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Developing a leadership style using the situational leadership model

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Abstract

Leadership is a key component in organizations. Successful organizations have one major attribute that sets them apart from unsuccessful organizations: dynamic and effective leadership (Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982). This paper will explore situational leadership as a way for principals to manage their personnel in an effective and successful manner.

DEVELOPING A LEADERSHIP STYLE USING

THE SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP MODEL

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by

Jon Nordaas

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Leadership is a key component in organizations. Successful organizations have one major attribute that sets them apart from unsuccessful organizations: dynamic and effective leadership (Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982). This paper will explore situational leadership as a way for principals to manage their personnel in an effective and successful manner.

Blanchard, Zigarmi & Zigarmi (1987) define leadership as working with and through people to accomplish a particular organizational goal. Niehouse (1988), expanding on this definition, stating leadership is a strategic skill that attempts to influence the behavior of one or more persons toward reaching a goal or accomplishing a task. It is strategic because how one influences varies according to the situation, and skill because it can be learned and applied.

There are a number of leadership styles available to principals. Conrath (1987) describes in table format the following styles: permissive, non-directive, authoritative, paternal/maternal, and authoritarian. James (1985) detailed theory X and theory Y, managerial grid, management by objectives, shopping list, transforming leadership and intention management.

These styles lean toward using one specific style to lead. In contrast, Thomas and Ogletree (1986) indicate, based on their research, that leadership does not occur in a vacuum but at a particular time and place and under a particular set of circumstances. Therefore, the situation determines to some degree the kinds of leadership skills and behaviors that may be required. Different leadership practices seem appropriate for different situations. In some situations you may use one of the above styles or a couple of styles in combination and under a different situation a completely different make up may result in the most effective leadership. The usefulness of one style as opposed to another depends upon several factors. These include the situation in which the particular style of leadership is to be employed and the ability of individual leaders to work comfortably through the use of a specific style. Periodically, leaders will use techniques characteristic of each of the various styles (Flood, 1985).

McMurray and Bentley (1986) describe the evolution from the "one best way" types of leadership approaches to the current situational approach.

Initial studies of leadership began with trait theory--an attempt to define leadership by a study of characteristics of leaders. These were abandoned as studies of leadership behavior became emphasized.

The current approaches have broken away from a straight line continuum of either-or style to looking at leadership in two dimensions of task-orientation and relations-orientation on the leadership continuum. Current theories of leadership are similar in one respect. They assume that leaders bring to the leadership situation varying amounts of the traditional leadership dimensions of concern for task (getting the job done) and concern for relationships (taking care of workers' needs) (Toppins, 1986).

Early studies at the University of Michigan (McMurray and Bentley, 1986) identified two concepts called "employee orientation" and "production orientation," designations that parallel the task and relations dimensions. A few years later Ohio State (McMurray and Bentley, 1986) studies categorized leaders' behavior along with the two dimensions of initiation structure (task) and consideration (relations). These studies for the first time described leader behavior on two separate axes, rather than on a single continuum. The Ohio State studies

found that task and relationship behavior were separate dimensions and not mutually exclusive.

A study done by Halpin (1959) suggested that task behavior consisted of the leader delineating the relationship between himself and his followers, defining patterns of organization and communication, and establishing methods of procedures. Relationship behavior referred to friendship, trust, respect, and warmth in the relationships between leader and subordinate. Blake and Mouton (1964) expanded the production (task) and concern for people (relationship) dimensions into a grid containing four quadrants. The horizontal axis represented task, while the vertical axis represented relationship with a 9,9 combination being their ideal style.

The next studies added the idea of situational or contingency leadership to the dimensions of task and relationship (Fiedler, 1967). Fiedler identified three important considerations as variables affecting whether task or relationship behavior was more appropriate for a given situation: leader-follower personal relations, task structure, and position power of the leader.

Hersey and Blanchard (1976) took the situational aspect of leadership into consideration and developed the most noted model on situational leadership theory by adding maturity of the people along with task and relationship dimensions. Hersey and Blanchard (1982a) made the following distinction between situational theory and the managerial grid: the grid identifies appropriate attitudes and values, high concern for production and high concern for people, while situational leadership helps managers determine the various behaviors they can use to make effective changes in their environment.

Hersey and Blanchard (1982b) have done extensive research on situational leadership. Through this research they have refined other researchers' views that leadership style is not an either-or approach but that the style to be employed depends on the situation. This is in agreement with current researchers. Effectiveness of a leadership style will depend upon the situation in which it is being applied (Hambleton and Gumpert, 1982). The trick to being an effective leader always has been to recognize the right approach for the right situation (Orton, 1984).

Organizational theorists have for a long time documented the dependency of task and relationship as determinants of a leader's style. Task behavior is organizing and defining the roles of followers and explaining what, when, where, and how tasks are to be accomplished while relationship behavior deals with socio-emotional support, psychological strokes, and other facilitating behaviors that a leader gives to followers (Hersey and Blanchard, 1976). One-way communication is appropriate when task is involved while two-way communication is more appropriate when dealing with relationship behaviors (Hambleton and Gumpert, 1982).

Hersey and Blanchard (1976) took task and relationship behaviors identified by previous organizational theorists and developed a grid model to compare level of task behavior (providing direction) and relationship behavior (providing support) in order to choose a leadership style to accomplish the goal of the organization. Level of task behavior is determined on the horizontal axis while the level of relationship behavior is determined on the vertical axis. Each axis is rated on a continuum from low to high with the model containing four grids. Each grid

contains a mixture of task behavior and relationship behavior. In order to accomplish the goal of the organization the leader would vary the amount of task to relationship behavior depending in which grid of the model the situation appeared. A leader would use high task and low relationship in grid one, high task and high relationship in grid two, high relationship and low task in grid three, and low relationship and low task in grid four.

The importance of the situation is not solely dependent upon the task, but depends on the people available for the leader to work with on a specific task (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1978). This is an area where Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Model differs from other organizational theorists who preceded them. The situational model adds the maturity level of the followers as an extra factor along with task and relationship when determining which leadership approach would work best to accomplish a goal (Gates, Blanchard and Hersey, 1976).

On the situational model, maturity of the follower is identified on a continuum from high to low and is placed directly below the horizontal continuum which identifies degree of task behavior. Once the

maturity level of the follower or group of followers is determined the proper degree of task and relationship behavior used by a leader can be determined. The important concept is that the maturity level of followers is not the same for each situation. Maturity can only be considered in relation to a specific task to be completed (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1978). Maturity level is the deciding factor in determining the relative balance between task and relationship behavior of the leader (McMurray and Bentley, 1986). In determining the maturity level Walter, Caldwell and Marshall (1980), identified three components: the ability to set high but attainable goals, the willingness to accept responsibility and sufficient experience or education. McMurray and Bentley (1986) added dependability of the followers and the personal chemistry between the follower and the leader as factors determining the maturity level to be applied to the situational task being performed. An effective leader is one who accurately assesses the group's maturity and adapts his/her leader behavior accordingly, rather than workers changing (Walter, Caldwell and Marshall, 1980).

Before the model could be used, a bell-shaped curve was superimposed over the grid. This curve helped in determining which mixture of task and relationship behavior should be used after determining the maturity level of the follower.

When using the model, the first step is to determine what you want accomplished through your followers. The second step is to determine the maturity level of the follower. Thirdly, from that point on the maturity continuum, draw a perpendicular line up into the grid. The point where the perpendicular line intersects the bell-shaped curve will place you in one of the four grids determining the amount of task and relationship behavior to use. Hersey and Blanchard (1976) identified four situational leadership styles; S1 for the grid that has high task/low relationship, S2 for the grid that has high task/high relationship, S3 for the grid that has high relationship/low task, and S4 for the grid that has low relationship/low task. There is also a direct link between the leadership styles and the levels of maturity. The S1 style goes with M1 (low) maturity, as does the S2 and M2, S3 and M3 and the S4 and M4 (high) maturity.

Each of these styles is further labeled. S1 is referred to as "telling" because it is characterized by one-way communication in which the leader defines roles of followers and tells them what, how, when, and where to do various tasks. S2 is referred to as "selling" because most of the direction is still provided by the leader. He or she also attempts through two-way communication and socio-emotional support to get the followers to buy psychologically into decisions that have to be made. S3 is referred to as "participating" because the leader and followers share in decision making through two-way communication and a great deal of facilitating behavior for the leader since the followers have the ability and knowledge to do the task. S4 is referred to as "delegating" because it involves letting followers "run their own show." The leader delegates since the followers are high in maturity, being both willing and able to take responsibility for directing their own behavior.

Leaders use power as a way of gaining compliance from followers. It is the followers' perception of a leader's power that induces compliance or influences behavior, not the leader's perception (Hersey,

Blanchard and Natemeyer, 1979). Therefore, the success of a leader's power base is determined by the situational maturity of the followers with different power bases working better at different maturity levels. Seven power bases correspond to maturity levels.

Coercive power is based on fear. People at low levels of maturity (M1), seem to be influenced by penalties. Coercive power can be motivating to someone in the "telling" stage of the situational model.

Connection power is based on the leader's "connections" with influential or important persons inside or outside the organization. This power base overlaps M1 and M2 maturity and can be used in the "telling" and "selling" leadership styles.

Reward power is based on the leader's ability to provide rewards for other people. The "selling" style is often benefited by this power base since individuals at this stage are willing to try new behaviors for rewards.

Legitimate power is based on the position held by the leader. This is appropriate for "selling" and "participating" styles at levels M2 and M3. At this

level, followers perceive the power of the leader as legitimate.

Referent power is based on the leader's personal traits. "Participating" style may be affected at the M3 level. This power base can provide confidence, encouragement, and recognition, and followers will generally respond in a positive way because they like, admire, or identify with the leader.

Information power is based on the leader's possession of information that is perceived as valuable to others. "Participating" and "delegating" styles at M3 and M4 are affected because followers look to the leader for information to maintain or improve performance.

Expert power is based on the leader's possession of expertise, skill, and knowledge. A leader with this power can facilitate the work behavior of others. It works with the "delegating" style and high maturity (M4).

The seven power bases are potentially available to any leader but there are differences in the power that leaders actually have. These differences can be due to the organization, the position held within the organization and individual differences between leaders.

While it is a major function of leaders to identify the maturity level of their followers, an even more important function as far as the organization is concerned is to manage the maturity level. As followers progress through the leadership curve from S1 to S4, leaders must continually monitor the individuals because not all will progress at the same rate. It is a slow and evolutionary process and any time a follower encounters a new challenge there will be a regression in task maturity and the leader needs to be aware of this and alter his/her leadership style accordingly (Hersey and Blanchard, 1976).

There is a definite and significant relationship between the leadership style of a leader in a particular situation and a leader's perception of subordinate job performance (Hambleton and Gumpert, 1982). But, Blanchard, Zigarmi and Zigarmi (1987) point out that while the leader's perceptions of their own behavior and its impact on others are interesting and important, they are not very helpful unless they match the perceptions of those they are trying to influence. Trying to move a follower through maturity stages too fast will not be successful. Also, to prevent a mismatch of leader and follower perceptions

it may be necessary to regress to a lower leadership style when the follower encounters a new challenge.

Blanchard, Zigarmi and Zigarmi (1987) highlighted the value of the situational leadership model to education by explaining that teachers vary in their capacity to set high but achievable goals, in their willingness and ability to take responsibility for role-related tasks, and in the relevance of past education and experience to accomplish particular tasks. Teachers deal with student relations, parent relations, curriculum and instruction, and classroom management. In each of these areas, an individual teacher will be at a different level of commitment and competence. Therefore, administrators must be able to determine the capacity of a particular teacher to accomplish a particular task, and to vary their leadership styles to ensure task accomplishment. The quality of interaction between principal and faculty is related to the principal's ability to meet the individual teachers where they are, and to provide for them what they cannot do for themselves.

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