2 Classic approaches to leadership

Chapter aims

- ☐ Introduce and critically discuss the classic theories of leadership
- ☐ Understand the meaning of 'entity' leadership
- ☐ Critically examine leadership behavioural theory
- ☐ Explore the concept of leading through contingencies
- ☐ Compare the strengths and weaknesses of the classic theories of leadership
- ☐ Focus on leadership in action: being an event entrepreneur by Jason Scott Allan.

Classic approaches to leadership – entity approaches

This chapter summarises the classic theories of leadership. The reader will note the similarities that exist within this area of leadership studies – these theories all focus on the individual leader, and view leadership as a specialised role. In these classic approaches to leadership, leadership is something someone 'does', and the focus is solely on the formal leader and their personality characteristics or their attributes. These approaches are now sometimes referred to as entity leadership because leadership is the sole preserve of the entity or individual, and that individual is highly influential. These theories of leadership began to emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and whilst they are now between 50 and 100 years old, it is important to explore them briefly, as they form the basis from which leadership studies first emerged.

At this stage, I remind the reader of the key point I made in the introductory chapter to this book – whilst the field of leadership is perhaps one of the most studied subjects in history, event management academics have yet to fully turn their attention to it. That is why, when you read through the next few chapters on specific leadership theory, you won't see a lot of references to specific event research.

Trait or Great Man leadership – what are leaders like?

One of the oldest ways of thinking about leadership is through trait theories or the trait approach – sometimes known as 'The Great Man Theory.' Trait theories emerged sometime during the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century, and revolved around the notion that certain personality characteristics make someone a leader. The trait approach suggests that people are born to be leaders – that there is a generic set of traits that leaders are born with – a set of extraordinary abilities – such as foresight, persuasive powers and intuition (Bass, 1990; Cawthon, 1996). Jago, writing in the 1980s, summarised the traits thought to signify leadership as physical (e.g. height, weight, hair, clothes); personality (e.g. aggression, dominance, enthusiasm, sense of humour); social (e.g. prestige, tact); skill (e.g. intelligence, judgement, knowledge) [List adapted from Jago, by Taylor, 2019].

Looking back on these first attempts to understand leadership, it is easy to be critical. Questions should immediately arise, such as – how did these 'leaders' get to be in the position of power in the first place? And which of the 100s of personality traits that exist really matter? And why are leaders always men…

The core issue is therefore the simplistic nature of trait theory. Simply identifying the presence of traits does not explain why those people are leading, or how those traits are contributing to leadership. And nor does it allow us to examine good or bad leadership – how do we know that the presence of a physical trait such as height results in effective leadership? Well of course we don't, because the presence of a physical trait alone is not enough for us to predict leadership effectiveness.

Importantly, it is also impossible for us to imagine that one person can possess all the leadership traits needed to run an event, all at the same time. Can you think of one event leader who was always positive, enthusiastic, aggressive, dominant, intelligent, funny and empathetic

all at once, no matter what the situation is?! The key criticism of trait theory then is that it is far too narrow and far too static – leadership cannot be boiled down to the possession of number of personality or physical traits, and cannot discount other important factors such as the way people behave, the context within which leadership occurs or the people who accept leadership (the followers).

The assumption within these trait theories was that if these personal characteristics or traits of a leader could be identified, the concept of leadership can be understood. However, as the seminal work by Stodgill, in 1948 showed, the studies conducted in the 1930s and 1940s failed to find any traits that would result in leadership success. Stodgill carried out a literature review of the first four decades of the 20th Century, attempting to identify and summarise the common themes and personality traits associated with leadership. This review demonstrated that whilst traits are an important part of the leadership picture, the results of the hundreds of studies Stodgill reviewed were inconclusive. In fact, a large number of traits emerged in different studies which were seen as descriptive of leaders but none of the research provided statistically significant differences in traits between the average person and a leader. Stodgill, then, concluded that people do not become leaders by virtue of the traits they possess, but that significant numbers of traits are important for people in leadership positions.

It is important to note that trait theory, whilst often dismissed in leadership literature, still has value today. Whilst scholars have rejected the genetic nature of trait theory (people are not born to be leaders) and have largely dismissed the traits such as sex, height and weight as being essential descriptors for 'good' leadership, there is still plenty of research that focuses on personality traits as important contributors to leadership. Northouse (2015), for example, reviews some of the major research findings within trait theory and concludes that there are six specific traits that people need to be leaders. These are intelligence, confidence, charisma, determination, sociability and integrity. And in a review of research into trait theory, Xu and colleagues (2014) demonstrate that there is now a contemporary view of trait theory, which includes a wider range of traits and looks at things like how traits might evolve over time, and under different situations. These contemporary views of trait theory tend to see traits as changeable, which is where