared Leadership Paradigms?**

Obviously, one would not lead poorly trained and inexperienced workers who haven't bought into management's goals the same way as well trained and experienced employees who have in terms of locus of decision-making as well as degree of execution direction. Therefore, why the team empowerment bias? Perhaps it is as simple as a cultural preference for democratic methods. It is remarkable that F. W. Taylor was able to advance his "Scientific Management" movement as far as he did with its unilaterally imposed methods and standards in light of the prevailing cultural inclinations. It could be reasonably argued, however, that the industrial union movement was in part a natural reaction to "Scientific Management." It might also be that more recent management scholars are accustomed to the "collegial model" and assume that it is universally applicable. Empirical evidence would suggest otherwise.

##### **4.1. Organic Organizational Structure**

An organic organizational structure is a flat organization that allows for horizontal communications and interactions, and is more suited to creative enterprises, as well as organizations employing large numbers of professionals. This type of structure is decentralized, giving employees at all levels a chance to participate in business related decision-making. Group decision-making is encouraged as is sharing of work responsibilities. Communication channels are also open to employees, who typically have more opportunities to interact with top management than employees in mechanistic structures.

##### **4.2. Mechanistic Organizational Structure**

The mechanistic organizational structure is the most common. It is typically bureaucratic with a formal hierarchy characterized by specialization, a well-defined chain-of-command committed to top-down direction with important decisions made at the top, and a set of formal procedures promulgated in written form. Opportunities for interaction with top management are severely limited.

Some organizations, such as hospitals and companies with R&D labs as well as manufacturing operations, employ both types of individuals. Even research labs employ a cadre of support staff consisting of less educated personnel. Therefore, supervisors, managers, and executives should adjust their leadership styles to account for the differences in subordinate attributes. As a reminder, not all unions and their members share management's goals.

##### **4.3. Circumstances of the Situation**

There are occasions when time is of the essence. As a result, superiors have no choice but to make the decisions. In some instances the organizational culture dictates who should decide. Bureaucracies such as the military or government agencies typically are very hierarchical in nature, i.e., superiors make decisions. For companies doing business in foreign countries it is the national culture that dictates decision-making practices (see Muczyk and Holt, 2008 for specific examples).

Organizations are dynamic rather than static enterprises. Some grow and change while others shrink and disappear. Mergers and acquisitions have an impact on both parties, especially on leadership patterns. Ditto for the intensity of competition, especially from low wage countries. Significant technological innovations, such as the steam engine, electricity, automobile, airplane, computer, and nuclear fission have dramatically altered the course of “first-world” economies. Recent history not only of the organization but also of the country matters as well. Eastern Europe is a case in point. Thus, managers/leaders need to determine which combination of leader characteristics, subordinate attributes, and situational circumstances is appropriate for autocratic/directive, autocratic/permissive, democratic/directive, and democratic/permissive leadership styles. In actuality relatively few organizations are sufficiently mature to warrant democratic/permissive leadership.

## 5. Global Leadership Contingencies

While the essence of leadership is making decisions/setting goals and following up on their execution/attainment, these decisions and goals should fall within the purview of the primary leadership concerns, i.e., production, consideration for subordinates, providing incentives for performance (see Exhibit 2), stimulating growth, maintaining stability, directing retrenchment, and utilizing appropriate leadership styles.

**Exhibit 2: Basis of Reward Structure**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Incentive for Performance</b>
U.S. & Canada	Individual Incentives
Asia (sans Japan)	Group Incentives
Japan*	Group Incentives
Middle East	Group Incentives
Western Europe	Individual Incentives
Eastern Europe**	Individual Incentives
Southern Europe	Group Incentives
Central America & South America***	Group Incentives

\* Group incentives include plant and organization wide incentives as well.

\*\* As Eastern Europe puts some distance between itself and the recent past, it will become more like Western Europe.

\*\*\* Mexico, while geographically in North America, culturally belongs in Central America.

However, the emphasis on each dimension differs depending on the national or regional culture (Muczyk & Holt, 2008). In some European countries the “Industrial Democracy” model has been adopted. Germany is an excellent example where workers share decision-making with management making as well as responsibility and authority in the workplace. In Germany, half of the supervisory board of directors (which elects management) is elected by the shareholders, and the other half by the workers. Another name for “Industrial Democracy” is “Co-Determination.” North American unions have typically rejected “Co-Determination,” and concentrated on improving the well-being of their members while letting management run the company. Given the fact that this topic has received attention from researchers and scholars relatively recently, it would be premature for prescriptions to be very precise. Nonetheless, a preliminary attempt has been made.

**Exhibit 3: Examples of preferred Regional Leadership Styles Based on Regional Cultural Determinants (Ceteris Paribus\*)**

<b>Global Region</b>	<b>Regional Leadership Styles</b>
U.S. & Canada	Democratic/Permissive
Asia (sans Japan)	Autocratic/Directive
Japan	Democratic//Permissive
Middle East	Autocratic/Directive
Western Europe	Democratic/Permissive
Eastern Europe**	Autocratic/Directive
Southern Europe	Autocratic/Directive
Central America & South America***	Autocratic/Directive

Adapted from Muczyk and Holt, 2008.

\* All other things being equal, such as the attributes of subordinates and the circumstances of the situation, including labor/management agreements.

\*\* Eastern Europe has been under the thumb of the Soviets for 45 years. It now looks to Western Europe, and in time will emulate Western European leadership styles.

\*\*\* Mexico, while geographically in North America, culturally belongs in Central America.

### **5.1. The Hazards of Excessive Complexity**

A good example of a complex leadership theory is the Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT) of Fotti and Lord (1987). ILT states that individuals create cognitive representations of the world, and use these preconceived notions to interpret their surroundings and control behaviors. ILT suggests that group members have implicit expectations and assumptions about personal characteristics, traits, and qualities that are inherent in a leader. These assumptions then guide an individual's response to a leader. Apparently, advocates of ILT assume that at least sizable groups form the same or similar assumptions. Otherwise, the theory would be too individualistic to be useful. Since different cultures produce different preconceived notions, to be practical, a different implicit leadership theory needs to be developed for at least each distinct culture. Just as complex tasks create an action paralysis, so do unnecessarily complex leadership theories or models.

## **6. Transformational Leadership—a Special Case**

A transformational leader has been defined as a person with a vision, charisma, and a willingness to take dramatic acts to save an organization in trouble or to alter its direction in order to secure its future (Muczyk & Adler, 2002). Transformational leadership applies to the top executive since a relatively few organizations need transforming as opposed to continual tweaking. There are a number of ways to transform an organization. One is through organic growth, others are through acquisitions, mergers, or retrenchment. Typically, a transformational leader brings with her/him a group of trusted colleagues to assist in this daunting challenge.

Another term for a transformational leader is a turnaround executive. More often than not turnaround is achieved through retrenchment, and as the term suggests retrenchment missions are concerned with general shrinking or backward movement of the business. Reversing inertia requires doing things in different, unfamiliar, and often unpleasant ways. Because organizations faced with such missions are subjected to undesirable, often painful changes, the decisions that have to be made and goals

that have to be set frequently run counter to employee self-interest. Managers are replaced, employees are terminated, and many disruptions are caused in the customary ways of doing things. In unionized organizations, the collective bargaining agreement establishes the ground rules, thereby making management's decisions regarding these matters somewhat easier.

In addition, urgency precludes participative methods, which are inherently time-consuming. To make matters worse, managerial education, until recently, has neglected the whole topic of how to retreat effectively. Finally, turnaround and retrenchment missions fly in the face of the "bigger is better" ethos that is firmly ingrained in U.S. culture and, in turn, has convinced many managers that being rewarded on the basis of the size of their units is the norm. Thus, only the leader can make these difficult and unpopular decisions under extreme time pressure (Muczyk & Steel, 1998).

## 7. Conclusion

While at a minimum leadership consists of setting a direction and influencing subordinates to move in that direction, such a definition is so "bare bones" that it possesses little utility. Attempts to put meat on the bone have resulted in a plethora of theories and models, large, mid-range, and small (Muczyk & Adler, 2002), resulting in confusion and controversy.

Such a situation might be viewed as an opportunity by some scholars who live by the written word, but practitioners and students, however, remain perplexed. What is needed at this juncture is a good faith effort to ameliorate the confusion by producing a model that is perceived by practitioners as useful, comports with reason, and includes key points on which there is agreement among most of the recognized theories and models.

Thus, this essay focuses on what leaders do, and how to combine the characteristics of leaders, the different kinds of subordinates that leaders encounter, and the many circumstances of the situation in which leadership takes place to create an appropriate leadership style. Since the world is rapidly becoming a global economic village, thanks in part to the rise of multi-national and transnational firms, the role that national culture plays is factored into the conversation as well. Substitutes for formal leadership are also introduced as are the situations in which they are appropriate. In a sense a "unified theory of leadership" of sorts is being proposed.

## References

- Blake, R. R. & Mouton, J. S. 1991. *Managerial Grid*. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co.
- Fleishman, E. A. 1953. The Description of Supervisory Behavior. *Personnel Psychology*, 37, 1–6.
- Foti, R. J. & Lord, R. G. 1987. Prototypes and Scripts: The Effects of Alternative Methods of Processing Information on Rating Accuracy. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 39, 318–340.
- House, R. J. 1971. A Path Goal Theory of Leader Effectiveness. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 16, 34.
- Koonz, H. & O'Donnell, C. J. 1959. *Principles of Management: An Analysis of Managerial Functions*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., & White, R. 1939. Patterns of Aggressive Behavior in Experimentally Created Social Climates. *Journal of Psychology*, May, 271–299.
- Likert, R. 1961. *New Patterns of Management*. New York: McGraw-Hill.



- Muczyk, J. P. & Adler, T. R. 2018. A View of Managership and Leadership from 30,000 Feet: An Historical Perspective. *Journal of Comparative International Management*, 21(1), 1–8.
- Muczyk, J. P. & Holt, D. 2008. Towards a Cultural Contingency Model of Leadership. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 14(4), 227–286.
- Muczyk, J. P. & Adler, T. 2002. An Attempt at a Consentience Regarding Formal Leadershi. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 9(2), 3–17.
- Muczyk, J. P. & Steel, R. 1998. Leadership and the Turnaround Executive. *Business Horizons*, March/April, 39–46.
- Muczyk, J. P. & Reimann, B. C. 1989. MBO as a Complement to Effective Leadership. *Academy of Management Executive*, 3(2), 131–138.
- Muczyk, J. P. & Reimann, B. C. 1987. The Case for Directive Leadership. *Academy of Management Executive*, 1(3), 301–311.
- Pfeffer, J. 1978. The Ambiguity of Leadership. In M. M. McCall, Jr. and M. M. Lombardo (Editors), *Leadership Where Else Can We Go?* Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press.