An Examination of the Situational Leadership Approach: Strengths and Weaknesses

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Abstract: This present paper examines the situational leadership approach as one of the styles that leaders and managers of organisations can use. Leaders are a key human resource in any organisation. We generally think of companies competing by means of their products, but they probably compete more by means of their leaders than their products. Better leaders develop better employees and the two together develop better products. To get things done by people, management must supply leadership the team for work accomplishment through leadership. Secondly, leadership aids authority. There are limits to the use of authority in obtaining high performance amongst subordinates. Authority alone cannot generate a favourable attitude for improved performance. Because of its main reliance on influence, leadership is essential for obtaining successful work accomplishment. Thirdly, if management fails to provide able leadership, informal leadership will develop which will eventually regulate the behaviour of the employees and may come into conflict with managerial leadership. Good leadership uses various approaches in order to steer the organisation to greater heights. The situational is one of those approaches which every leader or manager should be aware of.

Keywords: Examination, leadership, organisation, styles, situational

INTRODUCTION

One of the more widely recognised approaches to leadership is the situational approach, which was developed by Hersey and Blanchard [1] based on Reddin’s [2] 3-D management style theory. The situational approach has been refined and revised several times since its inception [3-6] and it has been used extensively in organisational 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 [7]. 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 [7].

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 recognise what employees need and then adapt their own style to meet those needs.

The situational approach is illustrated in the model developed by Blanchard [8] and Blanchard et al. [4] called the Situational Leadership II (SLII) model. The model is an extension and refinement of the original situational leadership model developed by Hersey and Blanchard [9].

Situational Leadership II
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 behaviour pattern of a person who attempts to influence others. It includes both directive (task) behaviours and supportive (relationship) behaviours. Directive behaviours 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 behaviours 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 behaviours help group members feel comfortable about themselves, their co-workers, and the situation. Supportive behaviours involve two-way communication and responses that show social and emotional support to others. Examples of supportive behaviours include asking for input, solving problems, praising, sharing information about oneself and listening. Supportive behaviours are mostly job related.

Leadership styles can be classified further into four distinct categories of directive and supportive behaviours. 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 behaviours. 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’ socio-emotional needs. The coaching style requires that the leader involve him or her 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 behaviours 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 illustrates how directive and supportive leadership behaviours combine for each of the four different leadership styles. As shown by the arrows on the bottom and left side of the model, directive behaviours are high in the S1 and S2 quadrants and low in S3 and S4, whereas supportive behaviours 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 [3]. 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 [19]. 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 labelling 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 [7].

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 proves 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 SL11 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 behaviour. Subordinates may move from one development level to
Another rather quickly over a short period (e.g. day or a week) or more slowly on tasks that proceed over much longer periods of time (e.g. 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 organisations. 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 behaviour (e.g. the decision-making approach in Vroom and Yetton, [10]), 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 easily 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 not do in various context. 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 emphasises leader flexibility [11,12]. Situational leadership stresses that leader 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 recognises 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 [13, 14]. Overall, this approach underscores that subordinates have unique needs and deserve our help in trying to become better at doing their work.

**Weaknesses**

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 [13, 11, 15]. Can we be sure it is a valid approach? Is it certain that this approach does indeed improve performance? Does this approach compare favourably in its impact on subordinates with other leadership approaches? It is difficult to give firm answers to these 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 conceptualisation in the mode 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 [16, 12]. In one of the earliest versions of the model, Hersey and Blanchard [9] 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 SL11 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., [3], there is a need for further research to establish how competence...
and commitment are conceptualised for each development level. Closely related to the general criticism of ambiguity about subordinates’ development levels is a concern with how commitment itself is conceptualised in the model. For example, Graeff [16] suggested the conceptualisation is very unclear. Blanchard et al. [4] 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 SL11 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., [3] for how commitment varies in the SL11 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 commitment is conceptualised, this dimensions 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 [17] 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 [13] 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 [15] 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. 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 criticised from a practical stand point because it does not fully address the issue of one to one versus group leadership in an organisational 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 [18] 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 analyse 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 behaviours. Because the best answers available to respondents have been predetermined, the questionnaires are biased in favour of situational leadership [11, 12].

CONCLUSIONS

The straight-forward 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 organisation. 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 or 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 organisation. 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 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 organisation, at any level, for nearly all types of tasks. It is an encompassing model with a wide range of applications.

REFERENCES