Contingency Leadership Approach for More Effective Leadership

(Nur Abidin)

1. Introduction
Leadership can be simply defined as the process of influencing followers or among themselves to achieve the intended objectives of the organisation (Lussier & Achua, 2010; DuBrin, 2004; Daft, 2005). It is the process of communication both verbally and non-verbally that involves coaching, motivating, directing, and persuading which altogether brings about changes critical to accomplish the desirable purposes. As an emerging discipline, concepts and models of leadership has been intensively developed through a number of leadership studies. Presently, a number of different leadership styles and approaches have been proposed and subjectively claimed to be effective in directing organisations achieving their objectives.

The issue of what leadership styles and approaches that universally works best for an organisation is still a subject of debate both among academia and practitioners, however. Some studies advocate that certain leadership styles and approaches are more effective, while others claim that other styles and approaches are better. They also contend that successful leadership is greatly determined by the characteristics of the leaders themselves. Contenders of this belief view leadership from the narrow perspective accordingly. Recent leadership studies, however, reveal that most successful organisations today are led by leaders who are able to combine and shift their leadership styles and approaches depending greatly on the existing situation of the organisation (Lussier and Achua, 2010; DuBrin, 2004; Daft, 2005). This essay will argue that leadership is not only about the characteristics of the leader alone, but also about the influence of the situation and its impact on the way the leader operates. It will illuminate how the changing situation within an organisation impacts on the leadership behaviours. It will also put forward evidences that good and effective leadership acts in response to the situation and do not lead according to their own style.

2. The Impacts of Situation on Leadership Behaviours
One of the best ways to gain understanding of the impact of situation on the leaders’ behaviours is through investigation of previous research and theories on contingency leadership approaches. A number of studies on this issue have indicated that situation is an unpredictable variable of leadership that is important not only in setting the boundaries of interaction between leaders and their followers but also the leadership behaviours (Lussier and Achua, 2010). The leaders’ ability of assessing the situation or context will determine the success and effectiveness of their leadership in achieving the organisational goals.

An early research delineating the impact of situation on leadership behaviours was carried out by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (Daft, 2005; Lussier & Achua, 2010). Daft, Lussier and Achua indicate that the study has successfully initiated the contingency theory of leadership renowned as Leadership Continuum theory. Tannenbaum and Schmidt concluded that leader might be autocratic, democratic or mixture of these styles which was described in a continuum model. In this model, they also indicated that leaders can control and adjust the level of leadership preferences or behaviours to meet the existing situation of the organisation which clearly reflects the contribution of situation in shaping the leadership behaviours.

Other research was done by Fieldler in 1967 known as Fieldler Contingency model. Razik & Swanson (2001) reported that by considering the situation, its people, task and organisation, Fieldler was able to identify three situational factors that possibly influence the leader effectiveness, they are 1) leader-member relation, 2) Task structure and 3) power of the leader. The interaction of these factors and the leadership styles produces three situation categories: high, moderate and high control, where the more
control is given by the leader, the more favourable the situation will be. This study suggests successful leadership is derived from the interaction between leadership styles and situational variables.

Similar theory was offered by House in 1971 (as cited in Green, 2005). In this model, the leaders’ responsibility is “to increase followers’ motivation to achieve both individual and organisational outcomes” (Samson & Daft, 2003, p.507). To accomplish their duty, the leaders’ behaviours are expected to meet the characteristics of the group members and the task expectation which is again largely dependant to the situation. In this theory, leaders’ role is to increase the followers’ efforts and motivation through providing clear direction to achieve the goals and increase reward (DuBrin, 2004).

Another model was Situational Theory of leadership proposed by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969. To support the theory, they used the Life-Cycle theory of leadership as the basis of their proposition (Avery & Ryan, 2002). According to this theory, leadership can be represented exactly in the same ways as parents looking after their children from infant and adolescence to adulthood. Any organisation will undergo different phases of development with different situation which also requires different leadership patterns. The leadership behaviour, according to this theory, is derived from the situational scanning or interplay between leaders’ direction and socio-emotional support and level of development of the followers. The theory gains a wide acceptance among the leadership practitioners; however, it is intensively criticized as the results of its internal inconsistency and limited empirical research that supports the theory.

Another contingency approach is normative leadership theory which heavily focuses on the interaction of leaders-followers in terms of decision making. Vroom and Yetton (as cited in Green, 2005) believed that organisational performance is much influenced by the quality of the leaders’ decision and followers’ acceptance to this decision. To achieve this, leaders are expected to scan the possible factors in situation to determine the appropriate style of decision making which results in five categories of decision making styles: Decide, Consult (individually), Consult (in group), Facilitate, and Delegate.

By considering the existing theory of contingency, Daft (2005) discovers three situational variables that is believed will shape and determine the leaders’ behaviours in their leadership practices including 1) the characteristics of their followers, 2) the work environment or tasks and 3) the external environment. According to the results of interplay among these situational factors, Daft speculates that leadership behaviours can be grouped into two categories: task behaviour and relationship behaviour. To comply with the emerging situation, leaders are expected to shift their leadership styles by moving the level of the above two behaviours into low or high level. He concludes that when the task behaviour is high, the leadership behaviours will tend to focus on planning for activities at hands, clarifying task, setting goals and roles and monitoring performances. On the other hand, high level of relationship behaviour will result in the provision of support, recognition, followers’ skill and confidence development, and involvement of followers in problem solving and decision making.

A number of research and theories of contingency approaches outlined above have clearly indicated that an effective leaders’ behaviour is never apart from and greatly determined by the situation or context of the organisation. Dubrin and Dalglish (2001) assert that “the essences of contingency approach of leadership are that leaders are most effective when they make their behaviors contingent upon situational forces” (p. 145).

3. Contingency Approaches for Effective Leadership

The underlying concept of contingency leadership approach is that leaders will be more effective when their leadership behaviours and styles are reliant and consider both the internal and external situational forces of the organisation (DuBrin, 2004; Daft, 2005). This section will provide empirical evidences that taking account of situation and applying a variety of leadership styles depending on such circumstances might offer better opportunity for gaining effective leadership rather than being committed to a single leadership style and characteristics possessed by the leader.
a. No single type of leadership that is universally effective for all organisations
A number of leadership studies have suggested that a particular type of leadership might have positive impacts on particular organisation’s performances compared to other styles. This could be true; however, what kind of leadership styles and under what kind of organisations’ circumstance remains questionable and unclear. Until recently, there is not specific research of leadership taxonomy that is claimed to be effective for all kind of organisations (Goleman 2008). Based on inferences and experiences people might contend that particular type of leaderships could work best for all; nevertheless, the credibility of such conclusion remains arguable and contentious. This can be recognized when similar investigations are carried out with different organisational setting and situation; the results might be significantly different. Accordingly, it is still difficult to judge objectively whether one leadership style is superior to others.

b. No universal lists of traits that all successful leaders possess
The premises that effective leadership depend on the individual characteristics of leader alone should be reconsidered. A number of studies have been able to draw different traits categories; however, a number of researchers alert that there are no universal lists of leadership traits that all successful leaders possess (Bass & Stogdill and Kirkpatrick & Locke as cited in Daft, 2004). Instead, the research reveals that the importance of particular leadership traits is greatly related to the situation and organisational environment. This exhibits that certain traits do not always guarantee success as a leader and also indicates that values of particular traits might be different for certain situations. Another study carried out by Smith and Piele (1989) has clearly challenged the idea that leaders are born usually associated with Great Man leadership approach. Instead, they contend that effective leadership traits and competency can be learned and developed accordingly.

c. The complex and dynamic nature of all organisations
Another reason highlighting the important influences of situation on leadership effectiveness is the nature of every organisation which is dynamic and complex. Numerous studies on the life-cycle of organisation uncover that all organisations follow a similar pattern in their development process. Lester et al. (as cited in Shirokhova 2009) point out that the stages involved in every organisational change are; existence, survival, success, revival, and decline. These distinct situational changes require different leadership styles and behaviours. Moreover, Razik and Swanson (2001) assert that the leadership approaches that were appropriate in the twentieth century will not meet the needs and challenges of organisation in the twenty first century. They add that to achieve the designated goals, leaders must have a sound understanding of the internal and external environment and context where leadership is exercised. In addition, the life-cycle of leadership theory proposed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969) also gives evidence that the nature of every organisation is also complex and dynamic that requires situational leadership approach to cope with. Although, the life-cycle of leadership model have been criticized some researchers for its internal inconsistencies and limited related research (Graeff, 1997), the followers’ development level appears to have some degree of validity as a determinant factors for selecting appropriate leadership styles (Hambleton & Gumbert; Norris & Vecchio as cited in Houghton & Yoho, 2005).

d. Empirical research on effectiveness of contingency leadership approach
In addition to the theoretical evidence contending the situational influences on leadership behaviours and success, a number of studies have successfully confirmed the effectiveness of the contingency leadership approach to effective leadership performances. One of the studies is reported by Avery and Ryan (2002) who exercised the situational leadership model over 17 managers of different organisations in Australia using qualitative research approach. Despite its limitation, the findings of the research indicate that situational leadership has given positive effects to the respondents as outlined in the following:

1. The situational leadership concept fits well with manager roles
2. As the nature of situational approach, respondents feel more confident with their roles
3. The situational approach is simple, intuitive and easy to use
4. The concept of situational leadership is logical and makes senses and successfully works for the respondent
Other research contending the effectiveness of contingency leadership approach was carried out by Charles M. Farkas, Philippe De Backer and Suzy Wetlaufer (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2001). In their study, they examined 160 CEOs from six continents who have exhibited a great success in their leadership practices. The investigation reveals that to achieve the intended goals and companies' needs, they adapted their leadership styles to fit particular situation. Specifically, they found five different leadership approaches that were used by the respondents according to the specific organizational situation including 1) strategic approach, e.g. create, test and design long term strategy, 2) Human assets, e.g. add value through hiring, retention and development program, 3) Expertise, e.g. design and implement program, 4) Box, e.g. add value through control, and 5) Change agent, e.g. create an environment of continual reinvention (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2001).

The latest empirical research confirming the need of contingency leadership approach was offered by Goleman (2000). He examines an international food and beverage company undergoing uncertainty and successive decrease in their market sales. To overcome the issues, a new general manager was hired by the Board. After a certain period, the company experienced a significant improvement indicated by increasing sale rates and people's commitment to organisation. Using the qualitative approach, the GM strategy was analysed with a conclusion that the GM has employed a different leadership styles (coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting, and coaching leadership style) for different situation within the given period. From this result, Goleman (2000) asserts that good and effective leaders possess the ability to shift among various leadership styles depending on the existing situations of the organisation.

4. Conclusion
The existence of debate towards the leadership choices and approaches for effective leadership performances indicates that leadership remains central to organisation. Contingency leadership approach which is based on a belief that leaders are most effective when they make their behaviours dependent upon situational forces is predicted to offer greater opportunity for a more effective leadership practices. As suggested in the previous section that leadership is not only about the characteristics of the leader alone, but also about the influence of the situation and its impact on the way the leader operates. A number of underlying theories and models of contingency leadership approach outlined earlier including the Fiedler's contingency theory; leadership continuum theory; path-goal theory; situational leadership; normative leadership and the latest contingency leadership concepts offer by Daft, have provided a sound basis to explain the important influences of situation to the leadership behaviours and styles. The paper also put forward evidences that good and effective leadership acts in response to the situation by questioning the universality of particular leadership styles, challenging the idea of Great Man leadership theory, considering the life-cycle of organisation and leadership as well as providing a number of empirical research confirming the validity of contingency leadership approach for more effective leadership results.
5. References


