Fiedler, Fred (1922–) from The AMA Dictionary of Business and Management

One of the leading researchers in industrial and organizational psychology. He was a professor at the University of Washington. He is the author of the Fiedler Contingency Model, which is used to assess the traits and personal characteristics of leaders.

Summary Article: Fiedler, Fred Edward
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Fred Edward Fiedler was born in Vienna, Austria on 13 July 1922. His parents, Victor and Helga Schallinger Fiedler, owned a textile and tailoring supply store prior to 1938. Fred was their only child. After completing secondary school, he served a brief apprenticeship in his father’s textile business before emigrating to the United States in 1938 and settling in South Bend, Indiana. After his high school graduation in 1940, Fiedler held a variety of low-level jobs in Indiana, Michigan and California, before returning to Indiana and a job at the Indiana and Michigan Electric Company. Following the German invasion of Austria, meanwhile, Fiedler’s parents moved first to Shanghai and then to the United States in 1946.

In the summer of 1942, Fiedler enrolled in engineering courses at Western Michigan College of Education (now Western Michigan University, in Kalamazoo), but quickly decided engineering was not his field. He also applied to and was accepted by the University of Chicago. He served in the US Army from 1942 to 1945. Following basic training and a brief assignment in a medical battalion, he was sent to Indiana University for training in the Turkish Area and Language Studies programme. Later he served in an infantry battalion, military civilian affairs and the military government. During tours of duty in England and Germany, Fiedler was involved in training, interpreting, telephone communications and public safety. Fiedler had met Judith M. Joseph at the University of Chicago before entering the army, and they married shortly after his discharge on 14 April 1946. They have collaborated on research and writing over the years, and have four children.

Fiedler developed an interest in psychology in his early teens from reading his father’s books on the topic. He took several extension courses in psychology while serving in the army. After his discharge from the army in November 1945, Fiedler was readmitted to the University of Chicago and resumed his study of psychology in January 1946. He received a master’s degree in industrial and organizational psychology in 1947 and his Ph.D. in clinical psychology in 1949.

During his years at the University of Chicago, Fiedler was actively involved in research under some of the most prominent names in the field, such as Lee Cronbach and Donald Campbell. Among the university’s professors were L.L. Thurstone and Thelma G. Thurstone, Donald Fiske, Carl Rogers and William Foote Whyte. Fiedler’s master’s thesis was on ‘The Efficacy of Preventive Psychotherapy for Alleviating Examination Anxiety’, and his dissertation, entitled ‘A Comparative Investigation of the Therapeutic Relationships Created by Experts and Non-experts of the Psychoanalytic, Non-directive, and Adlerian Schools’, is one of his most frequently cited works.

While at the University of Chicago he was a trainee and then a research assistant with the Veterans Administration (VA), and continued working for a year after his graduation as a research associate and...
instructor for the VA in Chicago. Following a summer in the Combat Crew Research Laboratory at Randolph Field, he became associate director on a naval research contract at the University of Illinois’ College of Education. His work during this period with Donald Fiske and Lee Cronbach sparked his lifelong interest in leadership.

From 1950 until 1969, Fiedler was on the faculty of the University of Illinois, where he initiated and directed the Group Effectiveness Research Laboratory (GERL). Harry Triandis and Joseph McGrath were associate directors. Research associates included Martin Chemers, Peter Dachler, David DeVries, Jack Feldman, Richard Hackman, J.G. Hunt, Edwin Hutchins, Daniel Ilgen and Terence Mitchell. While at the University of Illinois, Fiedler was appointed head of the social, differential, personality and industrial psychology divisions. His wife worked as a research sociologist in the university’s Survey Research Center.

In 1969 Fiedler moved to the University of Washington where he remained on the faculty until his retirement in 1993. There he established the Organizational Research Group and directed the Group Effectiveness Research Laboratory. His wife became assistant director of the University of Washington’s Educational Assessment Center. Among his associates were Gary Latham, Terence Mitchell, Lee Beach, Martin Chemers, James G. Hunt, Richard Hackman and Daniel Ilgen.

In the late 1940s the emphasis in leadership research shifted from traits and the personal characteristics of leaders to leadership styles and behaviours. From the late 1960s through the 1980s, leadership interests turned to contingency models of leadership. One of the earliest and best known is Fiedler’s contingency model of leadership effectiveness. Published in 1967 as A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness, the model immediately drew attention as the first leadership theory operationally to measure the interaction between leadership personality and the leader’s situational control in predicting leadership performance.

While many scholars assumed that there was one best style of leadership, Fiedler’s contingency model postulates that the leader’s effectiveness is based on ‘situational contingency’, or a match between the leader’s style and situational favourableness, later called situational control. More than 400 studies have since investigated this relationship.

A key component in Fiedler’s contingency theory is the least preferred co-worker (LPC) scale, an instrument for measuring an individual’s leadership orientation using eighteen to twenty-five pairs of adjectives and an eight-point bipolar scale between each pair. Respondents are asked to consider the person they liked working with the least, either presently or in the past, and rate that coworker on each pair of adjectives. High-LPC or relationship-motivated leaders describe their least preferred co-worker in more positive terms and are concerned with maintaining good interpersonal relations. Low-LPC or task-motivated leaders describe their least preferred co-worker in rejecting and negative terms, and give higher priority to the task than to interpersonal relations.

According to Fiedler, there is no ideal leader. Both low-LPC (task-oriented) and high-LPC (relationship-oriented) leaders can be effective, if their leadership orientation fits the situation. The contingency theory allows for predicting the characteristics of the appropriate situations for effectiveness. Three situational components determine the favourableness or situational control: leader–member relations, task structure and position power. Fiedler found that low-LPC leaders are more effective in extremely favourable or unfavourable situations, whereas high-LPC leaders perform best in situations with intermediate favourability.
Since personality is relatively stable, the contingency model suggests that improving effectiveness requires changing the situation to fit the leader. The organization or the leader may increase or decrease task structure and position power, and training and group development may improve leader–member relations. Leader-Match is a self paced leadership training programme designed to help leaders alter the favourableness of the situation, or situational control. The 1976 book describing Leader-Match was co-authored by Martin Chemers and Linda Mahar.

Fiedler’s contingency theory has drawn criticism because it implies that the only alternative for an unalterable mismatch between leader orientation and an unfavourable situation is changing the leader. The model’s validity has also been disputed, despite many supportive tests (Bass 1990). Other criticisms concern the methodology of measuring leadership style through the LPC inventory and the nature of the supporting evidence (Ashour 1973; Schriesheim and Kerr 1977a, 1977b; Vecchio 1977, 1983). Fiedler and his associates have provided decades of research to support and refine the contingency theory. Cognitive resource theory (CRT) modifies Fiedler’s basic contingency model by adding traits of the leader (Fiedler and Garcia 1987). CRT tries to identify the conditions under which leaders and group members will use their intellectual resources, skills and knowledge effectively. While it has been generally assumed that more intelligent and more experienced leaders will perform better than those with less intelligence and experience, this assumption is not supported by Fiedler’s research.

To Fiedler, stress is a key determinant of leader effectiveness (Fiedler and Garcia 1987; Fiedler et al. 1993), and a distinction is made between stress related to the leader’s superior, and stress related to subordinates or the situation itself. In stressful situations, leaders dwell on the stressful relations with others and cannot focus their intellectual abilities on the job. Thus, intelligence is more effective and used more often in stress-free situations. Fiedler has found that experience impairs performance in low-stress conditions but contributes to performance under high-stress conditions. As with other situational factors, for stressful situations Fiedler recommends altering or engineering the leadership situation to capitalize on the leader’s strengths.

Fiedler is known around the world for his writing, lectures and consulting work. Throughout his career, Fiedler has received research grants and contracts from many government agencies and private foundations. He held research fellowships at the University of Amsterdam from 1957 to 1958, at the University of Louvain in Belgium from 1963 to 1964, and at Templeton College, Oxford from 1986 to 1987. He has served as a consultant for various federal and local government agencies and private industries in the United States and abroad.

Fiedler was recognized by the American Psychological Association for counselling research in 1971 and for his contributions to military psychology in 1979. He received the Stogdill Award for Distinguished Contributions to Leadership in 1978. The American Academy of Management honoured Fiedler as a Distinguished Educator in Management in 1993, and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology recognized his outstanding scientific contributions in 1996. In 1999 the American Psychological Society presented Fiedler with its James McKeen Cattell Award. Fiedler is a member of the International Association of Applied Psychology and a past president of that organization’s Division of Organizational Psychology. He is a fellow of the American Psychological Association and a member of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology and the Midwestern Psychological Association. He has authored or co-authored more than 200 scientific papers and several books. His articles are frequently cited by others and have been published by the most respected journals in the fields of
psychology, leadership and management.

Fiedler’s career spans more than fifty years. Even in retirement, he continues to inspire and encourage research on leadership and other related topics. He proposed the contingency theory of leadership very early in his career, and has spent years since then testing its assumptions and making revisions. He has willingly debated his critics, offering additional research and alternative explanations based on his own investigations and the growing body of knowledge in the field. Fiedler and his contingency theory of leadership deserve a prominent place in the history of management thought. He was one of the first to recognize and produce a leadership model that combines personality traits and contextual factors. The more recent cognitive resource theory promises to extend his influence many years into the future.

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