

LEADERSHIP



TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORIES HANDOUT

Trait, Behavior, and Situational
Approaches Examined and Studied

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Born, Made, or Adapted?
What Makes a Leader—Traits, Behaviors, or Timing?



Traditional Theories of Leadership: Trait, Behavior, and Situational Approaches

Introduction

Leadership has been one of the most examined topics in organizational and business research for over a century (Houston et al., 2025; Yukl et al., 2002). Early scholars sought simple explanations for why certain individuals rise to positions of influence, while others focused on observable actions or contextual demands. Although no single theory fully explains leadership effectiveness, traditional leadership theories provide a critical foundation for understanding how leadership is studied and practiced today. This handout provides an overview, empirical grounding, and comparative analysis of approaches to leadership: Trait, Behavioral, and Situational, and offers future research directions for each (Jex & Britt, 2014).

“A colonial war shero, bareback rider and sharpshooter, Susannah Twitty used her Dickert rifle, leading men to success.”

Marti Mongiello, December 10, 2025, National Women’s Memorial at Arlington National Cemetary

Trait Approach to Leadership

The Trait approach is among the earliest leadership theories, emerging prominently in the 1920s and 1930s. It is grounded in the assumption that leaders possess inherent qualities that distinguish them from non-leaders (Deure et al., 2011; Fleenor, 2007; Landy & Conte, 2013). This perspective is closely related to the “great man” and “great woman” theories, which proposed that leadership capability is largely innate rather than learned.

Researchers have examined a wide range of traits, including intelligence, self-confidence, extraversion, integrity, ambition, and sociability. Empirical research has demonstrated that certain traits are moderately associated with leader emergence—that is, who becomes a leader within a group (Jex & Britt, 2014). Individuals high in extraversion and confidence, for example, are more likely to be perceived as leaders.

However, empirical findings have consistently shown weak and inconsistent relationships between traits and leader effectiveness. While traits may predict who emerges as a leader, they do not reliably predict how effective that leader will be across situations (Landy & Conte, 2013). This limitation led scholars to question whether leadership could be explained solely by stable personal characteristics.

AUTHOR INSIGHT: Featuring local shero: Susannah Twitty Graham Miller

Susanna Twitty stands as one of North Carolina’s quiet thunderclaps of courage, a frontier woman whose resolve helped turn the tide at the Battle of Graham's Fort. In the chaos of the attack, when fear might have ruled the day, Susanna stepped forward with iron nerves and clear purpose, rallying defenders and helping hold the fort against overwhelming odds (Frame & Drummond, 2007). Her actions weren’t polished for parades or carved for marble halls—but they mattered, deeply. Twitty reminds us that the American Revolution wasn’t won only by famous generals in pressed coats, but also by fearless women on the frontier who refused to yield, even when history barely bothered to write down their names. A patriot with grit, grace, and backbone, no footnote energy here.



Behavioral Approach to Leadership

In response to the limitations of the Trait approach, researchers shifted their focus toward what leaders do rather than who they are (Riggio, 2007). The Behavioral approach proposes that leadership effectiveness depends on observable behaviors that can be learned and developed (Houston et al., 2025; Riggio, 2007).

Classic empirical studies (Riggio, 2007), including the Ohio State and University of Michigan studies, identified two primary dimensions of leadership behavior: task-oriented behaviors (e.g., initiating structure, goal setting, and performance monitoring) and people-oriented behaviors (e.g., consideration, support, and relationship building). Research has shown that leaders who effectively balance these behaviors tend to achieve higher levels of employee satisfaction and performance. While the Behavioral approach advanced leadership theory by emphasizing development and training, empirical research revealed its limitations (Yukl et al., 2002). No single combination of behaviors was found to be universally effective across all contexts. This realization prompted researchers to consider the role of situational factors in leadership success.

“Trait-inherent born leaders can be cultivated even more successfully with excellent management behaviors that are learned.”

Marti Mongiello, December 12, 2025, US Chamber of Commerce, Washington, DC

Situational Approach to Leadership

The Situational approach emerged (Del Pino-Marchito et al., 2025) to address the idea that leadership effectiveness depends on context. This model argues that leaders must adapt their style based on situational demands, including task complexity and follower readiness (Frame & Drummond, 2007).

One of the most influential situational frameworks is Hersey and Blanchard’s Situational Leadership Model, which proposes four leadership styles—directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating—based on the level of task and relationship behavior required. Empirical research has provided mixed support for this model; while adaptability is consistently linked to effectiveness (Riggio, 2007), accurately assessing follower readiness remains a challenge.

Despite these limitations, situational leadership has been widely adopted in practice because it aligns with the dynamic realities of modern organizations and emphasizes leadership flexibility (Del Pino-Marchito et al., 2025; Frame & Drummond, 2007; Houston et al., 2025; Marstand et al., 2025).

AUTHOR INSIGHT: Meeting and being taught by Ken Blanchard in Chicago, Illinois

What I learned directly from Ken Blanchard in his Chicago seminar was deceptively simple—and devastatingly powerful: leadership is not about control, title, or ego; it’s about service, clarity, and trust. He brought home that great leaders adjust their style to the needs of their people, not the other way around—coaching when someone is learning, supporting when they’re steady, and stepping back when they’re ready to fly. Goals must be crystal clear, praise must be specific and timely, and accountability is not punishment; it’s respect. I walked out of that seminar knowing leadership isn’t loud; it’s intentional (Judge et al., 2002). It’s showing up, shutting up when needed, and letting others shine. Real leaders build champions. They are no longer looking for medals for themselves. That lesson sticks like cast iron; seasoned, durable, and still doing the work decades later.

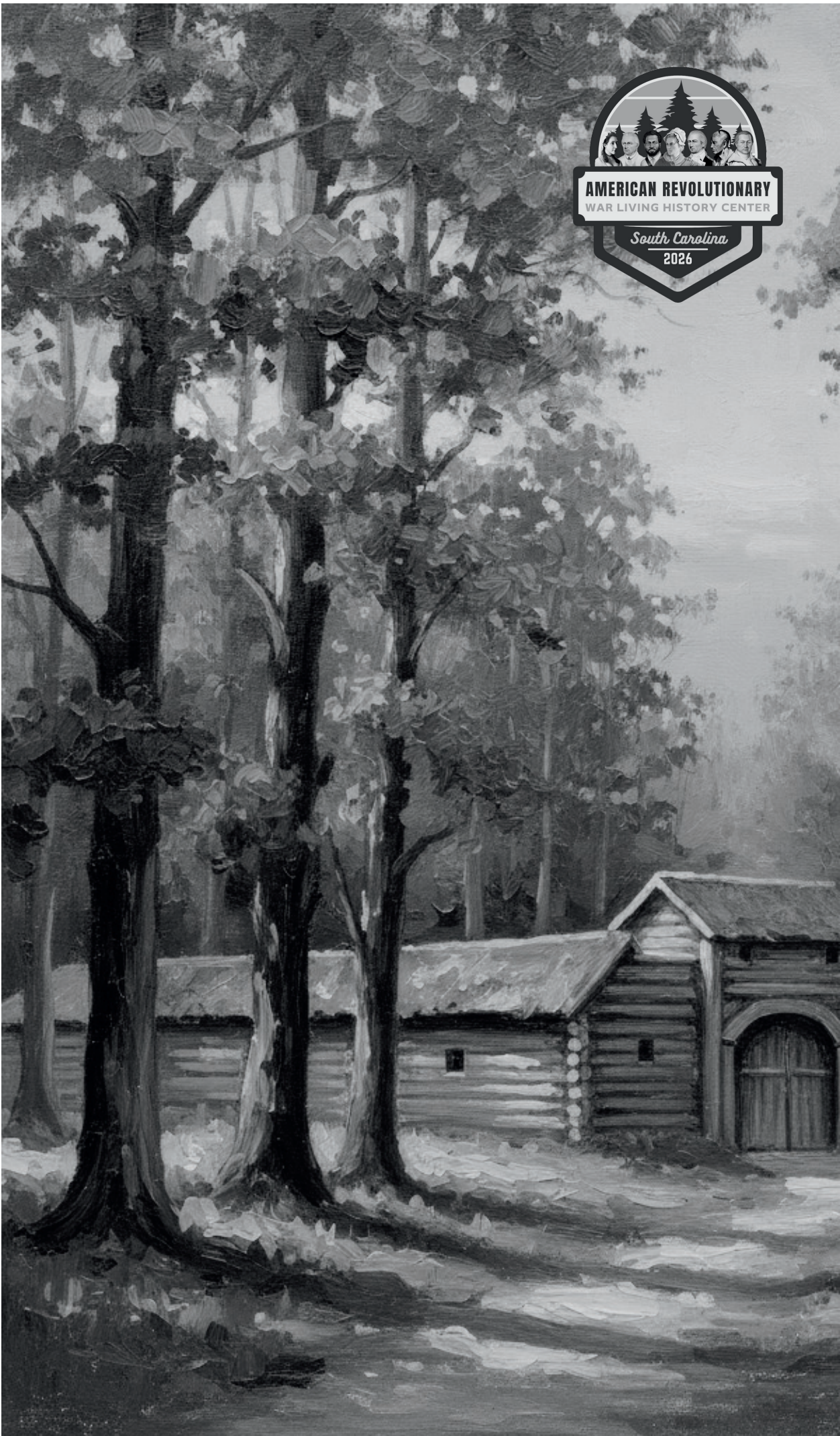


Susannah fires through a keyhole during the famed Battle of Graham’s Fort in Grover, NC. The word stuck because the shape stuck: a literal keyhole to survival—small opening, big consequences. Brutally practical and very effective.

On the Carolina frontier, courage was learned the hard way—by necessity (Frame & Drummond, 2007). Her brother taught her how to fire a rifle not as a novelty, but as a matter of survival: how to steady her breath, feel the weight of the barrel, read distance by instinct, and trust her hands when seconds mattered. Susanna hunted the surrounding forests regularly, riding bareback through pine and hardwood, moving quietly enough not to spook deer, strong enough to bring meat home. She knew the woods the way others knew streets—where shadows pooled at dusk, where creeks curved, where danger hid low and patient.

So when violence came to Graham’s Fort, her bravery was not sudden or theatrical; it was practiced (Derue et al., 2011). The same calm she used in the forest settled into her shoulders. She fired with purpose, defended with resolve, and stood her ground because that was what frontier life had trained her to do (Del Pino-Marchito et al., 2025). Susanna Twitty reminds us that heroism isn’t always born in battle; sometimes it’s forged over years of hard riding, steady aim, cold mornings, and the quiet understanding that survival favors the prepared. No speeches. No applause. Just grit, muscle, and an unbreakable will.

Picture Credits: Martin CJ Mongiello commissioned artwork, exclusively owned 100%, from a forensic rebuild of the lady living descendants of Susannah Twitty Graham Miller, and expanded upon with AI to produce period-accurate poses and renditions of Graham’s Fort, Grover, NC. Completed after five years of research with the American Revolutionary War Living History Center™, LLC, 2008 - 2018, All Rights Reserved.



Comparative Analysis of the Three Approaches

The Trait, Behavioral, and Situational approaches differ in their core assumptions and focus. Trait theory emphasizes internal characteristics (Del Pino-Marchito et al., 2025), sometimes called born leaders. Behavioral theory highlights observable actions (Derue et al., 2011), and Situational theory centers on context and adaptability. Trait theory is most useful for understanding leader emergence (Fleenor, 2007), Behavioral theory for leadership development, and Situational theory for application in dynamic environments - expressed on the fly (Frame & Drummond, 2007). Collectively, these approaches illustrate that leadership is neither purely innate nor entirely learned, and that it cannot be separated from context. Each theory contributes a necessary but incomplete piece of the puzzle. Combining all of them is what I was ultimately taught when I graduated from the Franklin-Covey Institute at Camp David. Being taught by Dr. Stephen Covey at the White House was the second time I had met him, and it was unforgettable.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on the Trait approach should explore how traits interact with organizational culture and diversity, particularly in global and inclusive workplaces. For the Behavioral approach, researchers could examine how digital and remote work environments influence effective leadership behaviors (Houston et al., 2025). Situational leadership research would benefit from longitudinal studies that examine how leaders adapt styles over time and how accurately they assess situational demands. All of these would benefit from analysis with Gen Alpha, Gen Z, and Millennial Generations (Del Pino-Marchito et al., 2025; Marstand et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Landy and Conte (2013) share that traditional leadership theories continue to shape contemporary leadership research and practice. The Trait approach explains why some individuals naturally emerge as leaders, the Behavioral approach demonstrates that leadership skills can be learned to safely hone naturally born trait leaders, and the Situational approach emphasizes adaptability. Effective leadership in modern organizations requires integrating all three perspectives, supported by ongoing research and reflective practice suggested with today's generations (Marstand et al., 2025).

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Addendum to the research

When I speak about my research into leadership and management, I do not begin with theories or tidy charts. I begin in the dirt, where gunpowder hangs in the air and decisions are measured in seconds and consequences are permanent.

At the center of my research is Susanna Twitty Graham Miller, not as folklore or legend, but as a living case study in leadership. She rode horses bareback, learned to shoot from her brother, and became a renowned sharpshooter and expert marksman at a time when women were expected to remain silent and unseen. Combat did not frighten her. Warfare did not paralyze her. She understood risk the way true leaders do, not as something to avoid, but as something to confront with clarity and purpose.

My work places her story within a much larger collision of leadership systems that was unfolding in real time.

At Graham's Fort, her stepfather constructed a defensive enclave designed to protect the elderly, babies, and children during a major Tory assault. Those attacking the fort were not simply soldiers. They were defenders of the old global order, rule by one, power inherited through bloodlines, leadership descending from fetus to throne, preferably male. The very word election was considered laughable. The idea that people could choose their leaders was viewed as childish, dangerous, and absurd.

Kings, queens, emperors, czars, caliphs, emirs, different titles, same structure. One rules, everyone else obeys.

Young people in the colonies dared to suggest that this system was nonsense. Old Europe laughed. Glasses clinked. Champagne flowed. The belief that rule by one could ever be removed from Earth was mocked as naive fantasy.

Then came the attack.

As the battle at the fort intensified, ammunition ran dangerously low. Outside the barricade lay John Burke, shot dead in the open, his powder horn and rifle still strapped to his body. This is the moment where leadership theory often collapses into fear and indecision.

Susanna did not call a meeting. She did not ask permission. She did not wait.

She ran out.

She unlocked the barricade in the middle of live fire, stunned the men on both sides, stripped the powder horn, rifle, and supplies from Burke's body, and sprinted back into the fort alive. She shut the door, locked the barricade again, and stood there as the men inside stared at her in disbelief and asked if she had lost her mind.

My research answers that clearly.

No.

She was decisive. She was clear headed. She was leading from the front.

That single act captures everything I study about leadership, timing, courage, moral clarity, and action under pressure. She knew what needed to be done, she knew when it had to be done, and she accepted the risk without hesitation.

I then trace this same leadership principle forward to the outcome of the war itself. After defeating the most powerful military force on Earth, backed by the immense resources of the Bank of England, the victorious commander, George Washington, did something that stunned the world.

He stepped down.

He willingly relinquished power and returned home. No crown. No throne. No lifetime rule. European elites were baffled. Victors do not walk away. Kings do not retire. The idea that a man could defeat an empire and then choose to live and die as a private citizen was incomprehensible to them.

And yet, that decision solidified a new leadership model, elections, representative government, upper and lower houses, independent courts, and protections such as double jeopardy, structures the world had never seen before. Two hundred and fifty years ago, wealthy and highly educated elites dismissed this system as childish and asinine.

History proved otherwise.

What I see, and what I teach, is that leadership is not inherited, not crowned, and not granted by bloodline. It is forged in moments like Graham's Fort, when a young woman runs into gunfire, retrieves exactly what her people need, and comes back alive.

That is not recklessness.

That is leadership.

And once that kind of leadership entered the world, it never left.



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