The third article of a series * . . .*

The Situational Approach

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The situational approach has had considerable recognition. Reliance upon it is dramatized by President Coolidge's reasons for not seeking the Presidential renomination: "The basic fact remains that I do not want the nomination. I think I know myself very well. I fitted into the situation that existed right after the war, but I might not fit into the next one."

It is believed that good business conditions, high employment and morale are prerequisites for Republican leadership, although not necessarily guarantees. An example of this is the case of President Hoover who had the appearance of a leader, experience in handling men and the necessary aggressive manner. Far more important is that he was elected during a period of increasing freedom of locomotion and permeability of class barriers, where internal class struggle was at a low ebb, where there was no international conflict or war and, of course, where the business world was looking forward to high prosperity.

Some think that the first few months of Hoover's administration were very successful. However, the stock market crash of the fall of 1929 brought about a radical restructuring of the situation which heretofore had been conducive to Hoover's leadership. An increasing struggle between labor and capitalism, a general decrease in the freedom of social locomotion, and a general retardation of the standard of living brought on a tensional situation which forced Hoover to identify himself with upper-bourgeois segments of the population. It should be noted that Hoover as an individual had changed very little. By the time of the 1932 election the leadership of Hoover was repudiated by the majority of the American people. This classic example is often cited by students of leadership of how the leadership situation is especially liable to change but the leader's characteristics, being less susceptible to change, alienate him from his following.

The situational approach is, however, not without its ambiguities. The victory of Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York—with the Democratic party in control, the Republican party on the

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wane for a decade or so, and the national climate ready for a resurgence of Democratic leadership—brings up the question once again of the influence of one big personality. The possibility is that the majority of leaders require a conducive situation. The exceptional personality however is able to ride above an incompatible situation.

The passing of personality as an empirical leadership dimension was not occasioned by a total affirmation of the situational approach. Most researchers acknowledged a blending of personality and the situation. They acknowledged that primarily by participating in group activities and expediting the group work, a person became endowed with leadership status. One summarizer of the various leadership studies concluded; "The leader is a person who occupies a position of responsibility and coordinating the activities of the group and their task of attaining the common goal." It was apparent that a person does not become a leader by virtue of the possession of some combination of traits, but rather the pattern of personal characteristics must bear some relevant relationship to the characteristics, activities and goals of the followers. We might say that the evolution of the empirical study of leadership came here to focus upon the relations of leaders and followers. To put it succinctly, a vital key to leadership is followership.

But this is not all. Leadership was conceived in terms of interaction of variables which are constantly in flux and change. Change became a characteristic of the situation which may be radically altered by the addition or loss of members, changes in goals and values.

In other words, the persistence of individul patterns of human behavior in the face of constant situational change appeared to many of the researchers to be the primary obstacle encountered not only in the practice of leadership, but also in the selection and placement of leaders. Although it is especially difficult to find leaders, it ·is quite another problem to place these persons in different situations where they will be able to function as leaders. Succeeding studies of leadership actually did affirm to some extent that leadership is always relative to the situation. The studies are far too numerous to consider in detail here, but what is important is that this change of leaders as a result of situation change represents not a change of role occupant but rather a change of role itself.

The studies of small groups suggest that leadership inhered in a variety of role patterns. With the changing of the situation occur changes in leadership roles and because of the factor of individual differences among group members, different members fill these roles better than others. This distinct possibility became a major clue to understanding leadership and caused considerable emphasis to be placed upon the relations that leaders and the group had with each other.

To be sure, the term situation connoted more than just behavior of the leaders and their group. One definition of the situation was that it is a set of values and attitudes with which the individual or the group has to deal in a process of activity with regard to which this activity is planned and results appreciated. By this definition the situa-

tion involved at least three kinds of data. They included the objective conditions under which the individual or society has to act, the pre-existing attitudes of the individual or the group, and the definition of the situation that is more or less clear to the people involved.

Gibb noted that the situational approach to the study of leadership connoted at least four categories including the structure of inter-personal relations within a group, group or syntality characteristics such as those discussed in the three succeeding chapters, characteristics of the total culture in which the group exists and from which group members have been drawn and lastly, the physical conditions and the task with which the group is confronted.

This latter point leads us to approach the study of leadership from the sole standpoint of existence of a problem having psychological reality for various members of the group. Hitler, for example, focused his early propaganda on emphasizing a problem that faced the general people and intensified their sense of threat by purposefully developing enemies from without as well as from within. He was working on the thesis that the belief that a problem exists is sufficient.

This approach to leadership is also found in more democratic countries where we see political parties spending a tremendous amount of time and oratory in describing the "issues" on which their platforms are built. They know that without a "problem" which has psychological reality for the followers, there is little reason for these followers to seek or accept their leadership. This particular viewpoint is highly related to the "Mayo school" which suggests that the relationship of the leader to the group depended upon how the individuals perceived of their situation and not necessarily upon the logic of it.

We may say that one vital incidence of leadership is a group that has a "felt difficulty." It is characteristic of human groups that "felt difficulties" become somehow objectified for purposes of concerted action. Or, the situation becomes reduced to manageable proportions.

It is characteristic of groups that this attempt at objectivity and subsequent action is not accomplished without encountering functional problems. Bales provided a major contribution to leadership research and theory. He discovered there are phases through which some groups pass as they attempt to overcome "felt difficulties." This phase theory holds only when the group works toward the goal of a group decision concerning a full-fledged problem. Under this condition, groups tend to move in their interaction from a relative emphasis on problems of orientation (what is it) to problems of evaluation (how do we feel about it) and subsequently to problems of control (what shall we do about it). Concurrent with these transitions, the relative frequencies of both negative reactions (disagreement, tension and antagonism) and positive reactions (agreement, tension release and showing solidarity) tend to increase. A full-fledged problem must provide opportunities for the group to come to grips with problems of orientation, evaluation and control (or decision). A full-fledged problem group is one where at the start

of the discussion there is no cognitive clarity about the situation facts and the group must work to arrive at a common definition of that situation. There is some variability in values and interest among the members and the problem exists of arriving at common value judgments. Lastly, there are several possible solutions and at least moderate pressure from various group members to agree upon a particular solution. When a group does not have the following conditions their problem is truncated.

In a full-fledged problem, the rate of acts of orientation decreases steadily from initial to final phase while rate of acts of control rises steadily. Acts of evaluation occur most frequently in the middle phase and less so in the initial and final phases. From initial to final phase both positive and negative reactions increase in rate, although the slopes of the increase diverge between middle and final phase with positive reaction showing positive acceleration.

These findings agree largely with common sense. One would expect that a group with a problem must devote most of its time initially to collecting and clarifying facts and then must proceed to evaluate and exchange opinions toward the end of the middle phase. This exchange involves both agreement and disagreement, solidarity and antagonism for the common evaluation of the situation has been defined as inevitably forged under some heat. Control gradually picks up in the second session as you might expect and markedly in the third to a point where a movement toward decision is accelerated and culminates in the acceptance of the decision

itself. It is important to note a persistent tendency for the relative frequency of disagreement, tension and antagonism to reach their maximum values during the second session. This is presumably brought on because the group is fighting over values that occur and, of course, this does bring about emotional involvement.

Decidedly important is that an occurrence of a status struggle in the second session, when worked out, usually results in successfully passing through the third phase. In four of the ten groups there was a high degree of agreement among members' ranking of each other on "leadership" criterion at the end of the fourth meeting. These four groups represent the high status-consensus groups and in the other six groups there was much less intermember agreement (low-status consensus). While both the high and the low groups manifest the same sharp increase in disagreement, tension and antagonism during the second meeting, in the high groups there is decrease in conflict in the third and fourth meetings. From the data one would expect that in the low groups the conflict continues. The researchers interpret the data to mean that all their groups had a struggle for status, but that the high groups resolved the conflict and came to agreement on status early while the low groups did not.

Besides the typical phase generalization, there is typical profile. Fifty per cent of the acts attempted are typically attempted answers, 26 per cent positive reactions, 12 per cent negative reactions, 6 per cent questions and 7 per cent attempted answers (reactions). With regard to sociometric leadership on the

basis of who contributed the best ideas for problem solving or who did most to guide the discussion, whom do you like, and whom do you dislike, it turned out that members' choices on "best ideas" and "guidance" correlated fairly highly with rank in frequency of initiation and receipt of interaction. The "top man" who does most of the talking has the most remarks addressed to him and is also credited as being most effective and influential member in accomplishing the group task. When members are asked to designate an overall "leader" they most often chose the person whom they have also ranked first on "best ideas" and "guidance." However, the best idea and guidance breeder is not rated highest as being liked. As a matter of fact, the task leader who initially is also a social leader usually loses the latter as the meeting progresses. It is common for the task leader to be the most disliked man on the average. The man ranked second or third best task leader is usually the best liked.

Problem solving groups apparently require two kinds of leaders, task and social. One promotes organization to accomplish group goals and the other keeps tension to a minimum. One makes accomplishment possible and the other makes group spirit possible. The best liked role, however, is the least accepted as the leadership role.

The theory to account for this ambivalence toward task and social leadership is related to the fact that task leadership imposes wishes of the leader upon others who respond to this threat of control or direction by asserting their own opinions, disagreements or agreements.

The question arises as to whether or not the same individual can assume both roles. The data indicate that in the ten instances where a man played both task and social leader initially, nine times the task role was dropped in favor of the social role. In one instance, the individual dropped both roles, perhaps because he could not satisfactorily resolve the conflict in his own mind.

The whole object of reporting these studies in this particular discussion is to show evidence why leadership is believed to be in part a functional role category of a particular social situation. Many theorists today believe that to achieve the group goal there are certain functional problems that necessarily determine the direction and quality of interaction and influence. Imposing a solution prematurely, expediting the evaluation phase without concern for attitudinal blocks or hasty generalization of the "felt difficulty" initially, will cause individuals to fail in acquiring leadership status. It is true that as a group exists, centralization of leadership occurs, but nevertheless, there are certain functional imperatives inherent in the organization of a group that define and delimit the power of leadership. These theorists feel safe to assure the reader that these imperatives give direction and character to the group just as much and probably more than personal qualities and traits of leaders. We shall continue this discussion in the fourth article of the series. At such time we shall note the ambiguities.

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Dr. Jennings fourth article in this series will appear in the April Journal.