

Comparative Analysis of Leadership Theories: Transformational, Servant, Situational, And Skills Approach in Organizational Contexts

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Abstract

The core of the paper focuses on comparing four prominent leadership theories: Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Situational Leadership, and Skills Theory. Each theory offers unique strengths and applications. Transformational Leadership excels in motivating and inspiring followers for innovation and change. Servant Leadership emphasizes ethical behavior and the well-being of followers, fostering a supportive culture. Situational Leadership highlights adaptability to follower needs and varying contexts. Skills Theory stresses the development of specific competencies crucial for effective leadership. Understanding these theories enriches the comprehension of leadership dynamics and provides practical tools for current and aspiring leaders. The paper aims to offer a comprehensive comparison, evaluating each theory's strengths, weaknesses, and applicability across different organizational settings, ultimately contributing to the development of versatile and effective leadership strategies.

Keywords: Leadership studies, transformational leadership, servant leadership, situational leadership, skills theory, organizational leadership, leadership theories

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I. Comparative Analysis Of Leadership Theories

Leadership is often mentioned in the same breath as management because they share similarities: Both involve influence, collaborating with people, and effective goal accomplishment. Many management functions align with the definition of leadership. However, leadership differs from management. Leadership has ancient roots, dating back to Aristotle, while management emerged in the early 20th century to reduce organizational chaos and improve efficiency (Northouse, 2022). In a paper on Leadership and Management, Verma, D. P. S., & Jain, K. (2001) theorizes that:

Both leadership and management are necessary in an organization. People want to be managed as well as led. Managerial leadership requires that the leader performs only those functions which cannot be carried out so effectively by those people whom he leads. The leader as a manager exercises personal attributes, but he does so in terms of the work quite different from his followers. But all management functions can potentially provide leadership, and all the leadership activities can contribute to management. Some managers do not lead, and some leaders do not manage.

According to Northouse (2022), The key role of management is to establish order and consistency within organizations, while the primary function of leadership is to drive change and movement. Management focuses on maintaining order and stability, whereas leadership aims to foster adaptive and constructive change. The study of leadership is critical to examining the complexity of the processes that shape how leaders influence and guide their followers. Among the many theories that have emerged to explain leadership effectiveness, four stand out for their distinctive approaches and widespread application: Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Situational Leadership, and Skills Theory.

Purpose and Roadmap

The purpose of this paper is to compare these four leadership theories, evaluating their strengths, weaknesses, and applicability within various organizational contexts.

Significance of the Topic

Leadership is an essential element in the success of any organization, influencing everything from employee satisfaction and productivity to organizational culture and performance. Understanding the nuances of these leadership theories not only enhances our grasp of leadership but also equips current and aspiring leaders

with diverse tools and perspectives to navigate the complexities of organizational responsibilities. The subsequent sections will delve deeper into each theory, providing a detailed comparison and highlighting their respective strengths and limitations.

Summary of Results

The comparative analysis of these four leadership theories reveals that each offers unique strengths and insights that can be leveraged to enhance leadership effectiveness. Transformational leadership excels in driving change and inspiring innovation, servant leadership fosters a supportive and ethical organizational culture, situational leadership provides the flexibility to adapt to varying follower needs, and skills theory emphasizes the development of essential leadership skills. By understanding and integrating these diverse approaches, leaders can create a more dynamic and responsive leadership strategy tailored to their specific organizational contexts.

II. Literature Review

Transformational Leadership

In the book "Leadership: Theory and practice," Northouse (2022) advances that transformational leadership focuses on the dynamics of how leaders can motivate and inspire their followers to achieve remarkable outcomes. This leadership style emphasizes the importance of leaders addressing the needs and motivations of their followers. By doing so, transformational leaders can foster a supportive and motivating environment that encourages personal and collective growth, leading to significant accomplishments. In other words, this approach highlights the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, where understanding and adapting to followers' aspirations and concerns are key to driving successful and meaningful change.

Transformational leadership is characterized by the ability to bring about significant change within an organization. Burns (1978) introduced the concept, which was later refined by Bass (1985) to distinguish between transformational and transactional leadership. Transformational leaders inspire followers through charisma, visionary thinking, and the ability to foster a sense of purpose and commitment. They focus on creating new values and visions that transcend the status quo and encourage followers to exceed their own expectations (Jung & Avolio, 1999; Gellis, 2001).

In "Transformational Leadership and Organizational Culture," Bass and Avolio (1993) explain that organizational culture is dynamic and evolves over time. Leaders play a crucial role in this evolution by reinforcing cultural norms and values through their actions and decisions. Founders have a significant impact on shaping the initial culture of an organization based on their personal beliefs and values. As the organization grows, the culture may need to adapt to changing external conditions and internal challenges.

The relationship between leadership and organizational culture is essential in understanding organizational development and success. According to Bass and Avolio (1993), organizational culture significantly shapes leadership, while leadership, in turn, has the potential to transform the culture. In other words, transformational leadership seeks to transform organizational culture by introducing a new vision and reshaping underlying assumptions, values, and norms. Transformational leadership drives growth and adaptation. As the organization matures, the culture may need to adapt to new realities, requiring leaders to balance continuity with necessary change. The existing culture within an organization can either support or constrain the development of transformational leaders. For example, a culture promoting autonomy and creativity at lower levels can prevent top administration from over-centralizing power and encourage transformational leadership. Bass and Avolio provide a framework for understanding the relationship between leadership and organizational culture. Their research underscores the necessity of balancing transactional and transformational elements to create a culture that supports both efficiency and innovation. By fostering a transformational culture, organizations can enhance overall performance, adaptability, and long-term success.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, a term coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in his seminal work "The Servant as Leader" (1970), represents a fundamental shift in the understanding and practice of leadership. It emphasizes the leader's role as a servant first, prioritizing the growth and well-being of their followers over personal gains. This approach contrasts sharply with traditional leadership models that often emphasize power, control, and authority. (Letizia, 2018).

Greenleaf's inspiration for servant leadership came from Hermann Hesse's "Journey to the East," a story that illustrates the profound impact of a character named Leo, who serves a group of travelers with humility and dedication. Although Leo initially appears to be a mere servant, his absence reveals his essential role as the group's leader and spiritual guide. This narrative underscores Greenleaf's belief that true leadership emerges from a fundamental commitment to serving others (Greenleaf, 2007). This model emphasizes key principles such as serving others, active listening, empathy, and healing, ensuring that the needs and

development of followers are prioritized. Servant leaders also exhibit awareness and foresight, use persuasion instead of authority to influence and guide, and are dedicated to the personal and professional growth of their team members. Furthermore, they aim to build a strong sense of community within the organization, fostering trust and mutual respect among all members (Greenleaf, 2007).

In the book “Antoine Frederic Ozanam”, Sickinger (2017) explains that the notion of servant leadership is deeply embedded in Christian teachings. Jesus Christ exemplified this model, teaching that true greatness lies in service rather than power. This is most vividly illustrated in the act of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, demonstrating humility and service. Frédéric Ozanam, a 19th-century French scholar and founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, embodied these principles. Ozanam was inspired by both Jesus Christ and Saint Vincent de Paul, who emphasized seeing the face of Christ in those served and respecting their dignity and liberty. Ozanam's leadership in the Society was characterized by empathy, humility, and a commitment to the well-being and growth of others.

Servant leadership in practice is characterized by listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Effective servant leaders prioritize understanding and addressing the needs and concerns of others, fostering empathy and healing in relationships. They are self-aware and ethically minded, using persuasion rather than coercion to build consensus. They balance visionary thinking with practical action, anticipate future outcomes based on past and present insights, and steward resources for the greater good. Their dedication to the personal and professional growth of others and their efforts to create a supportive community underscore their leadership approach (Sickinger, 2017).

Although there is substantial literature on servant leadership and its principles, research specifically linking servant leadership to employee engagement is relatively limited. However, existing studies suggest a positive correlation between servant leadership and enhanced employee engagement: Engaged employees are those who are emotionally invested in their work and the organization, and servant leadership contributes significantly to this emotional connection. This relationship is crucial as engaged employees are more productive, innovative, and committed to their organizations (Carter & Baghurst, 2014).

Situational Leadership

Situational leadership theory posits that effective leadership is contingent upon situational factors, rather than intrinsic traits of the leader. Developed by Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard in the 1970s, Situational Leadership Theory (originally called the Life Cycle Theory) suggests that there is no single best style of leadership. Instead, effective leadership depends on the situation and the maturity of the followers, defined by their ability and willingness to complete a task. (Arenas, Connelly, & Williams, 2017). This theory has been extensively applied in organizational settings but has also faced substantial criticism regarding its theoretical and practical validity (Ramakanth, 1988). A study by Butler and Reese (1991) found that there's a need for more nuanced and integrative approaches to leadership that consider the complex interplay of situational variables and leadership behaviors. The study examined the effectiveness of the Situational Leadership Model in the insurance industry, focusing on the relationship between leadership styles and sales performance.

Graeff (1983) explained the core concepts of situational leadership theory as centered on the idea that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership. As stated previously, leaders should use different styles depending on their subordinates' maturity levels. For subordinates with low maturity (low competence and motivation), a telling style (high task, low relationship) is recommended, where the leader provides clear instructions and closely monitors performance. For those with moderate maturity but low commitment, a selling style (high task, high relationship) is suitable, where the leader explains decisions, offers support, and encourages buy-in. For subordinates with high competence but variable commitment, a participating style (low task, high relationship) is ideal, involving the subordinates in decision-making and providing support. Finally, for highly mature subordinates who are both competent and motivated, a delegating style (low task, low relationship) is appropriate, allowing them to take full responsibility with minimal supervision.

Helmich and Erzen (1975) explain that Fred E. Fiedler's Contingency Model from the 1960s is key to the idea that leaders need to change their style based on the abilities of their team members, suggesting that a leader's success depends on how well their style fits the situation. Helmich and Erzen (1975) also suggest that both flexible and fixed leadership models have limitations and should be used carefully. Their research shows that task-focused leaders often have unmet personal needs, while people-focused leaders tend to feel more satisfied, indicating that task-focused leaders seek recognition and accomplishment through their work rather than through relationships.

Helmich and Erzen's study also finds differences between male and female leaders. Male corporate presidents often connect their leadership style with prestige and personal growth, which are higher-level needs according to Maslow's hierarchy. On the other hand, female corporate presidents value developing close

friendships, focusing more on social needs. These findings suggest that leadership training should be personalized to address the specific needs of each leader and consider gender differences. Overall, situational leadership theory emphasizes the importance of adapting leadership styles to different situations and personal needs to be more effective in various organizational environments. While the theory offers a simplified and popular framework, its practical utility in diverse organizational settings requires further scrutiny and refinement.

Skills Theory

Northouse (2022) describes the skills approach to leadership as focusing on developing specific competencies, knowledge, and abilities that leaders can learn and improve. Unlike approaches that emphasize inherent traits, the skills approach highlights actionable skills. Originating from Katz's work in 1955, it identifies three essential skills for effective leadership: technical, human, and conceptual. Technical skills involve specialized knowledge and proficiency in specific tasks, which are crucial at lower and middle management levels. For example, a manager in a tech company needs to understand programming languages and software tools, while an accounting manager must be adept in accounting principles and practices. Human skills, or people skills, are necessary at all management levels for effective interactions and team cohesion. These skills involve understanding and working well with others, which is essential for creating a supportive and collaborative work environment. Conceptual skills, important at upper management levels, help leaders articulate the organization's vision and understand broader implications. Leaders with strong conceptual skills can see the big picture, set long-term goals, and devise strategic plans to achieve those goals. Together, these skills enhance leadership effectiveness and contribute to organizational success (Northouse, 2022).

Building on Katz's foundation, researchers like Mumford and colleagues in the 1990s expanded the skills approach with a comprehensive model. This model includes problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge, which are crucial for handling organizational complexities. Problem-solving skills involve defining problems accurately, gathering relevant information, and generating effective solutions. These skills enable leaders to tackle challenges systematically and come up with innovative solutions. Social judgment skills enable leaders to interpret social cues, empathize with others, and manage relationships effectively. These skills help leaders navigate interpersonal dynamics and foster a positive organizational culture. Knowledge includes technical expertise and a deep understanding of the organizational context, including industry trends and internal processes. Leaders need to be well-informed about their field and the internal workings of their organization to make informed decisions and guide their teams effectively. This expanded model provides a robust framework for developing leaders at all levels, ensuring a pool of potential managers ready for succession. Organizations can use this model to identify and nurture future leaders, ensuring smooth transitions and continuity in leadership roles (Northouse, 2022).

The skills approach has several strengths. It emphasizes the leader's abilities and focuses on skills that anyone can develop, making leadership accessible to everyone. This approach is appealing because it frames leadership as a set of skills that can be learned and practiced, similar to improving at a sport through practice and instruction. For example, even someone without a natural talent for tennis can become a good player through dedicated practice and coaching. Similarly, individuals can develop their leadership skills through training and experience. The skills approach also offers a detailed map of leadership, incorporating various components like problem-solving, social judgment skills, knowledge, individual attributes, career experiences, and environmental influences. This comprehensive view captures the complexities of leadership and aligns well with leadership education programs. Many leadership programs focus on developing these skills through courses on creative problem-solving, conflict resolution, listening, and teamwork. However, the approach has limitations, including its broad scope and weak predictive value, as it does not clearly explain how skills lead to effective performance. Additionally, its general applicability is questioned since the model was primarily based on military personnel data. The highly structured and hierarchical nature of the military may not reflect the realities of leadership in other contexts, such as business or nonprofit organizations. Despite these limitations, the skills approach remains a valuable framework for understanding and developing leadership competencies. It provides a practical guide for individuals and organizations looking to enhance their leadership capabilities (Northouse, 2022).

III. Comparative Analysis

Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership, initially conceptualized by James MacGregor Burns and later expanded by Bernard Bass, emphasizes the importance of inspiring and motivating followers to transcend their own self-interests for the sake of a greater cause.

The key characteristics of transformational leadership include idealized influence, where leaders act as role models, earning the respect and trust of their followers. Inspirational motivation involves leaders

communicating a compelling vision that inspires and motivates their followers. Intellectual stimulation is another critical aspect, where leaders encourage creativity and innovation, challenging followers to think critically and solve problems. Additionally, individualized consideration is crucial, as leaders provide personalized support and mentorship, recognizing the individual needs and aspirations of their followers.

Transformational leadership has several strengths. It fosters high levels of motivation and engagement among followers, promotes innovation and creativity, and enhances organizational change and development. However, it also has weaknesses. It can be demanding for leaders, requiring high levels of charisma and personal influence, and there is a risk of leader dependency, where followers rely too heavily on the leader's vision.

Transformational Leadership differs from the other leadership styles discussed in this paper primarily in its focus on inspiring and motivating followers through a compelling vision and personal influence. Transformational leaders aim to create meaningful change within the organization by encouraging followers to exceed their own self-interests for the sake of the collective goal. This approach relies heavily on the leader's ability to communicate a clear vision, foster innovation, and provide personalized support to each follower.

In contrast, servant leadership is primarily concerned with serving others and meeting the needs of followers. Servant leaders prioritize the well-being and development of their team members, often putting the needs of others above their own. While transformational leaders focus on inspiring followers towards a common vision, servant leaders emphasize empathy, active listening, and personal growth. Situational leadership, on the other hand, is about adaptability. Leaders using this style adjust their approach based on the readiness and competence of their followers, switching between directive and supportive behaviors as needed. Skills theory, meanwhile, focuses on the specific skills a leader needs to be effective, such as technical, human, and conceptual skills, rather than on how they interact with followers.

Despite these differences, Transformational Leadership shares some similarities with the other leadership styles. Like Servant Leadership, it values the development and well-being of followers, although it does so through motivation and inspiration rather than through direct service and support. Both styles aim to build strong, trust-based relationships and create a positive organizational culture. Additionally, Transformational Leadership and Situational Leadership both recognize the importance of adapting to followers' needs. While Transformational Leadership does this by providing individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation, Situational Leadership adapts by changing the leader's approach based on followers' competence and commitment levels.

Additionally, Transformational Leadership and Skills Theory both highlight the importance of leader development. Transformational leaders must possess effective communication, visionary, and motivational skills to be effective. Similarly, Skills Theory emphasizes that effective leaders need to develop specific skills such as technical, human, and conceptual skills. Both theories suggest that effective leadership can be learned and developed over time, rather than being solely an innate trait. This focus on skill development and continuous improvement is a common thread that ties Transformational Leadership to Skills Theory, despite their different approaches to leadership.

Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership is distinct from the other leadership styles because it focuses primarily on serving others. The core idea of Servant Leadership is that leaders put the needs of their followers first, helping them grow and succeed. Instead of seeking power or authority, servant leaders aim to support their team members and ensure their well-being. This approach fosters a nurturing and supportive environment, where followers feel valued and empowered. In contrast, Transformational Leadership emphasizes inspiring and motivating followers to achieve a shared vision, Situational Leadership focuses on adapting leadership styles based on followers' readiness, and Skills Theory highlights the development of specific skills necessary for effective leadership.

Despite its unique focus on serving others, Servant Leadership shares some similarities with other leadership styles. Like Transformational Leadership, it aims to inspire and develop followers, but it does so by prioritizing their needs and fostering a supportive environment. Both styles encourage leaders to build strong relationships with their followers and help them reach their full potential. Additionally, Servant Leadership, like Situational Leadership, recognizes the importance of understanding and addressing the individual needs of followers. Servant leaders listen actively and provide personalized support, much like how situational leaders adapt their approach based on their followers' competence and commitment levels.

While Servant Leadership emphasizes serving followers, it also shares common goals with other leadership theories, such as promoting a positive organizational culture and achieving success through effective leadership. All four leadership styles—Servant, Transformational, Situational, and Skills Theory—recognize the importance of developing and empowering followers. They also stress the significance of good communication and relationship-building. By understanding these similarities and differences, leaders can better appreciate the

unique strengths of each approach and integrate them into their leadership practices to create a more effective and supportive work environment.

Situational Leadership

Situational Leadership stands out from other leadership theories due to its emphasis on the leader's need to adapt their style based on the readiness and needs of their followers. Developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard, this theory posits that effective leaders must be flexible, altering their approach depending on the situation at hand. For example, a leader might need to provide clear, directive instructions to new employees who are still learning their roles, while offering more supportive and encouraging guidance to experienced team members who are already confident and capable. This focus on continuous assessment and response to the evolving needs of the team is what makes Situational Leadership unique.

Despite its distinct focus on adaptability, Situational Leadership shares some similarities with other leadership theories. For instance, it recognizes, like Transformational Leadership, the importance of understanding and responding to followers' needs to enhance their performance and development. Both theories emphasize the leader's role in creating an environment where followers can excel, though they achieve this through different means. Transformational Leadership relies on inspiration and vision to motivate followers, whereas Situational Leadership uses tailored guidance and support based on the specific context and follower readiness.

The research also shows that Situational Leadership has common ground with Servant Leadership, particularly in its prioritization of the well-being and growth of followers. While Servant Leadership emphasizes the leader's ethical responsibility to serve and support their followers, Situational Leadership focuses on adapting leadership styles to meet the developmental needs of followers. Both theories value the leader's role in fostering a supportive environment that promotes follower growth, even though they approach this goal from different angles.

Finally, there is a notable similarity between Situational Leadership and Skills Theory. Skills Theory, which highlights the importance of various skills in effective leadership, aligns with Situational Leadership's requirement for leaders to possess a diverse skill set. Situational Leadership demands that leaders have the technical, human, and conceptual skills necessary to adapt their approach based on the situation and the needs of their followers. Both theories agree that successful leadership is not about adhering to a single style or possessing certain traits, but about being versatile and equipped with the right skills to manage different challenges effectively.

Skills Approach

The Skills Approach theory is distinct from other leadership theories because it emphasizes the development of specific skills and abilities that leaders need to be effective. Unlike theories that focus on innate traits or behaviors, the Skills Approach argues that leadership skills can be learned and developed. This means that anyone can become a better leader through education and practice, regardless of their natural abilities. The key skills in this approach are technical skills (knowledge and expertise in a specific area), human skills (the ability to work well with others), and conceptual skills (the ability to understand and solve complex problems).

In contrast, Transformational Leadership focuses on the leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers through a compelling vision and personal influence. This approach relies heavily on the leader's charisma and ability to drive change by engaging followers' emotions and intellect. While the Skills Approach highlights learnable abilities, Transformational Leadership emphasizes the leader's inherent qualities and their capacity to inspire followers.

Servant Leadership also differs from the Skills Approach by prioritizing the needs of followers and the community. Servant leaders put their followers' needs first and strive to help them develop and perform at their best. This approach is more about the leader's ethical mindset and commitment to serving others, rather than specific skills. However, both the Skills Approach and Servant Leadership share a focus on the leader's ability to support and develop their followers, albeit from different perspectives.

Situational Leadership is another theory that contrasts with the Skills Approach. It suggests that effective leadership depends on adapting one's style to the needs of the followers and the situation. Situational leaders assess their followers' competence and commitment and adjust their level of directive and supportive behavior accordingly. While Situational Leadership is flexible and context-driven, the Skills Approach provides a more consistent framework by emphasizing the development of key skills that can be applied in various situations. Both theories, however, recognize the importance of adjusting leadership practices to meet the needs of followers and the context in which they operate.

Summary

The comparative analysis of these four leadership theories reveals that each offers unique strengths and insights that can be leveraged to enhance leadership effectiveness. Transformational Leadership stands out for its ability to drive change and inspire innovation. Leaders who use this approach motivate their followers by presenting a compelling vision and encouraging them to go beyond their own self-interests for the sake of the group or organization. This type of leadership is particularly effective in situations that require significant change or innovation, as it fosters a culture of creativity and forward-thinking. By engaging followers' emotions and intellect, transformational leaders can build strong, committed teams capable of achieving remarkable outcomes.

Servant Leadership, on the other hand, focuses on creating a supportive and ethical organizational culture. Leaders who adopt this style prioritize the needs of their followers, helping them grow and succeed. They function as role models of ethical behavior, demonstrating empathy, active listening, and stewardship. This approach builds trust and strong relationships within the organization, promoting a sense of community and shared purpose. In environments where collaboration, mutual respect, and ethical conduct are critical, servant leadership can significantly enhance team cohesion and morale, leading to improved overall performance.

Situational Leadership offers flexibility by allowing leaders to adapt their style based on the needs of their followers and the specific situation at hand. This theory emphasizes the importance of assessing followers' readiness and providing the right balance of direction and support. Leaders can switch between directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating styles as the situation demands. This adaptability is particularly useful in dynamic environments where the context and needs of the team can change frequently. By adjusting their approach, situational leaders can more effectively guide their teams through varying challenges and stages of development, ensuring that their leadership remains relevant and effective.

Finally, Skills Theory emphasizes the development of essential leadership skills, suggesting that effective leadership is not about innate traits but about developing specific abilities. This theory highlights technical, human, and conceptual skills that leaders can learn and improve over time. Technical skills involve knowledge and proficiency in specific tasks, human skills pertain to the ability to work well with others, and conceptual skills involve the capacity to understand complex situations and think strategically. By focusing on skill development, this approach provides a clear framework for leadership training and growth. Leaders who invest in enhancing their skills can become more competent and versatile, better equipped to handle diverse challenges and opportunities.

Understanding and integrating these diverse approaches allows leaders to create a more dynamic and responsive leadership strategy tailored to their specific organizational contexts. By combining the visionary and motivational aspects of Transformational Leadership, the ethical and supportive focus of Servant Leadership, the adaptive nature of Situational Leadership, and the competency-building emphasis of Skills Theory, leaders can develop a comprehensive and effective leadership style that maximizes their impact and effectiveness.

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