

THE AMBIGUITY OF LEADERSHIP STYLES: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *Leadership is a multifaceted process that involves guiding, influencing, and directing a group toward common goals. Ambiguity in leadership styles arises due to the complex interaction of personality traits, situational factors and the dynamic nature of human interactions. This article examines the psychological underpinnings of leadership, exploring how different styles can be adopted and the impact of those styles on both leaders and followers. Based on various psychological theories and empirical studies, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nuances and ambiguities inherent in leadership styles and an argument for a leaders adaptability and authenticity which are not mutually exclusive, but can be complementary when properly managed.*

Keywords: *leadership styles, ambiguity, adaptation, authenticity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been a subject of interest in various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and organizational studies. This paper is part of a broader research I carried out during master's thesis at National Defense University "Carol I" – Bucharest, Air Command and Staff College, with the title "The act of military command. The correlation between personality and leadership styles". During this study, I observed that the majority (over 50%) of subjects (high-ranking Air Force officers with extensive leadership experience) had a high degree of ambiguity when determining the leadership style most characteristic of them.

The ambiguity of leadership styles often results from the dynamic interaction between a leader's personality, the context in which he leads, and the needs of his followers. This article explores these ambiguities from a psychological perspective, examining how different leadership styles emerge and evolve in response to different factors.

2. PERSONALITY TRAITS AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

Personality plays a crucial role in shaping leadership styles. The Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality, also known as the Big Five, includes dimensions of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Research has shown that these traits can significantly influence leadership behavior and effectiveness.

- **Extraversion:** Extraverted people are often perceived as charismatic and assertive, making them more likely to adopt transformative leadership styles. They are skilled at inspiring and motivating followers, encouraging a sense of vision and purpose.

Studies such as those by Judge [1] have demonstrated that extraversion is strongly linked to the occurrence and effectiveness of leadership.

- **Consciousness:** Leaders with high consciousness tend to be organized, reliable, and goal-oriented. They can move toward transactional leadership, focusing on clear structures, rewards, and performance management. Conscious leaders are often effective at setting clear expectations and maintaining high standards, as noted by DeRue [2]

- **Openness to experience:** Leaders who score high on openness are usually creative and open to new ideas. This trait can lead to innovative and adaptive leadership styles, encouraging followers to explore new possibilities and embrace change. Research by Lim and Ployhart [3] supports the link between openness and driving efficiency in dynamic environments.

- **Agreeableness:** Agreeable leaders are compassionate and cooperative, often adopting a participatory or servant leadership style. They prioritize the well-being of their followers and strive to create a harmonious and supportive environment. The study Judge [1] conducted also highlights the positive impact of agreeableness on leadership effectiveness.

- **Neuroticism:** High levels of neuroticism can negatively affect driving effectiveness. Leaders who exhibit high levels of neuroticism may struggle with stress and decision-making, which can lead to inconsistent or authoritarian leadership behaviors. Empirical evidence suggests that lower levels of neuroticism are associated with more stable and efficient conduction.

3. SITUATIONAL FACTORS AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

The context in which leadership takes place is another critical factor contributing to the ambiguity of leadership styles. Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) states that effective leadership depends on the training and competence of followers and the specific demands of the situation.

Follower readiness: SLT suggests that leaders need to adapt their style according to the level of development of their followers. For example, directive leadership may be necessary for inexperienced followers, while a more delegative approach may be effective for highly skilled and autonomous individuals.

Environmental context: The nature of the task, organizational culture, and external pressures can also influence leadership styles. In situations of great stress or crisis, a more autocratic style may be necessary to ensure swift and decisive action. Conversely, in a stable environment, a democratic or laissez-faire approach might be more appropriate.

Cultural influences: Cultural norms and values shape the expectations and behaviors of leaders. For example, in collectivist cultures, leaders may emphasize group harmony and consensus, while in individualistic culture, leaders may focus on personal achievement and autonomy. The GLOBE study by House [4] provides ample evidence of how cultural dimensions affect leadership styles.

Leadership is not static, it evolves over time as leaders and followers interact and as situations change. This dynamic nature contributes to the ambiguity of leadership styles, as leaders must continually adapt to new challenges and feedback.

Transactional-Transformational continuum, Bass and Avolio's [5] Full Range Leadership Model describes a continuum from transactional to transformative leadership. Effective leaders often exhibit behaviors from both ends of the spectrum, depending on the needs of their followers and context. This fluidity allows leaders to balance task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors.

Leader-Follower Exchange (LMX) Theory [6], LMX theory emphasizes the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers. High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and loyalty, leading to more adaptable and flexible leadership styles. Leaders with strong LMX relationships can better understand and respond to the needs of their followers.

Authentic Leadership: Authentic leadership focuses on self-awareness, transparency, and ethical behavior. Authentic leaders are true to their values and principles, which can lead to a more consistent and authentic leadership style. However, ambiguity arises as leaders try to balance authenticity with the need to adapt to different situations and followers' expectations.

4. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF AMBIGUITY ON LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

The ambiguity of leadership styles has significant psychological implications for both leaders and followers. Understanding these impacts can help develop more effective and adaptive leadership strategies.

Leader stress and burnout: The constant need to adapt and manage different leadership styles can lead to stress and burnout for leaders. Emotional work, the effort to manage and show appropriate emotions, is definitely taxation. Leaders must navigate the tension between showing trust and managing their own anxieties and uncertainties.

Follower satisfaction and performance: Followers' perceptions of leadership styles greatly influence satisfaction and performance. Transformative leadership is generally associated with higher levels of motivation and commitment. However, inconsistencies between the leader's behavior and the expectations of followers can lead to dissatisfaction and decreased performance.

Psychological safety: Leadership styles that promote mental safety, in which followers feel safe to take risks and express themselves without fear of negative consequences, are essential for promoting innovation and collaboration. Leaders who can create such environments, despite ambiguity, are often more successful in achieving organizational goals.

To further illustrate the ambiguity of leadership styles, I examined empirical studies and case studies that highlight different aspects of leadership. Some of the examples are:

- **Study on leadership flexibility:** A study by Yukl and Mahsud [7] found that flexible leaders who could switch between different styles based on situational demands were more effective than those who rigidly adhered to a single style. This flexibility has allowed leaders to better respond to the diverse needs of their followers and react to changing circumstances.

- **Case study of Steve Jobs:** Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Inc., is often cited as an example of a leader with an ambiguous style. Known for his visionary and transformative leadership, Jobs also demonstrated autocratic tendencies, especially when it came to product development and design. His ability to inspire and innovate, combined with his demanding and sometimes tough management style, illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of effective leadership.

- **Study of cultural differences:** Research conducted by House [4] in the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study demonstrated how cultural differences affect leadership styles. For example, in cultures with a large power distance, authoritarian leadership is more accepted, while in cultures with low distances, participatory leadership is preferred. These findings underscore the importance of cultural context in shaping leadership behavior.

5. BALANCING ADAPTABILITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Dominique Chalvin's (prominent French psychologist and sociologist known for his contributions to the fields of assertiveness training, transactional analysis, and human relations), work on management styles (from the position, role, authority point of view, management in this situation that describes different styles, is the same as leadership) addresses the inherent ambiguity that leaders face in their roles. Chalvin's approach [8] [9] emphasizes the need for flexibility and adaptability in leadership, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to leadership. Some key aspects of how Chalvin describes ambiguity are:

Situational adaptability: Chalvin highlights that effective management, leadership requires adapting to the specific needs of the situation and the individuals involved. This means that a leader might need to switch between different styles—such as authoritarian, participative, or delegative—depending on the context. The ambiguity arises because what works in one scenario might not work in another, requiring continuous assessment and adjustment.

Balancing control and empowerment: Leaders and managers must decide when to exert control and when to empower their team members to take initiative. This balance is delicate and context-dependent, as too much control can stifle creativity and autonomy, while too much freedom can lead to chaos and lack of direction.

Interpersonal dynamics: Chalvin also emphasizes the importance of understanding and managing interpersonal dynamics. Effective managers and leaders need to navigate the complex emotional and relational landscapes of their teams. This involves being perceptive to the varying motivations, conflicts, and needs of team members, which can change over time and require different leadership approaches.

Psychological insights: Drawing from psychological theories, Chalvin suggests that leaders must be aware of their own psychological tendencies and biases, as well as those of their team members. This self-awareness and understanding of others' psychological profiles can help managers tailor their approach to better fit the unique dynamics of their team.

Training and development: Continuous training and development to handle the ambiguities of leadership includes not only technical skills but also soft skills like emotional intelligence, communication, and conflict resolution. By continuously developing these skills, leaders can better navigate the uncertainties and complexities of their roles.

Flexibility and openness: Leaders must be willing to experiment and adjust their strategies based on feedback and changing circumstances. This openness to change helps in dealing with the ambiguous nature of leadership.

The idea of constantly adjusting one's leadership style to fit the team profile and situation is central to effective management. However, this does not necessarily mean that a leader loses authenticity. Instead, adaptability and authenticity are not mutually exclusive but can be complementary when managed appropriately. Research supports the idea that authenticity and adaptability can coexist in effective leadership:

Authentic Leadership Theory, this theory suggests that authentic leaders are those who are self-aware, transparent, and grounded in their values, while also being adaptable to different situations (Walumbwa, 2008) [10]. Authentic leaders are able to balance their true selves with the needs of their followers and the demands of the situation.

Leader – Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, high – quality LMX relationships are based on mutual trust and respect, allowing leaders to adapt their styles without losing authenticity.

Leaders can tailor their interactions to meet the needs of individual team members while maintaining consistent, authentic relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) [6].

5. CONCLUSION

The ambiguity of leadership styles reflects the complex and dynamic nature of human behavior and interactions. From the influence of personality traits to the impact of situational factors and cultural norms, leadership is a complex phenomenon that requires continuous adaptation and self-awareness. By understanding the psychological underpinnings of leadership, we can better appreciate the challenges and opportunities that come with leading others. Effective leadership is not about rigid adherence to a single style, but rather about being flexible, authentic, and responsive to the ever-changing needs of followers and contexts.

Chalvin's theory emphasizes that adaptability and authenticity are not mutually exclusive. Leaders can maintain their authenticity by staying true to their core values and principles while adapting their styles to meet the needs of their team and the demands of the situation. Through continuous development, transparent communication, and self-reflection, leaders can navigate the ambiguities of their roles and lead effectively.

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