

How to Choose A Leadership Style

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For the past 30 years, leadership theorists, researchers and practitioners have found themselves embroiled in an ongoing controversy commonly referred to as "Situationalism" vs. "One Best Style." Situationalists, or contingency advocates, interpret leadership theory and research as saying: "There is no one best style. How you lead depends on the situation." In direct contradiction, one-best-style theorists assert: "There is one best style. It involves applying principles of leadership, as these are emerging in the behavioral sciences."

Since each position is in conflict with and is mutually exclusive of the other, both can't be correct. Neither camp has yet

emerge in the behavioral sciences?

The research reported here provides an empirical foundation for answering these questions. Other findings derived from the research literature are reevaluated in light of the results from our research and are consistent with this new basis for resolving this controversy.

Resolution in empirical terms

Representative of the situational approach is the Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory.¹ They propose that sound leadership is dependent on a number of situational variables. The maturity of subordinates is considered the most critical factor in the situation. Maturity is

most effective alternative of the four in each situation as designated by Hersey and Blanchard is dependent on the maturity level of the subordinates.

A striking conclusion came clearly into view from this detailed study of their instrument. Selecting an alternative which is a clear 9,9-oriented statement of leadership was not possible in any of the 12 situations. One explanation for the omission of the 9,9 orientation follows:

To test their assertions about situationalism, but in the context of a 9,9 orientation, the authors prepared a fifth alternative for each of the 12 situations. This fifth alternative identified the 9,9 orientation in behavioral terms. The Hersey and Blanchard instrument, including the fifth alternative, was then administered to 100 experienced managers in two different settings.

In the first setting, 50 managers completed the five-alternative instrument as an interruption of their managerial duties (rather than as part of a training program). These managers, seemingly unacquainted with the controversy, represented 41 different companies, agencies and institutions. Third parties with no interest in the controversy administered the instrument. In a seminar setting, another group of 50 experienced managers attended a one-day seminar (focusing on the controversy). They also completed the Hersey and Blanchard instrument with the same 9,9 alternatives added to the original four for each of the situations.

Instructions were the same in both settings: "For each of the 12 managerial situations described here, rank the alternatives from 5, most effective, to 1, least effective for dealing with the described situation." Since no significant differences were found between these two samples, the data reported in Table 1 represent combined responses from both sources.

This direct test of one theoretical position against

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been able to convince the "opposition" that one approach is any more (or less) valid than the other. Without an objective basis for resolving the controversy, we abide the contradiction.

How can training and development personnel exercise professional responsibilities in a sound manner without a basis for resolving the contradiction? When called on to provide training in leadership and supervision, how shall they answer the inevitable question asked by today's managers, "Which direction should we follow?" Which approach should training and development personnel recommend as being more likely to result in the fullest possible human resource development as measured by productivity, creativity, satisfaction, etc.? Should we teach managers to change their behavior to fit situations or to change situations by bringing them in line with sound principles of leadership as they

defined as willingness (motivation) and ability (competence) to perform an assigned activity in the context of work, in contrast to maturity in the context of the biological aging process. Other contingency theorists include Fleishman,² Fiedler³ and Reddin.⁴ The conclusions drawn here apply equally for reinterpreting their situational positions. The 9,9 orientation within the grid is used as representative of one-best-style approaches. The conclusions drawn from this apply for reinterpreting positions of McGregor, Likert and Argyris.

Research pits Situationalism against One Best Style in a "head-to-head" evaluation of results. The research began with an evaluation of an instrument designed by Hersey and Blanchard according to their Situational Leadership Theory.⁵ In this instrument, 12 management situations are presented, and four different ways to supervise accompany each situation. The

another provides an empirical basis for evaluating the two theories. If experienced managers identify the prescribed Situational answer as most effective over the 9,9 orientation, or any other alternative to a significant degree, this means that managers with actual leadership experience select the Situational approach as more effective than the One Best Style. If they identify the 9,9 answers as more effective significantly more often, this confirms that the One Best Style is recognized as more effective than the answer based on Situational Leadership Theory for the range of situations provided. Results are presented in Table 1, where the prescribed alternatives based on Situational Leadership Theory are grouped by maturity level.

The 9,9-oriented alternatives were consistently chosen as the most effective way of dealing

with each of the 12 situations and across the four maturity levels. In "head-to-head" comparison, the One Best Style emerged as superior to the Situational alternatives with a highly significant degree of confidence, with all χ^2 s significantly far beyond the .001 percent level of confidence. Under the conditions provided by this test, these empirically valid data lead to rejection of the Situational Leadership Theory and acceptance of the One Best Style as the basis for exercising effective leadership.

The same experiment has been repeated using 36 MD and PhD mental health professionals as the criterion group for judging effectiveness. By academic training and experience, they are qualified to interpret behavioral science theories and research. The findings are comparable with those above, demonstrating that whether effectiveness is judged

from a managerial or mental health perspective, the results are the same.

These data lead to the conclusion that no justifiable basis exists for rejecting the One Best Style when the instrument used to evaluate leadership eliminates it from consideration.

Resolution in theoretical terms

How can omission of 9,9 as a management style in Situational Leadership Theory be accounted for? This is an important question because its omission has created a controversy apparently without substance. If the Hersey and Blanchard theory had made it possible for their instrument to contain 9,9 alternatives, they might have discovered that managerial effectiveness is associated with One Best Style. So the question remains, "How can the absence of 9,9-oriented alternatives in Situational Leadership Theory or in instruments designed by Fleishman, Fiedler or Reddin be explained?"

An examination of the concept formation underlying the Situational and Grid theories provides a comprehensive basis of clarification. A significant difference exists in the manner in which variables are combined in the two theories. This difference provides the key for understanding the absence of 9,9 alternatives in Situational Leadership Theory. In the Hersey and Blanchard model, the horizontal variable is "Task" and the vertical is "Relationships." Conceptually, these variables are treated behaviorally and as operationally *independent* of one another. Therefore, any magnitude of one can be added to or subtracted from any amount of the other. This is an arithmetic basis of combining quantities from two variables and can be symbolically expressed as "an add sign,"(+).

In the Grid framework, leadership variables are conceptualized as *interdependent*. The horizontal axis represents "concern for production" and the vertical axis,

Table 1

What Experienced Managers Judge to be the Most Effective Way of Leading When the 9,9 Orientation is Pitted Against the Prescribed Alternative from the Situational Leadership Model

Maturity Level	Situation	Per Cent Selecting as Most Effective ¹		χ^2	Level of Confidence
		Prescribed Situational Alternative	9,9 Alternative		
Lowest (M ₁)	1	4	75	108.46	.001
	5	11	79	93.41	.001
	9	11	83	104.05	.001
Next to Lowest (M ₂)	2	6	81	114.43	.001
	6	11	88	118.59	.001
	10	3	90	155.64	.001
Next to Highest (M ₃)	3	13	72	71.22	.001
	7	10	79	96.39	.001
	11	9	78	96.86	.001
Highest (M ₄)	4	4	77	113.62	.001
	8	5	79	112.40	.001
	12	6	79	109.03	.001

¹Row totals do not equal 100 because a few respondents chose as most effective some other alternative than either the 9,9 or the prescribed situational alternative.

"concern for people." Since leadership cannot be exercised without both people and task, the two variables produce different compounds depending on how they combine. Interdependence between the two dimensions is represented by a comma (,) as is true in all systems using Cartesian coordinates.

An example from chemistry demonstrates the central importance of the difference between interaction of interdependent but uncorrelated variables (,) and an arithmetic coupling of independent, non-interacting and uncorrelated variables (+). Implications of these differences for the design of research, training, development and practice follow from an awareness of this salient point.

A chemical mixture is analogous to the arithmetic combination of variables exemplified in Situational Leadership Theory. In a mixture, each element retains its distinctive features. The chemical example of a mixture is smog, a combination of particles and gases which, even though added together, retain their unique identities. By comparison, an interactive combination of elements is comparable to a chemical compound. In a compound such as water (H_2O), the resultant liquid has a different character than the gaseous elements which comprise it.

The mixture analogy depicts how "task" and "relationship" each retain their distinctive character when arithmetically combined in Situational Leadership Theory. For example, a "9" amount of task behavior is revealed in how the supervisor structures the subordinate's activities by telling him or her the what, how, when and where aspects in a "complete" way. A "9" amount of socio-emotional support is evidenced by the unrestrained giving of rewards, compliments and strokes for compliance, etc. Task direction and socio-emotional support are two independent behaviors. Conceptually, 9 units of "direction" retain the same character whether combined with 1 unit (9+1) or

with 9 units (9+9) of socio-emotional support.

Conversely, the importance of the concept of compound can be demonstrated by the difference between the 1,9 and 9,9 Grid styles of referring to what the second 9 represents in each of these two contexts. In each case, the second 9 (9,9 or 1,9) is the same magnitude of "high concern for people." The 9 of high "concern for people," however, in the context of high concern for production, the 9,9 orientation, is a very different way of thinking about and behaving when leading than in the context of low concern for production, the 1,9 orientation. In the 9,9-oriented Grid style, the second 9 stands for achieving production through behavior which brings forth teamwork characterized by openness, respect, involvement, resolving conflict through confrontation in the interest of achieving shared agreement and mutual commitment to productive outcomes, with learning based on the use of critique and feedback. In the 1,9-oriented Grid style, the second 9 in the context of low concern for production stands for warm and friendly leadership characterized by behavior in which one yields one's own convictions for the sake of harmony, even in disregard of adverse impact on results and without use of critique or feedback for learning, etc. Both 9's signify the same magnitude of concern. Qualitative differences in thought, feeling and behavior are evidenced in the compound resulting from the interaction between these two interdependent variables.⁶

Both systems have a corner where both variables are high, but what is the character of 9+9 leadership as contrasted with 9,9 leadership? High direction coupled with high reward for compliance, 9 + 9 leadership, is widely recognized as paternalism/maternalism, which is certainly not the 9,9 orientation of One Best Style. By comparison, 9,9 leadership involves achieving production through a high degree of shared responsibility, coupled

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with high participation, involvement and commitment—hallmarks of teamwork.

The absence of the 9,9 orientation in Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory, then, is explained by the impossibility of describing a 9,9 orientation in a 9+9 system for combining variables. Had they, or Fleishman and other situationalists, followed through the logic embedded in their theory by systematically analyzing 9+9 (or high-high), they might have identified the difference between paternalism/maternalism and 9,9-oriented team leadership.

Resolution of the controversy

It now may be clear how this confusion of 9+9 with 9,9 has led to contradictory conclusions being drawn, with claim met with counterclaim and challenge with challenge. Because the two are so different, there is no reason to expect that measures based on a 9+9 approach to combining variables will yield the same correlations with productivity and satisfaction as measures based on a 9,9 approach to combining variables. Yet, up to now, no 9,9 vs. 9+9 distinction has been drawn to indicate whether research was premised on the comma (,) or the add sign (+). The result is that research which uses two variables (e.g., task and relationship or production and people) to study how leadership styles affect outcomes (i.e., productivity, job satisfaction, etc.) has been inappropriately lumped together.

Regrouping of representative leadership research published since World War II, in light of the (,) vs. (+) distinction, yields conclusive evidence of the validity of the (,) basis of combining variables. It designates the 9,9 orientation as the most effective basis for exercising leadership and indicates lack of effectiveness correlated with Situationalism based on a 9+9 basis of combining variables.

Consistently inconclusive results are found in studies where measuring instruments are

based on 9+9. Korman brought together research on the additive (+) Fleishman model and associated measuring instruments which had been published up to 1966.⁷ The Fleishman instruments measure Initiating Structure (task) and Consideration (relationships). High-high in these studies is 9+9 and not synonymous with 9,9. Of the 26 studies reviewed, none demonstrated a consistent and positive correlation between leadership style and effectiveness criteria (e.g., productivity, administrative reputation, employee grievances, absenteeism, turnover, etc.).

Since the Fleishman model is similar to their own, Hersey and Blanchard interpret these results as supportive of Situational Leadership Theory. The only valid conclusion which can be drawn from these "additive" studies is, "When the 9,9 orientation is omitted from the measurement system and is replaced by paternalism/maternalism, it is found that paternalism/maternalism is not consistently better than any third style."

More recent studies by Larson, Hunt and Osborn⁸ and Nystrom⁹ stamp the desirability of high-high, or 9+9, as a myth, without their apparent awareness that paternalism/maternalism describes the 9+9 style. As these studies testify, paternalism/maternalism has been demonstrated to be an invalid basis of leadership. The (+) assumption hidden in these measuring instruments means the findings cannot be generalized to conclude Theory Y, Model II, System 4 or a 9,9 orientation also are invalid bases for exercising leadership.

Research findings where measuring systems are designed on a (,) basis lend definitive support to the soundness of the one-best-leadership-style approach. Examples include Likert's conclusion that the closer a work group's leadership is to System 4 (an approximation of the 9,9 orientation), the higher the group's productivity.¹⁰ Addi-

tionally, a wide range of survey research studies, involving more than 20,000 managers and 200,000 employees, summarized by Likert has verified these earlier results.¹¹ Similar conclusions have been reached in non-business fields such as school systems,¹² hospitals¹³ and government organizations.¹⁴ Results reported by Argyris¹⁵ involving an in-depth study of a number of company presidents lead to a similar conclusion. Changes in the presidents' behavior from Model I (approximating a 9,1 orientation) toward Model II (approximating a 9,9 orientation) show concomitant increases in corporate performance.

Comparable conclusions are drawn from research on *Grid Organization Development*. A 9,9 leadership orientation consistently proves to positively affect a variety of performance criteria.¹⁶ One particularly significant study involved a longitudinal comparison on a pre-post basis between two subsidiaries of the same parent company. In every important consideration (e.g., markets, brand names, new product access, access to headquarters, R&D, etc.), the two subsidiaries were essentially alike. Each competed with the other for the same corporate financial dollar for growth, development and expansion. The key difference was the participation of one in Grid OD. A 10-year comparison based on their respective annual reports indicates that the Grid-active company increased its profitability over the matched control by 400 percent. Other representative studies have been concerned with specifics. They show a 100 percent reduction in nonscheduled overtime, 67 percent reduction in monthly outlay for small tools and a 50 percent reduction in hourly costs of maintenance, etc.

Consequences for career success of the 9,9-oriented Grid style have also been the subject of major research. Two independent investigations demonstrate that managers who advance higher on the career ladder are

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more likely than others to solve production problems with and through people based on a 9,9 orientation. The original research was based on 716 managers from within one company.¹⁷ The findings were replicated 12 years later, based on 731 managers from different companies.¹⁸

A consistent pattern emerges from this review of the research when regrouped based on (+) and (,). The evidence clearly shows that a 9,9 orientation results in more productive outcomes than any other basis for exercising leadership. Research based on the additive models of 9+9 fails to demonstrate any consistent relationship between the paternalism/maternalism leadership style and productivity or other measured variables. The (+) basis of grouping brings together studies which eliminate the One Best Style. The (,) includes One Best Style and produces consistently positive correlations between leadership

style and productivity.

In short, when included in comparative research, the 9,9 orientation is found to be the most effective way of leading.

Implications for the profession

How should the training and development profession address itself to strengthening leadership throughout the occupational world? The soundest leadership is demonstrated to involve a 9,9 kind of leadership orientation which rests on emerging principles of behavior. Certain constant principles undergird sound leadership, just as constant principles of physics undergird sound engineering. Violate or disregard principles of physics in engineering a bridge, and physical disaster is possible. Social and organizational disaster is likely to result from denial or disregard in practice of sound leadership principles.

Ten major emerging principles of human behavior seem critical

Table 2

The Extent to Which Behavioral Science Principles Are Embedded Within Situationalism and One Best Style Approaches to Leadership

Concept	Situational Leadership Theory	9,9 Orientation
Participation	A technique used as socio-emotional reward at intermediate maturity levels only.	Skill in the use of interdependent interaction process is basic for teamwork at all maturity levels.
Candor	Not mentioned.	Prerequisite to effective participation.
Trust and respect	Prerequisite to delegation at highest maturity level only.	Essential for shared participation.
Involvement and commitment	Boss-controlled and present at highest maturity level only.	Core motivation underlying learning, problem solving and production at all maturity levels.
Conflict resolution	Not mentioned.	Open confrontation and resolution of differences essential for shared understanding and agreement.
Consensus	Absent.	A shared value which may not always be achievable.
Synergy/creativity	Not mentioned.	Human resources utilization based on teamwork.
Goals and objectives	Set by the boss for subordinates with some subordinate input permitted at higher maturity levels.	Mutually set as the basis for organization and direction of work.
Mutual support	Not dealt with.	A result of team-based interdependence.
Changing people	Use of Skinnerian reinforcement of subordinate compliance through giving or withholding of socioemotional rewards. Feedback disregarded or rarely mentioned.	Use of open critique and feedback for analyzing experience and increasing insight, understanding and effectiveness.

ferences is prerequisite to the exercise of leadership on the basis of understanding and agreement. No method of addressing conflict is discussed in the text or is represented in the measurement system based on Situational Leadership Theory, yet unresolved conflict bodes the prospect of undermining boss-subordinate relationships. The soundest approach to conflict resolution is confrontation,²⁰ an integral element of the 9,9 orientation.

Change is a key issue in effectiveness, and it is viewed in at least two significantly different ways. Situational Leadership Theory is premised on Pavlovian associative connections between stimulus response and rewards as amplified and refined by Skinner and others.²¹ Choice based on personal insight and conviction is eliminated or restricted when some external agent, such as a boss, extends or withholds rewards in exchange for compliance. A cybernetic model of learning, including single and double-loop learning, is far more pertinent when applied in the context of healthy young people and adults, regardless of maturity level.²²

Additional examples of successful implementation of the principles listed in Table 2 are available elsewhere.²³ These are sufficient to illustrate the important distinction between "strategies" and "tactics." Strategies for achieving production with and through people are implemented via tactics which apply the principles (strategies) to particular circumstances. Figure 1 shows how a 9,9 orientation as a strategy can consistently be maintained in dealing with others of all maturity levels. The arrows from the 9,9 orientation to maturity levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 indicate this.*

Figure 2 shows how this is done at two widely different maturity levels. With an M₁

*Dominant style is used to designate a person's most characteristic Grid style and backup style as the style shifted to whenever, and for whatever reason, the dominant style is abandoned. This shifting has nothing to do with shifting from one style to another, as prescribed within Situational Leadership Theory.

to the exercise of sound leadership. Significant differences between Situationalism and the 9,9 orientation are found in the use and application of these 10 principles.* These differences are summarized in Table 2 which identifies behavioral science principles.

The science of leadership involves incorporating these constant principles into one's leadership style and applying them consistently across situations. Successful leaders achieve production with and through people by establishing relationships which

embody these principles.

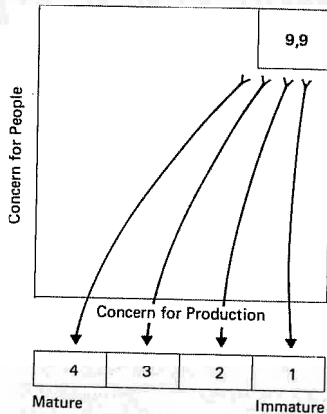
Skillfulness in releasing responsible participation, for example, is a leadership practice which consistently produces favorable results in using human resources. Leadership that can promote open participation and that allows both boss and subordinate to exercise mutual influence on outcomes contributes to job satisfaction. It is possible for this kind of participation to be constant across maturity levels. By comparison, the Situational Leadership Theory concept of participation is that of a technique and is used as a socio-emotional reward to promote greater willingness.

Resolution of conflicts and dif-

*This analysis concentrates on chapters 7-9 from Hersey and Blanchard¹⁹ which detail Situational Leadership Theory and present the measuring system used.

Figure 1

Subordinates at all levels of maturity supervised in a 9,9-oriented way



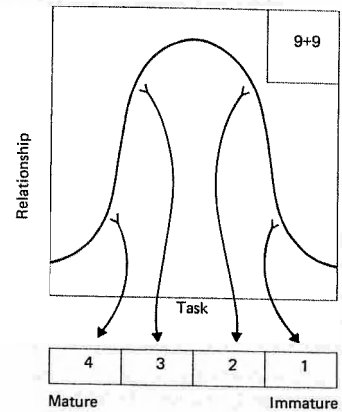
complex, subtle and of such character at the time they are set, as to make it impractical to do more than broadly outline the pathway toward their accomplishment. Goal setting is a constant principle of leadership from M₁ to M₄. The specifics of goal setting shift with circumstances.²⁴

This constant adherence to principles is absent within the Situational context, where strategy itself is the variant, as shown in Figure 3. The strategy of leadership is prescribed as shifting with maturity levels. For example, goal setting between boss and subordinate is eliminated as a consideration of leadership at M₁ and at M₄, but some subordinate input as to goals is allowed in M₂ and M₃. Reliance on or rejection of the principle itself, in other words, depends on the presumed maturity of the subordinate. Such a comparison demonstrates that behavioral science principles are not consistently applied in the Situational approach. This is comparable in the engineering practice carried out independently of principles of physics, or with respecting principles of

subordinate, for example, goals set between boss and subordinate are near-term, easy to reach, with clear pathways to their accomplishment and with immediate feedback as to progress. Goals are relied on equally with an M₄ subordinate at the opposite extreme of maturity. Here, goals are only likely to be reached within an extended time perspective. They are likely to be

Figure 3

Subordinates at each level of maturity supervised by a different style

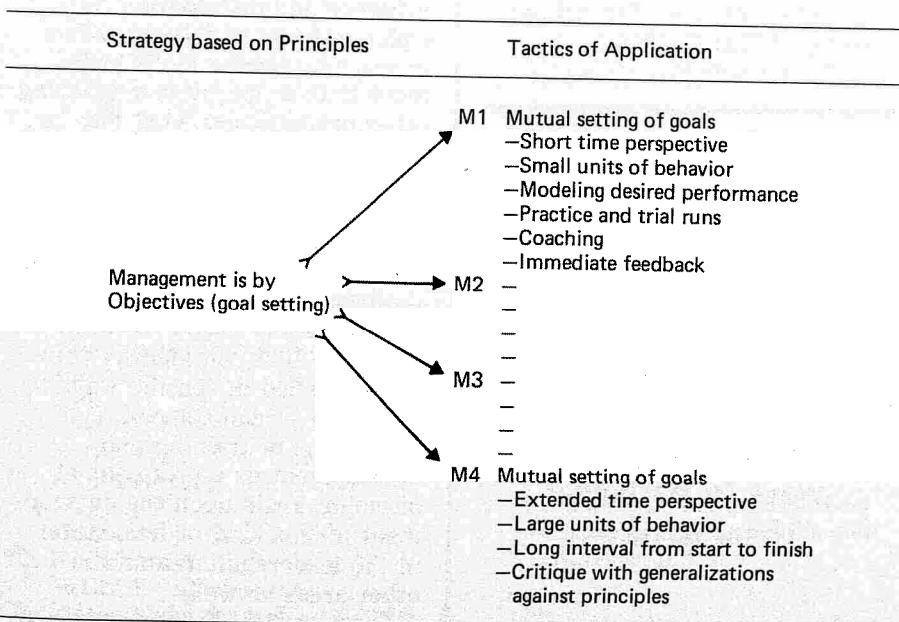


physics in certain situations but disregarding them in others. In the principles approach, emerging behavioral science principles are consistently employed in the same manner as physical science principles underlie the practice of engineering, regardless of the particular problem.

McGregor concluded, and we agree, that when a manager understands that Theory Y (i.e., the 9,9 orientation) is a way of managing people, then "...the tactics are worked out in the light of circumstances...the manager...will invent his or her own tactics provided he or she has a conception of the strategy involved."²⁵

Figure 2

9,9-Oriented Goal Setting as a Constant Strategy Vs. Tactics for Implementation at Different Maturity Levels



The authors conclude...

This article provides a basis for resolving the controversy as to what constitutes sound leadership. It reports a study in which Situationalism has been evaluated in the context of One Best Style. It has been shown that:

- The Hersey and Blanchard approach to Situational Leadership Theory and measurement contains no 9,9-oriented behavior as the basis for exercising leadership;
- When added to the Situational options, experienced managers and mental health professionals uniformly choose the 9,9 orientation over Situational

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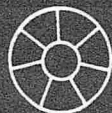
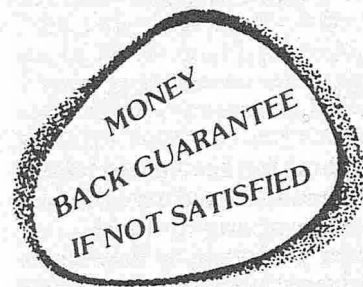
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answers as most effective;

- The concept formation underlying Situational Leadership Theory is premised on an additive basis for combining variables of leadership, while the Grid approach is an interactive basis;

- 9+9 (or high-high) is paternalism/maternalism, not a 9,9 orientation;

- The reexamination of representative leadership research since World War II but grouped in line with this (+) or (.) distinction demonstrates that 9+9 is not a sound basis for exercising leadership, but that 9,9 consistently correlates with measures of productivity and satisfaction;

- Situationalists disregard or occasionally employ behavioral science principles, violating the premise of constancy, while One Best Style leadership consistently relies on emerging behavioral

science principles to strengthen leadership;

- Principles can be consistently employed in ways that are appropriate at different maturity levels as exemplified through an analysis of goal setting;

- These findings have signifi-

The basis of professionalism uses a scientifically based research discipline that can identify principles applied in specific ways to particular circumstances.

cant implications for strengthening the practice of leadership in the occupational world.

A training and development person who ignores research evidence and disregards principles in favor of Situationalism in teaching leadership is little more than a practitioner teaching other practitioners what may or may not work based on personal and subjective experience and unvalidated convictions. This is different than a training and development professional because the basis of professionalism uses a scientifically based research discipline that can identify principles applied in specific ways to particular circumstances. The emergence of training and development as a professional discipline rests upon the development of this kind of foundation in the leadership area and in other areas as well.

These several lines of evidence

permit resolution of the controversy between Situationalism and One Best Style. They point to the soundness of the one-best-style orientation.

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