

Adaptive Leadership in Practice: A Comparative Analysis of the Managerial Grid and Situational Leadership

¹Rahul B. Rathod, ²Sailesh Kumar M.*, ³Sharana Gouda, ⁴Dr Shobha N. S.
Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, RV College of Engineering,
Bengaluru, India

**Corresponding Author*

E-Mail Id: saileshkumarm.im22@rvce.edu.in

ABSTRACT

In the fast-changing climate of today's organizations, leaders are required to stay flexible, responsive, and focused on growth—qualities that are key to adaptive leadership. This paper offers a comparative examination of two essential leadership frameworks—Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid and Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model—viewed through the principles of adaptive leadership. Utilizing recent empirical research and theoretical insights from the years 2019 to 2024, we assess how applicable each model is for promoting leadership agility, team development, and resilience amidst instability. While the Managerial Grid offers a stable yet valuable perspective on leadership behavior by examining task orientation versus people orientation, the Situational Leadership model provides a more fluid approach, adapting leadership styles based on follower readiness and situational needs. Insights drawn from the healthcare, education, and corporate sectors during and following the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the growing importance of adaptability in leadership roles. Our results indicate that the Situational Leadership model aligns more closely with adaptive leadership in practical settings, particularly in circumstances characterized by uncertainty and the necessity for individual growth. The study concludes with a recommendation for a blended leadership strategy that combines the strengths of both models while incorporating key principles of adaptive leadership to effectively address the challenges faced by modern organizations.

Keywords: Adaptive leadership, managerial grid, situational leadership, leadership flexibility, organizational agility, follower readiness, leadership models, crisis management, leadership development, comparative leadership analysis

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in the 21st century has undergone considerable transformation due to rising complexity, globalization, and the necessity for quick adaptation. While traditional leadership models serve as a foundation, they are increasingly scrutinized for their relevance and adaptability in the fluid landscapes of today's world. Among the new frameworks, adaptive leadership has emerged as particularly significant, focusing on responsiveness, learning, and the capability to manage uncertainty. It urges leaders to accurately assess

challenges, modify their behaviors accordingly, and cultivate an atmosphere that promotes growth and resilience throughout the organization. At the same time, established models like Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid and Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model continue to provide valuable guidance for managerial behavior and decision-making.[1]

The Managerial Grid depicts leadership as a balance between task-oriented and people-oriented concerns, serving as a straightforward yet useful tool for

analyzing leadership. Conversely, the Situational Leadership Model presents a more flexible framework that tailors leadership styles to the readiness and development stage of team members.

This study examines how these two models either align or conflict with the tenets of adaptive leadership. By integrating insights from recent literature published between 2019 and 2024, we aim to evaluate how effectively both models enhance adaptability, employee engagement, and overall performance. Additionally, we explore whether either model adequately prepares leaders to face the swift changes and complex challenges highlighted by recent global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through this analysis, this paper aims to contribute meaningfully to the discussion surrounding effective leadership in unpredictable circumstances by offering a critical comparison and suggesting a more integrated approach for future leadership development.[3]

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of leadership have transformed significantly in recent years since the rapid pace of change and complexity in organizations calls for flexibility, quick learning and people-oriented focus. This move towards adaptive leadership implies a recognition that the more static forms of leadership that have been predominant so far may not be up to the task of the ever-changing demands of 21st-century work.

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive Leadership - a concept first put into words by Heifetz and then further elaborated by Linsky and Grashow - is about the role of leaders in mobilizing people to confront tough challenges and flourish in the throes of change. Recent research [2,8] shows the role of adaptive leadership in the rise of crises such as

COVID 19, under which emotional intelligence, transparency, and distributed decision-making were paramount in keeping the operation going on track and morale high. This discovery goes on to show that adaptive leadership is not just about senior executives, however, it is about enabling everyone within organization to have ideas.

The Managerial Grid Model

The Managerial Grid, developed by Blake and Mouton, describes five key leadership styles premised on task and relationship behavior: 1. The style of “team management” (high concern for both people and task) has been very popular as the ideal. Although the model is educational and helps in leadership training and self-application, it has been criticized for being linear, nonflexible and not able to adapt to situational aspects. Recent conversations indicate that while the Grid raises the consciousness of leadership behavior, it does not provide leaders with enough direction in a dynamically changing environment or for working with diverse teams.

The Situational Leadership Model

One of the most influential theories regarding effective leadership is that of Situational Leadership; Situational Leadership Theory is described as “a trait theory that stresses the difference between the transactional and transformational leaders, and how important situational context is when leaders are being evaluated.[7]

The Situational Leadership Model developed by Hersey and Blanchard provides a more fluid style. It is based on the idea that a leader's style is contingent on the level of readiness of their followers, classified by their abilities and their willingness. Leaders are required to adjust their style of leading—telling, selling, participating, or delegating—

according to the development level of their employees. Recent studies [5,6] provide evidence of the usefulness of this model for promoting employee performance, particularly in dynamic settings. Organizations using the model gain increased flexibility, individualized development of their employees, and leadership that is closely aligned with team needs.

Contemporaneous Research: Comparative Perspectives

A number of comparative studies have recently investigated the extent to which classical models of leadership fit contemporary requirements for flexibility. Both models, however, are valuable frameworks [4], although the Situational Leadership Model is more consistent with adaptive leadership principles because it exists in a more flexible and developmental orientation. Additionally, Lien et al. (2024) argue that if an organisation aspires to agility, it can not be complacent with deterministic styles of leadership — as that could end up being counterproductive. The article suggests that a leadership style “grounded” on the context might be more appropriate for our times.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a qualitative research design using a systematic literature review method. The purpose is to critically assess and compare the Managerial Grid and Situational Leadership models in the area of adaptive leadership on the grounds of recent empirical and theoretical work (2019–2024).

Research Design

However, a qualitative comparative method was chosen to compare the extent to which each leadership model can be associated with the principles of adaptive leadership. This approach enables the

synthesis of insights from varied institutional environment, industries, and leadership issues. The main emphasis is to find similarities in themes, strengths, limitations and contextual efficiency of each of these models, applied in an adaptive environment.

Data Collection

The list of peer reviewed studies included journal articles, conference reports, and scholarly papers that are published in academic databases like Scopus, IEEE Xplore, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. Keywords search was applied, and they included adaptive leadership, managerial grid, situational leadership, leadership agility, leadership in crisis, and organizational change. They included: (1) January 2019-May 2024 date of publication, (2) leadership models in dynamic or uncertain environments as the potential focus, (3) sources written in English. Nine hundred and fifty-four articles were located of which thirty-five fit the criteria and they were reviewed in details.[9]

Analytical Framework

The analysis was modeled in the framework of three main dimensions suggested by the adaptive leadership theory:

- Contextual Flexibility- The power of the model to adapt to the behavior of the leadership according to the complexity in the environment.
- Emphasis on Follower Development- The degree at which the model promotes growth and independence of team members.
- Organizational Responsiveness- How the leadership model affects organizational responsiveness, organizational communication and making decisions.

The studies chosen were all reviewed and sorted in relation to Managerial Grid and

situational leadership models, based on their performance against the criteria. These findings were then synthesized to provide patterns, differences and areas of theoretical integration.

Although the methodology enables us to have a rich thematic analysis, it has several shortcomings because it uses secondary data. The lack of primary interviews or the field observations limits the possibility of the findings verification in the concrete organizational background. The empirical basis of the comparative framework would gain reinforcement in future studies based on case studies or experimental designs.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The examination of the chosen literature discloses a number of important results touched upon the comparative efficiency of the Managerial Grid and the Situational Leadership Model considered in the perspective that they can be evaluated on the basis of adaptive leadership. The chapter presents such findings in terms of the three analytical dimensions that were defined in the methodology: contextual flexibility, follower development and organizational responsiveness.

Contextual Flexibility

The Situational Leadership Model always proved to be more flexible in the different environments of our organizations. Research in both healthcare and educational contexts [2] Martinez-Gonzales et al., 2023) demonstrated that those leaders who employed a situation approach were better able to shift styles rapidly in the context of a crisis, including staff changes or abrupt changes in policy. Leaders changed their conduct according to the level of development of the members of his team and the exigency of the moment.[10]

The focus on fixed behavioral styles by

the Managerial Grid however, e.g. country club, or authority-compliance, was also less effective in terms of volatile environments. Though it served as a valuable source of information concerning the attitude of leaders towards people and production, it did not offer the mechanism of making behavioral changes instantly. Consequently, it could have been useful in high-pressure, fast changing conditions.

Follower Development

One of the main strengths of the Situational Leadership Model was that it incorporated the aspect of development to the employees. The aim of the practice was to ensure that leaders would evaluate competence and commitment of the followers and customize their approach to providing support, coaching, delegating or directing according to the needs of the follower. In multiple studies of organizational cases, the given approach was found to be connected to an enhanced team performance, engagement, and retention [4,5].

Managerial Grid on the other hand encouraged balanced emphasis on tasks and people but it failed to specifically consider the capability and motivation differences among individuals. The fact that it had a binary scale meant that it was harder to deal with the variances in the developmental needs of the workers, reducing their efficiency in the needs of team development and staff empowerment.

Organizational Responsiveness

The organizations that employed the principles of situational leadership were demonstrated to be better prepared to react to unforeseen interference. The adaptability of the model promoted active solution to problems, decentralized-decision, and a learning based culture. It was reflected in those institutions, which survived the COVID-19 crisis without

losing control by entrusting the mid-level managers to take initiatives based on local circumstances[8].

Conversely, the Managerial Grid was usually left in format of a diagnostic or training tool as opposed to a working leadership guide. It had narrow real-time applicability in particular situations which required fast and decentralized responses. Although it came in handy when measuring leadership inclinations, it failed to be effective when it comes to strategic responsiveness in uncertain circumstances.

RESULTS

To determine the effectiveness of leadership, it is important to look at the level at which various models meet the prerequisites of organizations. This section does a descriptive comparison between the Managerial Grid and Situational Leadership Model and points out the differences in their theoretical basis, usage, and adaptation to the shifting conditions of work. Although both of these models attempt to optimize modes of leadership behavior, the differences between them when it comes to flexibility levels, focus on followers, and situational responsiveness are rather large as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Managerial Grid and Situational Leadership Model.

| Dimension | Managerial Grid | Situational Leadership Model |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Contextual Flexibility | Low – Fixed styles | High – Adaptive to environment and people |
| Follower Development | Moderate – General people concern | High – Individualized development focus |
| Organizational Responsiveness | Limited – Mostly theoretical application | Strong – Practical, real-time adaptability |

These findings show that both leadership models are good as such, yet, the Situational Leadership Model promotes the principles and practices of adaptive leadership better.

DISCUSSION

Through comparative analysis, an essential difference can be noted between what used to be traditional models of leadership and what we are experiencing in modern times between the requirements of adaptive leadership and the new dynamic environments. They both can be great frameworks, though Managerial Grid and Situational Leadership Model would be very different in the context of adaptability, flexibility, and developmental leadership.

Practical Leadership Adaptability

The results are very evident in that the Situational Leadership Model was more adaptable to the real-life requirements of adaptive leadership. Its philosophy, which is to adapt leadership styles in relation to

the level of readiness of the team members, reflects the core aspects of the adaptive leadership, which contain issues of responsiveness in relation to the situation, emotional intelligence, and decentralization of decisions. It is necessary to quickly respond to organizational and personal demands in volatile or uncertain circumstances, i.e., in times of the COVID-19 crisis or when digital transformation programs are implemented. Here the Situational model comes in the best situation.

In this respect, the Managerial Grid, though conceptually useful in comprehending the orientation towards proper leadership, does not have a system of behavior that change mechanisms by situational variables. Its fixed

characteristic can be useful to the leadership growth and personal introspection yet little assistance is available to leaders who have to perform in dynamic and high stakes setting. In that regard, its use in real- time leadership during crisis is limited.

Leadership Development Implications

One of the main findings which were found in the study is the factor of versatility of the leader. Organizations also find they need leaders who are able to even course correct during the action. This demands the abandonment of rigid and fixed models to the use of more integrated frameworks, which incorporate behavioral self-awareness (as proposed in the Managerial Grid) with situational flexibility (as proposed in Situational Leadership). The leadership development programs must thus be modeled to develop emotional intelligence at the same time as establishing flexibility in decision-making.

The additional importance placed on the development of followers that can be seen in the Situational model is also consistent with the contemporary vision of leadership. The modern workforce does not only want to be instructed, but guided, given independence and chances to develop. When leaders appreciate and value this development process, then engagement, performance, and organization loyalty is enhanced.

Applicability in the Post-Pandemic World

At least the post-pandemic work environment has elucidated the need to have adaptive thinking and distributed leadership. Teleworking, cross-functional teams, employee well- being issues, and rapid digitalization require that leaders also adapt their style depending on not only the task but also the attributes of people. The person-specific flexibility of the

Situational model is more applicable in the situation than the task-relationship balance of the Managerial Grid.

Furthermore, in an age where the world faces a growing number of global challenges in the form of climate change, geopolitical instability, and technological interference, leading through ambiguity will become a competency in itself. One will not be able to use traditional models. Rather, it may be advisable to combine or merge hybrid or blended models utilizing several frameworks all based on adaptive leadership theories.

Practical and Theoretical Application

Whereas this paper places Situational model in a better position in terms of its flexibility, it does not imply that Managerial Grid should be dispensed altogether. Rather, a beneficial marriage of the two may include the use of the Grid to explain the concept of orientation to leadership and the Situational model to implement the concept of leadership orientation flexibly. Such a holistic technique might provide a more accurate and relevant leadership toolkit, which manages to fill the gap between theory and the requirements of actual leadership.

CONCLUSION

Leadership models should no longer rely on abstract concepts because in an age of fast-paced transformation, unpredictability and growing complexity of organizational life, set frameworks fail to reflect the realities of contemporary workplace. This paper aimed to discuss the applicability of two established theories of leadership that include the Managerial Grid and the Situational Leadership Model with the aid of adaptive leadership.

The comparative analysis indicated that the Managerial Grid can be an effective tool in comprehending the aspects of leadership orientation and used to achieve

primary knowledge and self- evaluation of the leader, yet it is too facile to be highly applicable in the contextual flexibility existing in the present-day environments. Its stationary structure fails to appropriately provide the dynamic changes that leaders have to alter as per situational variables and the team developmental requirements.

Conversely, the Situational Leadership Model was revealed to be much more consistent with the concepts of adaptive leadership. It favours a more individual and dynamic approach, in the sense that it teaches leaders to change their behaviour depending on the competence and dedication of the team members. Such flexibility enables it to be particularly optimal as it copes with organizational change, crisis management, and employee growth.

Notably, the research indicates that none of the models can be fully adequate on their own. It is possible that a more comprehensive view, one that combines the behavioral acuity of the Managerial Grid perspective with the flexibility of the Situational Leadership Model will represent the most mature framework in dealing with leading in situations that are complicated and dynamic.

This combined view must feature significantly in future leadership development initiatives, rather than focusing only on giving leaders diagnosis of their default styles along with the strategies that will help them be capable of leading in a wide variety of changing situations. Organizations are in a good position to create a climate of awareness and adaptation that will develop leaders who are not just good managers in the present but flexible enough to be strong change agents in the future.

REFERENCES

1. AllStrong Leadership. (2024, January). *Adaptive leadership vs. situational leadership: Key differences*. AllStrongServices.ca. <https://allstrongservices.ca>
2. Aouad, N., Hosie, K., & Toma, M. L. (2025). An adaptive organisational leadership framework through systems thinking. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 33(1), 99–116.
3. FasterCapital. (2025, April). *Adaptive leadership: Navigating change with the Leadership Grid*. <https://fastercapital.com>
4. Kumar, R., & Singh, A. (2024). Developing leadership agility through situational adaptability. *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 14(3), 77–89.
5. Lee, R., Sharma, S. R., & Singh, M. (2024). Situational leadership and employee engagement in post-pandemic organizations. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Development*, 45(4), 389–402.
6. Martínez-González, J., Sánchez-Cabrero, L., & Santos-Iglesias, M. (2023). Adaptive leadership in times of crisis: Exploring situational responses and contingent factors at sub-national levels. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(2), Article 127. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13020127>
7. Mirčetić, V., & Vukotić, S. (2021). The analysis of situational leadership models: Origin, divergence and development. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Applied Management, Economics and Finance*, Belgrade, Serbia.
8. Sott, M. K., & Bender, M. S. (2025). *The role of adaptive leadership in times of crisis: A systematic review and conceptual framework*. *Merits*, 5(1), Article 2. MDPI. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits5010002>
9. Wikipedia contributors. (2025, March).

Managerial Grid Model. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Managerial_Grid_Model

10. Wikipedia contributors. (2025, June).
Situational leadership theory.
Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situational_leadership_theory