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SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND TASK BEHAVIOR

In problem-solving groups, individual members engage in different types of behavior, including *task behavior*, which focuses on the external problem to be addressed, and *socioemotional behavior*, which addresses the feelings that arise as a result of group interaction. This entry describes these two types of behavior and examines the leadership styles of group leaders who focus on each one.

Starting in 1947, social psychologist Robert F. Bales, at Harvard University, began studying roles in problem-solving groups. For the time, his methods were quite innovative. Small groups were observed through one-way mirrors, and all behavior was recorded. The observed groups were composed of five male Harvard undergraduates. They were given a human relations case and were told to discuss it for about 40 minutes and then dictate a recommended solution into a tape recording at the end of their session. After some refinement, Bales devised a set of 12 behavior categories that trained judges could code while observing ongoing interaction. Generally, 15 to 20 acts were coded every minute.

The 12 categories of behavior included some that were directly relevant to solving the problem the group was asked to address. Three of these are *gives suggestion*, *gives information*, and *asks for opinion*. Other categories refer to emotional expression related to interpersonal interaction—for example, *shows tension release*, *shows antagonism*, and *shows solidarity*. Overall, 56% of the coded behaviors were considered problem-solving attempts, and 44% included reactions to those attempts. In general, a task-related initiative would produce both a task-related response and some emotional response. For example, one person might offer a suggestion, a second might give an opinion about that suggestion, and a third might express annoyance, causing the first person to look embarrassed.

One overall conclusion from these and related studies is that when groups work on problems, two kinds of issues come into focus—those related to the challenge of solving the problem confronting the group and those that involve addressing and managing the feelings that the interaction produces. Such emotions are almost always apt to be a feature of group interaction directed toward solving a problem, especially if the problem is ambiguous or difficult. Thus some behavior has to be directed toward the task, and some toward relationships and emotions.

A second conclusion from such studies is that while each person engages in behavior related to both challenges, some people focus more on the task, others focus more on feelings, and some are quite balanced. Whether any individual at any instant, or over time, focuses more on the external task or more on emotions within the group will depend on two things. First, what are the individual's own inclinations? What role or roles is he or she most comfortable performing? Second, how do others in the group behave? That is, any individual's behavior is shaped by his or her own personality and by the behavior of others. As pioneering psychologist Kurt Lewin observed many years ago, behavior is a function of the person and the environment.

Regardless of the cause, some individuals in groups become *task specialists* and others become what Bales called *socioemotional specialists*. This development has implications for leadership. Is the leader likely to be one of these specialists or instead a person who can deal effectively with both the challenges of the group's task and the dynamics arising from the group's feelings? An initial hypothesis was that there would be a status order in which the person who contributed most to problem solving would also be the best liked. This hypothesis was not supported. Neither the person who was most active nor the person who was rated as having the best ideas was typically the best liked. Instead, it was found that there seemed to be two leaders in many groups, one who was regarded as the *task leader* and one who seemed to be the *socioemotional leader*. This finding suggested the hypothesis of two complementary leaders, one focusing on the task and the other on emotions and relationships. This hypothesis included the idea that the two leaders might get along quite well, their complementary skills combining to promote both group success and group happiness. The idea that leadership involves these two roles is supported by research published by Ralph Stogdill in 1948. Stogdill found that two categories of leader behavior are *initiating structure* and *showing consideration*.

The phenomenon of two complementary leaders, or a bifurcated leadership structure, might emerge for two reasons. First, an individual leader may only rarely be skilled enough to effectively lead toward both task accomplishment and toward group cohesiveness. Second, it may be that there are inherent incompatibilities between task roles and socioemotional roles. On one hand, the task-oriented leader needs to move people and direct and organize them. Behaviors directed toward that end disturb and perhaps antagonize people. On the other hand, the relationship-oriented leader cannot both soothe ruffled feathers and issue orders, so that leader will stay away from directing tasks. Thus, the inherent conflict between moving people and soothing them is a challenge for leadership and opens the door to bifurcated leadership.

Task-Oriented Versus Relationship-Oriented Leadership Styles

In many organized groups, just one person has the formal authority to lead. Unless that individual is the rare person who can successfully choreograph both task leadership and socioemotional leadership, he or she is likely to prefer one style to the

other. This possibility was the starting point for Fred Fiedler's highly influential *contingency theory of leadership*. According to the social psychologist Martin Chemers, Fiedler's emphasis on task-focused versus socioemotionally focused leadership grew out of his research on psychotherapists who were more distant versus more accepting. This work led Fiedler to ask questions about the relative effectiveness of leaders who were more or less interpersonally oriented. Fiedler's important work on leadership led to a number of conclusions. First, leaders could be reliably distinguished as primarily valuing either interpersonal relations or goal accomplishment. Second, these two different kinds of leaders are effective in different kinds of situations. Third, the differential effectiveness of such leaders depends largely on whether their values and competencies match the demands of the situation. When there is a good match between the leader's personal qualities and the demands of the situation, the leader is more likely to feel confident and become active and directive and therefore effective. In these *in-match* situations, the leader is likely to experience *flow*, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described as a *dynamic state of consciousness* marked by feelings of engagement, confidence, and control.

After years of research, Fiedler devised a simple measure that has proven remarkably effective in identifying relationship versus task-oriented leaders—the Least Preferred Coworker (LPC) Scale. Individual leaders are asked to consider the one coworker "with whom you have had the most difficulty in getting the job done." The leaders rate the coworkers on dimensions such as pleasant–unpleasant, accepting–rejecting, and trustworthy–untrustworthy. Essentially, they indicate whether they think those difficult coworkers are good people or not. The high-LPC leader is one who values interpersonal relations and grants that the difficult coworker is a decent human being, even though he or she is a detriment to accomplishing goals. The low-LPC leader has no patience for the troublesome colleague and roundly condemns him or her.

Fiedler also identified three variables that determine how much control the leader has or, in somewhat different terms, how favorable the situation is for leadership. These variables are the quality of the leader–follower relationships in the group, the clarity and difficulty of the task facing the group, and the degree of power or authority the leader has by virtue of his or her formal position or role in the group. A highly favorable situation, in which the leader has lots of control, is one in which there are good relationships between the leader and the followers, the task is easy and clear, and the leader's position provides a good deal of formal authority. An unfavorable situation is one in which the opposites hold: The leader and the followers relate to each other poorly, the group faces a difficult and ambiguous task, and the leader does not have much formal power. Of course, most situations are neither that good nor that bad. Quite often the situation is moderately favorable, giving the leader a moderate degree of control.

Fiedler's major contribution was to show that low-LPC leaders, who value task accomplishment over good interpersonal relations, are more effective than high-LPC leaders when the situation is either very good or very bad. In very good situations, the leader can provide structure and direction without worrying about ruffling any feathers. In very bad situations, the leader does not have time to address hurt feelings or interpersonal conflict and instead must take charge and tell people exactly what to do. Both these situations call for the strengths of the low-LPC leader. In contrast, in moderately favorable situations, followers need some direction, but they also need to be treated with dignity, and their feelings warrant attention. These are the conditions that play to the values and competencies of the relationship-oriented, high-LPC leader.

A great deal of research has focused on Fiedler's contingency theory of leadership. On the whole, the research has supported it. Task-oriented and socioemotionally oriented leaders indeed thrive in different contexts. In those situations that play to their strengths, they are active and confident, and the groups they are leading do well. If there is a mismatch between the particulars of the situation and a leader's values and behavior, the leader's effectiveness is significantly diminished.

George R. Goethals

See also Charismatic Leadership; Contingency Theories of Leadership; Great Person Theory of Leadership; Interactionist Theories of Leadership; Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory; Leadership; Path–Goal

Theory of Leadership; Personality Theories of Leadership; Social Identity Theory of Leadership; Transactional Leadership Theories; Trasformational Leadership Theories; Vertical Dyad Linkage Model

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