

# Leadership Theories

## An overview in everyday language

<http://www.learn-to-be-a-leader.com/leadership-theories.html>

### 1. Naturalistic theories

Naturalistic theories of leadership were the first to develop. They were built on the idea that leaders were born, not made.

The earliest naturalistic theory was not really a theory as such, just a set of beliefs and assumptions. Every so often a society or culture threw up a great person who provided outstanding leadership. Just think of these examples:

- Jesus Christ, the Messiah promised to the Jews.
- King Arthur, a king who will unite Britain, defeat its foes and return when needed.
- William Wallace, the liberator of Scotland against the English.
- Abraham Lincoln, Who ended slavery in the USA.
- Ghandi, the peace maker who held together the fragile alliance in India at the time of independence.

At the time that people believed this explanation of leadership, in most societies the great leader was normally a man. One example of an exception was Boudicca, the queen of the Iceni in ancient Britain.

The belief or assumption was that such greatness could not have been learned but was inherent, part of their genetic make up. It was probably hereditary (or so it was believed)! This is one reason why ruling or aristocratic families emerged.

As the scientific method began to be applied to psychology, the study of human behaviour, a new naturalistic approach to leadership theories emerged – trait theory.

The trait theory of leadership still assumes that leaders are born, not made. But it sought to identify those personality traits associated with the best leaders, to help understand leadership and to identify people who, having the same traits, could (it was assumed) make good leaders. Trait theory still has its adherents. Some [psychometric instruments](#) used in the recruitment of leaders were built on the idea of inherent or “built in” traits.

## 2. Functional leadership theories

Functional leadership theories are based on very different assumptions. They focus on what leaders actually do. That is, their actions or functions.

One of the best known and most influential of functional theories of leadership, used in many leadership training programmes, is [John Adair's](#) "Action-Centred Leadership".

From here it is a short leap to the belief that if one person can do something, then others can learn to do it. We are now in the world of leaders being made, not born. And we open up the possibility of [leadership development](#) and planned leadership training.

This question of whether leaders are born or made is part of the whole question of whether human behaviour is due to [nature or nurture](#) .

Functional theories of leadership are developed by studying successful leaders and identifying the actions and behaviours they show. Large studies with lots of data make it possible to correlate the actions with the successful results.

## 3. Situational leadership theories

Functional leadership is all very well but it doesn't help us to deal with changes, different situations and the nature of the people being led.

Situational theories of leadership were developed to find good ways of adapting leadership actions to meet the needs of different situations and circumstances.

One classic situational model of leadership ( [Hersey & Blanchard](#) ) is concerned with identifying the ability (or competence) and willingness (commitment or motivation) of those being led, and then determining the best style of leadership to follow. Other approaches (eg, [Lewin, Tannenbaum & Schmidt](#) ) suggest of continuums of leadership style.

Leadership style here refers to the broad approach adopted by a leader. A leader's style of leadership is often based on a leader's own beliefs, personality, experiences, working environment and the situation at the time. Some leaders work within one leadership style. Others are more flexible and can adapt their style of leadership to meet the needs of different situations.

## **4. Autocratic vs Participative leadership theories**

These theories of leadership developed out of the concept of leadership style. However, they focus very much on the balance of power between the leader and the followers.

Autocratic leaders tend to make decisions and impose them on others. They often believe that they are best placed to make the decisions, that others should accept their authority. Some such leaders have certain personality traits, such as a need to be in control of situations. Autocratic leadership is suited to certain situations, such as emergencies or time critical circumstances. But they don't tend to nurture other people or get the best results from followers who are capable and motivated.

Participative leaders consult others and involve them in the decision making process. They may make the final decision but in consulting others they are demonstrating consideration, respect for others and the ability to listen. The assumption behind this approach is that it tends to be appreciated by followers who return the favour by being loyal and committed. Participative leadership also develops other people and builds support for the overall direction, leading to a shared vision and common goals.

Participative leaders often also adopt a facilitative leadership style. That is, they empower and encourage others to take make decisions, take action and act with authority, normally within defined boundaries.

## **5. Transactional vs Transformational leadership theories**

Another way of looking at leadership approaches is to do with the type of work and the relationship between the leader and the follower.

Transactional leadership theory is based on transactions or exchanges between the leader and the follower. It assumes that the working relationship is one where the leader issues the work, praises or criticises, rewards or punishes.

The follower has little responsibility, other than doing as they are required, correctly. All works well if both leader and follower carry out their part in the transactions as expected.

This approach is more often seen in low skilled jobs, where procedures are clearly defined or where there is little change.

Transformational leadership theory is all about change. Transformational leaders inspire others to follow a vision. They create opportunities for people to show flair and to take responsibility for new ideas.

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They are often very extravert, charismatic and strategic. They see the big picture rather than the detail. They inspire great loyalty, providing they succeed. If they fail, or are seen to be hypocritical, the followers may well become disillusioned or cynical.

Transformational leadership is more appropriate in fast changing situations, where people have high levels of skill and where the leader can afford to get involved in the detail.

## 6. Moral leadership

Moral approaches to leadership emphasise the role of the leader in various moralistic positions, such as:

- making the world a better place
- treating people well
- caring for the environment
- religious beliefs
- being true to, and acting consistently with, one's vision.

Various leadership writers have included moral elements in their work. They tend to suggest that leaders are more likely to be successful if they have a positive impact on others - rather than lead others just to benefit themselves.

Politicians and religious leaders, in particular, are expected to be moral leaders, partly because they address the issues above or adopt a moralistic platform.



Business leaders are perhaps expected to be less moralistic. However, when they do truly act for the good of others in general, and not just themselves and their shareholders, they tend to be highly regarded.

Related to moralistic leadership is the idea of [leadership ethics](#), which are largely to do with the relationship between the leader and their followers.

**Assignment:** Choose one or two of the leadership theories above that you are curious about and do some research on them. Why did you choose that theory?