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The Utility of Situational Leadership Theory

A Replication in a Military Setting

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In a constructive replication of prior comprehensive tests of situational leadership theory, members of 86 squads of U.S. Military Academy cadets (total of 860 participants) provided data on leader consideration, leader structuring, follower readiness/maturity, follower satisfaction, follower performance, and leader-member exchange. Results of regression analyses and tests for mean differences within follower readiness/maturity level did not yield clear evidence of a predicted interaction among leader style and follower attributes. These results are in alignment with prior findings and suggest the theory may have little practical utility.

**Keywords:** leadership; situational leadership theory; military psychology; group dynamics

Effective leader development lies at the core of the mission of both military and for-profit organizations. More broadly, it is a chief concern of the field of human resources development across a range of contexts. Generally, it is believed that an edge may be gained in enhancing effectiveness if leader behavior is guided by valid principles that are grounded in empirical research. But much published leadership research, unfortunately, has focused on generalities in leader style or disposition in place of specifying the relational tactics that would optimize subordinate contributions to the attainment of unit goals.

**Authors’ Note:** The authors wish to thank Colonel Thomas A. Kolditz of the USMA for his support of this study and Captain Archie Bates for his assistance with data collection.
One promising avenue for specifying these appropriate relational tactics, however, can be found in Hersey and Blanchard’s (1982, 1993; Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2000) situational leadership theory (SLT). The relevance of SLT for military leaders, and leaders in other contexts, has been recognized for some time. For example, the U.S. Army has used SLT as a developmental tool for training officers, and the U.S. Air Force uses SLT in most of its leader training programs for officers and noncommissioned officers (Cook, 1992; Yeakey, 2002). Furthermore, the 1999 Field Manual 22-100 (1999) advocates using the adaptive principles that are incorporated in SLT (chaps. 3 & 6). Despite this use of SLT, research that relates SLT to military settings has been nearly nonexistent.

In essence, the theory contends that leader effectiveness (measured typically by subordinate or group performance) is not merely a function of leader behavior, but rather is a joint function of leader behavior and situational requirements. More specifically, SLT espouses that subordinate readiness for self-direction (typically labeled subordinate readiness or subordinate maturity) is a key situational determinant of the appropriate mix of leader behavioral style along the two major dimensions of consideration and structuring. Leader consideration is defined in terms of the leader displaying warmth and supportiveness (i.e., emphasizing social relations), whereas leader structuring is defined in terms of the leader displaying directiveness and monitoring (i.e., emphasizing task accomplishment). Subordinate readiness is defined as a mix of the critical capacities of willingness (or commitment) and ability (or competence). For subordinates who are comparatively low on readiness (i.e., low on both commitment and competence), the optimal mix of leader behaviors is low leader consideration combined with high leader structuring. Essentially, effective leadership in this specific situation is primarily a matter of “telling” subordinates how to behave. As subordinates gain in readiness, the appropriate mix of leader behaviors involves less task emphasis and greater social-relations emphasis. This involves moving from telling subordinates what to do, to doing greater “selling,” and then greater “participating” with subordinates. When subordinates ultimately achieve the highest levels of readiness (and arguably are ready to be self-directed rather than other-directed), then leadership becomes far less relevant to subordinate performance, and the ideal leader style is one of reduced involvement with subordinates (low task emphasis and low social-relations emphasis). At this extreme height of maximal subordinate readiness, the prescribed leader style is one of “delegating.” In this instance, leader actions are viewed as inherently redundant and unnecessary. Hence, SLT recommends that leader behavior should progress from
telling to delegating as subordinates gain in readiness for self-regulation or self-direction.

Although the theory’s intuitive appeal is compelling and its principles enjoy a higher degree of visibility in leadership training circles (Blanchard & Nelson, 1997), SLT has not been blessed with a consistent record of empirical verification. Both theoretical and methodological shortcomings have been identified for SLT-related research (Graeff, 1983; Lueder, 1985; Nahavandi, 1997; Yukl, 2006). For example, prior studies have (a) relied on leader self-assessments of leader behavior (Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982; Yeakey, 2000); (b) tested for two-way interactions, rather than a predicted three-way interaction, among the theory’s three key elements (Blank, Weitzel, & Green, 1990); or (c) not assessed subordinate performance (Goodson, McGee, & Cashman, 1989). Although it has been noted that the model lacks a straightforward explanation of the process whereby leader behaviors might influence subordinate performance and attitudes (Graeff, 1983), it can be argued that the model (when used properly by a leader) involves creating developmental challenges for subordinates that can help to move a subordinate to higher levels of readiness/maturity (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). When a leader changes his or her behavior in accordance with the model’s recommended stylistic changes, the subordinate and the leader should both benefit.

Although the developmental dynamic of the theory has not been the subject of empirical testing, three comprehensive, cross-sectional tests that incorporated all of the key elements of the theory (i.e., leader consideration, leader structuring, and subordinate readiness/maturity), and that avoided leader self-assessment, have been published. All of these tests have yielded mixed, yet fairly consistent, results. Specifically, Vecchio (1987) studied 303 teachers and 14 principals in a large Midwestern city. Principals provided data on teacher readiness/maturity and performance for each teacher, whereas teachers provided data on leader behavior, satisfaction with the principal, and the quality of their leader-member working relationship. The evidence indicated that the theory held for low-readiness, rather than moderate- or high-readiness, employees. From these findings, Vecchio inferred that (a) more recently hired employees may require greater structuring from their supervisor and (b) the theory may be irrelevant for high-readiness employees.

In a replication of the Vecchio (1987) study, Norris and Vecchio (1992) studied 91 nurses and 7 hospital supervisors (head nurses). Results mirrored the findings of Vecchio in that directional support was found for low- and moderate-readiness/maturity employees. As in the earlier study, a low
percentage of cases were identified wherein leader behavior and subordinate readiness/maturity matched in accordance with the theory’s prescriptions. Hence, the natural occurrence of ideal combinations of supervisor and subordinate attributes is probably low.

In a further test of the theory, Fernandez and Vecchio (1997) collected data from 332 university employees and 32 supervisors. Beyond replicating a within-jobs test of the theory (the approach taken in prior studies), these authors also tested Vecchio’s (1987) proposal that the theory may have greater validity when examined from an across-jobs perspective (wherein a subordinate’s job level is used as a predictor of optimal leader behavior). Results suggested only directional support for the theory’s prediction in the moderate readiness/maturity level. Also, Fernandez and Vecchio did not find that job level adequately substituted for readiness/maturity in tests of the theory’s three-way interaction. However, they did find that increases in supervisory monitoring were positively correlated with reports of job satisfaction for lower-level university employees ($r = .25, p < .05$) but not for mid-level ($r = .03, ns$) or high-level employees ($r = .01, ns$). Furthermore, supervisor consideration had little association with job satisfaction for lower-level employees ($r = .07, ns$), but did correlate significantly for middle- and upper-level employees ($r = .39$ and $r = .37$, respectively, $p < .01$). This suggests that supervisory monitoring is judged more favorably by lower-level employees (in alignment with one of the basic principles of the theory) and that supervisory consideration is of greater importance to subordinate reactions for higher-level employees. Formal regression tests of the interaction between (a) job level and monitoring and (b) job level and consideration provided support for only the Job Level × Consideration interaction ($\Delta R^2 = .02, p < .05$).

The closeness of supervisory monitoring may be a particularly relevant dimension for SLT, as one can argue that the theory is, essentially, prescribing varying degrees of closeness of monitoring. As subordinate self-efficacy increases, supervisory involvement should decrease accordingly. Moreover, subordinates can be reasonably expected to vary in the extent to which they feel that they should be allowed greater independence or autonomy. Subordinates who report greater independence from supervision (as indexed by their expressed expectation for comparatively less monitoring) should likely report receiving less structuring behavior from their supervisor. Conversely, subordinates who are lacking in their expectation of being treated as self-efficacious should report greater dependency on their supervisor and, hence, greater experience of leader structuring.

A special challenge for testing SLT lies in the difficulty of specifying the precise nature of the interaction among the theory’s three key elements of
leader consideration, leader structuring, and subordinate readiness/maturity. As noted by Vecchio (1987, pp. 446-447), an effort to graph a predicted hyperplane reveals that the theory, in its narrowest and perhaps most precise interpretation, is only forecasting superior outcomes for specific locations in a multidimensional space. In all other locations in this space, the theory makes no predictions. As a result, multiple regression (with its assumptions of equal error variances along the predicted hyperplane) may be limited as a statistical tool for testing the theory, and instead theoretically specified settings probably need to be identified where cases can be directly compared on outcome dimensions. To test the theory most broadly, it can also be argued that both multiple regression analysis and setting-specific comparisons should be conducted to determine the potential limits of different approaches for testing the model.

The present study sought to replicate the prior comprehensive tests of SLT by assessing all key elements of the theory. However, this study examined the theory in a novel setting where all subordinates were far more comparable in terms of prior experience. That is to say, previous studies allowed variance on prior work experience, and even possible attrition, to operate in that job incumbents of varying tenure were studied cross-sectionally. In the present study, attrition did not occur for the participants (this being one of a number of features that typically distinguish military settings from other organizational settings; Lau, 1998; Van Fleet & Yukl, 1986; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1982), and variance on subordinate readiness/maturity was based on observed performance on relevant assignments. In addition to conducting tests of the theory’s predicted interaction, the present study also explored the role of subordinate perceptions of personal need for supervisory monitoring (i.e., whether subordinates who feel they need greater supervisory monitoring will report higher levels of leader structuring).

**Hypothesis 1:** There is an interaction among leader consideration, leader structuring, and subordinate readiness/maturity in predicting subordinate performance, leader-member exchange, and satisfaction with supervision.

**Hypothesis 2:** Subordinate reports of personal need for supervisory monitoring are correlated with reports of leader structuring.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Participants were 860 members of the U.S. Military Academy corps of cadets who were divided into 86 squads as part of their Summer Cadet Field
Training experience. Cadet sophomores, the followers in the current research, participate in Cadet Field Training during their second summer at the Military Academy. Cadet Field Training consists of almost 8 weeks of rigorous individual and small-unit military training that focuses on tasks required of crews or squads (8 to 12 persons) and platoon-level skills (consisting of members of 4 squads). Each of the squads participates in the same types of training activities, although the timing of those activities varies during the summer. The leaders of this training are cadet juniors and seniors. This summer training, therefore, provides basic military instruction to the sophomores while also allowing more senior cadets to develop their leadership skills by serving as squad leaders during the summer training program.

Cadet Field Training occurred in two 4-week segments wherein each team was under the direction of a more senior cadet. At the conclusion of the first 4-week training experience, each squad (both leader and members) was asked to complete a confidential set of questionnaires that assessed their reactions to the field training experience. Data were collected in a large classroom setting where leaders completed scales apart from subordinates. Of the 1,132 field training participants who were invited to provide data, 860 (76%) did provide data. Squad members and squad leaders were predominantly male (86.4% and 83.4%, respectively). Squad size varied from 13 to 5 members (including the squad leader), with a mean of 10.98 and a mode of 12 total members.

Measures

Data were collected separately for both the squad leaders (who assessed each of their squad members) and the squad members (who assessed their squad leader). Squad leaders provided their own names and the names of each subordinate. For each squad member, the leader provided an evaluation of individual performance on a two-item assessment scale (“This person displayed outstanding overall present performance”; “I expect this person to display outstanding future performance”; 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). In addition, the leader provided assessments of individual ability and commitment (“He/she was ABLE to do squad assignments (had the necessary training and skill)”; “He/she was WILLING to do squad assignments (had the necessary confidence & commitment)”; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), two components of subordinate readiness/maturity. The internal reliability coefficients for the performance and readiness/maturity assessments were .89 and .78, respectively.
Each subordinate squad member provided his or her own name and data on their squad leader using the 10-item LBDQ-XII measure (Stogdill & Coons, 1957) of consideration and structuring (sample item for consideration: “My squad leader was friendly and approachable”; sample item for structuring: “My squad leader made his/her attitudes clear to me”; 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = occasionally, 4 = often, 5 = always); a two-item measure of satisfaction with the squad leader (“In all, I was satisfied with my squad leader”; “In all, I was satisfied that the methods of leadership used by my squad leader were the right ones for getting my squad’s job done”; 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree); the seven-item measure of the leader-member exchange (Scandura & Graen, 1984) scale (“I could count on my squad leader to ‘bail me out’ at his/her own expense, if I really needed it”; same 5-point disagree-agree anchors); and a nine-item measure of perceived need for supervisory monitoring (“It was not necessary for my squad leader to supervise me”; “I did not need a great deal of interaction with my squad leader”; same 5-point disagree-agree anchors).

The 28 items completed by each follower were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis wherein a null model (consisting of a single general factor) was contrasted with a multifactor model (consisting of the five factors of consideration, structuring, satisfaction with the leader, leader-member exchange, and need for supervisory monitoring). For the null model (where all 28 items loaded on a single factor), the obtained chi-square was 3,218.91 (df = 350, p < .01), with normed fit index = .952, Tucker-Lewis index = .950, comparative fit index = .957, and root mean square error of approximation = .098. For the five-factor model (where each item loaded on its respective construct), the obtained chi-square was 1,221.74 (df = 340, p < .01), with normed fit index = .982, Tucker-Lewis index = .984, comparative fit index = .987, and root mean square error of approximation = .055. In addition to the fit indices, the resulting difference in chi-square between the two models (3,218.91 – 1,221.74 = 1,997.17, df = 10, p < .01) indicated that the five-factor model provided a superior fit as a representation of the data.

**Results**

Table 1 lists the means, standard deviations, internal reliabilities, and intercorrelations of the variables of interest. As indicated, leader performance ratings of subordinates were significantly and positively correlated with subordinate reports of leader-member exchange, leader consideration, leader structuring, and satisfaction with the squad leader. Performance was,
predictably, highly associated with assessments of subordinate readiness/maturity. Although subordinate reports of need for monitoring were not associated with performance assessments, these same reports were inversely associated with leader structuring (thereby supporting Hypothesis 2 by indicating that greater structuring was experienced by individuals who felt a greater need for monitoring).

Because SLT posits a higher-order interaction of consideration, structuring, and maturity/readiness, hierarchical regression was employed. In accordance with Aiken and West’s (1991) guidance, multiplicative interaction terms were created for the predictors, and the incremental criterion variance was assessed in a hierarchical analysis following mean-centering of all variables. Table 2 provides the results of the hierarchical regression tests for the predicted three-way interactions (Hypothesis 1). Formal significance tests did not yield evidence in support of the theory’s predicted higher-order interaction.

Despite these nonsupportive findings and the associated reduction in statistical power that results from using less than full information available in a data set for a statistical test, overall (or omnibus) tests and partitioned tests (comparing only those cases based on their location within the theoretical space)
were conducted to determine if support for the theory’s predictions might be otherwise evident (as the theory arguably is specified to operate in predefined contexts). To compare present results with prior reports and to explore a more refined test for matches and mismatches, the distributions of consideration and structuring were dichotomized and trichotomized, respectively. Also, the inherently continuous distribution for subordinate readiness/maturity was trichotomized. Trichotomizing was employed (rather than quartering, as is implied by graphic representations of the theory that are used in leadership training programs) to have an adequate sample size for conducting statistical tests across cells. Subordinates whose values on the predictors agree with the theory’s prescriptions (i.e., where a case is located in the appropriate mix for level of leader consideration and level of leader structuring, given the level of subordinate readiness/maturity) are termed matches, and their values on the outcome variables are forecast to be significantly higher than for the remaining cases (i.e., the mismatches). More specifically, this involved dichotomizing the consideration values at the sample median (19) and trichotomizing the structuring distribution (15 and 19), and the readiness/maturity distribution (8 and 10). These cuts are near the values reported in Vecchio (1987).

Results of the omnibus tests (see Table 3 for the omnibus comparisons) were not clearly supportive of the theory’s predictions (i.e., although performance was higher for the matched cases, the difference was not statistically significant,

Table 2
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Test of Situational Leadership Theory’s Predicted Three-Way Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Leader-Member Exchange</th>
<th>Satisfaction With Leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equation 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consideration (C),</td>
<td>.699**</td>
<td>.674**</td>
<td>.527**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>structuring (S),</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>readiness (R)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equation 2:</td>
<td>.703**</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.677**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C $\times$ S, C $\times$ R,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S $\times$ R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equation 3:</td>
<td>.703**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.678**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C $\times$ S $\times$ R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
and the means for the other dependent variables were higher for the mismatched cases). Furthermore, the within-readiness/maturity level partition tests (see Table 4 for the comparisons of matches and mismatches within each readiness/maturity level) were only directionally supportive of the theory for the means observed in the low-maturity and moderate-maturity groups (i.e., in 6 of the 9 within-readiness/maturity-level mean comparisons). For the high readiness/maturity level, the means for the matches were lower than the means for the mismatches in all three comparisons.

**Discussion**

As noted by Yukl (2006, 224), SLT has received only limited support for the proposition that more directive supervision is necessary for subordinates
Table 4
Results of Partitioned Tests: Comparisons Across Dependent Variables Within Maturity Levels Specified by Situational Leadership Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Estimated Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low readiness/maturity group</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>7.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>6.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = leader-member exchange</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>26.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>25.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = satisfaction with squad leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>8.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>7.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderate readiness/maturity group</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>8.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>8.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = leader-member exchange</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>28.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>26.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = satisfaction with squad leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>9.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>7.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High readiness/maturity group</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>9.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>9.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
who are low in readiness/maturity. Moreover, it has yet to be demonstrated that leaders who attempt to emulate the prescriptions of the theory will have higher effectiveness. Also, the potential developmental value of the theory is, as yet, unknown. The present study contributes to the further examination, from a cross-sectional perspective, of the descriptive validity of the theory. The present results, however, do not indicate support for the theory. For example, both the regression approach and the omnibus tests (i.e., the comparisons across all categories of maturity) did not provide evidence in support of the theory’s proposed interaction. Although advocates of the theory may find comfort in the directional results of the partitioned tests (i.e., for 6 of 9 mean comparisons that were made within the different levels of subordinate readiness/maturity), the results were most robust (in terms of effect sizes) in the high readiness/maturity category, where the means were actually in the direction opposite that predicted by the theory.

Although closeness of supervision has been a subject of investigation in the social sciences (cf. Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Pearlin & Kohn, 1966), the topic of supervisory closeness has not received much attention in recent years. Plus, it has not been studied in conjunction with SLT, where its relevance is particularly compelling. In the present study, subordinate reports of need for supervisory monitoring were only modestly related to other indices. However, the strongest relationship was with leader structuring.

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### Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Estimated Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = leader-member exchange</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>22.87</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44.39</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>28.54</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>127</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable = satisfaction with squad leader</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29.81</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mismatch</td>
<td>8.73</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Match denotes cases where the conjunction of leader consideration and leader structuring is in conformance with situational leadership theory’s predictions for superior outcomes for a given level of subordinate readiness/maturity. Mismatch denotes all other cases for the same level of subordinate readiness/maturity. Performance ratings by leaders were obtained on two 5-point scales, leader-member exchange was assessed on seven 5-point scales, satisfaction with squad leader was assessed on two 5-point scales.
This suggests that subordinates who felt that supervisory direction was necessary and appropriate also received greater structuring. Nonetheless, more attention is needed to further develop the construct of subordinate perception of the need for supervisory monitoring, whether it is desirable and sought, and its potential impact on subordinate performance.

When viewed in conjunction with past empirical tests of the theory, it is clear that SLT has yet to demonstrate robust findings in any specific setting. The present study examined a relatively unique sample where participants were comparable on prior experience and, therefore, provided variance on readiness/maturity that was uncontaminated by prior work experience, self-selection, or length of role incumbency. In a sense, this investigation more closely approximates a lab study wherein participants are arguably more uniform than private sector employees (who may likely vary on tenure and job skills to a great degree). Also, all leaders in the present study were newly appointed and had a common 4-week experience with an assigned work group. Hence, several alternative explanations for prior weak results were eliminated in the present study (thereby allowing us to make stronger inferences about the validity of SLT’s central principles).

Although the present results were not heartening for leadership trainers who rely heavily on SLT as a developmental model, some of the present results do offer additional valuable insights. For example, the single strongest correlate of supervisor ratings of subordinate performance was subordinate report of the extent of leader-member exchange. This suggests that as subordinates come to perceive themselves as members of the supervisor’s inner circle, they experience greater positive outcomes. Research in other domains has tended to substantiate the value of inner-circle status relative to the supervisor (cf. Gerstner & Day, 1997), including higher promotion rates, satisfaction, citizenship behavior, and lower turnover. In the present study as well, the strongest predictor of subordinate satisfaction with the leader was the measure of leader-member exchange. Following on the present evidence, future research might investigate not only the optimal stylistic behaviors for leaders (e.g., consideration and structuring), but also the specific methods a leader might use to bring subordinates into an in-group (Scandura & Graen, 1984). An understanding of such techniques would also provide insights on methods for building unit social cohesion. The results of such research would be of value to enriching the education of nonmilitary and military leaders (Ulmer, 1998; Yeakey, 2002).

**Methodological Issues**

Possible limitations of the present study include the inverse of the aforementioned uniformity of work group experience in that the theory’s proposed
dynamics may not have had sufficient time to emerge fully in the studied time period. Yet, it is worth noting that Cadet Field Training, although of fixed duration, is an intensive, 24-7 experience that allows for authentic leader-follower dynamics to operate. In addition, the present instrumentation of key variables may have been less than ideal. Nonetheless, the present scales possessed adequate psychometric properties. An alternative perspective to evaluating the theory, which may be of value to guiding future leadership research, might focus on measures of social influence tactics. Such an approach could try to match specific tactics (that are derived from the theory) to measures of leader effectiveness. Also, leaders who employ a broader range of influence tactics and display greater flexibility in their behavior may prove to be relatively more effective. A further untested perspective is offered by the possible examination of the theory’s developmental dynamics. As previously noted, all tests of the theory have been cross-sectional in nature. A very different approach would rely on longitudinal analysis where possible developmental differences and differential leader effectiveness might be identified in accordance with the theory’s propositions.

Finally, there is the continuing concern as to how best to operationalize the readiness/maturity construct. From one perspective (adopted in this study), it can be argued that the construct should be assessed from the leader’s standpoint in that it is how each follower is judged by the leader that should primarily influence the leader’s demeanor and actions toward a given follower. Although alternate indices of readiness/maturity may be conceivable (e.g., job longevity), it does seem that a leader’s actions will be driven ultimately by a belief that a follower is sufficiently trustworthy and competent so as to be granted a measure of self-regulation. Clearly, more efforts directed at construct validation are needed for both defining and operationalizing the construct of follower readiness/maturity. In addition, there is a concern with the observed association of performance ratings and leader assessments of follower readiness/maturity. Although it is difficult to conceive of settings where performance and follower readiness/maturity would not be likely to be associated, the present treatment of follower readiness/maturity as a variable to be controlled (by entering it into the early steps of the regression analysis as a main effect and as a component of the two-way interaction terms) does help to address the potential extraneous influence of follower readiness/maturity on performance. Moreover, the partitioned tests deliberately hold readiness/maturity level constant when testing for differences in performance ratings. To be sure, the association of readiness/maturity with performance may reduce the likelihood of finding evidence for the outcome of performance (given that much of the
variance in performance will be controlled by the initially entered main effect and two-way interaction predictors. Yet this potential bias makes the statistical tests more conservative (i.e., if results are found for the performance measure, they will need to be comparatively robust). However, it is important to note that the present study did not rely on a single outcome but instead employed a set of relevant dependent measures.

Theoretical Issues

Beyond various methodological concerns associated with testing the theory, SLT needs to be understood in terms of its fairly limited potential range of relevance. For example, the theory is silent with respect to the possible impact of a leader’s level within an organization. As a leader’s level rises within an organization, does it make sense to make recommendations concerning preferred styles, and, if so, under what contingencies? Also, does pressure on a leader to display consistency in behavior to all followers work against SLT’s espoused principle of the need to vary leader behavior? Does the presence of a crisis (or more generally, a high-stress situation) obviate the recommendations of the theory such that only directive leadership is appropriate (regardless of follower readiness/maturity issues)? Also, SLT needs to be recognized as being silent concerning multinational or cross-cultural issues. SLT also omits transformational dynamics that may be needed when a leader must implement significant organizational change. It is conceivable that all of these factors (organizational level, pressure for consistency of leader action, crisis management, cross-cultural issues, and transformational dynamics) could potentially be incorporated into SLT via the inclusion of additional situational contingencies. Presently, SLT is limited to a single, albeit universally important, contingency (i.e., follower readiness/maturity). However, the inclusion of additional situational variables may help to account for systematic variance that is currently treated as error variance.

The theory may also be of value as a starting point for further developing the prosocial notion that leaders should not give up on subordinates who are less ready/mature, but should espouse attitudes and behaviors that promote the development of all subordinates so as to realize their unique potential. The theory also implicitly subscribes to a view that leaders need to be focused on the unique dyad-based (Scandura & Graen, 1984) differences that exist in their relations with specific subordinates when attempting to be flexible in their behavior and tailoring their leadership behaviors to specific subordinate developmental needs. Hence, a greater contribution
of SLT to understanding and developing leaders may lie in these other, as yet unexamined, theoretical extensions.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study cast doubt on the prescriptions of SLT for how leaders should behave, in general stylistic terms, in relation to subordinates. For followers who are comparatively high on the dimension of readiness/maturity, the theory is arguably misspecified in that the theoretical prediction that low consideration and low structuring are an optimal combination did not receive empirical support. Instead, it appears that leadership may be, at best, largely irrelevant for such followers. For these subordinates, readiness/maturity may serve as a substitute for leadership (Howell, Bowen, Dorfman, Kerr, & Podsakoff, 1990). Although SLT is a well-known and oft-taught approach to leadership education in both managerial and military contexts, the results of empirical tests of the theory’s principles, judged in their totality, indicate that the theory cannot be endorsed without reservation or substantial modification.

Notes

1. Because of the wording and coding of responses to this scale, higher values indicate a lower need for supervisory monitoring.

2. To demonstrate that the various splits created measurable differences on the critical dimensions, formal tests for mean differences were conducted on the dimensions of leader consideration, leader structuring, and follower readiness/maturity. Comparisons for the three dimensions revealed significant differences on consideration (high \( M = 22.11, \) \( SD = 1.59; \) low \( M = 16.60, \) \( SD = 2.78; \) \( F = 857.54, p < .01, \) \( \eta^2 = .61 \)), structuring (high \( M = 21.82, \) \( SD = 1.67; \) moderate \( M = 17.88, \) \( SD = 1.02; \) low \( M = 13.16, \) \( SD = 2.18; \) \( F = 1,064.42, p < .01, \) \( \eta^2 = .80 \)), and readiness/maturity (high \( M = 10.00, \) \( SD = 0.00; \) moderate \( M = 9.00, \) \( SD = 0.0; \) low \( M = 7.24, \) \( SD = 1.47; \) \( F = 546.67, p < .01, \) \( \eta^2 = .63 \)). These results suggest that genuine distinctions were created on the key dimensions of the theory.

3. For example, because of the current war-time footing, Cadet Field Training involved all trainees keeping their weapons with them at all times and in all contexts (literally) throughout the entire training period. Continuous social contact during the training period in a number of natural social settings (e.g., at meals, in barracks, and during exercises) facilitated the development of genuine social dynamics and the emergence of relative degrees of social attraction.

References


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