

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, Zigarmi, & Nelson, 1993; Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1985; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, 1988), and it has been used extensively in organizational leadership training and development.

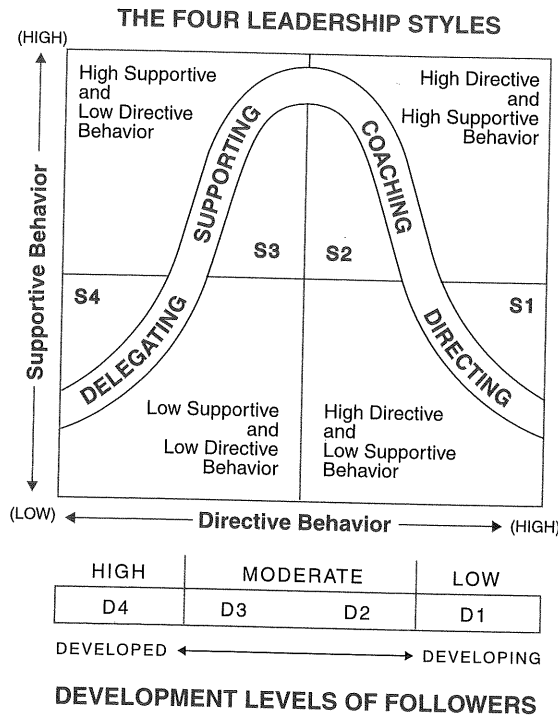
As the name of the approach implies, situational leadership focuses on leadership in situations. The premise of the theory is that different situations demand different kinds of leadership. From this perspective, to be an effective leader requires that a person adapt his or her style to the demands of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

Situational leadership stresses that leadership is composed of both a directive and a supportive dimension, and 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 employees and assess how competent and committed they are to perform a given task. Based on the assumption that employees' 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 subordinates.

In brief, the essence of situational leadership demands that a leader match his or her style to the competence and commitment of the subordinates. Effective leaders are those who can recognize what employees need and then adapt their own style to meet those needs.

The situational approach is illustrated in the model developed by Blanchard (1985) and Blanchard et al. (1985), called the Situational Leadership II (SLII) model (Figure 5.1). The model is an extension and refinement of the original situational leadership model developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969a).

Figure 5.1 Situational Leadership II



SOURCE: From *Leadership and the One Minute Manager: Increasing Effectiveness Through Situational Leadership*, by K. Blanchard, P. Zigarmi, and D. Zigarmi, 1985, New York: William Morrow. Used with permission.

The dynamics of situational leadership are best understood when we separate the SLII model into two parts: *leadership style* and *development level of subordinates*.

Leadership Styles

Leadership style consists of the behavior pattern of a person who attempts to influence others. It includes both *directive (task) behaviors* and *supportive (relationship) behaviors*. Directive behaviors help group members accomplish goals by giving directions, establishing goals and methods of evaluation, setting time lines, 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 (see 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 subordinates 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 subordinates' socioemotional needs. The coaching style requires that the leader involve himself or herself with subordinates by giving encouragement and soliciting subordinate 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.

Style 3 (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 the employees' skills around the task to be accomplished. The supportive style

includes listening, praising, asking for input, and giving feedback. A leader using this style gives subordinates 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 subordinates.

Last, Style 4 (S4) is called the *low supportive–low directive* style, a *delegating* approach. In this approach, the leader offers less task input and social support, facilitating employees' confidence and motivation in reference to the task. The delegative leader lessens his or her involvement in planning, control of details, and goal clarification. After the group agrees on what they are to do, this style lets subordinates take responsibility for getting the job done the way they see fit. A leader using S4 gives control to subordinates and refrains from intervening with unnecessary social support.

The SLII model (see 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 Levels

A second major part of the situational leadership model concerns the development level of subordinates. Development level is the degree to which subordinates have the competence and commitment necessary to accomplish a given task or activity (Blanchard et al., 1985). Stated another way, it indicates whether a person has mastered the skills to do a specific task and whether a person has developed a positive attitude regarding the task (Blanchard et al., 1993). Employees are at a high development level if they are interested and confident in their work and they know how to do the task. Employees are at a low development level if they have little skill for the task at hand but feel as if 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 employees on a given task. They are intended to be task specific and are not intended to be used for the purpose of labeling employees.

On a particular task, employees can be classified into four categories: D1, D2, D3, and D4, from low development to high development. Specifically, D1 employees are low in competence and high in commitment. They are new to a task and do not know exactly how to do it, but they are excited about the challenge of it. D2 employees 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 employees who have moderate to high competence but may lack commitment. They have essentially developed the skills for the job, but they are uncertain as to whether they can accomplish the task by themselves. Finally, D4 employees 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 employees move forward and backward along the developmental continuum, which represents the relative competence and commitment of subordinates. For leaders to be effective, it is essential that they determine where subordinates are on the developmental continuum and adapt their leadership styles so they directly match their style to that development level.

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 is the task that subordinates are being asked to perform? How complex is the task? Are the subordinates sufficiently skilled to accomplish the task? 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 developmental level at which their subordinates are functioning. For example, new employees who are very excited but lack understanding of job requirements would be identified as D1-level employees. Conversely, seasoned workers with proven abilities and great devotion to a company 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 subordinates (D1, D2, etc.) and the leader's style (S1, S2, etc.). For example, if subordinates are at the first level of development, D1, the leader needs to adopt a high directive and low supportive leadership style (S1). If subordinates are more

advanced and at the second development level, D2, the leader needs to adopt a coaching style (S2). For each level of development there is a specific style of leadership that the leader should adopt.

Because subordinates move back and forth along the development continuum, it is imperative for leaders to be flexible in their leadership behavior. Subordinates 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 tasks 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 subordinates and their unique situations. Unlike the trait or contingency approaches, which advocate a fixed style for leaders, the situational approach demands that leaders demonstrate a high degree of flexibility.

STRENGTHS

The situational approach to leadership has several strengths, particularly for practitioners. The first strength is that it has stood the test of time 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 credible model for training people to become effective leaders.

A second strength of situational leadership 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 situational leadership 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 of situational leadership: its 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 subordinates are very low in competence, situational leadership

prescribes a directing style for you as the leader. On the other hand, if your employees appear to be competent but lack confidence, the situational approach suggests that you should lead with a supporting style. These prescriptions provide leaders with a valuable set of guidelines that can facilitate and enhance leadership.

A fourth strength of situational leadership is that it emphasizes leader flexibility (Graeff, 1983; Yukl, 1989). Situational leadership stresses that leaders need to find out about their subordinates' needs and then adapt their style accordingly. Leaders cannot lead using a single style; they must be willing to change their style to meet the requirements of the situation. Situational leadership recognizes that employees act differently when doing different tasks and that they may act differently during different stages of the same task. Effective leaders are those who can change their own style based on the task requirements and the subordinates' needs, even in the middle of a project.

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

CRITICISMS

Despite its extensive use in leadership training and development, situational leadership does have some limitations. The following criticisms point out several weaknesses in situational leadership 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 situational leadership raises questions about the theoretical basis of the approach (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997; Graeff, 1997; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002). Can we be sure it is a valid approach? Is it certain that this approach does

indeed improve performance? Does this approach compare favorably in its impact on subordinates with other leadership approaches? 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 situational leadership concerns the ambiguous conceptualization in the model of subordinates' 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). Yet 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 subordinates' 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. (1985) stated that subordinates' 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 then rises again in D4. Intuitively, it appears more logical to describe subordinate 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 subordinates usually start out motivated and eager to learn, 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 subordinates who learn a task become less committed? Why is there a decrease in commitment at development levels 2 and 3? Without research

findings to substantiate the way subordinate commitment is conceptualized, this dimension of situational leadership remains unclear.

A fourth criticism of situational leadership has to do with how the model matches leader style with subordinate development level—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 the performance of more experienced and mature teachers was unrelated to the style their principals exhibited. In essence, the Vecchio findings suggest that in terms of situational leadership, it is appropriate to match a highly structured S1 style of leadership with immature subordinates, but it is not clear whether it is appropriate to match S2, S3, and S4, respectively, with more mature subordinates. In a replication study using university employees, Fernandez and Vecchio (1997) found similar results. Taken together, these studies fail to support the basic prescriptions suggested in the situational leadership model.

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-subordinate 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 not related to supportive leadership. In other words, employees with more education and more work experience desired less structure. Interestingly, age was positively related to desire for structure: The older employees desired more structure than the younger employees. In addition, their findings indicated that female and male employees had different preferences for styles of leadership. Female employees expressed a stronger preference for supportive leadership, whereas male employees had a stronger desire for directive leadership. These findings indicate that demographic characteristics may affect employees' preferences for a particular leadership style. However, these characteristics are not considered in the situational leadership model.

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 employees 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 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 the group as a whole.

A final criticism of situational leadership can be directed at the leadership questionnaires that accompany the model. Questionnaires on situational leadership typically ask respondents to analyze various work situations and select the best leadership style for each situation. The questionnaires are constructed so as to force respondents to describe leadership style in terms of the specific parameters of situational leadership (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 the 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 chief executive officer (CEO) of a large corporation works with her or his 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 subordinates 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 tasks. 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 Case Studies 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3. For each of the 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

What Style Do I Use?

Bruce Cannon is the owner of a 5-year-old small plastics company that employs about 20 people. The company consists of three areas: engineering, sales, and production. For each of these areas, there is a single manager.

Rick Nakano heads the engineering crew. He is a seasoned engineer and is the oldest employee in the company (he is 55 years old). Rick was hired because of his engineering ability and experience.

Before joining the company, Rick worked for 20 years as an engineer for Ford Motor Company. His coworkers perceive him as very competent, even-tempered, and interested in the company.

Rick has been spending most of his time in recent weeks on developing a long-range plan for the company. His goal is to develop a creative model for making decisions about future expenditures for materials, equipment, plant development, and personnel. Rick feels good about the way upper management has reacted to the first drafts of his plans.

Beth Edwards heads the sales force, which is the smallest unit in the company. Beth is the most recent hire in the company and has 15 years of sales experience in a different product area. Beth's peers see her as highly motivated but not too knowledgeable about the company's products. Beth's goal is to increase the company's annual sales by 30%. However, the first quarter sales figures indicate the rate of growth to be only 2%.

Although Beth has been upbeat since the day she arrived, in recent weeks there have been problems in her department. Her sales staff talks about how little she knows about the plastics industry. In discussions about new products, Beth often is confused. In addition, she has difficulty describing the company's capabilities to customers because she does not understand fully how a plastics company of this type functions.

Steve Lynch is the manager of production and has been with the company since its inception. Steve started out with the company just out of high school, working on the line, and moved up in the company as a result of his hard work. His goal is to streamline production and decrease costs by 10%. He knows production backward and forward but is a bit apprehensive about his new role as production manager. In fact, Steve is afraid he might fail as manager. He does not know whether he is ready to have others depend on him when he has always been the one depending on others. The owner, Bruce, has great faith in Steve and has had several meetings with him to clarify his role and reassure him that he can do the work. He is certain that Steve will be an outstanding production manager.

Bruce Cannon meets weekly with each of his managers to talk about how their group is fitting in with the overall company goals. In his upcoming weekly conference, he wants to discuss with them what new procedures they could implement within their departments to improve their long-term performance. Bruce is wondering how he should approach each of his managers.

Questions

According to the basic assumptions of situational leadership,

1. Where would you place the three managers in regard to levels of development in the SLII model (see Figure 5.1)?
2. If you were Bruce Cannon, would you act the same toward each of the three managers?
3. Which conference will be the hardest for you, and which will be the easiest? Why?

CASE 5.2

Why Aren't They Listening?

Jim Anderson is a training specialist in the human resource department of a large pharmaceutical company. In response to a recent companywide survey, Jim specifically designed a 6-week training program on listening and communication skills for effective management in the company. Jim's goals for the seminar are twofold: for participants to learn new communication behaviors and for participants to enjoy the seminar so they will want to attend future seminars.

The first group to be offered the program was middle-level managers in research and development. This group consisted of about 25 people, nearly all of whom had advanced degrees. Most of this group had attended several in-house training programs in the past, so they had a sense of how the seminar would be designed and run. Because the previous seminars had not always been very productive, many of the managers felt a little disillusioned about coming to the seminar. As one of the managers said, "Here we go again: a fancy in-house training program from which we will gain nothing."

Because Jim recognized that the managers were very experienced, he did not put many restrictions on attendance and participation. He used a variety of presentation methods and actively solicited involvement from the managers in the seminar. Throughout the first two sessions, he went out of his way to be friendly with the group. He gave them frequent coffee breaks during the sessions, and during these breaks he promoted socializing and networking.

During the third session, Jim became aware of some difficulties with the seminar. Rather than the full complement of 25 managers, attendance had dropped to only about 15 managers. Although the starting time was established at 8:30, attendees had been arriving as late as 10:00. During the afternoon sessions, some of the managers were leaving the sessions to return to their offices at the company.

As he approached the fourth session, Jim was apprehensive about why things had been going poorly. He had become quite uncertain about how he should approach the group. Many questions were running through his mind. Had he treated the managers in the wrong way? Had he been too easy regarding attendance at the sessions? Should he have said something about the managers skipping out in the afternoon? Weren't the participants taking the seminar seriously? Jim was certain that the content of the seminars was innovative and substantive, but he could not figure out

what he could change to make the program more successful. He sensed that his style was not working for this group, but he didn't have a clue as to how he should change what he was doing to make the sessions better.

Questions

According to the SLII model (see Figure 5.1),

1. What style of leadership is Jim Anderson using to run the seminars?
2. At what level are the managers?
3. From a leadership perspective, what is Jim doing wrong?
4. What specific changes could Jim implement to improve the seminars?

CASE 5.3

Getting the Message Across

Ann Caldera is the program director of a college campus radio station (WCBA) that is supported by the university. WCBA has a long history and is seen favorably by students, faculty, the board of trustees, and the people in the community.

Ann does not have a problem getting students to work at WCBA. In fact, it is one of the most sought-after university-related activities. The few students who are accepted to work at WCBA are always highly motivated because they value the opportunity to get hands-on media experience. In addition, those who are accepted tend to be highly confident (sometimes naively so) of their own radio ability. Despite their eagerness, most of them lack a full understanding of the legal responsibilities of being on the air.

One of the biggest problems that confronts Ann every semester is how to train new students to follow the rules and procedures of WCBA when they are doing on-air announcing for news, sports, music, and other radio

programs. It seems as if every semester numerous incidents arise in which an announcer violates in no small way the FCC rules for appropriate air-time communication. For example, rumor has it that one year a first-year student disc jockey on the evening shift announced that a new band was playing in town, the cover was five dollars, and everyone should go to hear the group. Making an announcement such as this is a clear violation of FCC rules; it is illegal.

Ann is frustrated with her predicament but cannot seem to figure out why it keeps occurring. She puts a lot of time and effort into helping new DJs, but they just do not seem to get the message that working at WCBA is a serious job and obeying the FCC rules is an absolute necessity. Ann is wondering whether her leadership style is missing the mark.

Each semester, Ann gives the students a very complete handout on policies and procedures. In addition, she tries to get to know each of the new students personally. Because she wants everybody to be happy at WCBA, she tries very hard to build a relational climate at the station. Repeatedly, students say that Ann is the nicest adviser on campus. Because she recognizes the quality of her students, Ann lets them do mostly what they want at the station.

Questions

1. What's the problem at WCBA?
2. Using SLII as a basis, what would you advise Ann to do differently at the station?
3. Based on situational leadership, what creative schemes could she use to reduce FCC infractions at WCBA?

LEADERSHIP INSTRUMENT

Although different versions of instruments have been developed to measure situational leadership, nearly all of them are constructed similarly. As a rule, the questionnaires provide 12 to 20 work-related situations and ask respondents to select their preferred style for each situation from four alternatives. The situations and styles are written so as to directly represent the leadership

styles of the four quadrants in the model. Questionnaire responses are scored so as to give respondents information about their primary and secondary leadership styles, their flexibility, and their leadership effectiveness.

The Brief Questionnaire provided in this section illustrates how leadership style is measured in questionnaires of situational leadership. For each situation on the questionnaire, you have to identify the development level of the employees in the situation and then select one of the four response alternatives that indicate the style of leadership you would use in that situation.

Expanded versions of the Brief Questionnaire give respondents an overall profile of their leadership style. By analyzing the alternative choices a respondent makes on the questionnaire, one can determine his or her primary and secondary leadership styles. By analyzing the range of choices a respondent makes, one can determine her or his leadership flexibility. Leadership effectiveness and diagnostic ability can be measured by analyzing the number of times the respondent made accurate assessments of a preferred leadership style.

In addition to these self-scored questionnaires, situational leadership uses similar forms to tap the concurrent perceptions that bosses, associates, and followers have of a person's leadership style. These questionnaires give respondents a wide range of feedback on their leadership styles and the opportunity to compare their own views of leadership with the way others view them in a leadership role.

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A BRIEF QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Look at the following four leadership situations and indicate what the development level is in each situation, which leadership style each response represents, and which leadership style is needed in the situation (action A, B, C, or D?).

Situation 1

Because of budget restrictions imposed on your department, it is necessary to consolidate. You are thinking of asking a highly capable and experienced member of your department to take charge of the consolidation. This person has worked in all areas of your department and has the trust and respect of most of the staff. She is very willing to help with the consolidation.

- A. Assign the project to her and let her determine how to accomplish it.
- B. Assign the task to her, indicate to her precisely what must be done, and supervise her work closely.
- C. Assign the task to her and provide support and encouragement as needed.
- D. Assign the task to her and indicate to her precisely what needs to be done but make sure you incorporate her suggestions.

Development level _____ Action _____

Situation 2

You have recently been made a department head of the new regional office. In getting to know your departmental staff, you have noticed that one of your inexperienced employees is not following through on assigned tasks. She is enthusiastic about her new job and wants to get ahead in the organization.

- A. Discuss the lack of follow-through with her and explore the alternative ways this problem can be solved.
- B. Specify what she must do to complete the tasks but incorporate any suggestions she may have.
- C. Define the steps necessary to complete the assigned tasks and monitor her performance frequently.
- D. Let her know about the lack of follow-through and give her more time to improve her performance.

Development level _____ Action _____

Situation 3

Because of a new and very important unit project, for the past 3 months you have made sure that your staff members understood their responsibilities and expected level of performance, and you have supervised them closely. Due to some project setbacks recently, your staff has become somewhat discouraged. Their morale has dropped, and so has their performance.

- A. Continue to direct and closely supervise their performance.
- B. Give the group members more time to overcome the setbacks but occasionally check their progress.
- C. Continue to define group activities but involve the group members more in decision making and incorporate their ideas.
- D. Participate in their problem-solving activities and encourage and support their efforts to overcome the project setbacks.

Development level _____ Action _____

Situation 4

As a director of the sales department, you have asked a member of your staff to take charge of a new sales campaign. You have worked with this person on other sales campaigns, and you know he has the job knowledge and experience to be successful at new assignments. However, he seems a little unsure about his ability to do the job.

- A. Assign the new sales campaign to him and let him function on his own.
- B. Set goals and objectives for this new assignment but consider his suggestions and involve him in decision making.
- C. Listen to his concerns but assure him he can do the job and support his efforts.
- D. Tell him exactly what the new campaign involves and what you expect of him, and supervise his performance closely.

Development level _____ Action _____

SOURCE: Adapted from *Game Plan for Leadership and the One Minute Manager* (Figure 5.20, Learning Activity, p. 5), by K. Blanchard, P. Zigarmi, and D. Zigarmi, 1992, Escondido, CA: Blanchard Training and Development (phone 760-489-5005). Used with permission.

Scoring Interpretation

A brief discussion of the correct answers to the Brief Questionnaire will help to explain the nature of situational leadership questionnaires.

Situation 1 in the Brief Questionnaire describes a common problem faced by organizations during downsizing: having to consolidate. In this particular situation, the leader has identified a person to direct the downsizing project who appears to be highly competent, experienced, and motivated. According to the SLII model, this person is at developmental level 4, which calls for a delegative approach. Of the four response alternatives, it is the (A) response, "Assign the project to her and let her determine how to accomplish it," that best represents delegating (S4): low supportive and low directive leadership.

Situation 2 describes a problem familiar to leaders at all levels in nearly all organizations: lack of follow-through by an enthusiastic employee. In the given example, the employee falls in developmental level 1 because she lacks the experience to do the job even though she is highly motivated to succeed. The SLII approach prescribes directing (S1) leadership for this type of employee. She needs to be told when and how to do her specific job. After she is given directions, her performance should be supervised closely. The correct response is (C), "Define the steps necessary to complete the assigned tasks and monitor her performance frequently."

Situation 3 describes a very different circumstance. In this situation, the employees seem to have developed some experience and an understanding of what is required of them, but they have lost some of their motivation to complete the task. Their performance and commitment have stalled because of recent setbacks, even though the leader has been directing them closely. According to SLII, the correct response for the leader is to shift to a more supportive coaching style (S2) of leadership. The action response that reflects coaching is (C), "Continue to define group activities but involve the group members more in decision making and incorporate their ideas."

Situation 4 describes some of the concerns that arise for a director attempting to identify the correct person to head a new sales campaign. The person identified for the position obviously has the skills necessary to do a good job with the new sales campaign, but he appears apprehensive about his own abilities. In this context, SLII suggests that the director should use a supportive style (S3), which is consistent with leading employees who are competent but lacking a certain degree of confidence. A supportive style is represented by action response (C), "Listen to his concerns but assure him he can do the job and support his efforts."

Now select two employees. Diagnose their current development level on three different tasks and your style of leadership in each situation. Is there a

match? If not, what specifically can you do for them as a leader to ensure that they have what they need to succeed?

SUMMARY

Situational leadership is a prescriptive approach to leadership that suggests how leaders can become effective in many different types of organizational settings involving a wide variety of organizational tasks. This approach provides a model that suggests to leaders how they should behave based on the demands of a particular situation.

Situational leadership classifies leadership into four styles: S1 is high directive–low supportive, S2 is high directive–high supportive, S3 is low directive–high supportive, and S4 is low directive–low supportive. The situational leadership (SLII) model describes how each of the four leadership styles applies to subordinates who work at different levels of development, from D1 (low in competence and high in commitment), to D2 (moderately competent and low in commitment), to D3 (moderately competent but lacking commitment), to D4 (great deal of competence and a high degree of commitment).

Effective leadership occurs when the leader can accurately diagnose the development level of subordinates in a task situation and then exhibit the prescribed leadership style that matches that situation.

Leadership is measured in this approach through the use of questionnaires that ask respondents to assess a series of work-related situations. The questionnaires provide information about the leader's diagnostic ability, flexibility, and effectiveness. They are useful in helping leaders to learn about how they can change their leadership style to become more effective across different situations.

There are four major strengths to the situational approach. First, it is recognized by many as a standard for training leaders. Second, it is a practical approach that is easily understood and easily applied. Third, this approach sets forth a clear set of prescriptions for how leaders should act if they want to enhance their leadership effectiveness. Fourth, situational leadership recognizes and stresses that there is not one best style of leadership; instead,

leaders need to be flexible and adapt their style to the requirements of the situation.

Criticisms of situational leadership suggest that it also has limitations. Unlike many other leadership theories, this approach does not have a strong body of research findings to justify and support the theoretical underpinnings on which it stands. As a result, there is ambiguity regarding how the approach conceptualizes certain aspects of leadership. It is not clear in explaining how subordinates move from low development levels to high development levels, nor is it clear on how commitment changes over time for subordinates. Without the basic research findings, the validity of the basic prescriptions for matching leader styles to subordinates' development levels must be questioned. Also, the model does not address how demographic characteristics affect employees' preferences for leadership. Finally, the model does not provide guidelines for how leaders can use this approach in group settings, as opposed to one-to-one contexts.

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Contingency Theory

DESCRIPTION

Although several approaches to leadership could be called contingency theories, the most widely recognized is Fiedler's (1964, 1967; Fiedler & Garcia, 1987) contingency theory. Contingency theory is a *leader-match* theory (Fiedler & Chemers, 1974), which means it tries to match leaders to appropriate situations. It is called *contingency* because it suggests that a leader's effectiveness depends on how well the leader's style fits the context. To understand the performance of leaders, it is essential to understand the situations in which they lead. Effective leadership is *contingent* on matching a leader's style to the right setting.

Fiedler developed contingency theory by studying the styles of many different leaders who worked in different contexts, primarily military organizations. He assessed leaders' styles, the situations in which they worked, and whether they were effective. After analyzing the styles of hundreds of leaders who were both good and bad, Fiedler and his colleagues were able to make empirically grounded generalizations about which styles of leadership were best and which styles were worst for a given organizational context.

In short, contingency theory is concerned with *styles* and *situations*. It provides the framework for effectively matching the leader and the situation.