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An Overview and Discussion of Fred E. Fiedler's Contingency
Model of Leadership Effectiveness

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Fred E. Fiedler, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Washington and specialist in “*Leadership and group effectiveness, social and organizational psychology*” (University of Washington, 2007), emigrated to the U.S. from Austria in 1938 (A&E, 2007). Here, I discuss his *Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness*, as first proposed in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (1964) and later clarified and extended in *Leadership and Effective Management* (1974). Twelve years of research predicated the model (1964) and by 1974, Fiedler had conducted over 30 studies (1974).

Fiedler's model arose in response to limitations in the two major questions focused on in leadership study at that time; what the personality factors are which make someone a leader, and what the personality traits are which make them effective (1964).

The two main concepts in Fiedler's theory are *situational favorableness* and *leadership style*. (Singh, Bohra, & Dalal, 1979). Fiedler sees group performance as being "contingent upon both the motivational system of the leader and the degree to which the leader has control and influence," viewing "the leadership situation as an arena in which the leader seeks to satisfy his own as well as the organization's goals" (1974, p. 73).

Fiedler defines groups as sharing *proximity, similarity* and a *common fate* on *task-related events*. Fiedler's model concerns itself with "groups in which the members are, and also perceive each other to be, interdependent in achieving a common goal, not "individuals working separately towards a common goal (*coacting groups*) (1964, p. 152).

The leader in the group is defined by Fiedler as the person who "directs and coordinates task-relevant group activities" and is elected, appointed or the most influential sociometric member regarding questions of task (1964, p. 152). The leader's effectiveness is determined by the result of his/her group's performance of their designated task (1964).

Fiedler's 1951 research on "psychotherapeutic relations" suggested that productive psychotherapists saw themselves as similar to their patients, as opposed to poor therapists who saw their patients as completely unlike themselves (1964). He postulated that he "who perceives another person as similar tends to feel psychologically close, accepting, and permissive" towards that person, and intended to discover whether these "attitudes were also related to team performance" (1964, p. 153).

Fiedler "anticipated that psychologically close teams would be more effective than teams characterized by task-oriented, psychologically distant, and less accepting" leaders, and the "importance of sociometric acceptance as a moderator variable" would become even more apparent (1964, p.156). "Sociometric relationships" or "sociometric acceptance" can refer to friendships or accepting, supporting relationships between individual members.

Fiedler's proposal was to "contribute to the theoretical integration of the area by presenting a framework for understanding factors which determine how a leader's personality attributes affect group performance," stating that it "will, therefore, be very important to know whether the group environment will make it relatively easy or difficult for the leader to influence the members of his group" (1964, p. 158).

The research program which formed the basis for Fiedler's Contingency Model "hypothesized that the leader's perceptions of his co-workers reflect important, task-relevant attitudes, and that these would materially influence group interaction and performance" (Fiedler, 1964, p. 153)

Of Fiedler's *predicator variables (personality measures)*, the key one is the LPC or Least Preferred Coworker score (Fiedler & Chemers, 1974), which began as one of two components in determining the ASo or "assumed similarity between opposites" score. He saw ASo and LPC to be so correlated that he used them interchangeably (1964).

The ASo score is obtained by asking the leader to describe: "(a) the person whom he considers his most preferred co-worker (MPC), and (b) the person whom he considers his least preferred co-worker (LPC). The descriptions are made on eight-point, bi-polar adjective checklists . . . using items descriptive of personality attributes" such as pleasant vs. unpleasant, friendly vs. unfriendly and rejecting vs. accepting (Fiedler, 1964, p. 154).

A measure of "profile similarity" is computed and "A person who perceives his most and least preferred co-workers as very similar will, therefore, have a high assumed similarity score (or, in operational terms, a small discrepancy score), while a person who strongly differentiates between these two "opposites" on his co-worker continuum, will have a low ASo (and thus a large discrepancy) score" (Fiedler, 1964, pp. 154-155).

The LPC score actually represents the level of esteem for the least preferred coworker. Fiedler uses LPC interchangeably with ASo because high assumed similarity between the least preferred coworker and most preferred coworker equals a high(er) esteem for the least preferred coworker (Fiedler, 1964).

A low ASo/LPC leader rejects his least preferred coworker as favorable, and focuses on the task more than relationships (Fiedler, 1964). They are "more punitive, although not necessarily more distant . . . give and ask for more suggestions, are less inclined to tolerate or to make irrelevant comments, demand and get more participation from members, and are more controlling and managing" (Fiedler, 1964, p. 155). Low ASo/LPC scorers are vocal and interruptive and issue more negative statements "again indicating less concern with having pleasant relationships" (Fiedler, 1964, p. 155). High ASo/LPC leaders promote member satisfaction and lower anxiety, typically being more compliant and relaxed "especially under pleasant and non-threatening conditions" and see "a poor co-worker in a relatively favorable manner" (Fiedler, 1964, p.155).

Fiedler's investigations demonstrated: "(a) that ASo or LPC scores predicted leadership effectiveness to the degree to which the leader had good interpersonal relations in

the group; and (b) that the direction of the relationship was contingent upon the leader's relations with key group members, as well as upon the nature of the task" (1964, p. 157).

Fiedler also found "that the permissive, accepting, high LPC leaders had better group performance on creative tasks under relatively stress-free conditions" and "the managing, controlling, low LPC leaders had better performance under relatively less pleasant, more tension-arousing group climates" (1964, p. 157). Fiedler admits that though the "model predicted a curvilinear relationship such that leaders with low. . . (LPC) scores. . . would perform more effectively in very favorable and unfavorable situations, while high LPC leaders . . . would perform more effectively in situations intermediate in favorableness," the data supporting the model occurs in the field and not in the lab (1971, p. 128).

Fiedler's Contingency Model is based on "three, critical, situational components which are likely to affect the leader's influence" (1964, p. 158). These components comprise the *situational favorableness* dimension, which is basically how much power over the group the leader is granted by the group situation (Fiedler, 1971, p. 129).

The first is *Affective Leader-group Relations*. "The liked and respected leader does not need formal power, and he can obtain compliance from his group under circumstances which, in the case of a disliked or distrusted leader, would result in open revolt" and this "leader's interpersonal attitudes influence group performance to a significantly greater degree than similar attitudes of a leader who is sociometrically not accepted" (Fiedler, 1964, p. 159). Determined by another 8 point continua; the leader defines group atmosphere by choosing levels of pleasantness, friendliness, etc. (Fiedler, 1964, p. 159).

Fiedler's second component is *Task Structure* which "describes the nature of the task in terms of its clarity or ambiguity," stating that the "leader's job will be considerably easier if the job is highly structured than if it is vague and unspecific" (1964, p. 160).

Fiedler's *Position Power*, the third situational component, is "defined by the

power inherent in the leadership position" including "rewards, sanctions, authority over group members, and organizational support," usually "inversely related to the power of his members" (1964, p. 161). Fiedler's statistical result, once again defined by a long check-list, illustrated that as in many military and industrial groups, leaders are generally given more power over their groups when the group performs a highly structured task (1964).

Fiedler graded these situational components from most to least important:

A leader who is liked by his group, who knows exactly what to do . . . and who holds a relatively powerful position will find it easier to do his job than one who is disliked by his group, has a vague, unstructured task, and has no power. Difficulty arises because any ordering of intermediate points is to some degree arbitrary. To order these octants, the leader's relationship with his members was postulated to be the most important of the three dimensions (1964, p. 163).

Task structure is second in importance as it demands "higher authority, such as a standard operating procedure," with position power coming in third (Fiedler, 1964, p. 163)

Fiedler paved the way. Strube & Garcia assert that "Fiedler's model represents the first concerted attempt to apply Lewin's (1951) precept that behavior is a function of the Person X Situation interaction to leadership research" (1981, p. 307). Fiedler himself notes how much response and criticism his contingency model has evoked, yet he never appears too defensive, often embracing criticisms from contemporaries and incorporating them into his extended research. This is a sign of a high LPC leader.

The strength of Fiedler's Contingency Model hinges on the fact that it is based in contingency theory, therefore allowing (in theory) for more variation of any given situation as well as the acknowledgement of human factors. I admire that Fiedler is open in his definition of a leader, anticipating that this person may not be the one with the title.

Fiedler allows other components may affect the influence of the leader such as member motivation and external stress, yet finds them "intercorrelated" because a "very able leader tends to be highly respected," therefore "able to motivate his group members."

(1964, p. 159). I do not agree this is sufficient theory as external stress is not stable and is a highly influential situational factor.

One significant problem with Fiedler's model is that it is too rigid. He uses very rigid, statistically controlled analyses to achieve quantifiable results which are neither rational, nor contingent. According to Singh, et al., the major issue with Fiedler's model is the fixed, invariability in the way *situational favorableness* is determined (assuming that group performance is the most important component and position power is the least and that this is unchanging across situations) (1979). Fiedler argued that "If leadership is indeed a relationship based on power and influence, then it seems reasonable to qualify situations on the basis of the power and influence" (1974, p. 63), and he acknowledged the first dimension of group atmosphere to be "highly subject to shifting frames of reference" as in unpleasant occurrences seeming even more unpleasant in a pleasant atmosphere" (1964, p.159), yet position power is still unequivocally third in importance.

In general, Fiedler talks one way (theory) and acts another (model), though I would not label him a hypocrite. The difficulty of his task – quantifying a contingency theory – is possibly impossible. The individual and humane contingency lives in his theory, but arbitrary statistical analysis lives in the model. For instance, in his 1974 text with Chemers, he discussed leadership as being an emotionally-charged issue due to the effects of power and influence on the nature of relationships, stating that "the leadership situation is more than a transaction based on an exchange of economic commodities" (1974, p. 5), yet he uses math to prove a leadership model. His model statistically qualifies Position Power as the least important indicator in *situational favorableness*, therefore not allowing for contingencies.

Fiedler did note a few contingencies regarding the ASo scores, stating that if "the low LPC leader knows that the task accomplishment is in the bag, he can afford to be friendly and concerned with the feelings of his coworkers" (Fiedler et al., 1974, p. 77), which is based in Maslow's need hierarchy using the logic that if hunger is satiated, food

will no longer motivate (Fiedler et al., 1974, p. 76). In fact, Fiedler noted contingencies at every step, saving his *derrière*, yet leaving the possibility of a workable structured statistical model such as his, doubtful.

Another issue with Fiedler's model is that it is always from the leader's perspective. No member input is calculated. What do the members of the group think about their leaders? Who knows! Who cares! Yet again, in the 1974 simplified and altered text, he states "there can be no leaders in isolation. If you want to know whether you are a leader, see if there is someone following you" (Fiedler et al., 1974, p. 4). Fiedler does assert in response to Ashour's (1973) criticism that "Our incomplete understanding of the Least Preferred Co-Worker score clearly represents a major weakness of the theory (1973, p. 361).

Sergiovanni notes *follower maturity* as missing from Fiedler's situational variables which make up *situational favorableness* (p. 391). This is a great point, but I would note that everything regarding the follower is disregarded in Fiedler's theory and model. He backtracks a bit in his 1974 text noting that "asking the members of the group to indicate . . . whether they accept or endorse their leader" is another way to gauge *Leader-member Relations*, though his model has yet to reflect this (Fiedler et al., 1974, pp. 64-65).

I would also mention that in arriving at an ASo score it may not be best, as Fiedler suggests, for the leader to think of everyone s/he has ever worked with in arriving at the LPC and MPC scores (1964), as this may lead to a tendency to idealize or criminalize these co-workers, veering from reality.

Would Fiedler's model work in a public library? It is possible, especially with the tendency to manipulate and flout statistics in order to keep the funding coming in from the board, the government, the community... though full implementation does not appear plausible, even though Strube & Garcia (through meta-analysis) found Fiedler's model to be "extremely robust in predicting group performance"(1981, p. 307).

Vecchio goes so far as to imply Fiedler and his students, researchers and associates tampered with the results, albeit unwittingly (1983, p. 406). Which makes a bit of sense when you read Fiedler's statement that the "model seems to predict leadership performance in field situations, but not completely in laboratory situations" (1971, p. 148).

Theodory's Lebanon schools study "rejects Fiedler's (5) argument that the degree to which groups are effective in high control situations is caused by the tendency of low and high LPC principals to secure their secondary motivational goals. Second . . . high and moderate control situations in high LPC schools have no differential bearing on teachers' satisfaction and students' achievement . . . And third, it provides covert support . . . that Position Power is more important than Task Structure." (1981, p. 5)

It would be extremely difficult to implement Fiedler's Contingency Model in a public library system for the above reasons. Most public librarians do not have many secondary motivational goals – seriously. I know this may be an idyllic thought, but besides providing for their families and/or simply bringing home a paycheck and not accruing late fines on the dozens of books they read per week, they are not in it for the perks.

Though Fiedler's model could perhaps be applied to the daily mechanical workings of a public library, it does not correlate to the individual humanity of the workers or the nature of the mission of a library (information and education without quantitative measures on how much our users are learning). Position Power is the more significant dimension in public libraries. There is no place in Fiedler's model to play with the values given each dimension to bestow upon one dimension more importance in any given situation.

That being said, I believe Fiedler's theory could be implemented splendidly in public libraries, if there were any way to boil it down to a concrete, adaptable model.

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