

Robert R. Blake, With Recognition of Jane S. Mouton

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Abstract

This article reviews the life and contribution of Dr. Robert R. Blake, who received the Lifetime Achievement Award in 1994 from the International Association for Conflict Management for his pioneering work and prolific career in the field of conflict management. As a longtime co-author and collaborator, Dr. Jane S. Mouton certainly would have been joint recipient of this award if it were not for her death in 1987: The vast majority of their research was published together. Jane Mouton and Robert Blake became famous for their promotion of the Managerial Leadership Grid and through their work as consultants to a variety of professions and organizations. But there is much more to Robert Blake's career and contributions than the Grid. Together, Blake and Mouton were tremendously influential in their work on managerial leadership and organizational development.

At some point during most leadership seminars, organizational behavior and organizational communication courses, and employee workshops, the Managerial Leadership Grid comes up (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Blake, Mouton, Barnes, & Greiner, 1964). The Grid, as it is often referred to (which is also a registered trademark), is presented as a way of conceptualizing the various approaches managers use in their leadership roles, and it suggests there is one best leadership style for managers to use (Blake & Mouton, 1982c). Blake and Mouton's managerial model is the precursor to a series of two-dimensional *dual concern* models developed to predict conflict and negotiation behaviors proposed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974), Rahim and Bonoma (1979), and Pruitt and Rubin (1986). The original Managerial Leadership Grid posited five different leadership approaches that managers take depending on their concern for the people they manage or the production of their unit (see Figure 1).

The Managerial Leadership Grid was influenced by the body of management and leadership theories that preceded it. Some of the earliest work that influenced the development of Blake and Mouton's Grid of organizational leadership was by Kurt Lewin, whose work in the 1930s and 40s demonstrated the value of using participative over autocratic leadership (Burke, 2017). A series of studies at Ohio State University in the 1940s set out to identify behaviors that leaders use. Another series of studies conducted at the University of Michigan in the 1950s identified two leadership styles based on the whether a leader had an employee orientation or a production orientation (Smith, Helm, Stark, & Stone, 2016). But perhaps the biggest influence on the Grid was McGregor's (1960) *Theory X* and *Theory Y*, which described two managerial leadership styles used to motivate employees based on whether employees are unmotivated and

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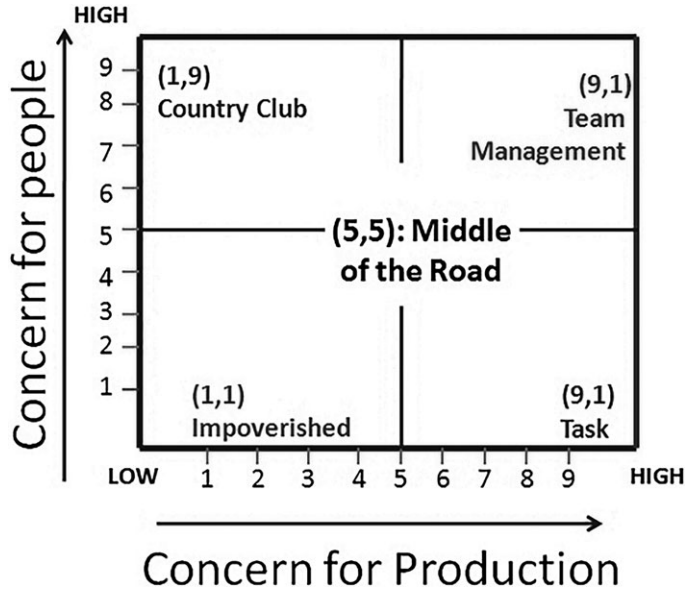


Figure 1. The Managerial Leadership Grid (Google Images, Retrieved January 11, 2019).

dislike work, which requires managers to supervise employees closely, called Theory X, or employees are highly motivated and eager to perform well in their work, which allows managers to lead by creating opportunities for employees to achieve, called Theory Y. The Grid proposed a middle ground, but one that set out to demonstrate the advantages of Theory Y as a leadership style, by proposing styles that emerge from a set of managerial concerns: whether managers have a high or low concern for their employees and whether they have a high or low concern for production. These separate but interdependent concerns lead to five distinct managerial leadership styles.

According to the Managerial Leadership Grid, managers who have high concern for people and for production use a *team* style, encouraging and supporting employees to work as a team to reach optimal productivity. Managers who have high concern for employees but low concern for productivity use a *country club* style, where the work environment is friendly and supportive but not necessarily productive. Managers with high concern for productivity and low concern for people use a *produce-or-perish*—or *task*—style, in which the manager pressures employees and controls the environment, emphasizing rules and control over a supportive climate in the workplace. The style used when managers have low concern for both people and productivity is referred to as *impoverished*, in which the manager works to avoid problems more than support employees or strive for innovative approaches toward productivity. And a moderate emphasis on people and productivity yields a *middle-of-the-road* approach, or *compromise* style, which provides some support and accomplishes some goals, but not at optimal levels of either.

This original model was published in 1964. Malloy (1998) described the Grid’s origin as follows:

Blake, Mouton, Barnes, and Greiner (1964) first described the application of [the Grid] in a manufacturing plant of 4,000 employees in 1963. This was a longitudinal study over 12 months, but without a control group. In total, 800 employees were exposed to the six phase Grid [organizational development] programme, and according to the authors, the results were impressive. At the individual level, they reported major shifts in dominant values, attitudes and behavior patterns. At what could probably be considered the team culture level, they noted improved union, community and parent company relationships and an improvement in team level performance surrogates including items such as boss’s work effort, problem liveliness in group discussions, quality

of decisions made and profit consciousness. However, the assessments were made after the study and compared with respondents' retrospective perceptions of the same items prior to the study. (pp. 23–24)

The Grid is primarily conceptual, and Blake and Mouton used it prescriptively to treat managerial issues. Malloy (1998) pointed out that “despite the richness of the Grid model when viewed as a model of leadership culture and the widespread application of Grid . . . , it has not been extensively or rigorously tested” (p. 23).

In 1970, Blake and Mouton proposed the Conflict Grid, which is often overlooked in the progression of dual concern models related to conflict and negotiation. The goal of this model was to identify how people think about conflict as a predictor for the approach they will take. Quite similar to the Managerial Leadership Grid, the conflict grid used a 1 to 9 scale (1 = *low*, 9 = *high*) on each axis, with the horizontal axis representing concern for producing results and the vertical axis representing concern for people. This dual concern model is much closer to the negotiation and conflict models that were to come, with high concern for people and high concern for results (9, 9), which represents an approach that uses problem solving; moderate concern for people and moderate concern for results (5, 5), which yields an approach of comprising; low concern for people and high concern for results (1, 9), which results in an *authority-obedience* approach; high concern for people and low concern for results (9, 1), which yields an approach in which the manager works to smooth over issues and protect harmony; and low concern for people and low concern for results (1, 1), which results in a manager who withdraws.

Between 1964 and 1987, Blake and Mouton co-authored a significant number of journal articles, book chapters, and books directly related to the Managerial Leadership Grid, applying it to the military, to NASA, to health care, to airlines and their cockpits, as well as to organizational management, human relations, and corporate mergers and acquisitions. In 1967, Blake and Mouton added a third dimension to the dimensions of concern for people and concern for production; this dimension was referred to as *thickness*, or the depth of the managerial style.¹ After Mouton's death in 1987, Blake published two more books—in 1991 and 1994—that addressed further developments and applications of the Grid.

Personal Life of Robert R. Blake

Robert R. Blake was born on January 21, 1918, in Brookline, Massachusetts. In 1941, he married Mercer Shipman Blain. They had a daughter, Cary Mercer Blake, and a son, Brooks Mercer Blake. Blake served in the Army during World War II until his discharge in 1945. He retired in 1997, and he died on June 20, 2004, in Austin, Texas.

Education

In 1940, Blake earned his Bachelor of Arts in psychology and philosophy from Berea College, a college for less privileged students who were all required to work on campus as part of their tuition. According to one account, his experience at Berea College was “truly memorable and inspiring” (Obituary of R. R. Blake 2004). In 1941, he earned a Master of Arts degree in psychology from the University of

¹A much later version (McKee & Carlson, 1999) of the Managerial Leadership Grid added two managerial leadership styles: *opportunistic* and *paternalistic*. The paternalistic style is characterized by an oscillation between the impoverished and the produce-or-perish styles, in which the manager sometimes praises and supports employees but maintains control and discourages challenges from employees about the way things are done. The opportunistic style also was added as a managerial leadership style, but it does not fit neatly on the grid; it characterizes a manager who uses attempts to lead in a way that will result in greater personal benefits; in other words, in this case, the manager has higher concern for self than for either people or production.

Virginia. His thesis was entitled, “The development of opinions regarding the differences between Negroes and Whites.”² And in 1947, Blake earned a doctorate in psychology from the University of Texas at Austin; his dissertation was entitled, “Ocular activity during the administration of the Rorschach Test.”³

Career

Blake continued as a fulltime faculty member at the University of Texas in psychology from 1947 to 1964. In addition to lecturing in the United States (e.g., Harvard University), he also had an international presence, lecturing at Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

Shortly after joining the faculty at the University of Texas in Austin in 1947, Blake spent a year—in 1949—as a Fulbright scholar at the Tavistock Clinic in London, England, where he participated in research related to psychoanalytic approaches to group therapy. From 1950 to 1960, Blake studied group behavior at the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine; this project started as a summer program, but he continued working there for ten years during the summers and serving as a member of the Board of Trustees. He cited his time there as some of the “richest learning experiences” of his life (Blake, 2004). During this decade, Blake worked with Herbert A. Shepard of Standard Oil (later the Exxon Corporation) on a ten-year research project, which was pivotal in Blake’s development as a consultant; it was during this project he learned to apply his theory and methods of organizational transformation to corporate settings.

In 1961, Blake was invited to give the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture (AKML) at the General Semantics Institute. Each year since 1952, distinguished individuals were invited to deliver a lecture on a topic of their choosing within the field of general semantics. The annual lecture honors Alfred Korzybski, who created the field of general semantics (not to be confused with semantics) and his goals for human development. Together with Mouton, Blake was invited to again deliver the AKML in 1982 (<http://www.generalsemantics.org/our-offerings/programming/alfred-korzybski-memorial-lecture-series/>).

In 1994, Robert Blake received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Association for Conflict Management for his pioneering work and prolific career in the field of conflict management. Although IACM does not grant posthumous awards, as a career-long partner and collaborator, certainly Jane Mouton shared credit for his receiving this award. Up until Mouton’s death in 1987, Blake and Mouton were close collaborators, and the vast majority of their research was published together.

Jane Srygley Mouton

Because Blake was the recipient of the IACM Lifetime Achievement Award, this review is primarily about him. However, Blake’s contributions over his career were developed and co-authored with Jane Srygley Mouton, whose ideas and efforts were highly influential in Blake’s career and to his many contributions. In many ways, Blake’s career is inseparable from Jane Mouton’s. Therefore, we would like to pay tribute to her and her collaboration with Robert Blake (see Figure 2).

In addition to playing a significant role in developing the original Managerial Grid in 1961, Mouton was co-author with Blake on over three dozen books, 460 journal articles, and 290 book chapters (Grid International, Inc., 2016). Together they co-founded Scientific Methods, Inc.—later renamed Grid

²Thanks to Nancy Kechner, Ph.D., RDS Research Software Support, University of Virginia Library Liaison for Biology, Biomedical Engineering, and Psychology, for her assistance in identifying Blake’s master’s thesis.

³Thanks to Victoria Pena, *Ask a Librarian* intern at the Perry-Castañeda Library, University of Texas at Austin, for her assistance in finding Blake’s dissertation.



Figure 2. Robert R. Blake & Jane S. Mouton.

International—where Mouton served in a variety of positions, including vice president, and, eventually, president, between 1961 and 1981.

Born in 1930 in Port Arthur, Texas, Jane Srygley Mouton earned a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics in 1950 from the University of Texas, a Master of Arts in Science from Florida State University, and a Ph.D. from University of Texas in 1957.

Blake began working on research with Mouton when she was a graduate student at the University of Texas. After she earned her doctorate, Blake and Mouton worked together as organizational consultants at Standard Oil, where they developed what would become the Managerial Leadership Grid. They then worked at National Training Laboratories (NTL), where Mouton was one of few women to lead one of the training groups. In 1961, they formed what would become Grid International, Inc.

Unfortunately, there seems to be little written about Jane Mouton's background and family life. She received several awards for her books, including from the American College of Hospital Administrators (1982), the *American Journal of Nursing* (1982), and the American Management Association (1982). She died of cancer in 1987 (Burke, 2017). In an autobiographical piece written in 1992, Robert Blake wrote the following tribute to Jane Mouton:

The happiest day in my professional life came in the fall of 1987. Jane Mouton and I had just learned that we were both to be inducted into the Human Resource Development Hall of Fame on December 9. The gratification was made doubly meaningful because of the simultaneous induction; in other words, a recognition that, whatever contribution had been made, it had been made as a team, not as two separate individuals. That gave validity to the operating premise of our entire joint career.

This moment of great fulfillment was all too soon followed by ultimate sorrow. The ceremony was scheduled in New York, immediately upon our return from a trip to India, where we addressed the International Congress of Training and Development, and then to Athens, where we were scheduled for client activity. The presentation in Delhi went quite well, but at this point a difficulty arose. Jane complained of abdominal pains and, as they grew worse, it was determined she should be hospitalized. She decided to cut the trip short and returned to Austin in late November. I continued to fulfill our commitments, phoning her daily in order to stay apprised of the latest events. Though she remained hospitalized, Jane claimed to be making progress and even thought she

might be able to rejoin me in New York for the Hall of Fame ceremony. She died quite suddenly, two days prior to this event, on December 7, 1987.

This tragedy symbolizes the end of a significant part of my career. Jane and I were partners, working hand in hand for 36 years. Together we formulated the Managerial Grid[®], the conceptual framework of which is contained in a book that has already exceeded sales of two million copies, and is available in sixteen languages. We also published *Synergogy*, a book that outlines a radical solution to many of the chronic problems facing teachers and educators today. These were only two of a long line of other books—38 in number—all mutually coauthored by us. Our major effort, however, involved the creation and development of Scientific Methods, Inc., and the leadership we provided that has sustained it for three decades. For all of these reasons, this autobiography can only be written by weaving the centrally important fact of our joint cooperation into the story which follows. (pp. 106–107)

Beyond the Grid

Although Blake and Mouton are known primarily for the Managerial Leadership Grid, their research extends well beyond their focus on managerial leadership.⁴ In addition to the many books and articles published on the Grid, Blake and Mouton—and their occasional co-authors—wrote about a number of other subjects related to organizational behavior. They conducted many studies on group conformity and intergroup competition as it occurs in settings with diverse group and individual opinions (e.g., Blake, Helson, & Mouton, 1957; Coleman, Blake, & Mouton, 1958; Helson, Blake, & Mouton, 1958), and they wrote many articles on group dynamics and group development (e.g., Blake, Mouton, & Fruchter, 1962). Blake and Mouton wrote extensively on organizational development, its history, and its value for managers in developing respect and trust (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1976a, 1979a, 1979b). In addition, they discussed effective management for corporate change, especially during mergers and acquisitions and international mergers (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1983, 1985). Taking a leave of absence from the University of Texas, Blake went to work as an internal organizational development manager to examine the inner workings of Lakeside (apparently an invented company name), a manufacturing plant with more than 800 employees. He co-authored with Mouton a book that treated his experience as a case study for organizational development practices, entitled *The Diary of an OD Man* (1976a). In addition, Blake and Mouton wrote a number of articles on how to measure organizational training for its effectiveness.

Blake and Mouton's research primarily addressed the Managerial Leadership Grid. They continually wrote in response to questions and challenges to their model (see, for example, Blake & Mouton, 1976b, 1982a) and promoted the value of the Grid. Blake and Mouton argued that the 9,9 approach to leadership was more useful, more preferred by managers, and more effective than the *situational* approach to leadership (Blake & Mouton, 1978, 1981, 1982b, 1982c). They repeatedly competed with Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory (Hersey, Blanchard, & Natemeyer, 1979), which argued that the best leadership style varies according to the specific managerial context. Blake and Mouton refuted *situationalism* as an approach to leadership, arguing that it ignores principles of behavioral science and treats concerns for people and production as separate situations.

Conclusion

Together, Blake and Mouton were tremendously influential in the work they did on managerial leadership and organizational development. One of the many tributes to Robert Blake in the memory book for his memorial service shows the kind of person he was:

⁴For a complete bibliography of the works by Robert R. Blake and Jane Srygley Mouton, go to the list of publications on the Grid International, Inc., website: www.gridinternational.com/publications.html

I first met Bob Blake around 1979, shortly before I attended The Managerial Grid Seminar as a twenty-five-year old. Both Bob and Grid had a profound influence on my professional life, as I ultimately became the international Grid Associate for Ireland. Bob was a truly original thinker and possessed a first rate and constantly enquiring mind. . . . When he visited Ireland he spoke of how he had a strong feeling of recognition in the countryside from his cultural forebears. Bob was truly one of the greats. He leaves a superb testimony to his life and achievements through the countless people who have benefited from Grid. As the old Irish expression has it “May his soul rest on the right hand of God”—“Ar dheis De go raibh a anam.” (James Conboy-Fischer, April 6, 2009)

It is no wonder the International Association for Conflict Management selected him to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award. This award was clearly well deserved.

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