



Evidence for the Validity of Situational Leadership Theory

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Teachers see the leadership behavior of principals as principals see themselves. Some principals need more flexibility in their choice of styles.

Research and practice have demonstrated that organizational leadership has two major dimensions — the performance of the organization and the socio-emotional needs of persons in the organization. Leaders who attend to both task and personal needs are considered effective.

The bulk of the evidence shows that no one style or type of leadership is consistently more effective than another. Leaders perceived to be effective are task oriented at times and concerned with socio-emotional needs at other times.¹ A plausible explanation is provided by Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory.² In brief, their theory holds that the leader should engage in different combinations of task and relationship behavior depending upon the maturity of members of the group in relation to a specific task.

According to the model,³ task behavior is organizing and defining the roles of followers and explaining what, when, where, and how tasks are to be accomplished. It is also characterized by efforts to establish well-defined patterns of organization and channels of communication. Relationship behavior

¹ A. C. Filley and R. J. House, *Managerial Process and Organizational Behavior* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969).

² P. Hersey and K. H. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977).

³ Philip E. Gates, Kenneth H. Blanchard, and Paul Hersey, "Diagnosing Educational Leadership Problems: A Situational Approach," *Educational Leadership* 33 (February 1976): 348-54.



Photo: NEA, Joe Didio

"... maintaining personal relationships ..."

between leaders and followers—is characterized by open communications, socioemotional support, “psychological strokes,” and other facilitating behaviors.

Group maturity has three components. A group is mature when it sets high but attainable goals, is willing to accept responsibility, and has sufficient experience and/or education. Figure 1 shows the relationship of group maturity to the appropriate leader behaviors. If the group is immature (M1) for a particular task, the leader should engage in high task/low relationship behavior (S1) with that group. A very mature (M4) group requires low task/low relationship (S4) behavior from the leader. The effective leader is one who accurately assesses the group’s maturity and adapts his/her leader behavior accordingly.

Hersey, Blanchard, and Hambleton have developed an education version of the *Leader Effectiveness and Adaptability Description* (LEAD) instrument to help persons assess the range and effectiveness of their leader behaviors. For each of 20 situations, the respondent is to select one of four alternative actions. Each of the alternatives reflects one of four combinations of task and relationship behavior:

1. High task/low relationship (S1), also known as “Telling”;
2. High task/high relationship (S2), also known as “Selling”;
3. Low task/high relationship (S3), also known as “Participating”;
4. Low task/low relationship (S4), also known as “Delegating.”

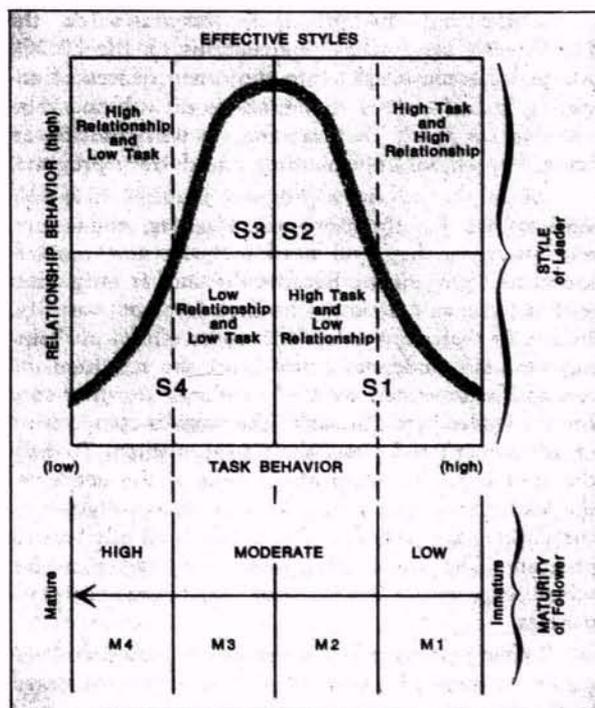
Selection of an alternative action in each of the 20 situations provides four scores which describe the leader’s range of styles. Combining the style scores yields an effectiveness score. The more the respondent’s choices reflect an equal distribution among the four combinations of leader behavior, the more effective is the leader.

The Reliability and Validity of the LEAD

The education version of the LEAD is a relatively new instrument; it has not been widely used or validated against other leadership⁴ measurement instruments. To establish reliability, we asked a group of 26 elementary school principals to respond to the LEAD. Two measures of internal consistency yielded reliability coefficients of .810 and .613.

Utilizing procedures described by Fox⁵ for determining the congruent validity of an instrument, we then asked 12 elementary school principals to respond to the education LEAD and four teachers

Figure 1. Relation Between Task-Relevant Maturity and Leadership Style



From P. E. Gates, K. H. Blanchard, and P. Hersey, “Diagnosing Educational Leadership Problems: A Situational Approach,” *Educational Leadership* 33 (February 1976): 350.

from each of their schools to respond to the LBDQ-XII. We assumed that both instruments would measure common constructs. The LEAD measures task and relationship behavior and the LBDQ-XII measures, among other dimensions, initiating structure and consideration. One could expect task behaviors to be related to initiating structure and relationship behaviors to be related to consideration. We also assumed that a leader found to be effective on the LEAD would sometimes, but not always, be perceived on the LBDQ-XII as initiating structure or showing consideration.

As expected, principals perceived by teachers as “always” initiating structure tended to choose high task/low relationship actions on the LEAD, and they did not have high effectiveness scores. Moreover, the principals who preferred low task/high relationship behavior were perceived by teachers as “seldom” or “never” initiating structure. These preliminary findings indicate some validity for the education version of the LEAD.

⁴ Interview with Ron Hambleton, University of Massachusetts, 31 August 1978.

⁵ David J. Fox, *The Research Process in Education* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

Implications for Leaders

Comparing the principal's responses on the LEAD with the teacher's perceptions on the LBDQ-XII yields some insight into the consequences of engaging in the various combinations of task and relationship behavior. To illustrate, we will envision an imaginary school implementing an advisory program.

Since the advisory program requires new role expectations for the principal, teachers, counselors, and students, they will need to learn new requirements and procedures. Because the staff is unfamiliar with advisement, it is at the first level of maturity. In this first phase, the leader focuses efforts on helping the staff understand and learn the requirements and skills associated with advisement. The first step for the leader is to "unpack" the various components of advisement and show their relationships. To help the staff begin to grasp application of the concepts, the leader takes the group through such activities as simulations and visits to a school with an advisement program. The leader also helps the staff plan for scheduling, use of forms, and other organizational matters.

When staff members show they have grasped the major concepts of advisement, they have progressed to the second level of maturity. As the program is implemented, the leader assists the group in mastering the details of advisement and provides socio-emotional support. The leader conducts structured observations and gives task-relevant feedback. Demonstrations and other forms of assistance help ensure competence. At the same time, the leader encourages and praises the staff. In other words, the leader recognizes and rewards success but continues to structure the task elements that are not yet operating smoothly.

At the third level of maturity, staff members show they understand and accept the advisement program and are approaching a high level of task proficiency. The leader discerns that the task is well underway and devotes primary attention to giving praise and reinforcement. He/she may make com-

... flexible and balanced use of task and relationship behaviors is beneficial for both organizational productivity and personal satisfaction."



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ments like "Nice work" or "I appreciate what you did with Mary yesterday." The leader inquires if any help is needed and encourages feedback with such questions as "How do you feel about advisement?" The relationship behaviors of the leader serve to increase a sense of confidence.

When the group members are fully mature with regard to the advisement program, they have enough knowledge to set high but attainable goals. They are also willing to accept the responsibilities of the advisement program. At this point, the leader no longer needs to structure the situation or to give socio-emotional support. The group supplies these from among its own resources. The leader now lets go and turns to other matters.

Principals' Preferred Styles

According to the model, for most new tasks the four kinds of leadership styles should be observed in sequence. Findings from the study, however, revealed that principals least preferred "S1" or "telling" and "S4" or "delegating" styles. This reluctance could be due to one of two factors. Principals may not be comfortable with high task behaviors and may be reluctant to delegate. On the other hand, principals may not have the ability to make judgments about a group's maturity. In either event, the finding suggests that some leaders should expand their repertoire of leader behaviors.

When leaders give attention to helping their staff initiate and structure a new task, success in the new venture is more likely. Initiating structure, or clearly delineating the components and requirements of the task, helps the staff acquire the necessary skills and understandings. The leader working with the staff implementing the advisement program takes time and effort to provide inservice, to observe performance, and to provide task relevant feedback. A high level

of structure in the early stages helps the staff acquire the education and experience for becoming mature.

While high task behavior may seem "authoritarian," it appears to have positive consequences. Surprisingly, high task/low relationship behavior by leaders was viewed by teachers as considerate. In other words, there are situations in which principals are most considerate when initiating structure. For example, staff members of the school implementing the advisement program will feel insecure if they are thrust immediately into the program without an opportunity to learn about advisement.

When principals combine high task with high relationship behaviors, teachers perceive them as being able to reconcile conflicting demands. Every leader has experienced the pressures of conflicting demands that arise out of differences in values, out of preferences for different methods, and other sources. Returning to the imaginary school, the leader of the advisement program can reduce disorder and confusion in the school if he/she helps the staff agree on a basic advisement philosophy. The effective leader will also reconcile conflicting approaches in the application of the advisement philosophy.

Relationships Overemphasized

It is popular in some quarters to emphasize that effective leaders and productive organizations are characterized by growth, intimacy, authenticity, and humaneness.⁶ While that may be true in general, our findings suggest that an *overemphasis* on relationships can be detrimental to the leader and to the organization.

Principals who said they used mostly high relationship/low task behavior were viewed unfavorably by their teachers. Teachers saw them as not assuming their proper role, as unable to reconcile conflicting demands, tolerate uncertainty, or predict outcomes accurately. While Hersey and Blanchard's model provides for such behaviors at a certain level of matur-

ity, it appears that engaging in them for too long is detrimental to the group and to the leader.

Principals are also reluctant to delegate—to practice low task/low relationship behavior. Perhaps they consider such behavior as lack of leadership, as not accepting responsibility, but the findings suggest that it has positive consequences. Teachers perceived principals who used low task/low relationship behavior as emphasizing production.

As the group becomes willing to accept responsibility and is able to set realistically high goals, delegating a venture (such as advisement) seems to increase productivity. It may be that persons who are ready to accept responsibility impose a certain amount of structure on themselves. We have all witnessed persons who perform at higher levels when responsibilities are delegated to them. An opportunity to be fully professional often releases energy and commitment.

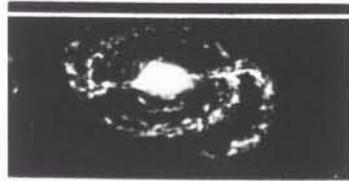
Delegating at the appropriate level of group maturity also improves the leader's management of time. Freed from having to devote a great deal of time to an ongoing activity, the leader can turn to other matters. One warning, however, is that the leader should remain available to intervene if the group's maturity regresses.

Summary

Our preliminary findings provide some support for situational leadership theory—for the idea that flexible and balanced use of task and relationship behaviors is beneficial for both organizational productivity and personal satisfaction. Some of the findings, especially those regarding high relationship/low task behaviors, raise issues deserving further study. Nonetheless, it appears that the LEAD may have some validity for assessing leadership style. *EL*

⁶ Jack R. Gibb, "Dynamics of Leadership," in *Organizations and Human Behavior: Focus on Schools*, ed. Fred D. Carver and Thomas J. Sergiovanni (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969).

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