# TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH RE-VISITED: BRINGING THEORY TO LIFE A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF A THEORETICALLY-BASED CASE ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

The current article develops a theory-based analysis of leadership behaviors demonstrated in the classic World War II film *12 O'Clock High,* providing methodology for instructors to use for theoretical explication of key leadership behaviors exhibited during the film. Multiple analyses of this film have been developed in the past, most, if not all of which provide little or no theoretical underpinning as a basis for the analysis.

Additionally, the current author provides historical background for key scenes used in the analysis in order to enhance students' understanding.

Finally, several excerpts from the film with instructor questions and answers to stimulate students' analyses of key scenes are presented, with a brief screening of one scene and related questions and answers demonstrated at the conference.

## PURPOSE

The film *Twelve O'Clock High* has been used as a teaching case for leadership training for various audiences. If one were to attempt to make a film specifically about leadership, it could not be any better at illustrating leadership. Until recently, the U.S. Air Force Academy used the film for the purpose of cadet training; it is often used in university classrooms, and the current author was first exposed to the film as part of formal leadership development while employed at a global Fortune 100 firm. Instructors often use their own interpretation of the film; organizations such as the Hartwick Humanities in Management Institute offer case modules for both instructor and student use.

The weakness of many of these approaches is the lack of grounding in leadership theory and principles. A distinct connection is often not made between leadership behaviors exhibited in the film and the underlying theories driving such behavior. The version of the case created by the current author provides a rigorous grounding of leadership behavior in past and current theories of leadership, with relevant leader behaviors in the film bringing these principles to life for the viewer.

The entire case with complete questions and answers is too lengthy to be presented *in toto* in this venue, therefore the author provides the methodology an instructor will find useful should he or she decide to use the case for leadership development. For demonstration purposes, the author provides partial explication of several critical scenes, as well as information key to the student's grasp of historical situational dynamics.

## METHODOLOGY

### General Administration

After testing several iterations, the author finds in-class viewing best leads to students' retention and interpretation of relevant leadership principles. Students attend more deeply to the behavior of key characters with the instructor present, providing whatever narration that might facilitate student comprehension, such as alerting students to key scenes, or providing relevant historical information. In-class screening can occur in real time, where the instructor shows a scene, then immediately has the class

participate in theoretical analysis of the leader's behavior.

A more effective approach, however, involves screening the film, then requiring students to conduct a written analysis of leader behavior. This allows the student time for reflection, as well as the opportunity to re-watch the film, as it is readily available as a download. The most effective method requires 3 - 4 member teams to provide a written group analysis, allowing differing perspectives on leader behavior to be vigorously discussed among members, resulting in a more inclusive analysis. The instructor then re-screens the film, with student discussion of leader behavior, the instructor eventually providing an appropriate theoretical analysis.

No matter which version is used, the instructor should stress three key elements of the analysis before screening:

    **A.** Was the leader's behavior an appropriate choice? If not, would there have been a more effective approach?

    **B.** Why it was the best approach. If not, explain what a better approach would have been. Did it serve its purpose, immediately or eventually?

    **C.** For A & B, explain your choice along the lines of a specific theory. For example, someone may have used what you identified as the supportive style of leadership from Path-Goal theory. Was it the most appropriate style to use in that situation? If not, choose another style & explain why it would have been a better approach.

## Pre-Screening

 A rigorous analysis of relevant leadership theory & principles should occur several days before viewing. Path-Goal Theory of leadership, Behavioral or "Grid" theories of leadership, Fiedler' Contingency Theory of Leadership and Transformational Leadership are the major theories which can be readily applied. To a lesser extent, examples of informal leadership, transactional leadership, trait leadership and LMX theory also occur. Multiple theoretical interpretations of the same scene are quite possible, and students should be encouraged to take this perspective.

## Screening

  The film is approximately 2 hours and 20 minutes in length. Screening should be split into 2 sessions to allow students time to ponder leadership behaviors occurring in the film.

Historical references are made in the film that are key to students' understanding of certain scenes and behaviors. The instructor can  provide these references in a hand-out or explain as they occur during screening:

## Selected Historical References

*12 O'Clock High:* The "clock" system was used by aircrew members to indicate direction of aerial threats using the numbers from the face of an analog clock for direction. The nose of the aircraft was always considered 12 O'Clock; the tail of the aircraft being 6 O'Clock and so on. "High" indicated the threat came from above, "low" indicated the threat was below; "level", the threat was on the same level as the aircraft.

*The German-American Bund* was an organization of approximately 25,000 U.S. citizens of German ancestry who were sympathetic to Adolph Hitler & Nazi Germany before the beginning of WWII. You can see why Lt. Zimmerman was carefully scrutinized, having parents who had belonged to this organization. Of course, upon the U.S.'s entry into the war, this group rapidly became defunct.

*The meaning behind the "Leper Colony".* At one time, leprosy was incurable. It was a flesh eating disease which would cause the flesh of those infected to be eroded. Body extremities would literally disintegrate. It was highly infectious; passed through close contact with an infected person. Since it was incurable, those infected were considered to be "undesirables" and were placed in isolated communities termed leper colonies in order to shield others from their illness. At one time, the Hawaiian island of Molokai held a leper colony.

The instructor should identify each of the chief characters for students as the character appears on screen. In terms of leadership behavior, the three key characters in order of importance are Brigadier General Frank Savage, Colonel Keith Davenport and Major General Pat Pritchard. Other characters should be identified, but are beyond the scope of this reduced case summary.

Students should be alerted to key scenes in order to focus students' attention. Many scenes contain leadership behavior, some more significantly than others. Specific scene information is provided in the full case.
The instructor can, if he or she chooses, may prompt students concerning theories and principles which are applicable to the leader's behavior in each scene. This method is effective if the instructor uses the case for real-time analysis and explication. If a post-screening written analysis is required, the film is readily available as a download. Students should be urged to review the film as the written analysis is conducted.

## SCENE ANALYSIS EXCERPTS

Following are brief excerpts and possible theoretical explanations for significant scenes in the film.

**Scene 1.** Pritchard and Savage travel to 918th HQ to meet with Davenport concerning the disastrous mission. Pritchard and Davenport discuss the failings of the lead navigator, Lt. Zimmerman.

*Q1: What style of leadership is Pritchard using here?* Path-Goal Theory. (House, 1996).

The most applicable response is participative leadership. Most students may initially interpret Pritchard's style as directive/authoritarian, but it is not. He never orders Davenport to replace the navigator. He asks Davenport "What are you going to do about it?" Additionally, Savage states "Keith, if you decide to replace the navigator..." Both statements intimate Davenport has a choice.

*Q2: Why is Pritchard using a participative style? Why does he just not use an authoritarian style and order Davenport to replace the navigator?*

Several responses are appropriate. If the students initially fail to understand the use of participative leadership, you may wish to probe and ask what are Pritchard's responsibilities and why do they prevent him from using directive leadership? He is responsible for several groups, and his span of authority is much too broad for him to micro-manage each group. Secondly, he asks Davenport: "Do you rely on your navigator?" Pritchard relies on Davenport and other group commanders. Here, Pritchard is attempting to determine if he can rely on Davenport. Clearly, he cannot.

Pritchard also uses a participative style when he asks Savage to take over the 918th and again when he briefs group commanders when planning the ball-bearing raid further along in the film.

*Q3: Why does Pritchard relieve Davenport?* Behavioral/Grid Theories (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Katz & Kahn, 1951; Stogdill, 1948) or Fiedler's Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967).

Pritchard cannot depend on Davenport, as noted above.  As detailed earlier in the film, Davenport is primarily relationship focused, preventing him from focusing on the task, and cannot successfully delegate within his command.  Fiedler would state a task oriented approach would be more effective in this situation.  Leader-member relations are strong, Davenport, as a full Colonel, possesses strong position power, and the nature of the task, war, is unstructured at best.  As a result of improper orientation, his performance is abysmal.  The mission was a failure. Five aircraft and crews were lost, compared to fairly light losses in other groups.
Students often interpret this relief as punishment per transactional leadership (Burns, 1978); it is not.  Punishment would constitute being broken in rank or court-martialed.   Davenport is merely re-assigned, although this action may prevent him from ever rising to general rank.

**Scene 2.**  Radio Malfunction.  Savage presses on despite a general recall of all groups.  The 918th is successful, but Pritchard confronts Savage about disobeying orders and "...gambling with my money!"

*Q1: What is Savage's general leadership style in this scene?* Transformational Leadership (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; House, 1976)

If students do not initially respond appropriately, the instructor may wish to ask:

*Q2: What are some characteristics and behaviors of transformational leaders? Are any of those elements illustrated by Savage's actions in this situation?*

Various elements of Transformational leadership are evident in this scene.  The instructor may need to prompt students' responses by directing students' attention to each component.

*Prompt 1: Transformational leaders motivate followers through the transformation of expectations. How might this apply in this scene?*

Followers begin to believe they can do much more than they initially believed.  Here, the 918th, a poor performing group, perseveres in difficult conditions, and out-performs all other groups.

*Prompt 2: Transformational leaders are often unpredictable.*  Pritchard certainly expected Savage to follow orders and abort the mission.  Savage decides otherwise, to the surprise of everyone at HQ.

*Prompt 3: Transformational leaders are said to engage in intellectual stimulation.  What implications does this hold for this scene?*

Transformational leaders view risk-taking as necessary and desirable for long-term organizational success. Was success a sure thing for the 918th in this situation? What would have happened to Savage if the mission had failed?

Transformational leaders view nothing as sacred or unchangeable such as bureaucracy, therefore, Savage is willing to ignore or change Pritchard's orders for a recall.

*Prompt 4: Through their behaviors, transformational leaders utilize Idealized Influence.  Where might*

*this occur in this scene?*

With Idealized Influence, a transformational leader considers the needs of subordinates over the leader's needs, and will sacrifice personal gains in order that subordinates may benefit. When Savage asks Pritchard for a commendation for the 918th, he also adds "...and there's no need to mention leadership." He did not plan this primarily for self-gratification.

**Scene 3.** All pilots have requested a transfer. Stovall and Savage discuss how the requests for transfer might be delayed in order for Savage's plan to begin taking effect.

*Q1: What style of leadership does Savage use when he asks Stovall to help him "...buy time'"?* (Path-Goal Theory)

The participative style from path-goal theory is the correct answer here. Savage does not order Stovall to slow down transfers, nor specify how he might wish this accomplished; he makes a general request. Savage leaves the method entirely up to Stovall.

*Q2: Why would Savage use this style? After all, he can just order Stovall to do so.*

Based on his experience as the group adjutant, as well as his training as an attorney in civilian life, Stovall is most likely an expert at "red tape" manipulation. Who better to come up with a novel yet effective way of "bending" rather than breaking U.S. Army rules?

*Q3: Why would Stovall agree to help Savage?* (Transformational Leadership)

When Stovall states "I want to see my client win." it indicates Stovall has "bought in" to Savage's vision, and will now direct his efforts to help Savage realize the vision.

*Q 4: Is there any other leadership theory on display in this scene?* {LMX Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995)}

*Prompt 1: What does Savage call Stovall at the beginning of the scene?*

Major Stovall, Stovall's formal title

*Prompt 2: What does Savage call Stovall at the end of the scene?*

Harvey, Stovall's first name

*Q5: What might this indicate?*

Savage has now included Stovall in his"in-group" Note throughout the film, Savage begins addressing many others informally; Major Cobb, Lieutenant Bishop, Major Kaiser, etc. Also note his use of the formal method of address with Lt. Colonel Gately until much later in the film.

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**CONFERENCE PRESENTATION**

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A key scene from the film, using questions created by the current author, will be utilized as a major portion of this presentation in order to demonstrate the operation of the case, as well as the connection between leader behaviors in the film, and applicable theories of leadership.

## CONCLUSION

As noted above, space limitations with the current format preclude presentation of the entire case analysis format as written, however, it should illustrate to readers the strong connection between well-established theories of leadership and leader behaviors in the film which bring these principles to life, and provide explicit examples for students of situationally appropriate as well as inappropriate leadership.

For background addressing the historical basis for many of the film's characters as well as events which occur in the film, please contact the current author. For example, it had long been believed that the character of Frank Savage was based on the real-life Colonel Frank Armstrong, who took command of the troubled 306th Bombardment Group (depicted in the film by the 918th) during the early days of the U.S.'s entry into WWII, however, the basis for Savage's character was most likely General Curtis LeMay (USAF, ret.), former Chief of Staff of the U.S.A.F.

**REFERENCES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST FROM THE AUTHOR**