

Path-Goal Theory: A Successful Columbia Records Story

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This analysis applies the principles of path-goal theory to a renowned music recording company, Columbia Records. By and large, path-goal theory posits that leaders can positively inspire the performance, contentment, and motivation of their employees by clarifying the path on how to achieve performance goals, bestowing rewards for achieving these goals, and removing obstacles that are stopping employees from achieving these goals. A major conclusion of this analysis is that, by thoroughly applying the multiple styles and tenets that path-goal theory offers, Columbia Records executives and chairmen have made this music recording company the most successful in history.

KEYWORDS *Columbia Records, leadership, music, participation, path-goal theory, support*

INTRODUCTION

This analysis applies the principles of path-goal theory to a renowned music recording company, Columbia Records. By and large, path-goal theory posits that leaders can positively inspire the performance, contentment, and motivation of their employees by clarifying the path on how to achieve performance goals, bestowing rewards for achieving these goals, and removing obstacles that are stopping employees from achieving these goals (House & Mitchell, 1974). One conclusion drawn by the authors of this analysis is that, from the time Columbia Records was founded (in 1888) by Edward Easton until today, most executives and chairmen of this music company have significantly ben-

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edited from path-goal theory. By thoroughly applying the multiple styles and tenets that path-goal theory has to offer—whether the style is participative or supportive leadership—these executives and chairmen have made Columbia Records the most successful music recording company in history.

This analysis begins with a rationale for conducting this analysis. It is followed by a detailed description of path-goal theory. More precisely, it defines the four original pillars of leadership effectiveness (i.e., directive leadership, supportive leadership, achievement-oriented leadership, and participative leadership) and additional perspectives on path-goal theory (e.g., shared leadership, value-based leadership, and interaction facilitation). Then, the authors proceed to give a chronological account of Columbia Records, starting with its origins and concluding with what it has become today. What comes subsequently is the heart of this analysis: the application of the principles of path-goal theory to Columbia Records. This section examined three leadership styles (as posited by path-goal theory) that have been adopted by Columbia executives in the past 120 years or so. The three leadership styles are (1) the participative leadership style, (2) the value-based leadership style, and (3) the supportive leadership style. This analysis ends with a discussion that also offers suggestions for future research.

RATIONALE FOR CONDUCTING THIS ANALYSIS

This analysis is unique in that it is one of the few to apply classic leadership principles to an artifact of the music industry, which has been largely ignored by path-goal theory scholars. So far, many path-goal scholars have focused on managers enrolled in MBA programs (Evans, 1974); professional employees at research and development organizations (Keller, 1974); military officers, civil service personnel, and project engineers (Stinson & Johnson, 1975); managerial and clerical employees' job satisfaction (Schriesheim & Schriesheim, 1980); leader-subordinate interactions between clerical and managerial employees (Fulk & Wendler, 1982); functional or dysfunctional employees in budget organizations (Weisenfeld & Killough, 1992); and even social services workers (Schriesheim, Castrob, Zhoua, & DeChurch, 2006).

Yet, these studies mostly looked at leadership from a micro-perspectival standpoint of subordinate-supervisor relationships, managers' motivational approaches, and the like. This analysis adds fresh insights to our understanding of path-goal theory in that it cross-examines multiple leadership styles, based on the tenets of an overarching leadership theory, from a macro-perspectival standpoint; it does not look at the specific communicative or interactive techniques that each executive or manager used when leading his or her employees. For the purpose of this study, such an approach would be limiting. In addition, this analysis demonstrates that there is not just one leadership style that executives and chairmen have to abide by to

turn a major music company into a successful venture. Rather, an assortment of styles may be used, depending on the employees' needs and historical circumstances.

DESCRIPTION OF PATH-GOAL THEORY

Path-goal theory was developed by American psychologist Robert House in 1971. The theory posits that a leader's attitude and behavior can drive the motivation, satisfaction, and performance of his or her subordinates (Evans & House, 1996). In other words, if a leader has a positive attitude and uses helpful and motivating techniques, his or her workers will perform at a higher level that, in turn, will please their supervisors—and vice versa (House & Mitchell, 1974).

Four Original Pillars of Leadership Effectiveness

The path-goal theory is directly based on House's (1971) earlier version of the theory, which he called "path-goal theory of leader effectiveness." In essence, path-goal theory rests upon four pillars of leadership effectiveness (Jermier, 1996). First, the leader should create situations in which he or she informs the followers as to what is expected from them and explains to them how to perform their tasks. Indeed, the leader should clarify a certain path so that subordinates know which way to go and how to handle certain situations (Mumford, 2009). House and Mitchell (1974) also call this "directive leadership." From this vantage point, leaders are expected to increase the rewards along the route. This not only helps the more inexperienced workers feel that they are a part of the team; it helps workers (who are assigned more ambiguous jobs) understand the assignment better. Employees who believe that they already understand the assignments and are more independent might not respond positively to this style (Schwartz, 1998).

Second, leaders need to take the needs of their employees into account. As such, they need to show concern for their subordinates' welfare and generate a friendly working atmosphere. For instance, they can boost the employees' morale by making the task more interesting (Dunbar, 2009). House and Mitchell refer to this as "supportive leadership," which is very efficient when the task is stressful, uninteresting, or hazardous. By the same token, leaders can support their workers by increasing their self-esteem with constant positive feedback. Supportive behavior is generally effective because, when applied, it satisfies workers' needs to feel appreciated and well liked. It also promotes togetherness, which prevents any individuals from feeling alienated (Northouse, 2007).

Third, leaders should remove any sort of roadblocks that are preventing their employees or subordinates from achieving their goals (Bertocci, 2009).

House and Mitchell call this “achievement-oriented leadership,” whereby leaders must set challenging goals and show utmost confidence in their followers’ capability to perform the goal. Achievement-oriented leadership works best when workers’ tasks at hand are not particularly challenging. For this reason, setting goals that are harder to achieve will help employees become more interested in the task at hand (Tosi, Mero, & Rizzo, 2000).

Fourth, leaders need to see their employees as team members. By involving team members in making decisions, they create what House and Mitchell refer to as “participative leadership.” This is particularly indispensable when creative thinking is required to solve complex problems, as seen in technical professions such as engineering or auto-making development. Today, many employees are clever, highly-skilled specialists (e.g., knowledge workers). Motivating such employees means making them feel valued. There might be no better alternative than treasuring people’s knowledge and skills by asking them, legitimately and openly, for their advice (Helmcamp, 2006). The participative leader style simply suggests asking for feedback from subordinates before making a decision. Participative leadership works especially well with more experienced employees whose opinions will have extensive depth (Aspell & Aspell, 2008; Buchholz & Roth, 1987).

Additional Perspectives on Path-Goal Theory

Deciding on what leadership style to adopt is contingent upon many situational factors. These include workers’ personality and their specific locus of control. *Locus of control* is a psychological term that refers to a person’s personal belief on what causes good or bad (Tosi et al., 2000). Put another way, it indicates whether they assume responsibility for their wrongs. An internal locus of control means they openly take responsibility for their actions. An external one says they do not (Miner, 1997; Morris & Morris, 2003). According to path-goal theory, leaders should not continuously follow one or the other in all situations. Rather, they should be able to adapt according to the situation. Many critics claim that path-goal theory is confusing due to the several types of leadership styles that leaders are expected to follow (House, 1971; Northouse, 2007).

The reworked 1996 version of path-goal theory was developed by House after twenty-five years of research on his original theory. The current path-goal theory has eight different versions of leadership behavior. Some of the additional versions include shared leadership, value-based leadership, and interaction facilitation (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004). Shared leadership describes situations in which leaders share a management position instead of simply keeping all the power to themselves. These leaders are known for not taking risks as much. Yet, shared leadership is known to greatly enhance the skills and knowledge of the group as a whole (Pearce & Conger, 2002). If the people in the organization work together and have

a voice in all decisions, they are more likely to follow the rules and make the company a success. This style is mainly used in schools, whereby the principal gives his or her teaching staff a right to be heard with respect to the school guidelines (Lathrop, Pettigrew, & Forest, 2008).

Value-based leadership is a style in which leaders are passionate about their position and will go through much self-sacrifice for their job. They expect very high performance quality from their workers and, at the same time, have complete confidence in them. They are also known to make many personal and job-related risks (Despain, Converse, & Blanchard, 2003). The interaction facilitation style of leadership is a style whereby leaders collaborate to resolve disputes within the company. They also express their values by encouraging their workers to use technology to get their points across. This motivates workers and helps them become part of one team (Clegg, Kornberger, & Pitsis, 2008).

DESCRIPTION OF COLUMBIA RECORDS

Columbia Records is an American record label that has signed many eclectic artists such as Beyoncé, Billy Joel, and Prince and various hip-hop and country singers. Columbia Records was founded in 1888 by Edward Easton (Wile, 1991). Originally, Easton entitled it the Columbia Graphophone Company until 1938, when William S. Paley of CBS bought it out (Mamorstein, 2007). Columbia Records is the oldest record company and the oldest brand name of recorded sounds—rather than simply with blank cylinders. Columbia has done an unparalleled job in keeping up with new technology every year since it was created. In 1908, Columbia mass produced the famous “double-sided” disc records, which played music on either side instead of just one side, saving consumers money (Wile, 1991).

In 1948, Columbia Records was the first company to release a long-playing (LP) record, which was revolutionary for the music business. Having an LP record allowed consumers to listen to classical music without a shred of interruption. The LP was approximately 10 to 12 inches in diameter and was the primary way to listen to music until the compact disc (CD) was released in 1988. Today, Rob Stringer, Steve Barnett, and Rick Rubin head the company as CEOs (Mamorstein, 2007). They are responsible for the success of the company. In addition to having created a culture that the company now enjoys, they have improved the marketing, financing, and signing-of-artists sides of Columbia Records (Baskerville, 2005).

In 1988, Columbia was bought out again. This time, the acquisition was made by Sony. This change naturally helped Columbia—making it a bigger, better-known company (Durham & Kellner, 2005). Another huge help came the following year, when Columbia Records and Columbia Pictures became sister companies. Sony also acquired additional record labels such as Arista,

Jive, and RCA records. Previously, Columbia and Sony had no affiliation with each other, but joining up only made the two stronger. Starting in the United States, Columbia Records now has locations in Japan and Canada. The label also has many affiliated labels such as ARC (the American Recording Company), Columbia label group in the United Kingdom, Columbia Nashville, and Aware records. After Sony executives bought out the company, they had difficulty in figuring out whether they should keep the trademark logo. For a few years, they compromised by just writing “Columbia” on all of their records. After this, they switched it around a few times and eventually decided on an updated version of the original logo because it was simply more recognizable to consumers (Schaeffer, 2009).

Columbia Records has created thousands of jobs for citizens. The more prominent jobs in the record company—such as producers, artists, and managers—are the ones many would first picture. Yet, there are also advertisers, photographers, assistants, consultants, songwriters, and even janitors to clean up after a long day of work. Their public relations department is of importance, too. The department makes sure the company avoids all scandals and looks good in the public eye (Baskerville, 2005). Columbia Records also launched music careers for countless artists. Music has changed many people’s lives and, without inspirational artists such as Aretha Franklin, some women might not have believed they could do anything about the lack of power and rights they had in society. Having a voice such as hers to speak for women was prevalent and helpful for women everywhere (Moore, 2009).

With the current economic recession, many people are illegally downloading their music with online software such as Limewire, Morpheus, and Aires. These sites are the ones that cause major record labels to take a huge financial hit (Johnson, McGuire, & Willey, 2009). The music business, in general, has seen annual sales decrease by 16%—but not Columbia Records. Indeed, recently, the latter has sold more records (both digitally and in music stores) than many other music recording companies in history. Columbia Records’ artists are currently raking in so much money and are selling so many album copies that the economic recession is not really affecting them (Kohan, 2009). The magic formula behind this is effective leadership, the one needed for keeping a major company afloat. The next section will explain how path-goal theory was used by Columbia Records’ managers and chairmen, through their various leadership strategies, to continually succeed in outdoing competitors and maximizing revenues.

Applying Principles of Path-goal Theory to Columbia Records

Chairmen and managers at Columbia Records have displayed strong abilities to adapt leadership styles to a variety of situations and circumstances. This section examines three leadership styles (as posited by path-goal theory)

that have been adopted by Columbia executives in the past 120 years or so. Indeed, many crucial leadership decisions have made Columbia Records the successful company that it has become today. The three leadership styles are (1) the participative leadership style, (2) the value-based leadership style, and (3) the supportive leadership style.

PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP STYLE

A major leadership attribute of path-goal theory that has been prominent in the successful history of Columbia Records is participative leadership. Participative leadership allows for equifinality, the idea that there is more than one path to reach an end-state or a goal (Goertz, 2005). It all started 120 years ago. At the end of the nineteenth century, Columbia executives encountered considerable problems in their attempt to improve the music industry. In part, it was due to the fact that related companies were selling unreliable equipment and were resistant to collaborating with Columbia for creating better sound recording devices (Brooks, 1978). Soon, Columbia was compelled to explore other ways to stay afloat. An innovative work practice by Columbia founder and visionary Edward Easton was to consider his employees as team members and invaluable knowledge producers and allow them time for thinking. By 1890, Columbia music engineers already came up with the invention of prerecorded musical cylinders: They would first sell them to exhibitors and coin-slot operators (Copeland & Dethlefsen, 2004).

Often, managers at Columbia Records would ask their own employees for advice. For example, advice was needed as to how products could be made less expensive. After team collaboration, Columbia products quickly became less expensive; at the same time, they were still quite serviceable (Mamorstein, 2007). By the beginning of the twentieth century, Columbia's participative leadership style allowed hundreds of workers to contribute to unparalleled inventions in the music industry and, by the same token, millions of music aficionados to enjoy phonographs for the first time (Milner, 2009). Not only did Columbia products cost less than those of rival record companies, they provided consumers with an extremely varied repertoire, both popular and classical. Additionally, Columbia became the music industry leader in maintaining and spreading the music of U.S. ethnic groups—along with the voices of “ordinary” Americans—through its unique personal recording program (Vernon, 1995).

In 1948, Columbia Records introduced the LP record format (rotating at $33\frac{1}{3}$ revolutions per minute). It became the model for the gramophone record for the next 50 years. The introduction of the LP record format would not have been possible without Dr. Peter Goldmark's collaborative mindset (Grushkin & Ness, 2006). Goldmark was an engineering supervisor at Columbia Records. His managerial style encouraged participation from

various employees, some of them working for CBS. In fact, Goldmark was the CBS research director at that time. Despite his amazing technical prowess, he was said to be humble, down-to-earth, and considerate of his employees' opinions and backgrounds (Conway, 2009).

VALUE-BASED LEADERSHIP STYLE

To complement his participative leadership style, Edward Easton demonstrated value-based leadership as well. He was so passionate about his position of chairman that he accomplished many self-sacrificial acts and a high number of risks for his company. He also demanded performance quality from his own workers. By 1895, Easton and his workers had recorded a multitude of patents. For example, they supplied small spring-driven cylinder phonographs to an emerging market (Frow, 1970). By 1898, Columbia had introduced so many new music inventions in the United States that it had become the most influential force in the recording industry (Wile, 1991). By 1999, Easton's vision of taking over the world was preoccupying him so much that he became even more adamant in asking the best of his employees. He insisted that his chief inventor, Thomas H. Macdonald, be constantly busy (but funded) at his laboratory in Bridgeport, CT. He wanted Macdonald to work on improved phonographs and cylinder duplication processes. Easton's leadership style bore its fruits: Columbia handled promising cylinder phonographs developed by various experts. The resultant innovations were plentiful, such as the invention of Edward Amet's Metaphone (a.k.a. Echophone) and Gianni Bettini's Lyrophone. Seeking to broaden Columbia's base, Easton even successfully tried his hand in motion pictures and typewriters.

More recently, Columbia Records was involved with popular television shows. One of these shows was the new FOX smash hit "Glee." Columbia's successful partaking in "Glee" would not have occurred without the diligent input from a wide range of Columbia employees—most of them being at the bottom of the scale. At times, employees would spend a few days working on the project without sleeping. Rob Stringer, the current Columbia chairman, and co-presidents Rick Rubin and Steve Barnett have adapted the principles of path-goal theory to the fullest. The very act of letting entertainment employees bring their knowledge and skills to the "Glee" soundtrack production made it one of the most popular albums on the internet. In fact, it skyrocketed on the charts (Wyatt, 2009).

SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP STYLE

Adapting principles of supportive leadership was necessary to motivate Columbia artists to create and write the music they wanted. For example, in the 1970s, Goddard Lieberson, then head of Columbia Records, felt it was necessary to support the unique musical ideas of artists such as Billy Joel,

Barbra Streisand, Carlos Santana, Pink Floyd, and Blue Öyster Cult. Lieberman was giving encouragements to these artists by increasing their self-esteem with repeated positive feedback about their work (Mamorstein, 2007). More seasoned Columbia artists such as Aerosmith were granted much creative control, thus making it easier for them flying on their own wings (Blackwell & Stephan, 2003). Lieberman and subsequent Columbia chairmen reasoned that if one follows a supportive leadership style by letting one's artists be creative and have more control over their musical project, it is in everyone's best interest to stay positive and foster a healthy work environment. After all, Columbia Records receives a portion of all its artists' earnings (Walters, 2008).

Hence, Columbia music executives and producers have made their artists feel supported and have treated them as assets. If these artists do not feel emotionally connected to their record company or if they have very little control, most likely they will use their talent for one of the company's competitors. Pushing an artist too far can have negative consequences for the record company itself. Sarah Bareilles, a U.S. singer-songwriter and pianist, famously fought back at Epic Records in her hit song "Love Song." Part of the lyrics go, "I'm not gonna write you a love song." Epic Records tried to force her to write happier and more radio-friendly tunes but, as she felt no inspiration, she wrote angry lyrics such as "We can understand the sentiment you're saying to us, oh but sensible sells, so could you kindly shut up and get started at keeping your part of the bargain." Epic Records was giving Sara Bareilles no support and was trying to mold her into a good-girl pop star image (Gardner, 2008).

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What this study has demonstrated is that the tenets of path-goal theory can be successfully applied to a record company, not just standard employee organizations or workplaces in general (e.g., subordinate-supervisor interactions). As we have seen, managers and chairmen at Columbia Records have greatly benefited from path-goal theory. By thoroughly examining and actively employing the multiple styles that path-goal theory has to offer—whether the style was participative or supportive leadership—these managers and chairmen have made Columbia Records the most successful music recording company in history. It may be true that different situations require different leadership techniques, but House's (1971) theory works efficiently in an assortment of circumstances. His reworked 1996 explanation for path-goal theory adds more riveting information for readers, one of which was analyzed in this study (i.e., value-based leadership).

From now on, music executives and producers should be able to adopt those styles fruitfully, which would prove priceless in a fast-paced environ-

ment such as the music industry. Had Edward Easton and other Columbia Records' leaders not recognized the worth of path-goal theory in their dreams, their company would have experienced huge losses or failures. For example, let us focus on participative leadership. By treating his employees as team members and resourceful knowledge producers and by giving them abundant time for thinking, Easton saw the rise of a music company that was beyond compare. Inventions in Easton's music business emerged like mushrooms after the rain.

A note can be made also on supportive leadership. In the 1970s, Columbia chairman Lieberman was supportive of his artists; he boosted their self-esteem with constant positive feedback on their work. Indeed, musicians are more likely to work for a company that treats them well or, at least, that allows them to follow their own musical train of thought. In a similar fashion, if the artists themselves understood path-goal theory, they could correctly identify—and thereby apply—the different leadership styles and techniques that their supervisors or executives use. Path-goal theory would become like transformative leadership, whereby a two-way leadership style seeks to transform both the leader and the led (Burns, 1978). Ultimately, it would improve the success of the company and the work atmosphere for everyone.

For future research, it might prove interesting to examine the key communication processes that path-goal theory entails. Although the theory stresses the importance of clarity of expectations and goals, little is known about the actual communicative aspects that each of the theory's leadership styles entails. Would teamwork and perceptions of intra-group support among employees improve, thanks to optimal communication? What is meant by clear goals? Do they have to be in writing or should the supervisor communicate them directly (and face-to-face) to employees? In this respect, how did Edward Easton and other Columbia's executives adopt their leadership styles from a micro-perspective? This study focused on the macro-perspective of path-goal theory, not on the micro-one, which would require the authors to write another paper.

Future scholars should also investigate whether the tenets of path-goal theory apply to other cultures. So far, most scholars using path-goal theory have conducted studies in North America (e.g., Shul, 1987; Stinson & Johnson, 1975). However, it would be useful to determine whether the theory can be applied to the music industry in a far-distant country such as Japan, where the Western-inspired pop music industry has enjoyed great success over the past two decades (Stevens, 2007). Finally, a recent poll taken by Harvard University shows that approximately 75% of Americans think that there is a leadership crisis in the United States today (Clegg et al., 2008). Given this fact, if more leaders applied the tenets of path-goal theory, would they be more able to significantly decrease the current phenomenon of leadership crisis?

It is the authors' hope that this study has enlightened readers on the significance of a classic leadership theory that was applied to a prominent artifact of life (to which most leadership scholars pay little attention). Scholars would find great value in conducting leadership studies in a field such as the music industry.

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