The Importance of Flexible Leadership

Gary Yukl
UAlbany

Research on leadership and management during the past several decades provide strong evidence that flexible, adaptive leadership is essential for most managers. The evidence comes from several different types of research and many different theories. Flexible, adaptive leadership is especially important when there is substantial change in situation and the leadership behaviors that are relevant for it. Differences in the situation occur within the same position, when a person is transitioning to a different leadership position, or when major changes are made in the current position (e.g., reorganization, merger). This paper provides a brief review of the relevant literature in management and leadership. The relevant literature from the past half century is vast, and my review only provides representative examples of different types of research.

Comparing Different Types of Managers

Many comparative studies have been conducted to identify roles, activities, skills, and behaviors associated with different types of management and administrative positions. The comparative studies find both similarities and differences in the essential activities and relevant behaviors for different types of positions. Research on managers at different levels found that the relevant roles and behaviors vary from first-line supervisors to top executives (e.g., Jacobs & Jaques, 1987; McCall, Morrison & Hannan, 1978; McCall & Segrist, 1980; Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007). Research comparing different types of management positions (e.g., staff vs. line position, sales vs. production) also finds important differences in the required skills and behaviors. The cross-cultural research on leadership provides additional evidence of the need for flexibility in behavior when taking a management position in a different country (e.g., House et al., 2004).

Despite the demands and constraints for a position, managers have choices and they can influence the scope of their responsibilities and the time they devote to different activities (e.g., Stewart, 1982). However, managers who spend a long time in one type of position usually have more difficulty in adapting to the requirements of a different type of position. The research comparing managers with either successful or derailed careers found that the behaviors and skills that are strengths in one type of position can become weaknesses if a manager is not flexible enough to adapt to the new requirements for a different position (e.g., Lombardo & McCauley, 1988; McCall & Lombardo, 1983).

The research comparing managerial positions has implications for improving flexible, adaptive leadership. First, managers should proactively seek to reduce constraints, modify demands (role expectations), and expand their choices over time. Second, a person's ability to adapt to different requirements should be considered in making selection and promotion decisions. Third, a variety of different types of challenges and leadership positions early in one's career can help individuals become more flexible and adaptive. The research at CCL identified types of challenges that are relevant for developing different leadership skills (e.g., McCauley, Eastman, & Ohlott, 1995).

Different Situations For the Same Manager

Another set of studies has examined how managers must adapt to different situations within the same job. Vroom and Yetton (1973) proposed a normative model specifying which decision procedures are appropriate for different types of decisions, and the research found that managers whose decision procedures were consistent with the normative model were more likely to be effective. Situational theories of leadership such as path-goal theory (e.g., House & Mitchell, 1974) and the Multiple-linkage Model (Yukl, 1989) identify appropriate behaviors for managers who are responsible for different types of tasks. For example, more clarifying of role expectations is needed for tasks that are novel and complex than for tasks that are routine and simple. Likewise, more supportive leadership is needed when the task is very stressful and difficult. Other theories of leadership specify different behaviors for subordinates who differ in their skills and motivation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1984) or their exchange relationship (e.g., Graen, 1985). For example, more delegation is appropriate and less close monitoring is needed for a subordinate who is confident and competent than for one who is not. Finally, research on influence tactics finds that a different mix of tactics is appropriate depending in whether the target person is a subordinate, peer, or boss (Kipnis, Schmidt & Wilkinson, 1980; Yukl, 2006; Yukl & Falbe, 1990).

The research on situational differences for the same manager has several implications for improving flexible, adaptive leadership. First, managers need to learn how to diagnose the situation quickly and understand what pattern of behavior that will produce a successful outcome. Second, managers should become proficient at using a wide range of behaviors. Third, managers can be proactive about influencing the situational variables that determine what behavior choices are available or necessary.

Changing Conditions and New Information

Flexible, adaptive leadership is also important when unusual events and external changes create an immediate crisis or an emerging threat or opportunity. Abrupt changes in the preferences or priorities of bosses, clients, or other users provide one source of uncertainty, and they may require quick revisions in plans and schedules. Adaptive behavior is also important when there are unusual events such as accidents, equipment breakdowns, supply shortages, a terrorist attack, or the effects of bad weather. Crisis management requires unusual actions and behaviors from leaders, and failure to respond in a decisive, appropriate way is often very visible. External changes that will affect the organization may be gradual rather than abrupt, but major changes may be needed to respond to new threats or opportunities. Even when there is more time for planning an appropriate strategy, flexible adaptive leadership is important to ensure the organization will survive and prosper in the future. Finally, when managers receive feedback about the effects of prior actions and decisions, there is an opportunity to evaluate effectiveness and determine if additional actions are required. A flexible, adaptive response is especially important when there is information that a prior decision or strategy is not working as expected and is likely to fail if adjustments are not made in a timely way.

The research on crises and major external changes provide some additional insights about flexible, adaptive behavior. It is not only a matter of reacting to immediate crises in a confident and decisive way. The research on changing conditions and new information points out that it is also important for leaders to identify potential problems and take steps either to avoid them or to prepare

for them. Second, it is essential for managers to learn about the effects of their actions and decisions and use the information to make revisions rather than denying or ignoring bad news. Finally, it is important to use feedback and new information to improve one's mental model about causal relationships.

Changing Priorities for Multiple Objectives Involving Tradeoffs

Flexible leadership is especially difficult when a manager has multiple objectives that are inter-related in complex ways that involve tradeoffs. The need to balance competing objectives or values creates difficult problems, because attempts to improve one objective may undermine efforts to achieve a related objective. The type of balance that is selected will not be permanent, because changing conditions often change the priorities for the objectives, or provide new challenges and opportunities relevant for attaining an optimal balance.

One type of tradeoff involves concern for task objectives and concern for people, and the leadership literature has a long history of research on ways to find an appropriate high-high solution (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1982; Bradford, 1976; Fleishman & Harris, 1962). Another set of competing objectives involves task performance versus learning objectives. When the top priority is reliable high performance, a manager will use a pattern of behaviors designed to avoid mistakes, whereas when learning by individual or team is very important, task assignments and autonomy will be increased and more learning from mistakes will be tolerated (e.g., Vroom & Jago, 1988). The tradeoff between efficiency and innovative adaptation has received much attention in the literature on strategic management, and ambidexterity for an organization requires flexible, adaptive leadership (e.g., Miller, 1990; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). Another type of challenge for managers is to find a good balance between short-term and long-term objectives. Finally, changing conditions over time will alter priorities for different objectives and require adjustments in a manager's actions and decisions (Beer, 2001; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004).

The research on multiple objectives and changing priorities provides more evidence about the importance of flexible, adaptive leadership and also has some practical implications. First, it is essential to learn about the complex tradeoffs among objectives and to recognize the likely side effects of leader actions and decisions. Second, leaders should learn how to look for synergies and ways to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously. Third, leaders should understand how changing conditions can alter the relative priorities for competing values.

Traits and Skills Relevant for Flexible Leadership

The trait approach has been around for many decades, but there is increasing interest in several skills that appear relevant for flexible, adaptive leadership. These skills involve the ability to understand the situational requirements for effective leadership and to be flexible in adapting to changing conditions and crises (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007). Evidence that these skills are related to effective leadership is still limited but the number of supportive studies has been increasing in recent years.

Cognitive complexity and systems thinking include the ability to understand how the various parts of the organization relate to each other and how changes in one part of the system will eventually affect the other parts. Managers must also be able to comprehend how changes in the

external environment will affect the organization. A manager with high cognitive complexity and systems thinking is able to develop a better mental model to help understand causal relationships (Senge, 1990). Situational awareness and social intelligence both involve a person's ability to identify and understand the leadership situation, including social and political processes and relationships. Social intelligence also includes the ability to select an appropriate response and to be flexible on one's behavior (Zaccaro, Gilbert, Thor, & Mumford, 1991).

Emotional intelligence includes the ability to recognize and regulate one's emotions, and empathy for the feelings of others, which is essential for determining how to influence and motivate them (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1995). Self awareness includes the ability to understand one's values, motives, and effectiveness in influencing others (Zaccaro, Foti, & Kenny, 1991).

Openness to learning and new ideas is one of the big five personality traits, and it is essential for leaders who must adapt to changing conditions. This trait includes the ability to accept feedback about the impact of one's actions and learn how to improve them. The trait also includes the ability to learn new ways to dealing with problems. A person who relies on habitual forms of behavior and denies negative feedback or new ideas is unlikely to be flexible and adaptive (Argyris, 1991; Dechant, 1990).

The practical implications of the research on traits and skills relevant for flexible leadership is that measures of them should be included when assessing candidates for positions where behavioral flexibility is especially important. A second implication is that management development should include opportunities to enhance skills relevant for flexible leadership. A third implication is that when individuals make career choices they should carefully consider the extent of their current skills in flexible adaptive leadership and the need for these skills in the types of positions they seek to attain.

Theories of Behavioral Flexibility

Several theories have directly addressed the need for behavioral flexibility by managers. The importance of flexible behavior is increased by role conflicts that occur when subordinates, peers, and bosses have different expectations for a manager (Hooijberg & Choi, 2000; Tsui, 1984; Tsui, Ashford, St. Clair, & Xin, 1995). Role conflicts may be caused also by the inconsistent preferences or priorities of different stakeholders, such as clients, owners, and employees in an organization. Role conflicts often require the manager to find a acceptable compromised or a win-win solution, and the process usually involves some negotiation and interpersonal influence. When changing conditions or new role senders create different role expectations, a manager must find new ways to cope with the changes.

Theories of competing values also include an explicit discussion of the need for flexible leadership (Hooijberg, 1994; Quinn, Spreitzer, & Hart, 1992). The effectiveness of a manager depends on finding ways to carry out competing roles in a highly integrated way. One example of a good balance is called "tough love" and it involves balancing values for human relations and task-goal achievement. Another example is called "practical vision" and it involves balancing values for change and stability.

The theory of versatile leadership (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003) also involves competing values, but effective flexibility is defined as an appropriate amount of skills or behavior related to competing objectives. Two competing values emphasized in this "duality approach" are forceful vs. enabling styles, and emphasis on strategic vs. operational objectives.

Flexible Leadership Theory

Flexible leadership theory uses ideas from several different literatures, including leadership, human resource management, strategic management, organization theory, and organizational change (Yukl, In Press; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004, 2005). It is a theory of strategic leadership that emphasizes the need to influence key determinants of financial performance for a company: efficiency, innovative adaptation, and human capital. One form of influence is the use of task, relations, and change-oriented leadership behaviors. Another form of influence is with management decisions about strategy, programs and systems, and organizational structure. Effective leaders look for behaviors and programs that are mutually compatible and likely to create synergies rather than adverse side effects. In addition, the actions and decisions of managers at different levels in the organization and in inter-dependent subunits must be mutually compatible and consistent with the organization's competitive strategy and external environment.

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