
RELEVANCE OF FIEDLER'S CONTINGENCY LEADERSHIP THEORY TO THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the relevance of Fiedler's Contingency Leadership Theory, in managing School Organization with special reference to primary and secondary levels of the Nigerian Education system. Related literature on the concept of leadership, types and qualities of leadership, what contingency leadership denotes, postulations of the theory under, and other related issues have been synoptically reviewed. The paper, based on the acute analyses of the literature, posits that despite the fact that the theory was not initially developed in the context of school organization, its assumptions relate positively to management effectiveness of primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. The paper thus, recommends among other things, deliberate, systematic and careful study of the school contingent situation before selecting and applying any of the renowned leadership approaches in the school organization.

Key words; Leadership, Management and Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

The success or failure of an organization in accomplishing the goals and objectives for which it is established, is associated, in most cases with the kind of leadership that operates in the organization. Basically, organizations are formed to attain predetermined goals through a number of functions and duties members engage in manifesting in interactions among the three basic components of the organization that is the people,

the task and the milieu within which the organization is situated. Such interactions could not successfully yield the desired results without the command, guidance, control, supervision and direction from the leaders who are otherwise referred to as managers and administrators. Thus, the leadership of an organization could be perceived as the pivot upon which the entire activities taking place in the organization revolve around. To this end therefore, the impact of leadership on

organization and vice versa is inevitable. Here management scholars express cogent views and propositions on whether it is the contingent situation of an organization that determines the leadership style or it is the leadership style that influences the organizational contingent situation more. The divergent opinions management theorists and practitioners present in this, as implied by Wehrich, Cannice and Koontz (2011) saw the emergence of two opposing theories technically referred to as situational leadership theory championed by Stogdill, Shuttlesworth and their associates. And contingency leadership theory propounded by Fred E. Fiedler and his associates.

The focus of this paper is on the latter theory and its relevance to school management. Fundamentally, the school leadership like that of any form of formal organization is in need of relevant theory that can be employed to improve the utilization of available resources to facilitate effective attainment of school goals. Schools according to Achunine (1998) make certain basic provisions like staff, physical facilities, equipment, finance and educational programmes before parents/guardians can entrust their children to the care of the organization. For this and many other reasons, school organizations could best be managed by well-informed leaders with wide and versatile knowledge of all the principles and technicalities that make management a success. It is against this background that this paper examines the applicability of this great

theory in the match towards successful management of school organization.

LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP STYLES: AN OVERVIEW

The concept-leadership is very complex and as such attracts a plethora of interpretations. Thus one could observe that there is no single universally accepted definition of leadership. This notwithstanding, a review of a number of such interpretations would expose one to the key ideas featuring in many of the definitions developed by management scholars and writers that is leadership depicts ability to influence people to strive for the accomplishment of certain objectives. According to Cole (1986) leadership is a dynamic process in a group whereby one individual influences the others to contribute voluntarily to the achievement of group tasks in a given situation. Closely related to this interpretation, is the view of Nwachukwu (1992) who posits that leadership is a social influencing process for the attainment of goals. Achunine (1998) following suit opines that leadership is the initiation, organization and direction of the actions of the members of a group in a specific situation towards the achievement of the objectives of the group. Campbell (1999) observes leadership as the ability to influence effectively the activities of role peers towards the achievement of organizational goals. Michael (2004) sees leadership as the process of getting things done through people. A leader, he concludes is a person who initiates changes

and directs the activities or efforts of the group towards the attainment of the desired goals.

So taking the above interpretations of leadership into account, deduction could be made that school- head teacher is also a leader, because he influences the efforts of teaching and non-teaching staff towards the accomplishment of the school goals of making school environment conducive for teaching and learning. The head- teacher, by virtue of the power and authority conferred on him to pilot the school organization identifies the school goals and develops procedures via which all the staff members under his control would be mobilized to function effectively for the sole aim of educating the students. This by implication means that the head teacher is required by the ethos of his callings, to understand and make use of the general principles, theories and guidelines governing effective leadership in the organizational management with the theory under consideration inclusive.

Leadership, seen from the perspective of ability to influence others to perform a given task, is classified in to various types. Thus, classification of leadership is a subject of disagreement among scholars and writers. To some writers such as Bush (2003), leaders can be categorized in to born or made. The former depicts a person born with attributes and qualities of leadership, while the later portrays a person possessing leadership qualities through training and experience. Another classification of leadership which enjoys a wide

patronage among various scholars is that of behaviouralists who based their classification of leadership on the attitude of the leader towards members of the organization and the task to be executed. Bello (2001) enumerates in this relation, some three leadership styles under the behaviouralists approach as Autocratic, Democratic and Laissez-faire. The first is task oriented leader who uses power to run the organization. The second respects the right of choice, social and emotional feelings of the subordinates and thus involves others in decision making. The third category can be seen as a leader who allows things to take their natural course. However, Campbell (1999) posits that the above three categories of leadership attitudes could further be extended to produce a six style of leadership form namely;

- a. Autocratic-Self Styles
- b. Autocratic-Nomothetic Styles
- c. Democratic-Nomothetic Styles
- d. Democratic-Idiographic Styles
- e. Democratic-Transactional Styles and
- f. Laissez-Faire Styles

Now whatever classification, leadership styles and approaches receive, one obvious issue surrounding the application of one leadership style or another is that leaders whether born or made, autocratic, democratic or laissez-faire operate in a given organization. And that the situation in the organization could exert influence on the kind of leadership they employ. In the same vein, and

taking it from the organizational perspective, the contingent circumstances in the organization could influence the choice of one kind of leadership style or another. This bi-lateral influence as could be inferred is the premise upon which this write-up is established.

CONTINGENCY LEADERSHIP THEORY

Contingency leadership theory is part of the general contingent approach to organizational management. Propounded by Fred E. Fielder and associates, the theory assumes that there is no single leadership style that can fit different types of organization. In the words of Achunine (1998) Contingency leadership style refers to a leadership style in which the manager takes into account the nature and characteristics of an organization in order to determine which leadership practice will work best under given a situation. Levine and Hogg (2012) posit in this connection that the contingency approach to management is based on the idea that there is no one best way to manage and that to be effective, planning, organizing, leading and controlling must be tailored to the particular circumstances faced by an organization. Gupta (2009) is of the view that contingency theory of leadership emphasizes the effectiveness of leadership which is dependent on matching a leader's style to right situation. The theory, he observes was originally developed by Fiedler after studying various leaders in different contexts.

Contingency leadership theory as could be construed from the above elucidations expels the dogmatic and die-hard attitude of sticking to one leadership style at the detriment of others. Instead, the leader applies different approaches in different organizational contingent situations. This suggests that no single leadership pattern is applicable in all organizations. Cole (1986) enumerates in this relation, the determinant factors for applying one leadership style or another as: nature of the task, size of the group, group norms, and roles of individuals within the group as well as nature of the environment. Perhaps, the wisdom behind applying different leadership styles in managing different organizations is that variation in tasks, people and situations means the need for dissimilar approach where effectiveness and productivity of leadership are concerned. Thus sticking to a particular leadership style in managing different organizations could be disadvantageous. Ocho in Alice (1997) observes in this relation that when an administrator concentrates on a single pattern of leadership acts, the organization suffers. In fact contingency theory contends that there is no one best way of leading and that a leadership style that is effective in some situations may not be successful in others (Levine and Hogg, 2012)

Furthermore, contingency leadership theory is of the assumption that personality traits are not the only determinants of successful leadership. So even if the leader is blessed with such traits; he or she has to take

into cognizance the contingent organizational situation and the pattern of interaction between the group members and the leader. It is based on this understanding of diversity and differences in organizational situations and members that the leader would work towards developing positive means to match the organizational situations, the subordinates needs and the leadership style. It is perhaps due to the emphasis of the theory on meeting employers' needs that the theory can be perceived as having congruence with the follower theory which according to Koontz and Wehrich (1988) signifies a situation whereby people tend to follow those whom they perceive as offering them a means of accomplishing their own personal desires.

Contingency theory as observed by Wehrich, Cannice and Koontz (2011) is made up of three principles namely: position power, task structure and leader-member relations. The position power is the degree to which the power of a position, as distinguished from other sources of power, such as personality or expertise, enables a leader to get group members to comply with directions. The task structure as a principle in the theory implies clear definition of a task and people held responsible for them. Thus the task structure means a process via which organizational tasks are clearly defined and responsibilities delegated to members in an unambiguous term. So, if organizational tasks are well structured and divided, there would be a room for effective evaluation of employee's

performance. The principle of leader-member relations simply refers to a situation in which the leader applies positive ways to gain trust from his subordinates, and this apparently calls for understanding the needs, derives and desires of the subordinates. Wehrich, *et al* (2011) observe in this connection that leader-member relations is more important than position power and task structure because of the fact that the principle of leader-member relations has to do with the extent to which group members like and trust a leader and are willing to follow that leader.

Generally speaking, contingency leadership theory is based on one fundamental postulation that assumes positive relationship between organizational contingent circumstances and leadership styles. Thus, the effectiveness of any leadership style depends on the organizational situation, task and the people.

RELEVANCE OF THE THEORY IN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

Like any other organization, school constitutes people, situation and task. School head-teachers, who assume the responsibilities to lead the school organization, are tasked with the duties of harmonizing, coordinating, supervising and controlling the entire activities of teaching and non-teaching staffers for the successful attainment of the objectives for which schools are established. The situations in schools differ due to differences manifesting in the members themselves, standard set for the school, the milieu

within which the school is situated as well as the objectives the school is set to achieve. In other words, school comprises different categories of people with different levels of intelligence, knowledge, experience, exposure and inclinations (Bello, 2001). And schools are of different types, dissimilar nature, and divergent standard as well as diversified objectives. This categorization includes public, private, basic, upper basic, day, boarding, grammar, science, vocational, boys, girls, mixed, secular, and religious and many other types of schools. These differences imply that managing such diversified types of school organization, could not be successful by strict adherence to one and single leadership style or approach. For instance, a leadership approach such as autocratic, that befits a rural school may not necessarily suit an urban school and vice versa. Similarly the leadership approach that befits a Boys' Secondary School may not be in congruence with that of a Girls' Secondary School.

The Nigerian state, being a land of diversity and the school being a reflection of the society signifies that a different approach is inevitable if effectiveness and productivity are to be realized in managing different school organizations. The National Policy on Education (FRN 2004) has stated in clear terms that "the school systems and consequently their management and day-to-day administration shall grow out of the life and social ethos of the community which they serve". The implication of this is that the difference in the social

ethos and dissimilar life styles of different communities in which different categories of schools are located, should guide the head- teacher to decide on the most appropriate leadership style to be employed. As such an autocratic school manager may find it inevitable to resort to democratic style when transferred to a school located in different social background that is unlike to his former school. But all these changes in the application of leadership style depend, as alluded earlier, on the contingent school circumstances, the nature of the task as well as the people. It is not out of place to note that, it is indispensable to the head- teacher to carefully study the personnel in the school; teaching and non-teaching, the school's objectives, the group norms and values and the nature of the different tasks in the school before deciding on the appropriate leadership approach.

In the light of the afore- mentioned analogy made in respect of the application of contingency leadership theory in school organizations, one could assert that the theory can serve as a panacea to the perennial problem of insubordination some school managers experience in relating with staff members. Gupta (2009) implies in this connection that if situations are really bad, such as poor leader-member relationship, contingency approach could be a potential solution.

CONCLUSION

Leadership style is to a large extent, the determinant factor of the successful attainment of organizational goals and objectives. There are different leadership styles that organizational managers employ to enable them perform their task effectively. Autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire are examples of leadership approaches that enjoy strong patronage among practicing organizational leaders. But findings of a number of empirical studies indicate that since organizations differ in a number of respects, none of these leadership approaches could be seen as always relevant to all sorts of organizations. As such, contingency theory postulates that different contingent organizational situations, dissimilarities in tasks and people could determine the suitability or otherwise of any leadership approach. The school organizations, being different in their nature, task and settings, constituting members with divergent levels of knowledge interest and experience, could best be managed by appropriate application of the contingent model of leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is based on the discussions made so far, that the following recommendations are proffered:

- a. That for successful, effective and result-oriented leadership the school head-teachers should carefully study the needs, derives and desires of the staff members before deciding

on the appropriate leadership style to be employed in the school,

- b. Dogmatic and die-hard attitude of sticking to one leadership style should be avoided especially while in managing different schools,
- c. To properly address the problem of insubordination some head-teachers in the Nigerian secondary and primary schools experience in relating with some staff members, there is a need for application of principles of effective delegation.

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