# WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE STYLE THEORIES?

*are some trainers engaging in "behavioral dilettantism"?*

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The absence of a generally accepted theory of managerial effectiveness, and of management styles confronts us with a major problem in formal management training which is still unresolved today. Principles are taught that everyone knows are consistently violated. All too often training reflects the thinking of a small nonmanagerial training group who identify with subordinates rather than managers. Some training officers pass through a stage which might be called "behavioral dilettantism." They run management courses in which up to a dozen behavioral theories may be discussed. While the course is labelled "management" a more accurate title would be "a survey of problem areas in social science." There has been and still is much confusion and uncertainty in the management training area. It is hidden sometimes by being a 'true believer' of the latest idea. So called 'exciting experiments' are conducted almost continually by some firms. While not always true this usually means they are not sure what they are doing or why they are doing it.

While behavioral theories can help managers there are some real problems hindering their development. For example there is the difficulty of measuring some highly abstract but key terms as "autocrat" or "power." Physiologists can agree on the precise definition of an organ such as the heart which can be observed, described and measured but psychologists define love much less precisely and so far have not been able to put forward a generally acceptable definition of it. This typifies the gap between the soft sciences like psychology and sociology and the hard sciences like chemistry and physics. Some would claim that the soft sciences will remain soft; many, in fact, would prefer that they did on the grounds that science and humanism do not mix. Whatever the position we have as individuals, it is clear that real problems exist.

To possess any practical value whatsoever; any theory of managerial effectiveness must avoid these approaches as all can lead to dead ends.

- "Either-or" approach
- "Types" approach
- "Psychological" approach
- "Ideal Style" approach
- "Is man a beast?" approach
- "Normative" approach

## THE "EITHER-OR" APPROACH

The "either-or" approach to management styles teaches that there are two basic management styles and two only, one of which is generally good and the other generally bad.

For example:

| BAD | | GOOD |
|---|---|---|
| Authoritarian | vs | Democratic |
| Employer Centered | vs | Employee Centered |
| Teacher Centered | vs | Learner Centered |
| Autocratic | vs | Permissive |
| Supervisory | vs | Participatory |
| Directive | vs | Non-Directive |

A careful examination of the literature on this polarized approach[1] indicated rather strongly that while this "either-or" approach is certainly popular it oversimplifies far too much. Certainly it is no help in giving guides to effectiveness. This simple view tends to produce inadequate answers to complex questions; it also leads to the belief that the main consideration is simply the style used rather than the style which is appropriate to a particular situation.

## THE "TYPES" APPROACH

Typology is a technical term meaning a collection of types. "Our team" and "their team" is a two type typology. This types approach can have some use in management development as the types provided by them can be used as convenient reference points. Several, including those of McGregor,[2] Zaleznik-Moment,[3] Brown,[4] Blake-Mouton[5] and Jennings[6] are worthy of attention.

Typologies are usually clear classifications with extensive descriptions. They do not however usually provide tools for changing or optimizing individual and organizational behavior. By themselves they do not deepen our understanding about the managerial process or offer anything new about management. As descriptive labels however they have some use.

The current popularity of typoligies and absence of a widely accepted theory indicate that there are not as yet any simple, precise and practical formulations in management theory that could compare to our knowledge of, say, atomic weights or even the temperature scale which express precisely a set of relationships among well-defined variables.

Things are improving however and will continue to do so as the valuable raw material that now exists is properly digested by theoreticians. This material includes executive biographies,[7, 8, 9] top man autobiographies,[10, 11, 12] studies of managers in Russia,[13] Europe,[14] U.K.,[15] France,[16] and the U.S.A.,[17] long-term case studies following individual careers,[18] summaries of serious psychological leadership research,[19] and the steadily growing collection of Harvard case studies.[20] All this material will be brought into focus more and more as management theorists develop more powerful tools of analysis. The "Types" approach will give way to theory.

# THE "PSYCHOLOGICAL" APPROACH

Many managers and some management theorists believe that psychological explanations are the best ones. They then explain organizational problems by pointing to individual needs and styles. No real attention is paid to the impact of technology or even the impact of expectations. Managers are offered a personality theory with managerial labels and asked to use it as a conceptual framework. This kind of frame-

work is far too limiting. A manager must think of the situation as well as the person. He must think sociologically as well as psychologically. He must become a situationist.

On the matter of needs, it is not particularly helpful to try and train managers to attempt to deduce the personal needs and motives of other managers. It is certainly of no value at all for them to consider how a manager happened to acquire the style he now uses. Psychologists might not agree; why should a manager try and what could he do with the information anyway?

# THE "IDEAL STYLE" APPROACH

Many, if not most, popular management theorists, have based their theory on the idea of a single ideal style and one or more poorer styles often labelled "autocrat" or "laissez-faire." It is implied or explicitly stated that managers might study and even copy the ideal style.

The ideal style approach does have real advantages. It provides an "image of potential" — a standard to aim at, and it provides a convenient collecting point for all behavior seen as 'good.' It is useful to present to managers as a model which they might copy. It makes short simple development courses feasible because the basic function of the course is to teach a single style and the behavior associated with it. Some could even argue that it isn't even necessary for an ideal style to exist; that its real function is to highlight the less effective styles.

While all of this is to some extent true, the "ideal style" approach still has these difficulties:

- It is frequently difficult or impossible to apply in practice.

- It can establish an impossible target leading to ultimate disappointment.

- It may induce guilt and anxiety in managers who cannot use it.

- It can lead to senior managers being seen as preaching one thing and practicing another.

- It can greatly increase subordinate manager dissatisfaction with existing conditions which perhaps should not and could not be changed.

- It can misdirect training efforts.

A combination of the "psychological" approach and an "ideal style" approach takes management theory backward to "trait" theory. The "trait" theorists suggested that a combination of certain qualities such as judgment, integrity, and perseverance, would generally lead to effectiveness in any management job. This is essentially what ideal style theory does except that general behavior descriptions are substituted for traits.

# THE "IS MAN A BEAST?" APPROACH

Is man a beast? This must seem an unusual question to raise concerning managerial styles, yet it is an underlying, often unstated, issue in many current behavioral theories based on needs. By understanding the issue it is possible to see the reasons for fundamental differences in approach.

Some theorists suggest to managers that many problems would be solved if managers only would agree on the nature of man and then treat him in the way the theorist suggests. This approach is unlikely to be successful as the "nature of man" is a philosophical question, one that has interested scholars through the ages, but one with no possible single answer. Attempts to establish yes-no answers will lead simply to rigidity rather than effectiveness.

The two basic approaches to this question can be summarized in this way:

should be transferred to the factory floor. As a value, many, if not most would hold that this is desirable if possible. As a feasible scientific proposition however it is another matter.

A managerial theory cannot be normative. It cannot be a thinly-veiled justification for the way the theorist would like to see the world. As persons, the motives of these theorists are understandable, and even laudable — as scientists their approach is unacceptable.

Taking a position one way or the other on this kind of issue is good for an argument. Since neither position is to any extent provable the argument is based on what each side would like to believe. A much more useful approach for a manager would be Theory "Z". It carefully avoids the ideological traps of either "X" or "Y". It sees man as a situationist and one open to both "good" and "evil."

## THE "NORMATIVE" APPROACH

The normative error, as scientists call it, is the unjustified assertion that one thing is better than another. The ideal style approach is an obvious example of it but it can go deeper so that the normative position is not stated at all or is even disguised.

What has happened in the human relations movement, that sprung up in the U.S.A. in the 1930's, is a good example. As the initial research findings were *more and more misinterpreted* the idea that the individual should always be placed ahead of the organization became popular. As recently as the early 1960's several textbooks used in U.S. colleges clearly had this approach. Much of this was supported by those who thought that the relatively permissive approach of academic life

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