

PathGoal Theory of Leadership

Pathgoal theory was initially developed by Robert House to explain workplace leadership. The theory builds heavily on two theories of work motivation: goal setting and expectancy theory. *Goal-setting theory* suggests that an effective way to motivate people is to set challenging but realistic goals and to offer rewards for goal accomplishment. *Expectancy theory* explains why people work hard to attain work goals. People will engage in behaviors that lead to goal attainment if they believe that (a) goal attainment leads to something they value (e.g., increase in pay, status, promotion) and (b) the behaviors they engage in have a high chance (expectancy) of leading to the goal. If people do not value the reward for goal attainment or believe that their behavior is unlikely to lead to goal attainment, then they will not be motivated to work hard.

Pathgoal theory builds on these propositions by arguing that effective leaders are those who help their subordinates achieve their goals. According to pathgoal theory, leaders have a responsibility to provide their subordinates with the information and support necessary to achieve the work goals. One way to do this is to make salient the effort reward relationship by linking desirable outcomes to goal attainment (e.g., emphasizing the positive outcomes to the subordinates if they achieve their goals) and/or increasing the belief (expectancy) that their work behaviors can lead to goal attainment (e.g., by emphasizing that certain behaviors are likely to lead to goal attainment).

The term *pathgoal* reflects the belief that effective leaders clarify the paths necessary for their subordinates to achieve the subordinates' goals. Leaders can do this in two main ways. First, leaders can engage in behaviors that help subordinates facilitate goal attainment (e.g., by providing information and other resources necessary to obtain goals). Second, leaders can engage in behaviors that remove obstacles that might hinder subordinates' pursuit of their goals (e.g., by removing workplace factors that reduce the chances of goal attainment).

Leadership Styles

Pathgoal theory is a *contingency theory*, proposing that effective leadership is contingent on the leader's adopting a particular style of behavior to match the needs to the subordinate and the situation in which the subordinate is working. The theory identifies four main types of leadership behaviors, each of which can help subordinates attain their goals. *Supportive* leadership involves being considerate of the needs of subordinates and creating a friendly atmosphere to work in. *Directive* leadership involves letting subordinates know what is expected of them, giving clear guidelines, and making sure they know the rules and procedures to get the work done. *Participative* leadership involves consulting with subordinates and taking account of their opinions and suggestions when making decisions. *Achievementoriented* leadership involves setting challenging work goals, emphasizing the need for excellence in performance, and showing confidence that the subordinates will attain high work standards.

The choice of which style of leadership to use depends on two groups of contingency variables. One group concerns environmental factors that are outside the control of the subordinate (e.g., task structure, authority system, work group), and the other group concerns individual factors that are inherently part of the subordinate (e.g., personality, experience, and abilities).

The theory makes a number of predictions concerning which style of leadership will be most effective in particular situations and with types of subordinates. Because of the large number of contingency factors, there are many potential predictions; some of the main ones are described below.

Supportive leadership should be most effective when the nature of the work is stressful, boring, or dangerous. This is because a supportive style by the leader will increase subordinates' satisfaction and selfconfidence and reduce the negative aspects of the situation. This should lead to an increase in the intrinsic valence of the job and the expectation that it will be performed well and lead to the attainment of goals. However, supportive leadership would have little benefit for those subordinates who are satisfied in their work and find it enjoyable (because they already find the work intrinsically motivating).

Directive leadership is most effective when people are unsure what tasks they have to do or when there is a lot of uncertainty within their working environment. This occurs primarily because a directive style clarifies what the subordinates need to do and therefore reduces task ambiguity. In addition, the directive style will make clear the relationship between effort and reward and therefore the expectancy that effort will lead to a valued outcome.

Participative leadership can be effective in unstructured situations because it can increase role clarity, and it can also be effective for people who have a high need to control their environment. Conversely, this style will be less effective for those people who like to be directed at the workplace and do not take on too much responsibility for their outcomes.

Finally, an achievement-oriented style is effective when the work is complex and the environment is uncertain. This is because it can increase subordinates' selfconfidence that they are able to attain the goals.

According to pathgoal theory, leaders, to be effective, need to do the following: recognize the needs of those they manage and try to satisfy these needs through the workplace, reward people for achieving their goals, help subordinates identify the most effective paths they need to take to reach their goals, and clear those paths so that subordinates can reach their goals. The particular style of leadership that is effective in achieving these outcomes will depend on the contingency factors described above.

The theory has a great deal of intuitive appeal because it can be applied easily to the workplace. It emphasizes understanding the needs of subordinates within the context of their working situation and using the appropriate style of leadership to help subordinates achieve their work goals. One implication of this approach is that leaders need to adopt multiple leadership styles and be able to tailor these styles to the characteristics of the subordinate and the situation. Because of the emphasis on the role of leaders' behaviors rather than their traits, the theory has many applications for leadership training programs.

—Robin Martin

Further Readings

House, R. J. *A path-goal theory of leadership effectiveness*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 16 (1971). pp. 321–338.

House, R. J. *Path-goal theory of leadership: Lessons, legacy, and a reformulated theory*. *Leadership Quarterly*, vol. 7 (1996). pp. 323–352.

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