

LIFE CYCLE THEORY OF LEADERSHIP

is there a "best" style of leadership?

The recognition of task and relationships as two important dimensions of leader behavior has pervaded the works of management theorists¹ over the years. These two dimensions have been variously labeled as "autocratic" and "democratic"; "authoritarian" and "equalitarian"; "employee-oriented" and "production-oriented"; "goal achievement" and "group maintenance"; "task-ability" and "likeability"; "instrumental and expressive"; "efficiency and effectiveness." The difference between these concepts and task and relationships seems to be more semantic than real.

For some time, it was believed that task and relationships were either/or styles of leader behavior and, therefore, should be depicted as a single dimension along a continuum, moving from very authoritarian (task) leader behavior at one end to very democratic (relationships) leader behavior at the other.²

OHIO STATE LEADERSHIP STUDIES

In more recent years, the feeling that task and relationships were either/or leadership styles has been dispelled. In particular, the leadership studies initiated in 1945 by the Bureau of Business Research at Ohio State University³ questioned whether leader behavior could be depicted on a single continuum.

In attempting to describe *how* a leader carries out his activities, the Ohio State staff identified "Initiating Structure" (task) and "Consideration" (relationships) as the two most important dimensions of leadership. "Initiating Structure" refers to "the leader's behavior in delineating the relationship between himself and members of the work-group and in endeavoring to establish well-defined patterns of organization, channels of communication, and methods of procedure." On the other hand, "Consideration" refers to "behavior indicative of friendship, mutual trust, respect, and warmth in

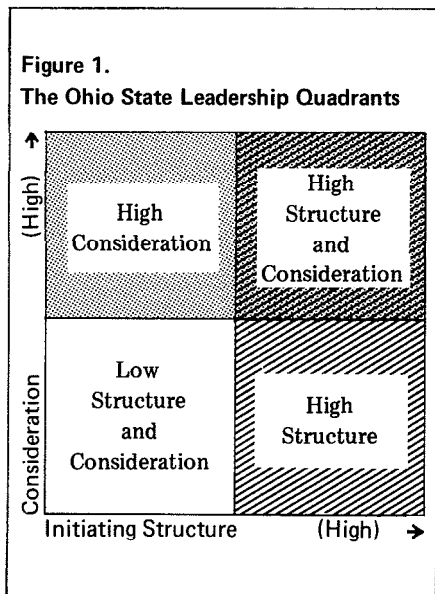
the relationship between the leader and the members of his staff."⁴

In the leadership studies that followed, the Ohio State staff found that leadership styles vary considerably from leader to leader. The behavior of some leaders is characterized by rigidly structuring activities of followers in terms of task accomplishments, while others concentrate on building and maintaining good personal relationships between themselves and their followers. Other leaders have styles characterized by both task and relationships behavior. There are even some individuals in leadership positions whose behavior tends to provide little structure or development of interpersonal relationships. No dominant style appears. Instead, various combinations are evident. Thus, task and relationships are not either/or leadership styles as an authoritarian-democratic continuum suggests. Instead, these patterns of leader behavior are separate and distinct dimensions which can be plotted on two separate axes, rather than a single continuum. Thus, the Ohio State studies resulted in the development of four quadrants to illustrate leadership styles in terms of Initiating Structure (task) and Consideration (relationships) as shown in Figure 1.

PAUL HERSEY
Chairman,
Department of Management
and Organizational Behavior
and formerly Director,
Center for Management
Development,
Ohio University,
Athens, Ohio.

and

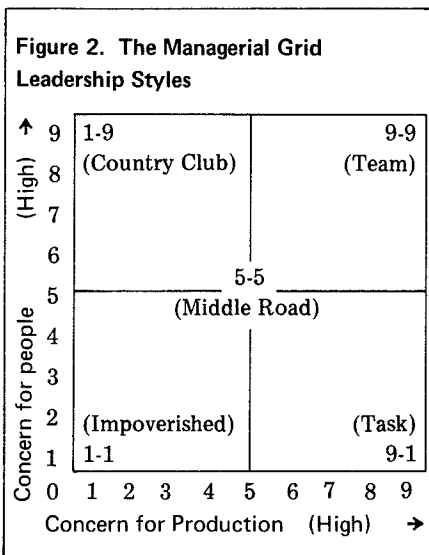
KENNETH H. BLANCHARD
Department of Management
and Organizational Behavior,
Ohio University,
Athens, Ohio.



THE MANAGERIAL GRID

Robert R. Blake and Jane S. Mouton⁵ in their Managerial Grid have popularized the task and relationships dimensions of leadership and have used them extensively in organization and management development programs.

In the Managerial Grid, five different types of leadership based on concern for production (task) and concern for people (relationships) are located in the four quadrants identified by the Ohio State studies.



Concern for *production* is illustrated on the horizontal axis. Production becomes more important to the leader as his rating advances on the horizontal scale. A leader with a rating of 9 has a maximum concern for production.

Concern for people is illustrated on the vertical axis. People become more important to the leader as his rating progresses up the vertical axis. A leader with a rating of 9 on the vertical axis has a maximum concern for people.

The Managerial Grid, in essence, has given popular terminology to five points within the four quadrants identified by the Ohio State studies.

SUGGESTING A "BEST" STYLE OF LEADERSHIP

After identifying task and relationships as two central dimensions of any lead-

ership situation, some management writers have suggested a "best" style of leadership. Most of these writers have supported either an integrated leader behavior style (high task and high relationships) or a permissive, democratic, human relations approach (high relationships).

Andrew W. Halpin,⁶ of the original Ohio State staff, in a study of school superintendents, pointed out that according to his findings "effective or desirable leadership behavior is characterized by high ratings on both Initiating Structure and Consideration. Conversely, ineffective or undesirable leadership behavior is marked by low ratings on both dimensions." Thus, Halpin seemed to conclude that the high Consideration and high Initiating Structure style is theoretically the ideal or "best" leader behavior, while the style low on both dimensions is theoretically the "worst".

Blake and Mouton in their Managerial Grid also imply that the most desirable leadership style is "team management" (maximum concern for production and people) and the least desirable is "impoverished management" (minimum concern for production and people). In fact, they have developed training programs designed to change the behavior of managers toward this "team" style.⁷

LEADERSHIP STYLE SHOULD VARY WITH THE SITUATION

While the Ohio State and the Managerial Grid people seem to suggest there is a "best" style of leadership,⁸ recent evidence from empirical studies clearly shows that there is no single all purpose leadership style which is universally successful.

Some of the most convincing evidence which dispels the idea of a single "best" style of leader behavior was gathered and published by A. K. Korman⁹ in 1966. Korman attempted to review all the studies which examined the relationship between the Ohio State behavior dimensions of Initiating Structure (task) and Consideration

(relationships) and various measures of effectiveness, including group productivity, salary, performance under stress, administrative reputation, work group grievances, absenteeism, and turnover. Korman reviewed over twenty-five studies and concluded that:

Despite the fact that "Consideration" and "Initiating Structure" have become almost bywords in American industrial psychology, it seems apparent that very little is now known as to how these variables may predict work group performance and the conditions which affect such predictions. At the current time, we cannot even say whether they have any predictive significance at all.

Thus, Korman found the use of Consideration and Initiating Structure had no significant predictive value in terms of effectiveness as situations changed. *This suggests that since situations differ, so must leader style.*

Fred E. Fiedler,¹⁰ in testing his contingency model of leadership in over fifty studies covering a span of fifteen years (1951-1967), concluded that both directive, task-oriented leaders and non-directive, human relations-oriented leaders are successful under some conditions. Fiedler argues:

While one can never say that something is impossible, and while someone may well discover the all-purpose leadership style or behavior at some future time, our own data and those which have come out of sound research by other investigators do not promise such miraculous cures.

A number of other investigators¹¹ besides Korman and Fiedler have also shown that different leadership situations require different leader styles.

In summary, empirical studies tend to show that there is no normative (best) style of leadership; that successful leaders are those who can adapt their leader behavior to meet the needs of their followers and the particular situation. Effectiveness is dependent upon the leader, the followers, and other situational elements. In managing for effectiveness a leader must be able to diagnose his own leader behavior in

light of his environment. Some of the variables other than his followers which he should examine include the organization, superiors, associates, and job demands. This list is not all inclusive, but contains interacting components which tend to be important to a leader in many different organizational settings.

ADDING AN EFFECTIVENESS DIMENSION

To measure more accurately how well a leader operates within a given situation, an "effectiveness dimension" should be added to the two-dimension Ohio State model. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

By adding an effectiveness dimension to the Ohio State model, a three-dimensional model is created.¹² This Leader Effectiveness Model attempts to integrate the concepts of leader style with situational demands of a specific environment. When the leader's style is appropriate to a given environment measured by results, it is termed *effective*; when his style is inappropriate to a given environment, it is termed *ineffective*.

If a leader's effectiveness is determined by the interaction of his style and environment (followers and other situa-

tional variables), it follows that any of the four styles depicted in the Ohio State model may be effective or ineffective depending on the environment.

Thus, there is *no* single ideal leader behavior style which is appropriate in all situations. For example, the high task and high relationships style is appropriate only in certain situations, but is inappropriate in others. In basically crisis-oriented organizations like the military or the police, there is considerable evidence that the most appropriate style would be high task, since under combat or riot conditions success often depends upon immediate response to orders. Time demands do not permit talking things over or explaining decisions. For success, behavior must be automatic.

While a high task style might be effective for a combat officer, it might not be effective in other situations even within the military. This was pointed out when line officers trained at West Point were sent to command outposts in the Dew Line, which was part of an advanced warning system. The scientific personnel involved, living in close quarters in an Arctic region, did not respond favorably to the task-oriented behavior of these combat trained officers. The level of education and maturity of these people was such that they did not need a great deal of structure in their work. In fact, they tended to resent it.

Other studies of scientific and research-oriented personnel show also that many of these people desire, or need, only a limited amount of socio-emotional support. Therefore, there are situations in which the low task and relationships style, which has been assumed by some authors to be theoretically a poor leadership style, may be an appropriate style.

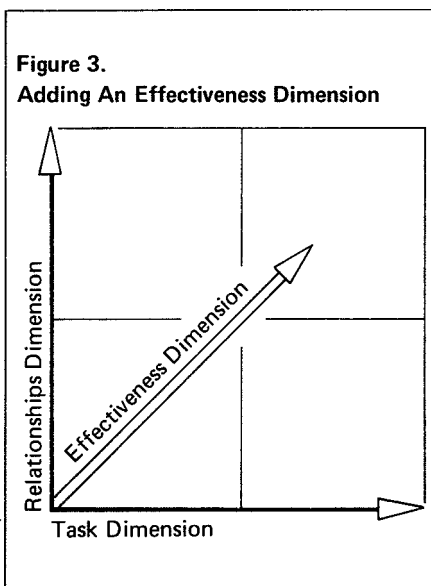
In summary, an effective leader must be able to *diagnose* the demands of the environment and then either *adapt* his leader style to fit these demands, or develop the means to *change* some or all of the other variables.

ATTITUDINAL VS. BEHAVIORAL MODELS

In examining the dimensions of the Managerial Grid (*concern* for production and *concern* for people), one can see that these are attitudinal dimensions. That is, concern is a feeling or emotion toward something. On the other hand, the dimensions of the Ohio State Model (Initiating Structure and Consideration) and the Leader Effectiveness Model (task and relationships) are dimensions of *observed* behavior. Thus, the Ohio State and Leader Effectiveness Models measure *how* people behave, while the Managerial Grid measures *predisposition* toward production and people. As discussed earlier, the Leader Effectiveness Model is an outgrowth of the Ohio State Model but is distinct from it in that it adds an effectiveness dimension to the two dimensions of behavior.

Although the Managerial Grid and the Leader Effectiveness Model measure different aspects of leadership, they are not incompatible. A conflict develops, however, because behavioral assumptions have often been drawn from analysis of the attitudinal dimensions of the Managerial Grid.¹³ While high *concern* for both production and people is desirable in many organizations, managers having a high concern for both people and production do not always find it appropriate in all situations to initiate a high degree of structure and provide a high degree of socio-emotional support.

For example, if a manager's subordinates are emotionally mature and can take responsibility for themselves, his appropriate style of leadership may be low task and low relationships. In this case, the manager permits these subordinates to participate in the planning, organizing and controlling of their own operation. He plays a background role, providing socio-emotional support only when necessary. Consequently, it is assumptions about behavior drawn from the Managerial Grid and not the Grid itself that are inconsistent with the Leader Effectiveness Model.



LIFE CYCLE THEORY

Korman,¹⁴ in his extensive review of studies examining the Ohio State concepts of Initiating Structure and Consideration, concluded that:

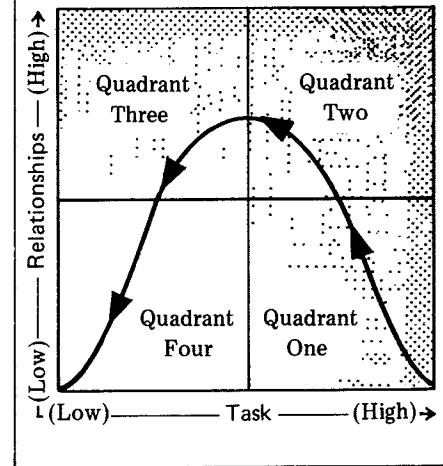
What is needed . . . in future concurrent (and predictive) studies is not just recognition of this factor of "situational determinants" but, rather, a systematic conceptualization of situational variance as it might relate to leadership behavior (Initiating Structure and Consideration).

In discussing this conclusion, Korman suggests the possibility of a curvilinear relationship rather than a simple linear relationship between Structure and Consideration and other variables. The Life Cycle Theory of Leadership which we have developed is based on a curvilinear relationship between task and relationships and "maturity." This theory will attempt to provide a leader with some understanding of the relationship be-

tween an effective style of leadership and the level of maturity of one's followers. The emphasis in the Life Cycle Theory of Leadership will be on the followers. As Fillmore H. Sanford has indicated, there is some justification for regarding the followers "as the most crucial factor in any leadership event".¹⁵ Followers in any situation are vital, not only because individually they accept or reject the leader, but as a group they actually determine whatever personal power he may have.

According to Life Cycle Theory, as the level of maturity of one's followers continues to increase, appropriate leader behavior not only requires less and less structure (task) but also less and less socio-emotional support (relationships). This cycle can be illustrated in the four quadrants of the basic styles portion of the Leader Effectiveness Model as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4.
Life Cycle Theory of Leadership



Maturity is defined in Life Cycle Theory by the relative independence,¹⁶ ability to take responsibility,

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and achievement-motivation¹⁷ of an individual or group. These components of maturity are often influenced by level of education and amount of experience. While age is a factor, it is not directly related to maturity as used in the Life Cycle. Our concern is for psychological age, not chronological age. Beginning with structured task behavior which is appropriate for working with immature people, Life Cycle Theory suggests that leader behavior should move from: (1) high task - low relationships behavior to (2) high task - high relationships and (3) high relationships - low task behavior to (4) low task - low relationships behavior, if one's followers progress from immaturity to maturity.

PARENT-CHILD EXAMPLE

An illustration of this Life Cycle Theory familiar to everyone is the parent-child relationship. As a child begins to mature, it is appropriate for the parent to provide more socio-emotional support and less structure. Experience shows us that if the parent provides too much relationships before a child is somewhat mature, this behavior is often misinterpreted by the child as permissiveness. Thus it is appropriate to increase one's relationships behavior as the child is able to increase his maturity or capacity to take responsibility.

A child when first born is unable to control much of his own environment. Consequently, his parents must initiate almost all structure, i.e., dress the child, feed the child, bathe the child, turn the child over, etc. While it is appropriate for a parent to show love and affection toward a child, this is different than the mutual trust and respect which characterizes relationships behavior. Consequently, the most appropriate style for a parent to use with his children during the early pre-school years may be high task - low relationships (quadrant 1).

Even when the child begins to attend school, the parent must provide a great

deal of structure. The child is still not mature enough to accept much responsibility on his own. It may become appropriate at this state, as the child matures, for the parent to increase his relationships behavior by showing more trust and respect for his child. At this point, the parent's behavior could be characterized as high task - high relationships (quadrant 2).

Gradually as the child moves into high school and/or college, he begins to seek and accept more and more responsibility for his own behavior. It is during this time that a parent should begin to engage in less structured behavior and provide more socio-emotional support (quadrant 3). This does not mean that the child's life will have less structure, but it will now be internally imposed by the "young man" rather than externally by the parent. When this happens the cycle as depicted on the Leader Effectiveness Model begins to become a backward bending curve. The child is not only able to structure many of the activities in which he engages, but is also able to provide self-control over his interpersonal and emotional needs.

As the child begins to make his own living, start his own family, and take full responsibility for his actions, a decrease in structure and socio-emotional support by the parents becomes appropriate. In reality, the umbilical cord has been severed and the child is now "on his own." At this stage of the parent-child relationship, a low task - low relationships style seems to be most appropriate (quadrant 4).

Although the Life Cycle suggests a basic style for different levels of maturity in meeting specific contingencies, it may be necessary to vary one's style anywhere within the four quadrants to deal appropriately with this event. For example, even when a young man is away at college and his parents are using a high relationships style with him, it might be appropriate for them to initiate some structure with their son if they discover that he

is not behaving in as mature a way as expected (he has become a discipline problem). A change in parental behavior might even be necessary later in life after a son (or daughter) has had a family of his own for a number of years. If this son, for example, suddenly begins to experience marital difficulties and his family begins to disintegrate, it might be appropriate for his parents temporarily to increase their socio-emotional support.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE LIFE CYCLE

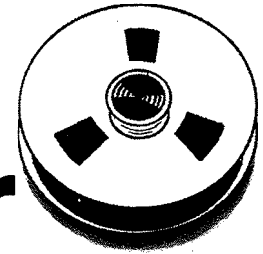
The parent-child relationship is only one example of the Life Cycle. This cycle is also discernible in other organizations in the interaction between superiors and subordinates. An interesting example is found in Research and Development work. In working with highly trained and educated Research and Development personnel, the most effective leader behavior style might be low task - low relationships. However, during the early stages of a particular project, the director must impose a certain amount of structure as the requirements and limitations of the project are established. Once these limitations are understood, the R & D director moves rapidly through the "project cycle" back to the mature low task - low relationships style.

In a college setting, the Life Cycle Theory has been validated in studying the teacher-student relationship. Effective teaching of lower division students (freshmen and sophomores) has been characterized by structured behavior on the part of the teacher as he reinforces appropriate patterns in attendance and study habits, while more relationships behavior seems to be appropriate for working with upper division undergraduates and Master's students. And finally the cycle seems to be completed as a teacher begins to work with mature Ph.D. candidates, who need very little guidance or socio-emotional support.

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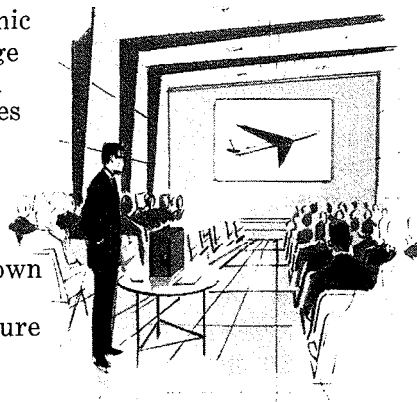
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society do not reach the backward bending aspect of the cycle. But there is some evidence that as the level of education and experience of a group increases, appropriate movement in this direction will take place. However, the demands of the job may often be a limiting factor on the development of maturity in workers. For example, an assembly line operation in an automobile plant is so highly structured that it offers little opportunity for the maturing process to occur. With such monotonous tasks, workers are given minimal control over their environment and are often encouraged to be passive, dependent, and subordinate.

LIFE CYCLE AND SPAN OF CONTROL

For years it has been argued by many management writers that one man can *supervise* only a relatively few people; therefore, all managers should have a limited span of control. For example, Harold Koontz and Cyril O'Donnell¹⁸ state that:

In every organization it must be decided how many subordinates a superior can manage. Students of management have found that this number is usually four to eight subordinates at the upper levels of organization and eight to fifteen or more at the lower levels.

While the suggested number of subordinates which one can supervise varies anywhere from three to thirty, the principle usually states that the number should decrease as one moves higher in the organization. Top management should have fewer subordinates to supervise than lower level managers. Yet the Life Cycle Theory of Leadership suggests that span of control may not depend on the level of the management hierarchy but should be a function of the maturity of the individuals being supervised. The more independent, able to take responsibility, and achievement-motivated one's subordinates are, the more people a manager can supervise. It is theoretically possible to supervise an infinite

number of subordinates if everyone is completely mature and able to be responsible for his own job. This does not mean there is less control, but these subordinates are self-controlled rather than externally controlled by their superior. Since people occupying higher level jobs in an organization tend to be more "mature" and therefore need less close supervision than people occupying lower level jobs, it seems reasonable to assume that top managers should be able to supervise more subordinates than their counterparts at lower levels.¹⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Rensis Likert²⁰ found in his research that supervisors with the best records of performance were employee-centered (high relationships), while job-centered (high task) supervisors were found more often to have low-producing sections. While this relationship seemed to exist, Likert raised the question of which variable was the causal factor. Is the style of the supervisor causing the level of production or is the level of production encouraging the style of the managers? As Likert suggests, it may very well be that high-producing sections allow for general supervision rather than close supervision and relationship behavior rather than task behavior. The supervisor soon learns that his subordinates are mature enough to structure their own environment, thus leaving him time for other kinds of activities. At the same time a low-producing section may leave the supervisor with no choice but to be job-centered. If he attempted to use a relationships style this may be misunderstood and interpreted as reinforcement for their low level of performance. The point is, the supervisor must change appropriately.

CHANGING STYLE

The problem with the conclusions of Likert and other behavioral scientists comes in implementation. Practitioners read that employee-centered supervisors tend to have higher-producing

sections than job-centered supervisors. Wanting to implement these findings overnight, they encourage all supervisors to become more employee-oriented. Consequently, a foreman who has been operating as a task-oriented, authoritarian leader for many years may be encouraged to change his style—"get in step with the times." Upon returning from a "human relations" training program, the foreman will probably try to utilize some of the new relationships techniques he has recently been taught. The problem is that his personality is not compatible with the new concepts, but he tries to use them anyway. As long as things are running smoothly, there is no difficulty. However, the minute an important issue or crisis develops he tends to revert to his old basic style and becomes inconsistent, vacillating between the new relationships style he has been taught, and his old task style which has the force of habit behind it.

This idea was supported in a study conducted by the General Electric Company at one of its turbine and generator plants. In this study, the leadership styles of about 90 foremen were analyzed and rated as "democratic," "authoritarian" or "mixed." In discussing the findings, Saul W. Gellerman²¹ reported that:

The lowest morale in the plant was found among those men whose foremen were rated *between* the democratic and authoritarian extremes. The GE research team felt that these foremen might have varied inconsistently in their tactics, permissive at one moment and hard-fisted the next, in a way that left their men frustrated and unable to anticipate how they would be treated. The naturally autocratic supervisor who is exposed to human relations training may behave in exactly such a manner... a pattern which will probably make him even harder to work for than he was before being "enlightened."

Thus, changing the style of managers is a difficult process, and one that takes considerable time to accomplish. Expecting miracles overnight will only

lead to frustration and uneasiness for both managers and their subordinates. Yet industry invests many millions of dollars annually for training and development programs which concentrate on effecting change in the style of managers. As Fiedler²² suggests:

A person's leadership style . . . reflects the individual's basic motivational and need structure. At best it takes one, two, or three years of intensive psychotherapy to effect changes in personality structure. It is difficult to see how we can change in more than a few cases an equally important set of core values in a few hours or even in the course of a more intensive training program of one or two weeks.

Fiedler's point is well-taken. It is indeed difficult to effect changes in the styles of managers overnight. How-

ever, it is not completely hopeless. But, at best, it is a slow and expensive process which requires creative planning and patience. In fact, Likert²³ found that it takes from three to seven years, depending on the size and complexity of the organization, to effectively implement a new management theory.

Haste is self-defeating because of the anxieties and stresses it creates. There is no substitute for ample time to enable the members of an organization to reach the level of skillful and easy, habitual use of the new leadership . . .

CHANGING PERFORMANCE

Not only is it difficult to effect changes in the styles of managers overnight, but the question that we raise is whether it is even appropriate. It is

questionable whether a work group whose performance has been continually low would suddenly leap to high productivity with the introduction of an employee-centered supervisor. In fact, they might take advantage of him and view him as a "soft-touch." These workers lack maturity and are not ready for more responsibility. Thus the supervisor must bring them along slowly, becoming more employee-centered and less job-centered as they mature. When an individual's performance is low, one cannot expect drastic changes overnight, regardless of changes in expectations or other incentives. The key is often reinforcing positively "successive approximations." By successive approximations we mean behavior which comes closer and closer to the supervisor's expectations of



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good performance. Similar to the child learning some new behavior, a manager should not expect high levels of performance at the outset. As a parent or teacher, we would use positive reinforcement as the child's behavior approaches the desired level of performance. Therefore, the manager must be aware of any progress of his subordinates so that he is in a position to reinforce appropriately improved performance.

Change through the cycle from quadrant 1 to quadrant 2, 3 and then 4 must be gradual. This process by its very nature cannot be revolutionary but must be evolutionary — gradual developmental changes, a result of planned growth and the creation of mutual trust and respect.

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