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The Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership® Theory

Choosing the Right Leadership Style for the Right People

What type of leaders does your team need?

You've just finished training the newest member of your team. Now that he's ready to start working, you give him the data that you need him to enter into the company's database, and then you hurry off to a meeting.

When you return later that afternoon, you're disappointed to find that he hasn't done anything. He didn't know what to do, and he didn't have the confidence to ask for help. As a result, hours have been lost, and now you have to rush to enter the data on time. Although you may want to blame the worker, the truth is that you're as much to blame as he is.

How can you avoid situations like this?

Management experts Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard argue that these things happen because leaders don't match their style of leadership to the maturity of the person or group they're leading. When style and maturity aren't matched, failure is the result.

In this article, we'll review the Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership® Theory, and we'll explain how it's used in different leadership situations.

Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory

The Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory was created by Dr Paul Hersey, a professor and author of "The Situational Leader," and Ken Blanchard, author of the best selling "The One-Minute Manager," among others.

The theory states that instead of using just one style, successful leaders should change their leadership styles based on the maturity of the people they're leading and the details of the task. Using this theory, leaders should be able to place more or less emphasis on the task, and more or less emphasis on the relationships with the people they're leading, depending on what's needed to get the job done successfully.

Leadership Styles

According to Hersey and Blanchard, there are four main leadership styles:

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- **Telling (S1)** – Leaders tell their people exactly what to do, and how to do it.
- **Selling (S2)** – Leaders still provide information and direction, but there's more communication with followers. Leaders "sell" their message to get the team on board.
- **Participating (S3)** – Leaders focus more on the relationship and less on direction. The leader works with the team, and shares decision-making responsibilities.
- **Delegating (S4)** – Leaders pass most of the responsibility onto the follower or group. The leaders still monitor progress, but they're less involved in decisions.

As you can see, styles S1 and S2 are focused on getting the task done. Styles S3 and S4 are more concerned with developing team members' abilities to work independently.

Maturity Levels

According to Hersey and Blanchard, knowing when to use each style is largely dependent on the maturity of the person or group you're leading. They break maturity down into four different levels:

- **M1** – People at this level of maturity are at the bottom level of the scale. They lack the knowledge, skills, or confidence to work on their own, and they often need to be pushed to take the task on.
- **M2** – At this level, followers might be willing to work on the task, but they still don't have the skills to do it successfully.
- **M3** – Here, followers are ready and willing to help with the task. They have more skills than the M2 group, but they're still not confident in their abilities.
- **M4** – These followers are able to work on their own. They have high confidence and strong skills, and they're committed to the task.

The Hersey-Blanchard model maps each leadership style to each maturity level, as shown below.

Maturity Level	Most Appropriate Leadership Style
M1: Low maturity	S1: Telling/directing
M2: Medium maturity, limited skills	S2: Selling/coaching
M3: Medium maturity, higher skills but lacking confidence	S3: Participating/supporting
M4: High maturity	S4: Delegating

To use this model, reflect on the maturity of individuals within your team. The table above then shows which leadership style Hersey and Blanchard consider the most effective for people with that level of maturity.

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Leadership Style Examples

1. You're about to leave for an extended holiday, and your tasks will be handled by an experienced colleague. He's very familiar with your responsibilities, and he's excited to do the job.
2. Instead of trusting his knowledge and skills to do the work, you spend hours creating a detailed list of tasks for which he'll be responsible, and instructions on how to do them.
3. The result? Your work gets done, but you've damaged the relationship with your colleague by your lack of trust. He was an M4 in maturity, and yet you used an S1 leadership style instead of an S4, which would have been more appropriate.

2. You've just been put in charge of leading a new team. It's your first time working with these people. As far as you can tell, they have some of the necessary skills to reach the department's goals, but not all of them. The good news is that they're excited and willing to do the work.
3. You estimate they're at an M3 maturity level, so you use the matching S3 leadership style. You coach them through the project's goals, pushing and teaching where necessary, but largely leaving them to make their own decisions. As a result, their relationship with you is strengthened, and the team's efforts are a success.

At Mind Tools, we recognize the truth within this model; however we believe that a different leadership style, "transformational leadership", is often the most effective style of leadership in business. If you'd like to learn more about different styles, including transformational leadership, see our article on Leadership Styles.

Key Points

All teams, and all team members, aren't created equal. Hersey and Blanchard argue that leaders are more effective when they use a leadership style based on the individuals or groups they're leading.

Start by identifying whom you're leading. Are your followers knowledgeable about the task? Are they willing and excited to do the work? Rate them on the M1-M4 maturity scale, and then use the leadership style that's appropriate for that rating.

Situational Leadership

Last time we published an article on leadership, we spoke about the six different leadership styles that successful managers can apply to different settings. One key to the success of a manager is their ability to

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switch, or flex, styles as conditions change. This is commonly referred to as "**situational leadership**."

Situational Leadership Theory

Most of the leadership training programs offered today are aimed at helping you discover the leadership style you exhibit, and making you aware of its strengths and weaknesses. However, a situational leadership style is not dictated by the leadership skills of the manager. The theory behind situational leadership is more closely tied to using the style needed to be successful given the existing work environment, or the specific needs of the business.

The effective manager is able to utilize multiple leadership styles as conditions change. This is the theory behind the concept of situational leadership. Implementing situational leadership in an organization then becomes a matter of training managers to recognize the current work setting, or employee condition, and using the most effective leadership style given the specific challenge.

For example, delegating work to an employee that is ill prepared to accept that responsibility may result in the impression that the worker is incompetent. This can lead to frustration for both the manager and worker. Ironically, it is actually the manager's inability to recognize the most effective leadership style, or refusal to switch styles, that is really the cause of an ineffective workforce.

Situational Leadership Models

Presently, there appears to be two mainstream theories describing situational leadership. The first model we'll discuss is based on Daniel Goleman's elements of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.

Goleman's Model of Situational Leadership

In Goleman's model of situational leadership, he combines his five elements of emotional intelligence to formulate a total of six situational leadership styles, which are described below. Goleman emphasizes the need for a manager to change between these six styles as conditions around them change.

Coaching Leaders

In the Coaching Leadership Style, the leader focuses on helping others in their personal development and in their job-related activities. The coaching leader aids others to get up to speed by working closely with them. They make sure employees have the knowledge and tools to get their job done. This situational leadership style works best when the employee already understands their weaknesses, and is receptive to ideas on how to improve.

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Pacesetting Leaders

When employees are self-motivated and highly skilled, the Pacesetting Leadership Style is extremely effective. The pacesetting leader sets very high performance standards for themselves and their group, and the leader exemplifies the behaviors that are sought from other members of the group. This leadership style needs to be used sparingly, since workers can often "burn out" due to the demanding pace of this style.

Democratic Leaders

The Democratic Leadership Style gives members of the work group a vote or a say in nearly every decision made by the team. When used effectively, the democratic leader builds flexibility and responsibility, and can help identify new ways to do things with fresh ideas. Be careful with this style, however, because the level of personal involvement required by this approach, and the decision-making process itself, can be very time consuming.

Affiliative Leaders

The Affiliative Leadership Style is most effective in situations where morale is low or teambuilding is needed. This leader is easily recognized by their theme of "employee first." Employees can expect much praise from this style. Unfortunately, poor performance may also go without reprimand.

Authoritative Leaders

If your business seems to be drifting aimlessly, then the Authoritative Leadership Style can be very effective in this type of situation. The authoritative leader is an expert in dealing with the problems or challenges at hand, and they can clearly identify goals that will lead to success. This leader also allows the employees themselves to figure out the best way to achieve those goals.

Coercive Leaders

The Coercive Leadership Style should be used with caution because it's based on the concept of "command and control," which usually causes a decrease in motivation among those that are interacting with this type of manager. The coercive leader is most effective in situations where the company or group requires a complete turnaround. It is also effective during disasters, or when dealing with under-performing employees - usually as a last resort.

Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model

The second situational leadership model we're going to discuss is derived from the leadership theory

explained by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey. In this model, Blanchard and Hersey describe two fundamental concepts: that of leadership style, as well as the development level of the person being led.

Situational Leadership Styles

Blanchard and Hersey characterized the situational leadership style in terms of the amount of the direction, and the support, that the leader provides to followers. The situational leadership styles they described fall into the following four types:

Telling Leaders

The telling leader defines the roles and tasks for each follower, and then supervises them very closely. All important decisions are made by the leader, and announced to the followers. This means communication is predominantly one-way.   These leaders tell others what to do.

Selling Leaders

The selling leader defines the roles and the tasks of each follower, but also seeks ideas and suggestions from followers. Decisions are made predominantly by the leader, but the communication style used is two-way. These leaders are good at "selling" their ideas.

Participating Leaders

A participating leader passes along the day-to-day decisions, such as dividing up the workload, to their followers. The participating leader will help to facilitate discussions, and takes part in the decision-making process, but ultimate control is with the followers.

Delegating Leaders

The delegating leader is still involved in the workgroup's decisions, and helps to solve problems, but the ultimate control is with the followers. In fact, with this situational leadership style, the followers decide when to get the leader involved.

Development Levels of Followers

Blanchard and Hersey's situational leadership model also recognized the importance of the development level of those being led. Their theory states that the leader's style needs to reflect, in part, the competence and commitment of the followers. Those two dimensions were then used to derive the following four

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development levels of those being led:

- Low Competence, High Commitment
- Some Competence, Low Commitment
- High Competence, Variable Commitment
- High Competence, High Commitment

In Blanchard's model of leadership, there exists an ideal type of leadership style to apply to each development level. Much of that logic is the same as that found in Goleman's model.

Implementing Situational Leadership

As mentioned earlier, implementing situational leadership in an organization is really nothing more than teaching managers how to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each leadership style, and how this knowledge can be applied to a given work situation. It's also important for managers to recognize their intrinsic leadership style, because that will often be the style they will fall back into in times of stress.

Successful leaders in any organization are able to quickly recognize the correct style to apply in a given situation. They make use of that style to achieve superior business results. Regardless of the model or theory used to describe leadership styles, both Goleman and Blanchard agree on this last point: flexibility is the key to success.