

Leadership is not a command to follow, but an invitation to move forward together.

Leadership is the art and science of inspiring and enabling others to accomplish shared dreams. Many leadership theories were developed and studied during the last century, but no single approach to leadership has been identified as the best method for all situations. The fundamentals of leadership, motivating and directing a group to achieve a common goal, have changed very little over time; but the context of leadership, the complexity of, and diversity within organizations, and societal values, have each evolved greatly over the last one hundred years. Due to innate flexibility, the strengths of Situational Leadership far outweigh the theory's shortcomings. Situational leadership is applicable at both micro and macro scales, appropriate for simple or complex tasks and adaptable for followers of all developmental levels (Thomas and Bainbridge). Leadership is contextual and Situational Leadership Theory is timeless because it addresses both the changing complexity of the tasks, and the changing abilities of the followers, as they move together toward goal attainment. I believe that *Situational Leadership* is best suited to the practice of College Student Affairs and best describes my primary personal leadership style. Leadership is a dynamic process that must realistically address both the dreamers and their dream.

A Brief Overview of The Theory

Hersey and Blanchard developed their situational leadership approach in 1969, based on Reddin's 3-D management style theory (Northouse). The primary responsibility of the situational leader is to adapt their own leadership style to meet the team member's needs for varied amounts task direction and personal encouragement based on the individual's readiness to complete a particular assignment. This includes accurately diagnosing both the skill and willingness level of an individual or group, and prescribing chores that appropriately balance the

follower's competency and commitment to complete the assignment. Although Situational Leadership is represented graphically by a four-square matrix with distinct phases, there is endless movement, in both directions, along the continuum from being unskilled and unwilling to being very skilled and very willing, with various combinations along the way. A situational leader needs to continually balance the amount of direction given with building relationships, because people's skills and motivations change over time. The leader must attempt to balance high technology and high touch in these dynamic times (Schermerhorn). Leaders must have passion, be honest, communicate clearly and have good judgment; Situational Leadership also requires the flexibility to quickly adapt to changing scenarios, characters and circumstances.

Theory into Practice – The Strengths of Situational Leadership

The primary strengths of situational leadership are that it is directive and flexible in nature, in that the model tells the leader what to do given different situations. Understanding who can, and will, do what, is critical to leadership. Leadership implies change, and Situational Leadership is based on adaptation to change. External and internal pressures cause people, groups and goals to change, and good situational leaders are capable of quickly responding to all kinds of change. Situational Leadership is clearly defined, easy to apply and logical. For instance, the newest team member is likely have great enthusiasm for the project, but may not have perfected the skills required for their first task. This individual would need more direction than motivation in the beginning. As that individual mastered the task, much less direction would be required, but more motivation might be required to stave of boredom as the task became repetitive and unchallenging. At that juncture, the leader would need to reassess the new task/relationship balance and adapt the amount of direction and support required for the new

situation. Situational Leadership is prescriptive, yet flexible by guiding the leader in balancing the amount of direction versus support a follower needs depending on their ability and desire.

Situational leadership recognizes and values differences among team members, plays to the individual's strengths and nurtures and works to develop their weak areas. The diversity of the twenty-first century requires adaptation of last century's methods and situational leadership builds on the individual traits of the follower. Rather than representing problems, gender, age, cultural origin, socioeconomic background, and sexual identity are merely components that help create the whole individual that is assessed for task and behavior readiness in the situational leadership model. This diversity enriches and strengthens the team. Additionally, this model requires leader to be involved and knowledgeable with both the production and personnel aspects of the process in order to accurately adapt their own behavior. I think of this as leading from within as opposed to leading from above. A leader needs to be connected to the goal, as well as to those seeking the goal, and situational leadership validates that connection (Hersey & Blanchard).

Situational Leadership has endured a moderate test of time. It has been applied in both large and small populations, in business, military, educational and family settings for over four decades. It is both generally well accepted in a variety of venues and is also frequently utilized as a leadership training tool in corporations, industry and in educational institutions with positive results (Northouse). The circumstantial nature of the model requires that the leader adapt their own behavior each time the situation changes. Each time the relationship between the follower and the task changes, the situational model allows the leader to reframe their actions to meet new parameters. In reapplying the model in successive approximations, the leader can reassess the degree of direction and support the followers need throughout the continuum from goal inception to goal attainment.

Theory into Practice – The Shortcomings of Situational Leadership

Situational Leadership requires incredible judgment based on task knowledge and human assessment. Not everyone has the vision, character, perception, strength, tenacity, luck, or constituent buy-in, to lead in every situation, despite their traits, skills, or style. Misdiagnosing either the follower's ability or willingness to complete a task can disrupt the team's progression and undermine the follower's self-esteem. Both underestimating and overstating the team's abilities are detrimental to goal attainment. The misdiagnosis of the readiness and commitment of multiple team members could quickly lead to project failure. A strong situational leader would need to be well educated in cognitive and psychosocial development theory, alert to differences among people due to the influences of gender, age, cultural and racial identity and of the social parameters that cause change.

Situational Leadership Theory requires the leader be closely familiar with the intellectual and development level of those being lead. The model does not address important details like the complex factors effecting motivation. The model does not include tools for the leader to diagnose a group's task ability or communal willingness. It is much harder, or impossible, for a leader to really know all the members of larger the groups and consequently diagnosis and prescriptions for the followers behavior are based on less, or no, personal information. That is why I believe that situational leadership is better suited to small groups, or for small groups within a larger organization with a single cohesive goal. Truly understanding the abilities and motivations of the team are vital to and a major limitation to this theory.

Situational Leadership has been applied in various workplaces, on a variety of followers, by an assortment of leaders, with varying success. However, little formal research has been conducted on the effectiveness of situational leadership and some studies refute the

task/relationship pairings in the Situational Leadership quadrangle. In a study of 300 high school principals and new teachers, Vecchio found that some followers preferred a strong leadership style despite their task readiness. A later study, also by Vecchio, found that followers with more education and experience desired less structure regardless of the leader's supportive behavior (Northouse). A last criticism related to the research on situational leadership concerns the bias inherent in the leadership questionnaires that support the theory. The close-ended questions limit the respondent to choosing answers that support the theory. Despite these shortcomings, Situational Leadership is a valuable tool when used appropriately.

Situational Leadership in the context of Student Affairs

Universities are populated by people with diverse thoughts, cultural backgrounds, intellectual abilities, passions, opportunities and expectations. Universities are also split into subdivisions with purposes and goals that support the overall mission of the institution. Since situational leadership builds on the strengths, and strives to educate weaknesses of followers, it is very compatible with the workings of higher education. The most successful Student Affairs practitioners are in tune with the both the psychosocial and intellectual development of students which enables them to use situational leadership to lead students toward their goals. College students are immersed in an environment that promotes rapid growth and the flexibility of situational leadership allows for leaders to adapt their style to meet the ever changing abilities and needs of individual students. The university is a place where diversity is seen as a resource not a hurdle, where innovation comes from the youngsters, as well as from the elders, where challenge is the impetus for growth not failure, and situational leadership can provide the road map for the tiniest of steps or for giant leaps toward goal attainment.

Situational leadership teaches the leader to transform to match the needs of the team which means the leader's development is nurtured by the follower's growth. Although student services workers frequently do the same tasks over and over again, each situation is slightly different, each student is unique, and situational leadership directs how to balance leadership style with the circumstances. Situational leadership is also an adaptable tool for students to use in governing themselves and campus leaders can easily train their followers to lead. The fluid character of this theory fits the dynamic nature of the collegiate population, both the student-body and the administration. Situational leadership can direct leaders and followers to transition from insecure to confident and from unknowing to informed, empowering both parties.

Conclusion

In researching this paper, I realized that situational leadership has always been a part of my life. I believe that most parenting could be considered situational leadership because it is characterized by constantly having to identify the correct balance between educating and supporting, with frequent reassessments as new tasks emerge causing shifts in ability and willingness. The cycle of educating, nurturing, and observing results and then regrouping has likely been used by parents throughout the ages. I lead my parents, husband, and children, based on the situation. I lead my Chancellor and the youngest freshmen in a situational style with equal success, as the model forces me to adapt my behavior to the needs of others. In retrospect, most of my major leadership accomplishments were born of the situational leadership style, long before I was formally introduced to this model. I am a teacher and a nurturer, consequently situational leadership frequently assists me in attaining my goals.

Situational leadership calls for the leader to modify their leadership style to fit the tasks required for goal attainment to the abilities of the individuals comprising the group. While

personal traits, charisma, intellect, skill, and style all play a part in leadership; I believe that situational leadership can be applied in most circumstances because it is simple to understand and flexible in application. Some leadership roles are designated due to organizational structure and some spontaneously emerge as the result of circumstance, but in either case, successful leaders inspire and direct ordinary people in achieving extraordinary goals. By using group values to motivate individual actions, in turning stumbling blocks into stepping stones, and transforming dreams into realities, great leaders identify and build on their follower's strengths. I believe that great leaders adapt their own behavior to meet the needs and abilities of their team, adjust their methods to match evolving circumstances and share both the power and rewards of the process. Leadership is a relationship that requires unmitigated trust and unbridled passion, situational leadership theory provides the direction and support required for individuals and groups to attain their goals.

References:

Hersey, Paul and Kenneth H. Blanchard. Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing human resources. New Jersey. Prentice-Hall. 1993.

Northouse, Peter G. Leadership: Theory and practice. Third edition. California. SAGE Publications. 2004.

Schermerhorn, John R. *Situational Leadership: Conversations with Paul Hersey*. A pamphlet prepared by The Center for Leadership Studies. 2001.

Thomas, Donald and William L. Bainbridge. *Sharing the Glory*. Leadership. Volume 31, Number 3, Pages 12-15, January 2002.