

# LEAST PREFERRED COWORKER SCALE (LPT: SCALE)?

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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## LEAST PREFERRED COWORKER SCALE (LPC SCALE)

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Organizational Psychology, Leadership Studies, Social Psychology

### 1. Core Definition and Function

The Least Preferred Coworker Scale, commonly abbreviated as the **LPC Scale**, is a specialized psychometric instrument designed to measure an individual's fundamental leadership style by assessing their attitude toward the person with whom they have worked least effectively. Unlike standard popularity polls, the LPC scale does not directly evaluate the leader's appeal; rather, it indirectly determines whether the leader is primarily **task-oriented** or **relationship-oriented**, a core distinction central to contingency models of leadership. The scale requires the respondent (typically the leader being assessed) to rate a specific, identifiable co-worker--the one they found most difficult to work with--across a series of bi-polar adjective pairs.

This instrument serves as a critical diagnostic tool within organizational settings, quantifying the respondent's dispositional hierarchy of work values. The ratings quantify how charitable or critical the leader is when describing someone with whom they have experienced professional conflict or dissatisfaction. The resulting score is interpreted as an intrinsic reflection of the respondent's motivational structure, which subsequently dictates their behavioral responses in various operational contexts. Specifically, the scale identifies the degree to which a leader prioritizes maintaining positive interpersonal relationships versus achieving strict performance targets, even when faced with challenging co-workers.

In practice, the LPC Scale allows researchers and organizational psychologists to gauge a workforce's implicit opinion and emotional climate surrounding key personnel. By aggregating these quantified opinions, organizations can highlight not only who the least preferred worker is but, more importantly, can use the data to understand the underlying leadership dynamics and potential sources of conflict within teams. It is a measure that goes beyond surface-level metrics, diving into the cognitive framework through which a leader perceives others, especially those who impede workflow or cause stress.

### 2. Historical Context and Proponent

The **LPC Scale** was developed by the eminent U.S. psychologist Fred Fiedler (1922-2017) during his foundational research into group performance and leadership effectiveness. Fiedler's work began in the mid-22th century and culminated in the formulation of the highly influential **Contingency Model of Leadership**. The genesis of the LPC scale was necessitated by Fiedler's need for an objective, reliable measure of leadership style that could be used as a predictor variable within his situational framework, thereby connecting individual traits to organizational

outcomes.

Before Fiedler's model, leadership research often focused on identifying universal traits that guaranteed success, regardless of the situation. Fiedler challenged this assumption by arguing that effectiveness depended on the interaction between a leader's inherent style and the favorability of the working environment. The LPC Scale became the cornerstone measurement for defining this inherent style. The scale's development involved rigorous testing and refinement across diverse organizational and military settings, establishing its psychometric robustness for classifying leadership orientations into distinct categories crucial for the subsequent predictions made by the Contingency Theory.

Fiedler posited that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon the match between the leader's style (measured by the LPC score) and the degree to which the situation gives the leader control and influence. Therefore, the historical significance of the LPC Scale lies not just in its existence as a measurement tool, but in its integral role in shifting leadership studies from a purely trait-based approach to a more complex, interactional, and situational perspective. This intellectual contribution remains a landmark achievement in organizational psychology, with the LPC Scale enduring as its most recognizable empirical component.

### 3. Methodology and Administration

The administration of the **Least Preferred Coworker Scale** follows a standardized procedure using semantic differential techniques. The respondent is first instructed to bring to mind the single co-worker (past or present) with whom they could work least well. This individual need not be the person they disliked most, but rather the person with whom the achievement of organizational tasks proved most challenging or frustrating. This focusing mechanism ensures the measurement captures attitudes related to professional interaction rather than purely personal animosity.

Once the individual is identified, the respondent rates this "Least Preferred Coworker" across a set of 16 to 20 bi-polar adjective pairs. These pairs typically describe various aspects of behavior and attitude on an eight-point scale. Examples of these bi-polar dimensions include: **Friendly vs. Unfriendly**, Supportive vs. Hostile, Trustworthy vs. Untrustworthy, Pleasant vs. Unpleasant, and Cooperative vs. Uncooperative. The eight-point format forces a choice, as there is no neutral midpoint, thereby maximizing the variability and diagnostic power of the instrument.

The scoring mechanism is crucial: points are assigned from 1 (negative end) to 8 (positive end) for each pair. The total **LPC score** is the sum of the ratings across all pairs. If the respondent describes their Least Preferred Coworker using positive adjectives (e.g., scoring highly on "friendly" and "supportive"), their overall LPC score will be high. Conversely, if they describe this co-worker using negative adjectives (e.g., scoring low on "unfriendly" and "hostile"), their LPC score will be low. The resulting composite score is used to categorize the individual's fundamental

motivational hierarchy.

## 4. Interpretation of Scoring

The interpretation of the final LPC score is what distinguishes the scale from simpler personality inventories. The score does not measure the quality of the least preferred coworker, but rather the underlying motivational system of the rater (the leader). The scores delineate two primary motivational types, which are intrinsically linked to a leader's priorities when under pressure or working in unfavorable conditions.

A **High LPC Score** signifies a leader who describes their least successful work partner in relatively positive terms. This high score suggests that the leader's primary motivational goal is **relationship-orientation**. Even when faced with a difficult colleague, the High LPC leader prioritizes maintaining positive interpersonal ties and group harmony. For these leaders, success is often defined by strong rapport, mutual trust, and collaborative spirit. If relationships are secure, they then turn their focus to task achievement.

Conversely, a **Low LPC Score** results when the leader rates their least preferred coworker using highly negative, critical terms. This low score suggests a leader whose primary motivational structure is **task-orientation**. For the Low LPC leader, task accomplishment and productivity are paramount. If a relationship hinders the successful completion of a goal, that relationship is viewed negatively and secondary to the objective. They seek fulfillment and motivation through the efficient execution of tasks, only addressing relationships after primary goals have been met.

It is important to note that the LPC score is intended to be a stable measure of personality; it reflects the leader's fundamental orientation that persists across different situations, unlike behavioral models that suggest leaders can easily switch styles. This stability is the key premise that allows the score to be effectively utilized within the situational matching framework of Fiedler's Contingency Model.

## 5. Integration with Contingency Theory

The true significance of the **LPC Scale** is realized when it is integrated into Fiedler's Contingency Model, which posits that no single leadership style is universally superior. Instead, optimal leadership effectiveness is contingent upon matching the leader's style (measured by the LPC score) with the degree of situational control and favorability they possess. Fiedler categorized situational favorableness using three primary variables: leader-member relations, task structure, and position power.

According to the model, **Low LPC (task-oriented) leaders** are predicted to be most effective in situations that are either highly favorable (where everything is running smoothly and tasks are

clear) or highly unfavorable (where chaos reigns, and firm direction is needed). In these extremes, the task-focus provides the necessary structure, whether for fine-tuning efficiency or bringing order to disorder. Their focus on productivity is best utilized when the situation demands decisive action over consensus building.

In contrast, **High LPC (relationship-oriented) leaders** are predicted to perform best in situations of intermediate favorableness--those characterized by moderate certainty and moderate ambiguity. In these middle-ground scenarios, interpersonal diplomacy, sensitivity, and motivation through relationship building become crucial for navigating complexity and securing cooperation. Fiedler's model suggests that if a leader's style does not match the situation's demands, organizational performance will inevitably suffer, underscoring the necessity of using the LPC Scale to achieve optimal leader-situation fit.

## 6. Psychometric Properties and Validity

Academically, the **LPC Scale** is recognized for possessing certain unique psychometric qualities, though these qualities have simultaneously generated considerable debate. The scale is designed to measure a motivational hierarchy, meaning that the construct being measured is not simply a behavioral trait but a deep-seated preference that influences behavior across contexts. Early validation studies conducted by Fiedler and his colleagues established adequate internal consistency and test-retest reliability, supporting its stability as a personality measure.

However, the most contentious psychometric aspect remains the construct validity--specifically, precisely what the score is measuring. Fiedler initially labeled the LPC score as a measure of "psychological distance," but later refined the interpretation to motivational hierarchy. Critics often argue that the scale's focus on rating a single, extreme individual limits its generalizability, suggesting it may measure generalized negativity or a specific coping mechanism rather than a pure leadership style. Despite these challenges, its operational validity within the specific confines of the Contingency Model remains strong, demonstrating a reliable correlation between the LPC score and predicted group performance outcomes under varying situational favorableness.

Attempts have been made to create shorter forms of the LPC Scale to improve ease of administration, such as a 10-item version. While these shorter versions maintain some correlation with the original, the complexity of the construct often mandates the use of the full 16-to-20-item scale for academic research to ensure comprehensive coverage of the bi-polar dimensions and maintain the predictive power necessary for accurately assessing leader-situation fit according to Fiedler's precise specifications.

## 7. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its longevity and influence, the **Least Preferred Coworker Scale** has faced substantial

criticism from organizational researchers and leadership scholars. One major limitation lies in the **ambiguity of interpretation**; critics argue that the construct being measured is ill-defined, making it difficult to pinpoint whether a high LPC score reflects genuine relationship focus or merely a generalized desire to avoid conflict or social desirability bias. The semantic leap required to connect an individual's rating of a difficult colleague to their primary leadership motivation remains a key point of contention.

Another significant criticism focuses on the forced-choice, bi-polar nature of the scale, which mandates that individuals choose between two extremes without a neutral option. While designed to enhance diagnostic power, this structure can force respondents into positions that do not accurately reflect their nuanced feelings, potentially skewing the final composite score. Furthermore, the reliance on a single, subjective memory of a "least preferred coworker" introduces potential reliability issues related to memory decay, emotional state during administration, or the variability of experiences across different organizational contexts.

Methodologically, the most profound limitation stems from the challenge of practical application. Because the LPC score is treated as a stable personality trait, Fiedler's model suggests that leaders cannot easily modify their style to fit the situation. Instead, organizations must change the situation (modify task structure, position power, or leader-member relations) or replace the leader to achieve optimal performance. This prescriptive rigidity, which flows directly from the fixed nature of the LPC score, is often viewed as impractical and counterproductive in modern, dynamic organizational environments that emphasize leader adaptability and developmental growth.

## Further Reading

[Fred Fiedler \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Fiedler Contingency Model \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychology Dictionary: Least Preferred Coworker Scale \(LPT: SCALE\)](#)