

What is Contingency Theory in Leadership?

Worksheet

Contingency theory posits that leadership effectiveness depends on how well a leader's style matches the demands of the situation. Leaders must diagnose the context (task clarity, follower maturity, urgency) and adapt their approach accordingly.

Questions

1. A team of senior engineers working on a cutting-edge project. Best leadership style?
 - A) Directive (micromanage)
 - B) Achievement-oriented (set high goals, trust execution)
 - C) Coaching (hand-hold)
 - D) Participative (consensus on everything)
2. During a company crisis (security breach, major loss), leadership must
 - A) Immediately ask for team input
 - B) Take decisive directive action
 - C) Call for a long planning session
 - D) Delegate to the team
3. Contingency theory assumes the best leader is
 - A) Always directive
 - B) Always participative
 - C) Flexible and adapts style to context
 - D) Most charismatic
4. A team member is highly competent but unmotivated. Which style best fits?
 - A) Directive (tell them what to do)
 - B) Coaching (close support)
 - C) Achievement-oriented (challenge with meaningful goals)
 - D) Participative (consensus)
5. A startup in survival mode (cash running low, product not gaining traction). What leadership style is most effective?
6. A mature product team with high expertise and clear processes. The team feels demotivated by micromanagement. What style should change?
7. A new team member struggles with complex processes and lacks confidence. What style is best?
8. Define: What is contingency theory in leadership?
9. Define: Name the four core leadership styles.
10. Define: When is a directive style most effective?

Answer Key

1. B) Achievement-oriented (set high goals, trust execution) - Mature, expert teams thrive with high autonomy and challenging goals. Achievement-oriented style motivates mastery.
2. B) Take decisive directive action - Crises demand fast, clear decisions. Directive leadership is most effective when speed and clarity are critical.
3. C) Flexible and adapts style to context - Contingency theory rejects one-style-fits-all. Effective leaders diagnose and adapt.
4. C) Achievement-oriented (challenge with meaningful goals) - High competence + low motivation calls for achievement-oriented style: set ambitious goals and trust them.
5. Task urgency is high, decision clarity needed fast. Directive style: quick decisions, clear priorities, rapid execution. This is NOT the time for consensus-building or lengthy consultations.
6. Task clarity is high, follower competence is high. Shift from directive to participative or achievement-oriented style. Give autonomy, set stretch goals, and step back. Trust the team.
7. Follower maturity is low, task complexity is high. Use a coaching style: clear guidance + emotional support + mentoring. Gradually reduce directive behavior as competence grows.
8. The theory that leadership effectiveness depends on how well the leader's style matches the situation (task, people, context).
9. Directive (tell), Supportive/Coaching (encourage), Participative (involve), Achievement-Oriented (challenge).
10. In crisis, with new or low-competence team members, or when tasks are unclear and decisions must be fast.

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