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## PATH-GOAL ANALYSIS

"Leaders, to be effective, engage in behaviors that complement subordinates' environments and abilities in a manner that compensates for deficiencies and is instrumental to subordinate satisfaction and individual and work unit performance" (House 1996, 324). Management scholar Robert J. House's remark about leadership concisely captures the essence of the path-goal theory of leadership. According to this theory, followers consciously consider alternative courses of action and assess the likelihood that each course of action will yield desirable as well as undesirable outcomes. After consciously considering these alternative actions, proponents of the theory propose that followers act in a manner they believe will maximize the attainment of positive outcomes while minimizing the attainment of negative outcomes. Using this conceptualization of motivated behavior, path-goal leadership theory suggests that an effective leader directs followers' behavior by changing followers' perceptions of the relationship between behaviors and outcomes.

### HISTORIC CONTEXT FOR PATH-GOAL THEORY

During the 1950s and 1960s, leadership researchers primarily focused on identifying the behaviors of effective leaders. Although many specific behaviors were identified by researchers at the University of Michigan and the Ohio State University, they independently classified these behaviors into two general

categories: initiating structure and consideration. Initiating structure, encompassing production-centered leader behaviors, refers to leader behaviors that clarify performance expectations for subordinates. Examples of initiating structure would be the leader implementing a formal performance appraisal system or the leader setting specific production goals. On the other hand, consideration covers more employee-centered behaviors and refers to leader behaviors that communicate concern for followers' welfare. Examples of consideration behavior would be the leader publicly defending the interests of followers or publicly expressing appreciation for followers' work.

Unfortunately, although the research on leader behavior initially appeared to eliminate the ambiguity of prior findings, it soon became apparent that a singular focus on behavior is also insufficient for identifying when a leader would be effective. For example, some behavioral studies found that initiating structure enhanced follower performance, whereas other studies showed no effect or even a negative effect on follower performance. Clearly, factors other than leader behavior (e.g., situational conditions, leader personality, follower beliefs) have to be considered to understand when leader behaviors will produce effective follower performance.

In 1970, Martin G. Evans published a paper that considered some of these additional factors by connecting the leader behavior research to the most popular motivation theory of the time: Victor H. Vroom's (1964) VIE (valence, instrumentality, and expectancy) theory. VIE theory states that the motivation to act in a certain way depends on the valence, instrumentality, and expectancy beliefs of individuals. Valence refers to an individual's assessment of the desirability of the outcome. Instrumentality refers to an individual's belief in the likelihood that a particular performance outcome leads to particular outcomes/rewards. Lastly, expectancy refers to an individual's belief in the likelihood that a particular behavior results in various performance outcomes. VIE theory states that these three beliefs interact in determining motivated behavior. Specifically, if only one of the aforementioned beliefs is low for a particular action, then it is predicted that the individual will be less motivated to take that action.

To link the leader behavior literature with VIE theory, Evans emphasized the connection between the leader's behavior and the follower's beliefs and behavior. He argued that initiating structure and consideration behaviors would lead to leadership effectiveness when these behaviors strategically change followers' beliefs about the outcomes that result from various actions. In 1971, Robert J. House extended Evans's ideas when he articulated the role of contingencies in Evans's model. This elaboration by House is called the "path-goal theory of leader effectiveness."

### FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS OF PATH-GOAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

The first complete description of path-goal leadership theory was provided by House in 1971. In this paper, House made three assumptions about human behavior. First, consistent with VIE theory, subordinates are assumed to behave in a rational, self-serving manner. Second, House assumed that people are uncomfortable and experience stress in ambiguous situations. More specifically, House believed that people would seek ways to minimize role ambiguity, which refers to confusion about how certain tasks should be conducted or confusion about how role performance will be evaluated. Finally, House assumed that a reduction in role ambiguity would lead to increased subordinate satisfaction and performance enhancement.

Based on these three assumptions, House structured path-goal theory around two categories of leader behavior: path-goal clarifying behavior and subordinate need fulfilling behavior. In terms of path-goal clarifying behavior, which parallels initiating structure, House argued that leaders will be effective when they do two things. First, leaders need to act in ways that increase the valence of outcomes associated with subordinates' work-goal attainment. This can be accomplished when leaders use their reward power to affect the desirability of outcomes associated with attaining and not attaining work goals. It was predicted that this type of leader behavior would greatly reduce subordinate role ambiguity.

Second, House predicted that leaders would be effective if they behaved in ways that clarified and strengthened subordinates' path-instrumentality beliefs. Leaders can do this by sending clear messages about which outcomes result from the attainment and non-attainment of work goals. One way of sending these clear messages is for the leader to consistently deliver rewards and punishments as a function of subordinate performance.

Although the strengthening of path-instrumentalities can increase the likelihood of the leader being effective, House noted that it does not always lead to effective behavior. According to House, initiating structure behaviors are only necessary in highly ambiguous task situations. In the absence of task ambiguity, House predicted that initiating structure on the part of the leader would reduce follower satisfaction, due to subordinates perceiving the leader as exercising unnecessary levels of control.

In terms of subordinate need fulfilling behavior, which is conceptually similar to leader consideration behaviors, House proposed that subordinate performance can be enhanced by leader behaviors that fulfill subordinate personal needs. When need fulfillment is, in the follower's mind, contingent on goal-directed behavior, it can increase the positive valence of goal-directed effort.

Thus, the basic tenets of path-goal leadership theory are that leaders will effectively motivate followers by making the outcomes associated with work-goal achievement desirable and by helping followers understand the behaviors and strategies that will lead to these desirable outcomes.

### REFINEMENT OF PATH-GOAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

Since its initial formulation, there have been two major refinements of path-goal theory. The first refinement, in 1974, was primarily concerned with issues of leader behavior measurement. The second refinement, in 1996, was focused on contemporizing the theory.

In 1974, House and Mitchell elaborated path-goal theory by increasing the specificity of the two general types of leader behaviors. To facilitate measurement,

they proposed four distinct types of behavior: directive path-goal clarifying behavior, supportive leader behavior, participative leader behavior, and achievement-oriented behavior.

Directive path-goal clarifying leader behavior is generally aimed at reducing role ambiguity, clarifying the link between follower effort and goal attainment, and linking follower goal attainment to extrinsic rewards. Again, it is very similar to the original "initiating structure leader behavior" discussed earlier. In deciding how much directive behavior is necessary, a leader must consider both the characteristics of the task and the needs of the follower. When tasks are relatively unstructured, directive behavior can help reduce ambiguity. Similarly, more directive behavior can be effective with certain followers who have a greater individual need for role clarity.

Supportive leader behavior focuses on the personal needs of followers. It is very similar to the original "consideration leader behavior" discussed earlier. Specific supportive leader behaviors include making the work environment an enjoyable place and expressing concern for the personal welfare of followers. As stressed in House's initial theory, fulfillment of followers' personal needs can, when tied to goal-directed effort, enhance follower motivation and performance. This performance boost is due to the reduction of stress and frustration. Reducing such negative affect is posited to result in an increased net positive valence for work-related activities. House and Mitchell suggested that supportive leader behavior would be most effective when work-related activities were not intrinsically satisfying. In such a way, leader behaviors can serve to complement task characteristics.

The third type of behavior specified by House and Mitchell in 1974 is participative leader behavior. Participative leader behavior involves considering followers' input and valuing their opinions when making decisions that affect them. This type of leader behavior is essentially a combination of directive and supportive leader behavior. House and Mitchell claimed that the impact of this type of behavior is highly contingent on follower personality. Specifically, they argued that the extent to which subordinates prefer external control, as opposed to

independence, moderates the effect of participative leadership. House and Mitchell suggested that participative leader behaviors would be most effective when directed toward followers who prefer independence.

Finally, achievement-oriented behavior, which is also a combination of directive and supportive leader behavior, is concerned with enhancing follower performance in an almost inspirational manner. Leaders engaging in such behavior express confidence in the capability of followers to reach their goals and encourage followers to set high goals and elevate standards of excellence. The net result is an overall increase in follower performance and satisfaction. Yet again, the impact of such behavior is contingent on situational and follower characteristics. House and Mitchell posited that achievement-oriented behavior would be most effective for unstructured, ambiguous tasks because follower confidence in such situations is likely to be low.

In summary, by elaborating the categories of leader behaviors, House and Mitchell stressed the importance of follower dispositional characteristics as well as situational characteristics to identify leader behaviors that result in effective behavior. It should be noted that subsequent revisions of path-goal theory have expanded the number of leader behavior categories to ten. Like the elaboration discussed above, this new expansion of leader behavior explicates the conditions under which these various types of leader behaviors would enhance motivation, abilities, performance, and satisfaction of subordinates. The primary reason for this additional refinement of leader behaviors was to enhance the accuracy of measurement. Interested readers should consult House's 1996 paper for a detailed description of these behaviors.

In 1996, House attempted to contemporize path-goal theory by expanding the theory's predictions about how leader behavior can enhance follower ability. House claimed that by intentionally working to develop follower abilities, and by acting as role models of effective task behaviors, leaders can facilitate the growth of follower task abilities. Leaders clarify how followers should complete tasks by modeling appropriate role behaviors. Further, lead-

ers can affect the development of followers' abilities by individually attending to the capabilities of each follower. House believed that follower ability improvement should result in enhanced follower performance.

A second change to path-goal theory made in 1996 was the inclusion of predictions regarding the effect of leader behavior on work-unit performance. All prior versions of the theory focused on the individual relationship between a leader and a follower. In the 1996 version, however, House recognized the importance of work group leadership and expanded path-goal theory to incorporate how a leader can enhance the performance of an entire work group. Specifically, he predicted that group performance should improve when the leader acts in ways that enable meaningful interactions among work group members as well as develop quality relationships between the work group and the rest of the organization. Additionally, the leader can augment group performance by facilitating access to necessary resources for the group. Thus, this new version of path-goal theory not only discusses the role of the leader in motivating an individual, but also extends this theory to explain how a leader can affect a group as an aggregate.

## EMPIRICAL SUPPORT FOR PATH-GOAL THEORY

While path-goal leadership theory has generated a considerable amount of research since it was first proposed, empirical validation of the theory as a whole has proved difficult. Some hypotheses of the theory have been well supported, while others have not. For instance, hypothesized relationships between leader behavior and follower performance are more consistently found than are the hypothesized relationships between leader behavior and follower satisfaction. Further, whereas the theory discusses the hypothesized relationships in causal terms, the majority of empirical evidence is correlational in nature, allowing possible alternative interpretations for the results.

Despite many empirical studies, most leadership scholars agree that path-goal theory has not been

adequately tested. One of the most frequently noted deficiencies in path-goal research is that of improper measurement. Most research on path-goal theory has relied on various versions of the leader behavior description questionnaire (LBDQ) to measure leader behaviors. Yet, scholars have repeatedly noted the inappropriateness of this instrument in investigating the relationships posited by path-goal theory, arguing that the scale does not adequately tap the proposed constructs. In light of such findings, much of the early research on path-goal theory is in need of reassessment.

A second criticism of path-goal research is that it tends to be relatively simplistic, despite the complex nature of the theory. The majority of research on path-goal theory has focused on determining how task structure moderates the relationship between leader behavior and follower performance and satisfaction. Investigations of directive leader behavior and supportive leader behavior have dominated the literature, while research has generally neglected the other types of leader behavior about which the theory makes predictions. In order to comprehensively evaluate path-goal theory, all of the hypothesized relationships must be tested.

A third criticism of the research on path-goal theory is that it has not examined the basic motivational assumptions of the theory. Seminal reviews of the VIE research all noted some empirical support, but have also identified several problems. These problems have ranged from mismeasurement of the three key constructs (valence, instrumentality, and expectancy) to the use of inappropriate research designs to assess the validity of the theory. A late-twentieth-century meta-analysis found that despite these problems, there is evidence that the three VIE components predict job performance. Finally, while rationale theories like VIE have received less attention from social scientists over the years, recent work by Lord, Hanges, and Godfrey (2003) has integrated the original VIE conceptualization into a framework more consistent with current models of human information processing.

In sum, while research on path-goal leadership theory has generally been supportive of its assertions, the theory as a whole has not been adequately

tested. Some scholars have suggested that path-goal research has been hindered by flawed methodology and incomplete, simplistic testing of the theory. Furthermore, some have suggested that the basic assumptions of the theory could be flawed.

### IMPACT OF PATH-GOAL THEORY ON THE FIELD

Aside from contributing to our understanding of leadership through empirical tests, path-goal leadership theory has been instrumental in the development of new perspectives in the leadership field. The substitutes for leadership theory is one such example.

Substitutes for leadership theory, developed by Steve Kerr and John Jermier in 1978, was inspired by the path-goal leadership theory prediction that followers with certain characteristics in unambiguous situations do not need leaders to clarify their jobs. Substitutes theory suggests that certain alternatives for leadership can exist, such as organizational formalization, that make leader behaviors redundant. In both path-goal leadership theory and substitutes for leadership theory, such redundancy is hypothesized to decrease follower satisfaction. In addition to making predictions about leaders occasionally being redundant, substitutes theory claims that some contextual variables can also have a direct effect on employee outcomes.

Substitutes theory is conceptually distinct from path-goal theory in that the latter does not argue for the complete irrelevancy of leader behaviors to employee outcomes. However, the theoretical roots of substitutes theory are clearly in the contingent nature of path-goal theory. Although the evidence for substitutes theory is mixed, it is widely cited in organizational behavior texts and has an extensive following in the field.

A second theoretical outgrowth of path-goal leadership theory is the 1976 theory of charismatic leadership, also developed by House. While House's path-goal theory stresses the importance of leader adjustment to and fulfillment of follower needs, charismatic leadership theory posits that arousing, changing, and overall enhancing follower needs and desires is an important facet of leadership. Follower

motives for achievement, affiliation, and power can all be aroused to increase intrinsic motivation and outcome valence. The theory's focus on leader-initiated change in followers' needs is symmetrically opposed to path-goal theory's tenets of leader adjustment to such needs and thus is an expansion of path-goal theory. Stated differently, path-goal theory defined the gap that charismatic theory filled. Decades after its development, the theory of charismatic leadership continues to exert strong influence in the leadership field due to generally supportive research findings.

### CURRENT STATUS OF PATH-GOAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

Methodological limitations and incomplete empirical support have led to a decline in research on path-goal theory. While the theory generated a great deal of research throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, work on path-goal theory has since tapered off. Scholars have asserted that the theory must be further developed if it is to continue to inspire empirical research. House's 1996 revision addressed some of these concerns. To date, few empirical investigations of the 1996 reformulation have been conducted.

Despite difficulty in empirically validating path-goal theory, it has proven to be quite valuable to broader leadership and organizational theory. In the early 1970s, a time of simplistic behavioral conceptualizations of leadership, the theory forced leadership scholars to consider more complex relationships between leader behaviors and subordinate outcomes. Specifically, the theory forced the incorporation of situational and dispositional contingencies into leadership models. In recognizing the complexity of the phenomenon, path-goal theory paved the way for more intricate theories of leadership. Some of these theories, such as substitutes for leadership and charismatic leadership theory, grew directly out of path-goal theory. Thus, while currently not a hotbed for empirical research, path-goal theory is an important part of the development of contemporary theories of leadership and, therefore, has secured a place in the history of organizational theory.

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and Paul J. Hanges

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