

WHY FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP IS ESSENTIAL

Gary Yukl

*University at Albany–State University of
New York*

Rubina Mahsud

Seattle University

In this article we explain different conceptions of flexible and adaptive leadership and the reasons why such leadership is essential in today's organizations. Then we briefly describe several streams of research that provide useful knowledge about flexible and adaptive leadership. It was not feasible to provide a comprehensive and detailed review for each research stream, but we describe the primary research methods, summarize major findings, and provide some practical guidelines for leaders on how to become more flexible and adaptive. Finally, we point out limitations of the available research and make recommendations for future research.

Keywords: flexible, adaptive, leadership

Flexible and adaptive leadership involves changing behavior in appropriate ways as the situation changes. A variety of terms have been used to describe leaders who are able to accurately diagnose the situation and vary their behavior accordingly. Examples of these terms include flexible, adaptable, agile, and versatile (e.g., Kaiser, Lindberg, & Craig, 2007; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000). As yet, there is considerable ambiguity in the management and leadership literature about the nature of flexible leadership and how to assess it. One reason for the ambiguity is that flexible leadership can occur in several different contexts. For example, flexibility is required within the same position as conditions change for a leader, and flexibility is also required when moving from one type of leadership position to another with different responsibilities and challenges.

Flexible and adaptive leadership is becoming more important for most managers and administrators as the pace of change affecting organizations increases (e.g., Burke & Cooper, 2004; Dess & Picken, 2000). The types of changes that increase the need for flexibility, adaptation, and innovation by leaders include: increased globalization and international commerce, rapid technological change, changing cultural values, a more diverse workforce, more use of outsourcing, new forms of social networking, increased use of virtual interaction, more visibility of leader actions (e.g., on the Internet), and concern for outcomes besides profits (e.g., ethical actions, social responsibility, environmental impact, and sustainability) (e.g., Burke & Cooper, 2004). The amount of research explicitly focused on flexible and adaptive leadership is still limited, but interest in the subject is increasing as its importance becomes more obvious.

We begin by describing different conceptions of flexible and adaptive leadership and related indicators of behavioral flexibility. Then we briefly describe several streams of research in the literature on management and leadership that provide useful insights about flexible and adaptive

Gary Yukl, Management Department, UAlbany (SUNY), and Rubina Mahsud, Management Department, Seattle University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gary Yukl, Management Department, UAlbany (SUNY), 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222. E-mail: g.yukl@albany.edu

leadership. It is not possible in this brief article to provide a comprehensive and detailed review of this extensive literature, but for each type of research we describe the primary methods, important discoveries, and general implications for helping managers become more flexible and adaptive. In the final sections of the article we identify weaknesses in the research, suggest ways to accelerate the pace of discovery in the future, and summarize the major findings.

Indicators of Behavioral Flexibility

Behavioral flexibility and adaptability can be defined and measured in a variety of ways, and the indicators reflect the context in which it is studied. One indicator is the extent to which a leader uses a variety of different behaviors. However, to be adaptive, the selected behaviors must be relevant for the situations in which they are used. Thus, a better indicator of flexibility is the extent to which a leader's behavior varies in ways appropriate for different tasks and subordinates. Most leaders have responsibility for several diverse tasks in a typical day or week, and it is often necessary to shift quickly from one type of activity to another (Mintzberg, 1973). Different tasks usually require a different pattern of leadership behavior. Moreover, subordinates commonly differ with regard to their experience, skills, values, and needs, and a leader's behavior with different individuals should vary accordingly. For example, more delegation is appropriate for subordinates with strong skills and commitment to task objectives. Flexibility is also required when changes occur over time in a subordinate's skills and motives. Using the same example, as a subordinate gains more experience and confidence, more delegation will be appropriate.

When a sudden, unusual event threatens to disrupt normal operations or to harm people or property, a rapid but appropriate response is needed to minimize the adverse effects for the organization. How well a leader handles these immediate crises is an indicator of flexible and adaptive leadership. Over a longer period of time, major changes in the external environment create emerging threats or opportunities for the organization, and changes in strategies or tactics are often needed to ensure effective performance and continued survival for the organization. The extent to which a leader makes appropriate changes in strategies and tactics provides another indicator of flexible and adaptive leadership.

Competing values make leadership more difficult. To be effective a leader must find an appropriate balance for objectives that involve difficult tradeoffs, such as reliability and efficiency versus the need for innovative adaptation to emerging threats and opportunities. The competing values and tradeoffs sometimes involve behaviors that are opposites (e.g., controlling vs. empowering). The extent to which a leader is able to balance competing values and opposite types of behavior in a way that is appropriate for the situation is another indicator of flexible leadership (Kaiser et al., 2007; see also, Kaiser & Overfield, 2010, this issue).

It is common in a managerial career to move from one position to another in the same organization or to a higher position in a different organization. The pattern of behavior required for effective leadership often varies for different types of management positions, and for positions in another organization with a different mission or culture. Success in making these job transitions is yet another indicator of flexible and adaptive leadership.

Relevant Theories and Research

Seven distinct streams of theory and research provide useful insights about flexible and adaptive leadership. They include: (1) contingency theories about situational variables that moderate the effects of leadership behavior; (2) comparative studies of essential roles and behaviors for different types of leadership positions; (3) studies of managers who make successful or unsuccessful transitions to different positions; (4) research on the response of managers to immediate disruptions and crises; (5) research on emerging threats and opportunities in the external environment that require adaptive strategic leadership; (6) research on conditions that make adaptive leadership more difficult, such as competing values and stake-

holder conflicts; and (7) research on traits and skills that facilitate flexible and adaptive leadership. After briefly describing each body of literature, we provide some practical guidelines for managers based on the major theories and findings.

Contingency Theories of Effective Leadership

Most contingency theories of leadership describe how aspects of the situation moderate the effects of leader behavior on the performance of an individual or group (Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2010). Interest in contingency theories was strong in the 1970s, but it declined after empirical research failed to find much support for the theories (see Yukl, 2010). Prescriptive universal theories (e.g., transformational leadership) have been more popular during the last 25 years, but they fail to capture the complexity of leadership processes in modern organizations. The contingency theories are relevant for flexible and adaptive leadership because they provide insights about how to diagnose the situation and identify forms of behavior likely to be effective for a leader.

The types of situational variables used in the early contingency theories include task characteristics (e.g., complexity, stress), subordinate characteristics (e.g., skills, experience, motivation), and leader-subordinate relations (e.g., shared goals, mutual trust). Several theories emphasized the implications of situational variables for task-oriented and relations-oriented behavior, including Path-Goal Theory (e.g., House, 1971; House & Mitchell, 1974), Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1984), and Leadership Substitutes Theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). The Normative Decision Model (Vroom & Jago, 1988; Vroom & Yetton, 1973) described several decision procedures and identified aspects of the decision situation that determine which decision procedures are likely to be most effective for each type of situation.

The most comprehensive contingency theory in terms of specific behaviors and situational variables was the Multiple-Linkage Model (Yukl, 1989), which includes ideas from several earlier contingency theories. In addition to short-term leader actions in response to the current situation, the model includes longer-term efforts to change the situation to make it more favorable. Leaders can reduce the need for some types of behavior by increasing “substitutes” for it. For example, one way to reduce the need for direct supervision is to select experienced subordinates and delegate authority to them for resolving problems in their work.

Most of the research on the early contingency theories of leadership used survey methods. Subordinates were asked to indicate on a questionnaire how often their leader used each type of behavior, and situational variables were measured with questionnaires filled out by subordinates or the leaders. The dependent variables were usually ratings of subordinate satisfaction or ratings of leadership effectiveness by superiors of the leader. Hundreds of studies were conducted, and despite generally weak results, this stream of research has several implications for improving flexible and adaptive leadership. The following guidelines are suggested for a leader:

- Learn to diagnose the situation and use relevant contingency theories to identify appropriate types of leadership behavior for each type of situation.
- Increase flexibility by learning how to use a wide range of relevant behaviors; methods found to be useful for improving behavior include multisource feedback, behavioral modeling, role playing, and executive coaching.
- Proactively influence aspects of the situation to create substitutes for leadership; for example, improve the selection of competent subordinates to reduce the need for close supervision and direction.

The contingency theories also suggest a number of more specific behavioral guidelines for managers, and some examples are the following:

- When subordinates have high role ambiguity, the leader should clarify objectives, priorities, standards, and policies, monitor their work more closely, and provide helpful feedback and coaching.

- When subordinates lack strong commitment for a task, the leader should explain why it is important, appeal to their values and emotions, and provide valued incentives for successful execution of the task.
- When subordinates have relevant information and ideas about a decision and share the leader's task objectives, the leader should involve them in analyzing the problem, suggesting solutions, and making a decision.
- When a subordinate is highly competent and reliable, the leader should delegate more responsibility and encourage more initiative in resolving work-related problems.
- When subordinates have interdependent tasks that require a high level of cooperation and teamwork, the leader should emphasize common interests and values, provide incentives for overall group performance, and use team-building activities that build identification with the group.
- When subordinates lack adequate resources to perform their assigned tasks, try to obtain additional resources and allocate them in a way that will ensure they are used efficiently to accomplish task objectives.

Leadership Roles for Different Types of Positions

Another source of insights about adapting leadership behavior to the situation is research comparing different types of managerial positions with regard to required roles and the typical pattern of activities. The situational variables in this stream of research include different types of organizations, subunits, levels of authority, and national cultures. The research compared managers at different levels in the organization (from first-line supervisors to top executives) and managers in different types of positions (e.g., staff vs. line position, functional manager vs. general manager, sales manager vs. production manager). The comparative studies have used a variety of data collection methods, including observation, diaries, critical incidents, interviews, and survey questionnaires.

The comparative research found both similarities and differences with regard to the essential activities, roles, and behaviors for different types of positions. Substantial differences were found in studies comparing managers at different levels with respect to the key roles and the skills needed to perform them (e.g., Jacobs & Jaques, 1987; Jaques, 1989; Katz, 1955; Luthans, Rosenkrantz, & Hennessey, 1985; McCall, Morrison, & Hannan, 1978; McCall & Segrist, 1980; Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Schweiger, Anderson, & Locke, 1985). For example, executives typically have more responsibility for making strategic decisions and they require more cognitive skills. Cross-cultural research comparing the same types of managers in different countries found that cultural values and traditions had implications for the types of leadership behavior considered appropriate and effective in each country (e.g., House, Gupta, Hanges, Javidan, & Dorfman, 2004). Successful adaptation is more likely if a leader understands the demands and constraints for a position, but the research also found that managers have choices and can influence the scope of their responsibilities and the time they devote to different activities (Stewart, 1982).

Being flexible and adaptive often includes finding innovative ways to deal with new problems and opportunities, but the types of decisions and actions needed for effective leadership may not be consistent with traditional role expectations in an organization. Sometimes role expectations are based on outmoded beliefs or irrelevant norms and values (e.g., gender role stereotypes, centralized authority, intolerance for any failures, or promotion based on seniority rather than performance). To expand their choices, it may be necessary for a leader to influence people to change their assumptions and beliefs about what is appropriate and effective, especially when the beneficial effects of innovative approaches are not immediately obvious.

This stream of research on managerial roles for different types of positions has the following implications for someone who is the new occupant of a management position:

- Find out what role expectations people have for you in your current position and the types of behavior that are considered appropriate by the boss, peers, and subordinates.
- When you need to interact with people from other countries, learn about cross-cultural differences in role expectations and attitudes about ideal forms of leadership behavior.
- Identify choices in your roles and behaviors, and determine which ones are consistent with your interests, skills, and objectives.
- Proactively influence the role expectations people have for you to avoid unrealistic or inappropriate expectations and increase your choices.

Transitions to Different Leadership Positions

Insights about flexible leadership are also provided by research on managers who move to a new position, and most of these studies involve managers promoted to a higher level position based on successful performance in their earlier positions. Many of the studies are longitudinal and involve measures of leader skills and behaviors made at different stages of a manager's career. A primary research objective is to identify the reasons for eventual success or failure in the new position.

The transition studies found that failure is more likely when the new position requires different skills and behaviors than earlier positions, and the managers who derail are unable to learn new skills and to change their behavior in appropriate ways (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001; Freedman, 1998; Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, in press; Kaiser, 2005). The behaviors and skills that were strengths in an earlier management position can become weaknesses if a manager is not flexible enough to adapt to different conditions (e.g., McCall, 1998; Lombardo & McCauley, 1988; McCall & Lombardo, 1983). Managers who spend a long time in one type of position usually have more difficulty in adapting to a very different type of position, especially when the initial position did not require much flexibility (Stewart, 1982). A variety of different types of challenges and leadership positions early in one's career can help individuals become more flexible and adaptive (Howard & Bray, 1988). Researchers also identified some types of assignments and activities that provide good opportunities to learn relevant leadership skills (e.g., Kaiser, 2005; McCauley, Eastman, & Ohlott, 1995).

The research on difficulties in transitioning to different types of managerial positions has practical implications for leaders who are considering a job change, and for leaders who are responsible for preparing subordinates for career advancement:

- When deciding about job changes for your own career, consider the skills and behaviors needed in a new position and your qualifications for it. Then, identify relevant strengths and weaknesses in your current skills, and consider the possibility that current strengths can become weaknesses if overemphasized in the new job.
- Use developmental activities and take advantage of diverse experiences in order to enhance skills you are likely to need in a future position.
- Help subordinates develop the skills needed to prepare them for promotions or expected changes in their jobs by providing developmental assignments, coaching, and mentoring; help subordinates understand the differences in skill requirements for current and future jobs.
- When recommending subordinates for a promotion or new assignment, consider skills relevant for the new position in addition to a person's past performance; the essential skills for the new position may not have been required for earlier success.

Managing Immediate Crises

Flexible and adaptive leadership is important when unusual events disrupt the work or create an immediate problem that requires the leader's attention. The descriptive research on managerial activities and decision making found that most managers spend considerable time dealing with

problems and disturbances that can disrupt the work (e.g., Hales, 1986; McCall & Kaplan, 1985; Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976). An unusual and immediate problem that can have serious effects is called a crisis, and examples include serious accidents, explosions, natural disasters, equipment breakdowns, product defects, supply shortages, health emergencies, employee strikes, sabotage, or a terrorist attack (Pearson & Clair, 1998).

The most common method for this stream of research involves analysis of cases describing successful and unsuccessful management of disruptions and immediate crises. Researchers attempt to identify the types of leader actions and decision processes that are effective (e.g., Augustine, 1995; Mitroff, 2005; Mitroff, Shrivastava, & Udvardia, 1987; Muffet-Willett & Kruse, 2008; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Relevant skills and behaviors include the ability to anticipate problems in advance, the ability to quickly but accurately identify the reasons for a problem, decisiveness in responding to immediate problems (rather than denying them or delaying in the hope they will go away), being proactive in planning how to avoid problems, making contingency plans to minimize effects of unavoidable problems, and confidently leading others in a collective response to a crisis. The amount of research is limited, but the findings suggest the following practical guidelines for leaders:

- Learn to recognize early warning signs of an impending crisis that can affect your organization; avoid the common tendency to ignore or discount these warning signs.
- Make a quick but systematic analysis to understand an immediate problem or crisis.
- Direct the response by the unit or team in a confident and decisive way but remain receptive to information and ideas from others about things you may have overlooked.
- Keep responses to a crisis consistent with the core values of the organization and high standards of corporate social responsibility.
- Plan in advance how to avoid serious problems, and make contingency plans for coping with potential problems that cannot be avoided.
- Keep people informed about the nature of a major problem and what is being done to resolve the problem.
- Conduct a review session after a crisis ends to determine what was done well, what mistakes were made, and what lessons were learned.

Adapting to Emerging Threats or Opportunities

Gradual changes in the external environment often create an emerging threat or opportunity for the organization. Examples include new competitors, new technology, social and cultural changes, new legal requirements or governmental regulations, changes in economic conditions, and changes in the needs and preferences of customers. Successful adaptation to such changes often requires an innovative new strategy rather than merely refining the existing strategy or using a predetermined contingency plan.

The primary research method used in this stream of research involves analysis of case studies about leaders who succeeded or failed in their attempt to initiate a major change or implement a new strategy in their organization (Beer, 2001; Finkelstein, 2003; Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Hambrick, Nadler, & Tushman, 1998). The researchers use information obtained from interviews, questionnaires, diaries, or corporate records to identify patterns of effective and ineffective leader behavior by top executives. A few researchers have also used survey studies or simulations to identify leader behaviors, skills, values, or beliefs that are correlated with innovation and adaptation by the leader's team or organization (e.g., Jung, Chow & Wu, 2003; Yukl, 2009).

Adaptation to changing conditions is unlikely to be effective unless leaders are able to obtain accurate, timely information and correctly interpret the implications for their team or organization. Accurate mental models about causal relationships and processes facilitate interpretation of events, diagnosis of problems, and identification of relevant strategies and action plans (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994; Senge, 1990). Success in adapting to external changes usually requires collective learning and collaboration by many members of the organization, and leaders can encourage and

facilitate these processes (Yukl, 2009; 2010). Adapting to emerging threats or opportunities involves a sequence of related actions and decisions by leaders that occur over a period of months or years. As the effects of initial actions and decisions are discovered, leaders can determine if additional actions are required. A flexible and adaptive response is especially important when a new strategy or plan is not working as expected. The leader must be able to explain why change is necessary and to build confidence and commitment to a new strategy or initiative. Building support for a major change is more difficult when there is not an obvious threat or crisis. To be successful in leading change, leaders must continually assess progress, learn from experience, and make necessary revisions in strategies and plans.

The research on adapting to emerging threats and opportunities provides some practical guidelines for flexible and adaptive leadership in a turbulent environment:

- Monitor external changes and identify emerging threats and opportunities.
- Identify relevant strategies, decisions, and actions for responding to external changes.
- Articulate an appealing vision of the likely benefits from proposed changes.
- Identify reasons for resistance to change and seek to convert opponents to change agents.
- Build optimism for a new strategy but balance it with the recognition that change will not be easy.
- Monitor progress for the effects of major changes and make any necessary adjustments.
- Keep people informed about the progress of change and maintain commitment for it.
- Use information about the outcomes of strategic decisions to refine mental models.

Competing Values and Stakeholder Conflicts

Flexible and adaptive leadership is especially difficult when a leader pursues multiple objectives that involve competing values. Tradeoffs occur when efforts to achieve one important objective make it more difficult to achieve other important objectives. One common type of tradeoff for leaders involves concern for task objectives and concern for people, and the leadership literature has a long history of research on ways to find an appropriate balance (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1982). Tradeoffs can also occur between short-term and long-term objectives. For example, the types of changes and investments needed to improve long-term performance often require a temporary reduction in short-term performance.

The tradeoff between efficiency and innovative adaptation has received much attention in the literature on strategic management. The relative importance of these two key determinants of financial performance depends in part of the industry and the firm's competitive strategy, but success for many firms requires "ambidexterity" with regard to both determinants (e.g., Miller, 1990; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1997). In the flexible leadership theory (Yukl, 2008; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004), top executives can influence key determinants of organizational performance (such as efficiency, innovative adaptation, and human capital) by the use of relevant behaviors and decisions about strategy, structure, and management programs and systems. An organization is more likely to be effective if the actions and decisions of its different managers are mutually compatible and consistent with the organization's competitive strategy and external environment.

The difficulty of balancing competing values is increased when they are advocated by different stakeholders, such as clients, owners, and employees. Different stakeholders with incompatible objectives or priorities create role conflicts for a manager (Hooijberg & Choi, 2000; Tsui, Ashford, St. Clair, & Xin, 1995). The difficulty of balancing competing values is also increased by changing conditions that alter priorities for different objectives and require more frequent adjustments in a manager's actions and decisions (Beer, 2001; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004).

Competing value theories describe how effective managers find ways to balance competing values and opposite behaviors (Hooijberg, 1996; Quinn, 1988; Quinn, Spreitzer, & Hart, 1992). One example (called "tough love") involves balancing values for human relations with values for task-goal achievement. Another example of this approach (called "practical vision") involves balancing values for change and stability. In the theory of versatile leadership (Kaplan & Kaiser,

2003, 2006), effective leaders are able to find an appropriate mix of behaviors that appear to be opposites (e.g., forceful vs. enabling), they find an appropriate balance for strategic versus operational objectives, and they avoid extreme amounts of behavior that would have negative consequences.

Research on how leaders deal with tradeoffs and competing values usually involve analysis of cases describing leaders who deal with these challenges successfully or unsuccessfully (e.g., Miller, 1990), or survey studies relating patterns of leader behavior to indicators of leadership effectiveness (e.g., Hart & Quinn, 1993; Kaiser et al., 2007). Although the amount of research is still very limited, the theories and research on competing values and versatile leadership have some obvious practical implications for managers:

- Consider how actions intended to achieve one objective will affect other objectives.
- Look for synergies and ways to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously.
- Find an appropriate balance for behaviors that are opposites.
- Understand how extreme amounts of some behaviors can have adverse consequences.
- Understand the values and priorities for important stakeholders and how they differ.
- Identify different priorities for stakeholders and look for ways to reconcile them.
- Understand how changing conditions are likely to affect preferences and alter priorities.

Traits and Skills That Enhance Flexible Leadership

The trait approach has been around for many decades, but in recent years there has been a growing interest in skills that are especially relevant for adaptive leadership. These skills involve the ability to understand the leadership situation, and the ability to be flexible when confronted by changing conditions that require a change in strategies or behaviors (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007). Evidence for the implications of specific skills for effective leadership is still limited, but the number of studies has been increasing in recent years (Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2010). The usual research method is a study in which measures of leader skills and personality are correlated with indicators of leadership effectiveness, and in a few cases with leadership behavior.

Cognitive complexity and systems thinking include the ability to understand how the various parts of the organization relate to each other, how changes in one part of the system will eventually affect the other parts, and how changes in the external environment will affect the organization. A manager with a high level of these skills is able to develop a better mental model for understanding complex causal relationships (Senge, 1990). Cognitive skills are essential for strategic leadership, and as noted earlier they are especially important at higher levels of management (Mumford, Campion et al., 2007).

Social intelligence involves the ability to understand the leadership situation, including political processes and social relationships, and it also includes the ability to select an appropriate response and vary one's behavior in response to changing conditions (Zaccaro, Gilbert et al., 1991). Emotional intelligence includes empathy, self awareness, and the ability to regulate one's own emotions. Empathy for the feelings of others is essential for determining how to influence and motivate them (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1995). Self awareness includes the ability to understand your own values, motives, and effectiveness in influencing others (Zaccaro, Foti, & Kenny, 1991). Self regulation of emotions includes the ability to avoid sharp mood swings and emotional reactions that prevent effective problem solving, such as panic when there is a crisis.

Openness to learning and new ideas is one of the big five personality traits, and it is essential for leaders who must adapt to changing conditions. This trait includes the ability to accept feedback about the impact of your actions on others and the ability to learn new and better ways to deal with problems. A person who relies on habitual forms of behavior and denies negative feedback or new ideas is unlikely to be flexible and adaptive (Argyris, 1991; Dechant, 1990). The ability to learn from experience predicts success in higher level jobs (Karaevli & Hall, 2003; McCall, 1998).

A leader's self awareness about relevant traits, skills, and behaviors can be increased by providing feedback from multiple sources (e.g., subordinates, peers, bosses, clients), and coaching

can be used to increase skills that are deficient (Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005). For example, in two field experiments consultants used feedback workshops to increase the use of effective tactics by managers in their influence attempts with subordinates (Seifert, Yukl, & McDonald, 2003; Seifert & Yukl, in press). Other methods for improving relevant skills and behavior are also available, including training programs, assessment centers, and developmental assignments (Yukl, 2010).

The research on traits and skills relevant for flexible and adaptive leadership has practical implications, and the following guidelines are suggested for managers:

- Learn about the types of traits and skills that enhance flexible and adaptive leadership (e.g., cognitive complexity, social intelligence, empathy, situational awareness, self awareness).
- Understand how the relative importance of different skills varies with level of management (e.g., talk to promoted managers to learn how they adapted to the differences).
- Take advantage of opportunities to assess your traits, skills, and behavior and increase self-awareness about them (e.g., from feedback programs and developmental assessment centers).
- Look for opportunities (e.g., training programs, mentoring, executive coaching) to develop skills that will improve flexible and adaptive leadership.
- Help subordinates who have leadership responsibilities or who seek to increase them to develop skills that facilitate flexibility and adaptation.
- Consider skills and traits relevant for flexible and adaptive leadership when determining who to recommend for a promotion.

Limitations and Research Suggestions

In this section we will describe general limitations of the research reviewed earlier and provide some suggestions for improving the pace of discovery in future research.

Weaknesses and Limitations

Much of the research on leadership behavior has used weak research methods such as cross-sectional survey studies with convenience samples (see Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2010). Few researchers attempted to determine whether the results in survey or comparative studies are affected by unmeasured situational variables or respondent biases and attributions. Most studies only measured broadly defined aspects of leader behavior such as task-oriented leadership, relations-oriented leadership, or transformational leadership. Although some use of these three types of behaviors is clearly desirable, flexible and adaptive leadership requires specific forms of behavior that are relevant for the immediate situation. Behaviors that are not relevant waste time and may have adverse consequences.

Another limitation of most research on leadership behaviors is to examine only linear relationships for each individual behavior. As already noted, too much of a specific type of behavior can be as ineffective too little of the behavior, and a moderate amount of a behavior is sometimes optimal. For example, excessive empowerment for individual subordinates can result in quality problems and lack of coordination, and excessive clarifying and monitoring (“micromanaging”) can inhibit innovation and initiative. Such complexities are seldom examined in research on the impact of leader behavior (for an exception see Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003; 2006).

Most survey studies only examine how often a behavior was used by a leader, but the effects also depends on the timing of the behavior and how skillfully it was used (Shipper & White, 1999). It does little good to use a behavior before it is relevant or after it is already too late to have a beneficial effect. Moreover, the unskilled use of a behavior can have a negative effect rather than the desired positive effect.

Another limitation of many studies on situational leadership is analysis of each type of leadership behavior separately, rather than examining the pattern of leadership behaviors used by a leader (Shipper & White, 1999; Yukl, 2010). Some types of leadership behavior have facilitative or inhibiting effects when used together in the same situation. Studies that measure

only one or two specific aspects of behavior or that analyze effects separately for each specific behavior are unlikely to discover these interactions or identify the most effective pattern of behavior for each situation.

A limitation of most survey studies on the consequences of leader skills and behavior is reliance on subjective ratings of effectiveness made by subordinates or bosses, rather than using objective measures of team or company performance (Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008; Yukl, 2010). As noted earlier, subordinates do not have the same priorities and concerns as bosses, and these attitudes and values will affect their ratings. Regardless of what criteria are used, survey studies do not provide clear evidence about causality for leader skills and behaviors, and few experiments have been conducted to verify that causality is from behavior to outcomes rather than the reverse.

Like the survey research on contingency theories, much of the comparative research on behavioral requirements for different types of leadership positions has weaknesses that limit practical utility for helping managers become more flexible and adaptive. One common weakness is the failure to measure a wide range of behaviors and situational variables. Similar limitations apply to much of the research on leader traits and skills related to flexible and adaptive leadership. Few studies have examined adaptation by leaders to a different type of situation, and some only involve retrospective accounts by leaders (which may be biased) rather than data collected over a long period of time. Finally, despite increased interest in crisis management and change leadership, the amount of research on those subjects is still limited and mostly involves analysis of cases.

Suggestions for Future Research

Many aspects of flexible and adaptive leadership have not yet been investigated extensively, and research is needed on several aspects of flexible and adaptive leadership. More research is needed on skills and traits that determine how well a leader identifies changes in the situation, understands what types of responses are appropriate, and is able and willing to provide the type of leadership that is needed. More research is needed also to assess the impact of flexible and adaptive leadership on unit performance, and to determine how this impact varies for the different contexts and different levels of management in an organization. Flexible and adaptive leadership seems especially important when there is an emerging threat that can seriously impact the organization, and major changes in strategies or tactics are needed to avoid a disaster. Top executives have the primary responsibility for providing such leadership, but middle or lower-level managers are often in a better position to see the first signs of serious problems that will require an unconventional response. Research could be conducted to verify the proposition that front-line managers need to recognize an emerging crisis quickly, take appropriate remedial actions for someone with their limited authority, and notify higher management that more drastic steps will be necessary.

As mentioned the research methods used in most studies on leadership have weaknesses that limit their utility. Stronger research methods are needed for future research on flexible and adaptive leadership. Intensive, longitudinal studies should be used more often to identify the skills and patterns of behavior that explain effective adaptation to changing situations by a leader who remains in the same position. More longitudinal studies are needed to follow leaders who are promoted, assess whether they remain successful, and determine how flexible leadership is related to their success in a new position. A variety of data collection methods should be used in the longitudinal field studies, including observation, diaries, and interviews as well as questionnaires and ability tests.

It is also desirable to conduct more experimental studies that allow the researcher to manipulate situational variables and assesses how leaders adapt to the changes. Although this type of study is seldom feasible in an actual organization, it can be done using a realistic simulation. For example, a simulation for a top management team that makes strategic and operational decisions during several time periods can be used to assess flexible and adaptive leadership for a CEO confronted by changing conditions. Leadership behavior and group processes can be observed and evaluated by subject matter experts. This type of simulation can be used not only to gain insights about flexible and adaptive leadership, but also to develop the leadership skills of participants.

Another promising method is the use of longitudinal field experiments on the effects of developing skills relevant for flexible and adaptive leadership in managers. Trained managers can be compared to a control group of untrained managers to determine how much the training improved flexible and adaptive leadership, and the benefits in terms of better performance by the leader's team or organizational unit. By assessing behavior at several points in time, this type of study can be used to learn more about the effects of leader behavior and the relative utility of different types of developmental interventions for improving flexible and adaptive leadership. By partnering with consultants, or by offering consulting for a reduced fee, researchers can find more opportunities to use strong research methods that yield more knowledge about flexible and adaptive leadership.

Summary

The seven research streams that we described have some general implications for effective leadership. It is important for leaders to understand the different contexts that require flexible and adaptive behavior. For each context they need to know how to diagnose the situation and identify the types of behavior that are appropriate. In addition, they need to know how to use many different behaviors skillfully. Leaders need to have mental models that facilitate understanding about the complex effects of their behaviors on multiple objectives, and the importance of balancing competing values. Leaders need to appreciate and take advantage of opportunities to increase their self awareness of relevant traits, skills, and behaviors, and to develop necessary skills before they are needed. Leaders should also recognize their responsibility for helping subordinates develop and use the skills and behaviors required for flexible and adaptive leadership. Finally, to be flexible and adaptive in a world full of change and uncertainty is difficult and stressful and leaders need to have a high level of commitment to do what is necessary and ethical.

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