

Situational Approach

DESCRIPTION

One of the more widely recognized approaches to leadership is the situational approach, which was developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969a) based on Reddin's (1967) 3-D management style theory. The situational approach has been refined and revised several times since its inception (see Blanchard, 1985; Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Nelson, 1993; Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 2013; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, 1988), and it has been used extensively in organizational leadership training and development.

As the name of the approach implies, the situational approach focuses on leadership in situations. The premise of the theory is that different situations demand different kinds of leadership. From this perspective, to be an effective leader requires that a person adapt his or her style to the demands of different situations.

The situational approach is illustrated in the model developed by Blanchard and his colleagues (Blanchard et al., 1993; Blanchard et al., 2013), called the Situational Leadership® II (SLII®) model (Figure 5.1). The model is an extension and refinement of the original model developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969a). This chapter focuses on the SLII® model.

The situational approach stresses that leadership is composed of both a directive and a supportive dimension, and that each has to be applied appropriately in a given situation. To determine what is needed in a particular situation, a leader must evaluate her or his followers and assess how competent and committed they are to perform a given goal. Based on the assumption that followers' skills and motivation vary over time, situational leadership suggests that leaders should change the degree to which they are directive or supportive to meet the changing needs of followers.

In brief, the essence of the situational approach demands that leaders match their style to the competence and commitment of the followers.

Effective leaders are those who can recognize what followers need and then adapt their own style to meet those needs.

The dynamics of this approach are clearly illustrated in the SLII® model, which comprises two major dimensions: *leadership style* and *development level of followers*.

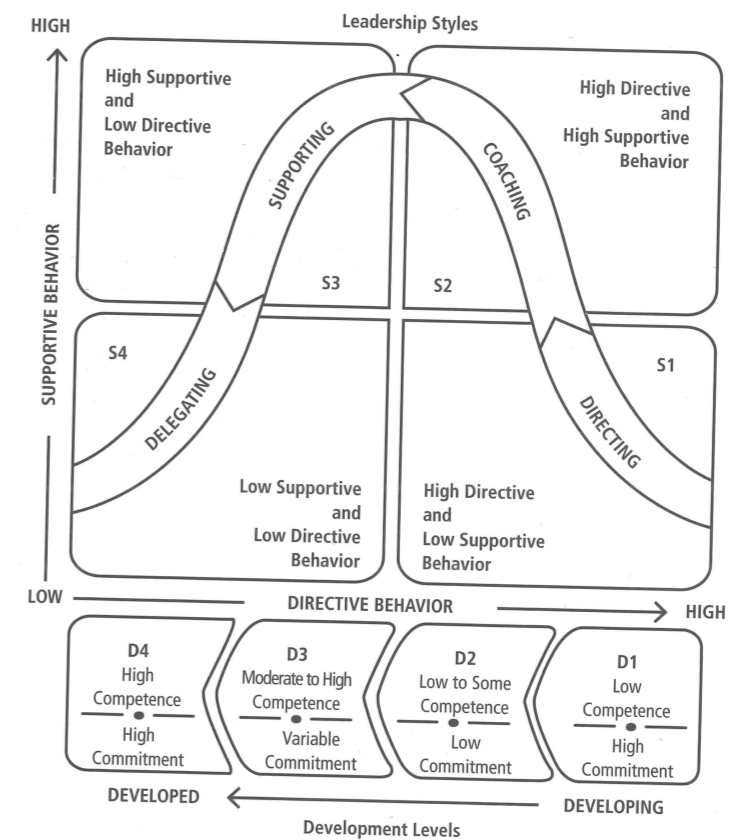
Leadership Style

Leadership style consists of the behavior pattern of a person who attempts to influence others. It includes both *directive behaviors* and *supportive behaviors*. Directive behaviors help group members accomplish goals by giving directions, establishing goals and methods of evaluation, setting timelines, defining roles, and showing how the goals are to be achieved. Directive behaviors clarify, often with one-way communication, what is to be done, how it is to be done, and who is responsible for doing it. Supportive behaviors help group members feel comfortable about themselves, their coworkers, and the situation. Supportive behaviors involve two-way communication and responses that show social and emotional support to others. Examples of supportive behaviors include asking for input, solving problems, praising, sharing information about oneself, and listening. Supportive behaviors are mostly job related. Leadership styles can be classified further into four distinct categories of directive and supportive behaviors (Figure 5.1). The first style (S1) is a *high directive–low supportive* style, which is also called a *directing* style. In this approach, the leader focuses communication on goal achievement, and spends a smaller amount of time using supportive behaviors. Using this style, a leader gives instructions about what and how goals are to be achieved by the followers and then supervises them carefully.

The second style (S2) is called a *coaching* approach and is a *high directive–high supportive* style. In this approach, the leader focuses communication on both achieving goals and meeting followers' socioemotional needs. The coaching style requires that the leader involve himself or herself with followers by giving encouragement and soliciting follower input. However, coaching is an extension of S1 in that it still requires that the leader make the final decision on the *what* and *how* of goal accomplishment.

The third style (S3) is a *supporting* approach that requires that the leader take a *high supportive–low directive* style. In this approach, the leader does not focus exclusively on goals but uses supportive behaviors that bring out followers' skills around the goal to be accomplished. The supportive style includes listening, praising, asking for input, and giving feedback. A leader using this style gives followers control of day-to-day decisions but remains available to facilitate problem solving. An S3 leader is quick to give recognition and social support to followers.

Figure 5.1 Situational Leadership® II



SOURCE: From *Leadership and the One Minute Manager: Increasing Effectiveness Through Situational Leadership® II*, by K. Blanchard, P. Zigarmi, and D. Zigarmi, 2013, New York, NY: William Morrow. Used with permission. This model cannot be used without the expressed, written consent of The Ken Blanchard Companies. To learn more, visit www.kenblanchard.com

Last, the fourth style (S4) is called the *low supportive–low directive* style, or a *delegating* approach. In this approach, the leader offers less goal input and social support, facilitating followers' confidence and motivation in reference to the goal. The delegative leader lessens involvement in planning, control of details, and goal clarification. After the group agrees on what it is to do, this style lets followers take responsibility for getting the job done the way they see fit. A leader using S4 gives control to followers and refrains from intervening with unnecessary social support.

The SLII® model (Figure 5.1) illustrates how directive and supportive leadership behaviors combine for each of the four different leadership styles. As shown by the arrows on the bottom and left side of the model, directive

behaviors are high in the S1 and S2 quadrants and low in S3 and S4, whereas supportive behaviors are high in S2 and S3 and low in S1 and S4.

Development Level

A second major part of the SLII® model concerns the development level of followers. Development level is the degree to which followers have the *competence* and *commitment* necessary to accomplish a given goal or activity (Blanchard et al., 2013). Stated another way, it indicates whether a person has mastered the skills to achieve a specific goal and whether a person has developed a positive attitude regarding the goal (Blanchard et al., 1993). In earlier versions of the model, this was referred to as the *readiness* or *maturity* of the follower (Bass, 2008; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969a, 1969b, 1977, 1996).

Followers are at a high development level if they are interested and confident in their work and know how to achieve the goal. Followers are at a developing level if they have little skill for the goal at hand but believe that they have the motivation or confidence to get the job done.

The levels of development are illustrated in the lower portion of the diagram in Figure 5.1. The levels describe various combinations of commitment and competence for followers on a given goal. They are intended to be goal specific and are not intended to be used for the purpose of labeling followers.

On a particular goal, followers can be classified into four categories: D1, D2, D3, and D4, from developing to developed. Specifically, D1 followers are low in competence and high in commitment. They are new to a goal and do not know exactly how to do it, but they are excited about the challenge of it. D2 followers are described as having some competence but low commitment. They have started to learn a job, but they also have lost some of their initial motivation about the job. D3 represents followers who have moderate to high competence but may have variable commitment. They have essentially developed the skills for the job, but they are uncertain as to whether they can accomplish the goal by themselves. Finally, D4 followers are the highest in development, having both a high degree of competence and a high degree of commitment to getting the job done. They have the skills to do the job and the motivation to get it done.

HOW DOES THE SITUATIONAL APPROACH WORK?

The situational approach is constructed around the idea that followers move forward and backward along the developmental continuum, which

represents the relative competence and commitment of followers. For leaders to be effective, it is essential that they determine where followers are on the developmental continuum and adapt their leadership styles to directly match their followers' development levels.

In a given situation, the first task for a leader is to determine the nature of the situation. Questions such as the following must be addressed: What goal are followers being asked to achieve? How complex is the goal? Are the followers sufficiently skilled to accomplish the goal? Do they have the desire to complete the job once they start it? Answers to these questions will help leaders to identify correctly the specific development level at which their followers are functioning. For example, new followers who are very excited but lack understanding of job requirements would be identified as D1-level followers. Conversely, seasoned followers with proven abilities and great devotion to an organization would be identified as functioning at the D4 level.

Having identified the correct development level, the second task for the leader is to adapt his or her style to the prescribed leadership style represented in the SLII® model. There is a one-to-one relationship between the development level of followers (D1, D2, etc.) and the leader's style (S1, S2, etc.). For example, if followers are at the first level of development, D1, the leader needs to adopt a high directive–low supportive leadership style (S1, or directing). If followers are more advanced and at the second development level, D2, the leader needs to adopt a high directive–high supportive leadership style (S2, or coaching). For each level of development, there is a specific style of leadership that the leader should adopt.

An example of this would be Rene Martinez, who owns a house painting business. Rene specializes in restoration of old homes and over 30 years has acquired extensive knowledge of the specialized abilities required including understanding old construction, painting materials and techniques, plaster repair, carpentry, and window glazing. Rene has three employees: Ashley, who has worked for him for seven years and whom he trained from the beginning of her career; Levi, who worked for a commercial painter for four years before being hired by Rene two years ago; and Anton, who is just starting out.

Because of Ashley's years of experience and training, Rene would classify her as primarily D3. She is very competent, but still seeks Rene's insight on some tasks. She is completely comfortable prepping surfaces for painting and directing the others, but has some reluctance to taking on jobs that involve carpentry. Depending on the work he assigns Ashley, Rene moves between S3 (supporting) and S4 (delegating) leadership behaviors.

When it comes to painting, Levi is a developed follower needing little direction or support from Rene. But Levi has to be trained in many other aspects of home restoration, making him a D1 or D2 in those skills. Levi is a quick

learner, and Rene finds he only needs to be shown or told how to do something once before he is able to complete it easily. In most situations, Rene uses an S2 (coaching) leadership behavior with Levi. If the goal is more complicated and requires detailed training, Rene moves back into the S1 (directing) behavior with Levi.

Anton is completely new to this field, developing his skills but at the D1 level. What he lacks in experience he more than makes up for in energy. He is always willing to jump in and do whatever he's asked to do. He is not as careful as he needs to be, however, often neglecting the proper prepping techniques and cleanup about which Rene is a stickler. Rene finds that not only he, but also Ashley, uses an S1 (directing) behavior with Anton. Because Levi is also fairly new, he finds it difficult to be directive with Anton, but likes to give him help when he seems unsure of himself, falling into the S3 (supporting) behavior.

This example illustrates how followers can move back and forth along the development continuum, requiring leaders to be flexible in their leadership behavior. Followers may move from one development level to another rather quickly over a short period (e.g., a day or a week), or more slowly on goals that proceed over much longer periods of time (e.g., a month). Leaders cannot use the same style in all contexts; rather, they need to adapt their style to followers and their unique situations. Unlike the trait approach, which emphasizes that leaders have a fixed style, the situational approach demands that leaders demonstrate a high degree of flexibility.

With the growing cross-cultural and technical influences on our society, it appears that the need for leaders to be flexible in their leadership style is increasingly important. Recent studies have examined situational leadership in different cultural and workplace contexts. In a study of situational leadership and air traffic control employees, Arvidsson, Johansson, Ek, and Akselsson (2007) assessed leaders in different contexts and found that the leader's style should change in different group and individual situations. In addition, they found that the most frequently used leadership style was high supportive–low directive and the most seldom-used style was high directive–low supportive. In another study, Larsson and Vinberg (2010), using a case study approach, found that successful leaders use a relation orientation as a base but include along with it a structure orientation and a change orientation.

STRENGTHS

The situational approach to leadership has several strengths, particularly for practitioners. The first strength is that it has a history of usefulness in the marketplace. Situational Leadership® is well known and frequently used for training leaders within organizations. Hersey and Blanchard (1993)

reported that it has been a factor in training programs of more than 400 of the Fortune 500 companies. It is perceived by corporations as offering a useful model for training people to become effective leaders.

A second strength of the approach is its practicality. Situational Leadership® is easy to understand, intuitively sensible, and easily applied in a variety of settings. Whereas some leadership approaches provide complex and sophisticated ways to assess your own leadership behavior (e.g., the decision-making approach in Vroom & Yetton, 1973), Situational Leadership® provides a straightforward approach that is easily used. Because it is described at an abstract level that is easily grasped, the ideas behind the approach are quickly acquired. In addition, the principles suggested by this approach are easy to apply across a variety of settings, including work, school, and family.

Closely akin to the strength of practicality is a third strength: It has prescriptive value. Whereas many theories of leadership are descriptive in nature, the situational approach is prescriptive. It tells you what you should and should not do in various contexts. For example, if your followers are very low in competence, Situational Leadership® prescribes a directing style for you as the leader. On the other hand, if your followers appear to be competent but lack confidence, the situational approach suggests that you lead with a supporting style. These prescriptions provide leaders with a valuable set of guidelines that can facilitate and enhance leadership. For example, in a recent study, Meirovich and Gu (2015) reported that the closer a leader's style is to the prescribed style, the better the performance and satisfaction of the employees.

A fourth strength of Situational Leadership® is that it emphasizes leader flexibility (Graeff, 1983; Yukl, 1989). The approach stresses that leaders need to find out about their followers' needs and then adapt their leadership style accordingly. Leaders cannot lead using a single style: They must be willing to change their style to meet the requirements of the situation. This approach recognizes that followers act differently when doing different goals, and that they may act differently during different stages of the same goal. Effective leaders are those who can change their own style based on the goal requirements and the followers' needs, even in the middle of a project. For example, Zigarmi and Roberts (2017) reported that when followers perceive a fit between the leader's behavior and their own needs, it is positively related to job affect, trust, and favorable work intentions.

Finally, Situational Leadership® reminds us to treat each follower differently based on the goal at hand and to seek opportunities to help followers learn new skills and become more confident in their work (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997; Yukl, 1998). Overall, this approach underscores that followers have unique needs and deserve our help in trying to become better at doing their work.

CRITICISMS

Despite its history of use in leadership training and development, Situational Leadership® has several limitations. The following criticisms point out several weaknesses in this approach and help to provide a more balanced picture of the general utility of this approach in studying and practicing leadership.

The first criticism of Situational Leadership® is that only a few research studies have been conducted to justify the assumptions and propositions set forth by the approach. Although many doctoral dissertations address dimensions of Situational Leadership®, most of these research studies have not been published. The lack of a strong body of research on this approach raises questions about the theoretical basis of the approach (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997; Graeff, 1997; Meirovich & Gu, 2015; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002; Vecchio, Bullis, & Brazil, 2006). Can we be sure it is a valid approach? Is it certain that this approach does indeed improve performance? Does this approach compare favorably with other leadership approaches in its impact on followers? It is difficult to give firm answers to these questions when the testing of this approach has not resulted in a significant amount of published research findings.

A second criticism that can be directed at the situational approach concerns the ambiguous conceptualization in the model of followers' development levels. The authors of the model do not make clear how commitment is combined with competence to form four distinct levels of development (Graeff, 1997; Yukl, 1989). In one of the earliest versions of the model, Hersey and Blanchard (1969b) defined the four levels of commitment (maturity) as unwilling and unable (Level 1), willing and unable (Level 2), unwilling and able (Level 3), and willing and able (Level 4). In a more recent version, represented by the SLII® model, development level is described as high commitment and low competence in D1, low commitment and some competence in D2, variable commitment and high competence in D3, and high commitment and high competence in D4.

The authors of Situational Leadership® do not explain the theoretical basis for these changes in the composition of each of the development levels. Furthermore, they do not explain how competence and commitment are weighted across different development levels. As pointed out by Blanchard et al. (1993), there is a need for further research to establish how competence and commitment are conceptualized for each development level. Closely related to the general criticism of ambiguity about followers' development levels is a concern with how commitment itself is conceptualized in the model. For example, Graeff (1997) suggested the conceptualization is very unclear. Blanchard et al. (2013) stated that followers' commitment is composed of confidence and motivation, but it is not clear how confidence and motivation

combine to define commitment. According to the SLII® model, commitment starts out high in D1, moves down in D2, becomes variable in D3, and rises again in D4. Intuitively, it appears more logical to describe follower commitment as existing on a continuum moving from low to moderate to high.

The argument provided by Blanchard et al. (1993) for how commitment varies in the SLII® model is that followers usually start out motivated and eager to learn, and then they may become discouraged and disillusioned. Next they may begin to lack confidence or motivation, or both, and last they become highly confident and motivated. But why is this so? Why do followers who learn a task become less committed? Why is there a decrease in commitment at Development Levels 2 and 3?

Some clarification of the ambiguity surrounding development levels is suggested by Thompson and Glasø (2015), who studied a sample of 80 supervisors and 357 followers in financial organizations and found that the predictions of the earlier model of situational leadership are more likely to hold true when the leaders' ratings and followers' ratings of competence and commitment are congruent. They stressed the importance of finding mutual agreement between leaders and followers on these ratings.

Without more research findings to substantiate the way follower commitment is conceptualized, this dimension of Situational Leadership® remains unclear.

A fourth criticism of the situational approach has to do with how the model matches leader style with follower development levels—the prescriptions of the model. To determine the validity of the prescriptions suggested by the Hersey and Blanchard approach, Vecchio (1987) conducted a study of more than 300 high school teachers and their principals. He found that newly hired teachers were more satisfied and performed better under principals who had highly structured leadership styles, but that the performance of more experienced and mature teachers was unrelated to the style their principals exhibited.

Vecchio and his colleagues have replicated this study twice: first in 1997, using university employees (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997), and most recently in 2006, studying more than 800 U.S. Military Academy cadets (Vecchio et al., 2006). Both studies failed to find strong evidence to support the basic prescriptions suggested in the situational approach.

To further test the assumptions and validity of the Situational Leadership® model, Thompson and Vecchio (2009) analyzed the original and revised versions of the model using data collected from 357 banking employees and 80 supervisors. They found no clear empirical support for the model in any of its versions. At best, they found some evidence to support leaders being more directive with newer employees, and being more supportive and less directive as employees become more senior. Also, Meirovich and Gu (2015)

found evidence that followers with more experience indicated a more positive response to autonomy and participation, a finding supporting the importance of leaders being less directive with experienced employees.

A fifth criticism of Situational Leadership® is that it fails to account for how certain demographic characteristics (e.g., education, experience, age, and gender) influence the leader–follower prescriptions of the model. For example, a study conducted by Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) showed that level of education and job experience were inversely related to directive leadership and were not related to supportive leadership. In other words, followers with more education and more work experience desired less structure. An interesting finding is that age was positively related to desire for structure: The older followers desired more structure than the younger followers did. In addition, their findings indicated that female and male followers had different preferences for styles of leadership. Female followers expressed a stronger preference for supportive leadership, whereas male followers had a stronger desire for directive leadership. These findings indicate that demographic characteristics may affect followers' preferences for a particular leadership style. However, these characteristics are not considered in the Situational Leadership® approach.

Situational Leadership® can also be criticized from a practical standpoint because it does not fully address the issue of one-to-one versus group leadership in an organizational setting. For example, should a leader with a group of 20 followers lead by matching her or his style to the overall development level of the group or to the development level of individual members of the group? Carew, Parisi-Carew, and Blanchard (1990) suggested that groups go through development stages that are similar to individuals', and that therefore leaders should try to match their styles to the group's development level. However, if the leader matches her or his style to the mean development level of a group, how will this affect the individuals whose development levels are quite different from those of their colleagues? Existing research on Situational Leadership® does not answer this question. More research is needed to explain how leaders can adapt their styles simultaneously to the development levels of individual group members and to the group as a whole.

A final criticism of Situational Leadership® can be directed at the leadership questionnaires that accompany the model. Questionnaires on the situational approach typically ask respondents to analyze various work situations and select the best leadership style for each situation. The questionnaires are constructed to force respondents to describe leadership style in terms of four specific parameters (i.e., directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating) rather than in terms of other leadership behaviors. Because the best answers available to respondents have been predetermined, the questionnaires are biased in favor of Situational Leadership® (Graeff, 1983; Yukl, 1989).

APPLICATION

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, Situational Leadership® is used in consulting because it is an approach that is easy to conceptualize and apply. The straightforward nature of Situational Leadership® makes it practical for managers to use.

The principles of this approach can be applied at many different levels in an organization. They can apply to how a CEO of a large corporation works with a board of directors, and they can also apply to how a crew chief in an assembly plant leads a small group of production workers. Middle managers can use Situational Leadership® to direct staff meetings, and heads of departments can use this approach in planning structural changes within an organization. There is no shortage of opportunities for using Situational Leadership®.

Situational Leadership® applies during the initial stages of a project, when idea formation is important, and during the various subsequent phases of a project, when implementation issues are important. The fluid nature of Situational Leadership® makes it ideal for applying to followers as they move forward or go backward (regress) on various projects. Because Situational Leadership® stresses adapting to followers, it is ideal for use with followers whose commitment and competence change over the course of a project.

Given the breadth of the situational approach, it is applicable in almost any type of organization, at any level, for nearly all types of goals. It is an encompassing model with a wide range of applications.

CASE STUDIES

To see how Situational Leadership® can be applied in different organizational settings, you may want to assess Cases 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3. For each of these cases, ask yourself what you would do if you found yourself in a similar situation. At the end of each case, there are questions that will help you analyze the context from the perspective of Situational Leadership®.

CASE 5.1

Marathon Runners at Different Levels

David Abruzzo is the newly elected president of the Metrocity Striders Track Club (MSTC). One of his duties is to serve as the coach for runners who hope to complete the New York City Marathon. Because David has

(Continued)