

The Major Leadership Theories

The Eight Major Theories of Leadership

Psychology

By [Kendra Cherry](#) - Reviewed by a [board-certified](#) physician.

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As interest in the psychology of leadership has increased over the last 100 years, a number of different leadership theories have been introduced to explain exactly how and why certain people become great leaders.

What exactly makes a great leader? Do certain personality traits make people better suited to leadership roles, or do characteristics of the situation make it more likely that certain people will take charge?

When we look at the leaders around us – be it our employer or the President – we might find ourselves wondering exactly why these individuals excel in such positions.

People have long been interested in leadership throughout human history, but it has only been relatively recently that a number of formal leadership theories have emerged. Interest in leadership increased during the early part of the twentieth century. Early leadership theories focused on what qualities distinguished between leaders and followers, while subsequent theories looked at other variables such as situational factors and skill levels. If you'd like to know more about your own leadership style, [this quiz can help you learn more](#).

While many different leadership theories have emerged, most can be classified as one of eight major types:

1. "Great Man" Theories

Have you ever heard someone described as "born to lead?" According to this point of view, great leaders are simply born with the necessary internal characteristics such as charisma, confidence, intelligence, and social skills that make them natural-born leaders.

Great man theories assume that the capacity for leadership is inherent – that great leaders are born, not made. These theories often portray great leaders as heroic, mythic and destined to rise to leadership when needed. The term "Great Man" was used because, at the time, leadership was thought of primarily as a male quality, especially in terms of military leadership.

2. Trait Theories

Similar in some ways to Great Man theories, trait theories assume that people inherit certain qualities and traits that make them better suited to leadership. Trait theories often identify a particular personality or behavioral characteristics shared by leaders. For example, traits like

extraversion, self-confidence, and courage are all traits that could potentially be linked to great leaders.

If particular traits are key features of leadership, then how do we explain people who possess those qualities but are not leaders? This question is one of the difficulties in using trait theories to explain leadership. There are plenty of people who possess the personality traits associated with leadership, yet many of these people never seek out positions of leadership.

3. Contingency Theories

Contingency theories of leadership focus on particular variables related to the environment that might determine which particular style of leadership is best suited for the situation. According to this theory, no leadership style is best in all situations.

Success depends on a number of variables, including the leadership style, qualities of the followers and aspects of the situation.

4. Situational Theories

Situational theories propose that leaders choose the best course of action based upon situational variables. Different styles of leadership may be more appropriate for certain types of decision-making. For example, in a situation where the leader is the most knowledgeable and experienced member of a group, an authoritarian style might be most appropriate. In other instances where group members are skilled experts, a democratic style would be more effective.

5. Behavioral Theories

Behavioral theories of leadership are based upon the belief that great leaders are made, not born. Consider it the flip-side of the Great Man theories. Rooted in behaviorism, this leadership theory focuses on the actions of leaders, not on mental qualities or internal states. According to this theory, people can *learn* to become leaders through teaching and observation.

6. Participative Theories

Participative leadership theories suggest that the ideal leadership style is one that takes the input of others into account. These leaders encourage participation and contributions from group members and help group members feel more relevant and committed to the decision-making process. In participative theories, however, the leader retains the right to allow the input of others.

7. Management Theories

Management theories, also known as transactional theories, focus on the role of supervision, organization and group performance. These theories base leadership on a system of rewards and punishments. Managerial theories are often used in business; when employees are successful,

they are rewarded; when they fail, they are reprimanded or punished. Learn more about theories of transactional leadership.

8. Relationship Theories

Relationship theories, also known as transformational theories, focus upon the connections formed between leaders and followers. Transformational leaders motivate and inspire people by helping group members see the importance and higher good of the task. These leaders are focused on the performance of group members, but also want each person to fulfill his or her potential. Leaders with this style often have high ethical and moral standards.