Diagnosing Educational Leadership Problems: A Situational Approach

PHILIP E. GATES* KENNETH H. BLANCHARD PAUL HERSEY


*Philip E. Gates, Director of Secondary Education, Scottsdale Unified School District No. 48, Arizona; Kenneth H. Blanchard, Professor of Leadership and Organizational Behavior and Co-Director, Center for Curriculum and Organizational Development, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and Paul Hersey, Director, Center for Leadership Studies and Professor of Management and Organizational Behavior, Ohio University, Athens

矿 mine when it is appropriate to behave in what way, all theory and research have done is set the practitioner up for frustration. As a result, one of the major concerns of the work of Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard has been the development of a conceptual framework which can help practicing managers make effective day-to-day decisions on how various situations should be handled. Situational Leadership Theory


OVER the past few decades, practitioners and writers in the field of leadership and management have been involved in a search for a “best” style of leadership which would be successful in most situations. Yet, the evidence from research clearly indicates that there is no single all-purpose leadership style. Successful leaders are those who can adapt their behavior to meet the demands of their own unique environment. This conclusion that leadership “all depends on the situation” is not very helpful to the practicing educational leader who may be personally interested in how he or she can find some practical value in theory.

Unless one can help this leader deter-
(sometimes referred to as “Life Cycle Theory of Leadership”) will be presented in this article by Hersey and Blanchard, the theorists, and applied to educational leadership situations by Philip E. Gates, the practitioner.

Situational Leadership Theory

This theory grew out of earlier leadership models that were based on two kinds of behavior central to the concept of leadership style: task behavior and relationship behavior. Task behavior is the extent to which a leader engages in one-way communication by explaining what each subordinate is to do as well as when, where, and how tasks are to be accomplished. Relationship behavior is the extent to which a leader engages in two-way communication by providing socio-emotional support, “psychological strokes,” and facilitating behaviors. The two dimensions of leader behavior, plotted on two separate axes, are shown in Figure 1.

Since research in the past several decades has clearly supported the contention that there is no “best” style of leadership, any of the four basic styles shown in Figure 1 may be effective or ineffective depending on the situation.

Situational Leadership Theory is based upon an interplay among (1) the amount of direction (task behavior) a leader gives, (2) the amount of socio-emotional support (relationship behavior) a leader provides, and (3) the “maturity” level that followers exhibit on a specific task.

Level of Maturity

Maturity is defined in Situational Leadership Theory as the capacity to set high but attainable goals (achievement-motivation3), willingness and ability to take responsibility, and education and/or experience of an individual or a group. These variables of maturity should be considered only in relation to a specific task to be performed. That is to say, an individual or a group is not mature or immature in any total sense. People tend to have varying degrees of maturity depending on the specific task, function, or objective that a leader is attempting to accomplish through their efforts. Thus, a teacher may be very responsible in organizing lesson plans but very casual about handling discipline in the classroom. As a result, it may be appropriate for a principal to provide little supervision for this teacher when organizing the classroom curriculum, yet to closely supervise when class discipline is the issue.

The Basic Concept

According to Situational Leadership Theory, as the level of maturity of their followers continues to increase in terms of accomplishing a specific task, leaders should begin to reduce their task behavior and increase their relationship behavior. This should be the case until the individual or group reaches a moderate level of maturity. As the followers begin to move into an above average level of maturity, it becomes appropriate for leaders to decrease not only task behavior but relationship behavior as well. Now the individual or group is not only mature in terms of the performance of the task but also is psychologically mature.

Since the individual or group can provide their own “strokes” and reinforcement.

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a great deal of socio-emotional support from the leader is no longer necessary. People at this maturity level see a reduction of close supervision and an increase in delegation by the leader as a positive indication of trust and confidence. Thus, Situational Leadership Theory focuses on the appropriateness or effectiveness of leadership styles according to the task relevant maturity of the followers. This cycle can be illustrated by a bell-shaped curve superimposed upon the four leadership quadrants, as shown in Figure 2.

**Style of Leader vs. Maturity of Followers**

Figure 2 attempts to portray the relation between task relevant maturity and the appropriate leadership styles to be used as followers move from immaturity to maturity. As indicated, the reader should keep in mind that the figure represents two different phenomena. The appropriate leadership style (style of leader) for given levels of follower maturity is portrayed by a curvilinear function in the four leadership quadrants. The maturity level of the individual or group being supervised (maturity of follower) is depicted below the leadership model as a continuum ranging from immaturity to maturity.

In referring to the leadership styles in the model, we will use the following shorthand designations: (1) high task-low relationship will be referred to as leader behavior style S1; (2) high task-high relationship behavior as leader behavior style S2; (3) high relationship-low task behavior as leader behavior style S3; and (4) low relationship-low task behavior as style S4.

In terms of follower maturity, it is not simply a question of being mature or immature but a question of degree. As can be seen in Figure 2, some benchmarks of maturity can be provided for determining appropriate leadership style by dividing the maturity continuum into four levels of maturity. Low levels of task relevant maturity are referred to as maturity level M1; low to moderate as maturity level M2; moderate to high as maturity level M3; and high levels of task relevant maturity as maturity level M4.

**Application**

What does the bell-shaped curve in the style-of-leader portion of the model mean? It means that as the maturity level of one’s followers develops along the continuum from immature to mature, the appropriate style of leadership moves accordingly along the curvilinear function.

**Determining Appropriate Style**

To determine what leadership style is appropriate to use in a given situation, one must first determine the maturity level of the individual or group in relation to a specific task that the leader is attempting to accomplish through their efforts. Once this
EFFECTIVE STYLES

HIGH

M4

MOD

M3

ERATE

M2

LOW

x

**

M1

Figure 3. Determining an Appropriate Leadership Style

maturity level is identified, the appropriate leadership style can be determined by constructing a right angle (90° angle) from the point on the continuum that identifies the maturity level of the followers to a point where it intersects on the curvilinear function in the style of leader portion of the model. The quadrant in which that intersection takes place suggests the appropriate style to be used by the leader in that situation with followers of that maturity level. Let us look at an example in Figure 3.

Suppose a superintendent has determined that a principal’s maturity level in terms of administrative paper work (reports, attendance records) is low. Using Situational Leadership Theory he or she would place an X on the maturity continuum as shown in Figure 3 (above M1). Once the superintendent had decided that he or she wanted to influence the principal’s behavior in this area, the superintendent could determine the appropriate initial style to use by constructing a right angle from the X drawn on the maturity continuum to a point where it intersects the bell-shaped curve (designated in Figure 3 by O). Since the intersection occurs in the S1 quadrant, it is suggested that when working with people who demonstrate M1 maturity on a particular task, a leader should use an S1 style (high task-low relationship behavior). If one follows this technique for determining the appropriate leadership style for all four of the maturity levels, it will become clear that the four maturity designations (M1, M2, M3, M4) correspond to the four leader behavior designations (S1, S2, S3, S4); that is, M1 maturity needs S1 style, M2 maturity needs S2 style, etc.

In this example, when we say low relationship behavior, we do not mean that the superintendent is not friendly or personable to the principal. We merely suggest that the superintendent, in supervising the principal’s handling of administrative paper work, should spend more time directing the principal in what to do and how, when, and where to do it, than providing socio-emotional support and reinforcement. The increased relationship behavior should occur when the principal begins to demonstrate the ability to handle necessary administrative paper work. At that point, a movement from Style 1 to Style 2 may be appropriate.

Thus, Situational Leadership Theory contends that in working with people who are low in maturity (M1) in terms of accomplishing a specific task, a high task/low relationship style (S1) has the highest probability of success; in dealing with people who are of low to moderate maturity (M2), a moderate structure and socio-emotional style (S2) appears to be most appropriate; while in working with people who are of moderate to high maturity (M3) in terms of accomplishing a specific task, a high relationship/low task style (S3) has the highest probability of success; and finally, a low relationship/low task style (S4) has the highest probability of success in working with people of high task relevant maturity (M4).
Developing Maturity in Followers

In attempting to help an individual or group mature in a particular area, such as getting them to take more and more responsibility for performing a specific task, a leader must be careful not to delegate responsibility and/or provide socio-emotional support too rapidly. If the leader does this, the individual or group may view the leader as a “soft-touch” and take advantage. Observe the teachers whose supervisor presents the staff with the district supply list, and without establishing any parameters, instructs them to go ahead and order from it. Some of the staff may not have any experience in ordering supplies and will order virtually everything available, whether they need it or not. At the opposite extreme, others will order too frugally and end up short.
Teachers experienced with this task will select needed items efficiently and economically. Obviously, it is up to the supervisor to determine exactly how much direction should be given to each teacher for ordering supplies. The degree of individual structure the supervisor provides will depend on the maturity of each of the teachers in relation to the task at hand.

A leader must develop the maturity of followers slowly on each task that they perform, using less task behavior and more relationship behavior as they mature and become more willing and able to take responsibility. When an individual’s performance is low on a specific task, one must not expect drastic changes overnight. For a desirable behavior to be obtained, a leader must reward as soon as possible the slightest behavior exhibited by the individual in the desired direction and continue this process as the individual’s behavior comes closer and closer to the leader’s expectations of good performance. This behavior modification concept is called positively reinforcing successive approximations of desired behavior.

For example, a principal might want to move a newly appointed department head through the cycle so that she would be assuming significantly more supervisory responsibilities. If this individual has had no experience chairing departmental meetings, the principal might help her plan a written agenda for her first meeting, and then evaluate the results with her. If this responsibility is well handled by the department head, the principal will want to reinforce this behavior with increases in socio-emotional support (relationship behavior). This is a two-step process: first, a reduction in structure, and second, if adequate performance follows, an increase in socio-emotional support as reinforcement. This process should continue until the department head has reached moderate levels of maturity (M2 and M3) in chairing departmental meetings. This does not mean that her meetings will be less structured; rather it means that the direction provided will be given by the department head rather than being provided by the principal.

As the department head continues to develop in this area, the appropriate leadership style for the principal to use begins to move toward Style 4. Now the department head is not only able to chair department meetings, but is able to provide her own satisfaction for interpersonal and emotional needs. At this stage of maturity (M4), the department head will tend to be positively reinforced for her accomplishments by the principal not looking over her shoulder at department meetings and leaving her more and more on her own. It is not that there is less mutual trust and friendship between the principal and department head but rather that less interaction time is needed to prove it.

Let us look at another example of how knowledge of the developmental aspect of Situational Leadership Theory could help an individual increase the maturity level of followers in a particular area.

Tom was a bright student who failed ninth grade English. He failed, not because he could not do the work, but because his teacher used an inappropriate teaching style for him in this subject. Since Tom’s English class was considered a “bright” group, the teacher assumed that he could make assignments to students with little direction or close supervision. While this approach worked with other students, Tom was an exception. He came from a broken home where he got little support or encouragement in his school work. When he brought home written assignments from English, he was often “side-tracked” and interrupted. As a result, even if he completed an assignment, it was sloppy and disorganized. All his teacher did was tell Tom continually that he had to be both

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more careful with his work and get it in on time. But generally, his teacher left him alone and merely kept score of his "failures" in the grade book. At the end of the semester, Tom failed the course.

The next semester he was asked to repeat the course with the same teacher. This time he earned honor roll grades in English. How did this dramatic change in behavior occur?

Between the two classes, Tom's teacher was exposed to Situational Leadership Theory. Bothered by Tom's failure, the teacher was continually thinking about Tom while learning about the theory. Analyzing the situation, the teacher realized that Tom's maturity level in terms of the course requirements for English was very low (M1) and yet generally, the teacher was using a "hands off" (S4) teaching style with him.

Armed with these new insights, the teacher developed a strategy for working with Tom this time. Since his maturity level was low in writing and compositional skills, the teacher knew that Tom would need some significant task behavior (S1) from the beginning. As a result, knowing that Tom loved sports, the teacher directed him to start writing some sports stories for the student newspaper. As advisor to the paper, the teacher was able to give Tom specific assignments and work with him closely (S1) as he wrote his articles. After they had worked together on his first article and it was published, Tom really got excited about writing and began to take it more seriously. Since Tom was doing his writing at school, he was in a supportive environment where he could get supervision as he needed it. In the long run, the teacher was able to reduce direction and supervision and provide Tom with more socio-emotional support (S2).

Eventually Tom became responsible enough that he was able to turn out acceptable copy with little help from the teacher. Now the teacher was able to concentrate almost exclusively on commending his efforts (S3). This gradual development paid dividends. Not only did Tom's English grades improve to B's and eventually A's, but he also was able to get a part-time job working with the local community newspaper. He wrote and proofread copy, and learned to set type. This was accomplished with limited teacher involvement (S4). Tom had completely accepted responsibility for the task of writing well. In terms of Situational Leadership Theory, he had fully matured with respect to the desired task as a result of the teacher's adopting appropriate leadership styles.

Intervening When Maturity Is Decreasing

Although Situational Leadership Theory suggests a specific style for each different level of task maturity, it is not a one-way street. When an individual begins to regress in maturity for whatever reason, such as a crisis at home or a change of job, it becomes appropriate for the leader to adjust his or her leadership style accordingly. For example, take a teacher who was highly motivated and competent (M4) and therefore could be left on his own (S4). Suppose he is promoted to principal, based on his teaching ability alone. While it may have been appropriate to leave him alone (S4) as a teacher, now that he is principal, a task for which he has little experience, it may be appropriate for his supervisor in the central office to change styles by providing more socio-emotional support and then increasing the direction and supervision of his activities (Style 3 to Style 2). This high task-high relationship style should continue until he is able to grasp his new responsibilities. At that time, a movement back from Style 2 through Style 3 to Style 4 may be appropriate. Starting off using the same leadership style that was successful while he was a teacher may now prove devastating because it may be inappropriate for the needs of this situation.

We have endeavored to present Situational Leadership Theory as a means by which educational leaders at every level can increase their probability of success in working with and through others to accomplish goals.
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