Effective Leadership Theories for Geographers in Education

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In this era of uncertainty and conflict in higher education institutions, the position and merit of geography has been gradually declining. Geography programs have been reviewed regarding the value, nature, purpose, and utility of the discipline. Some geography departments have been terminated, such as the one at the University of Michigan (Kish & Ward, 1981). Skeptics of geography, moreover, point to the great range of problems, such as the identity of geography and the role it plays in education, which have plagued the discipline. Yet effective and efficient leadership have rarely been voiced as one means to enhance the status of geography.

It is the intent of the author, therefore, to focus on effective leadership so as to provide helpful cues for improving geography at the university and/or college levels. Indeed, geographers have seldom considered the role of leadership in formulating strategies that would lead to success (Khan & Vuicich, 1984a). Two major situational or contingency theories of leadership will be presented and their potential in formulating strategies for effective functioning of the geography chairs in education will be discussed.

The situational leadership theories to be reviewed include: Path-Goal Theory (Georgopolous, Mahoney, & Jones, 1957; Evans, 1970; House & Mitchell, 1974; House & Dessler, 1974), and the Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967; Fiedler & Mahar, 1979). Prior to discussing any of these theories, it is helpful to briefly review the nature and definitions of leadership.

LEADERSHIP DEFINITIONS: A REVIEW

There are numerous leaders appointed for different situations. Almost every situation in an academic setting demands that a particular leadership style be used. In many cases, the behavior of academic deans and chairs, for example, is governed by variables inherent in the situation. It follows, then, that an academic chair or dean might use a particular style which is considered contrary to the norms held by the faculty. Hence, before examining leadership the-
ories, one needs to identify how leadership is viewed. The following definitions aim to describe a dynamic relationship between the geography chair and the faculty.

1. Bellows, Gilson and Odiorne (1962, p. 75) see leadership "as ordering or directing the activities of others: this depends upon the authority of the supervisor or executive [chair]."

2. Hollander (1974, p. 24) has suggested that "Leadership is, in fact, a transactional process."

3. Khan and Vuicich (1984b, p. 6) presented the belief that leadership involves an "evolutionary cognitive process that attempts to respond to both short- and long-range internal and external problems through the communication process."

The foregoing definitions are applicable to all types of academic geography departments where influence, authority, or power play a key role in moving human resources—faculty—toward attainment of goals or "preferred outcomes." This is because:

Almost everything in organizational life is either a function of leadership or is, at least, associated with it. The leader undeniably plays a central role in this process and usually commands the greatest attention and influence. (Hollander, 1974, p. 19).

For leadership in a geography department to occur effectively, the needs, wants, goals, and objectives must be shared by most members of the department. However, if the faculty members resist the preferred outcomes advocated by the chair, effective leadership will be jeopardized and opportunities to innovate may be lost. It becomes critical, then, that the leadership behavior of geography department chairs must be thoroughly understood since we cannot afford to enhance "unrealistic strategies that produce leaders skilled in moving people [faculty] in directions that have no meaning and that change indiscriminately and without purpose" (Huckaby, 1980, p. 613). It is through the leadership process that a major dimension of the status of geography may be developed and improved.

LEADERSHIP THEORIES: DESCRIPTIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The Path-Goal Theory of Leadership (House & Mitchell, 1974) proposes that the leader's task is to provide adequate coaching, guidance, and training to improve the performance levels of the faculty. Additionally, the theory focuses on four dynamic leadership styles that, once applied, facilitate the accomplishments of short-, mid- and long-term goals of academic departments of geography. The leader typology of House and Mitchell identify four distinct groups: supportive, directive, participative, and achievement-oriented. Thus, a supportive department chair takes into account the needs, wants, desires, and goals of the faculty members; a directive chair informs faculty with respect to their roles and responsibilities in a clear manner; a participative chair gathers views and suggestions from faculty when tactical or strategic decisions are initiated and implemented; and an achievement-oriented chair sets high goals, expects higher scholarly productivity, and shows, through actions, trust in faculty's ability to strive for excellence.

The Path-Goal Theory categorically implies that the chair should be receptive to the needs, wants, and expectations of the individual faculty members in the department. Further, the chair must encourage faculty members to share in both tactical and strategic decision-making processes that affect the geography department directly or indirectly. Likewise, the chair must play a "coaching" or "directing" role by helping faculty choose a "path" that is productive and meaningful. This is important inasmuch as "the integrity of the relationship [chair/faculty] depends on some yielding to influence on both sides" (Hollander, 1974, p. 27).

Fiedler (1967) and Fiedler and Mahar (1979) developed a Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness by focusing
on three critical dimensions of leadership:

1. Leader-Member Relations. A geography chair who has the support of the followers (faculty) will succeed in any endeavor that requires hard work, dedication, and commitment.

2. Position Power. An appointed geography chair possesses power by virtue of his/her position. Power must be used not only to provide negative sanctions, but also reward faculty members who adhere to the established rules, expectations, and policies of the department and/or college. Power must be used with great care and must be shared with others (Thomas, 1983, p. 40).

3. Task Structure. When the assigned task has inherent clarity, it is assumed that it will be completed with greater ease. As a result, the geography chair is then able to evaluate the “quality” of the faculty member’s performance. However, if the assigned role is ambiguous, the chair has the prerogative of influencing faculty members to the degree that the chair, for example, “controls” faculty members’ behavior.

In order to operationalize the preceding variables of chair-faculty relationships, position power and task structure, Fiedler has constructed a specific instrument that aims to measure subordinate (faculty) perception of the “least preferred co-worker.” Depending on how the individual faculty members score on the instrument, one of two outcomes are possible. Faculty members who rate their chair on the low-end of the scale exhibit autocratic behavior and are more task-centered (demanding publications, superior performance in the classroom), whereas faculty members who rate their chair higher on the instrument are more easy-going and friendly and are less concerned with task completion. It should be recognized, however, that Fiedler recommends that there is no one best style that may be used in all situations. Hence, rather than change the chair’s leadership style, the Contingency Model argues for modifying the work situation to fit the established mode of behavior for maximum effectiveness.

The factors encompassing chair effectiveness are greatly controlled by the environment: people, task, communication, perception, risk, time, climate (social and physical), influence, authority, power and transaction (Boles, 1982; Khan & Van Vleet, 1985). As a result, Fiedler’s theory implies that academic chairs must create a clear comprehension of the behavior they wish to exhibit in order to accomplish established goals and objectives. This can be successfully acquired by integrating human, physical, and financial resources.

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The foregoing reasoning supports the notion that department chairs in geography should understand key leadership variables, such as supportive, directive, achievement-oriented, and participative, if they are to exercise effective leadership. Accordingly, several additional insights and implications may be derived for further consideration.

1. The understanding of the situational leadership variables of leader-member relations, position power and task structure should enhance geography chair’s thinking concerning the importance of motivating faculty members to perform at an optimal level. This course of action will help acquire more recognition and prestige for the academic geography departments since motivated faculty members are likely to engage in greater scholarly productivity.

2. The leadership principles, such as use of power, influence and authority, discussed should increase geography chair’s cognition of the available methods and techniques in order to resolve critical department-related problems.

3. The two leadership theories should provide a “path” that might help in developing more effective interpersonal relationships with superordinates, subordinates and peers in
order to enhance the status of the geography department. This may be achieved by practicing and advocating participative management style whereby faculty views and opinions are sought whenever a major decision is made by the chair. Specifically, planned change, involving faculty participation, is more desirable than unplanned change to enhance the image of geography.

4. Ideas explored in this article should help the chair gain insights into the complex role of leadership in maintaining a viable geography department in a dynamic environment.

5. The leadership theories provide clues for establishing a supportive environment whereby the achievement of the geography department may be shared with the rest of the college or university community through inhouse publications, such as department newsletter or campus newspaper.

6. Chairs should provide leadership in faculty development. That is, have as a goal the development of the unique capacities and potentialities of each faculty member rather than common goals for all staff members. This purpose is often more honored on paper compared to practice.

SUMMARY

In this article, the author identified and described critical elements that constitute situational leadership. The acquisition of an understanding of the situational leadership factors and their effective application will help geography department chairs and other educational leaders to exercise good judgment in dealing with simple or complex "situations" demanding action. In addition, the two theories manifest that geography department chairs and other educational leaders should examine their own behaviors in light of the characteristics of the faculty members and situation. By taking this route and permitting faculty participation in decision-making, it will be possible to enhance the image and status of geography in academic institutions.

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