

What is Situational Leadership? How Flexibility Leads to Success

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Situational leadership is an adaptive leadership style. This strategy encourages leaders to take stock of their team members, weigh the many variables in their workplace and choose the leadership style that best fits their goals and circumstances. In the words of leadership theorist Ken Blanchard, “In the past a leader was a boss. Today’s leaders can no longer lead solely based on positional power.”

Situational leadership is the model of choice for organizations around the world that want to do the following:

- Develop people and workgroups
- Establish rapport and to bring out the best in their people
- Use a common leadership style across all units in an organization, be it local, national, or international

Read more about situational leadership:

Situational leadership defined

Situational leadership is flexible. It adapts to the existing work environment and the needs of the organization. Situational leadership is not based on a specific skill of the leader; instead, he or she modifies the style of management to suit the requirements of the organization.

One of the keys to situational leadership is adaptability. Leaders must be able to move from one leadership style to another to meet the changing needs of an organization and its employees. These leaders

must have the insight to understand when to change their management style and what leadership strategy fits each new paradigm.

There are two mainstream models of situational leadership, one described by Daniel Goleman and another by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hershey.

The Goleman theory of situational leadership

Daniel Goleman, the author of “Emotional Intelligence,” defines six styles within situational leadership.

1. **Coaching leaders**, who work on an individual’s personal development as well as job-related skills. This style works best with people who know their limitations and are open to change.
2. **Pacesetter leaders**, who set very high expectations for their followers. This style works best with self-starters who are highly motivated. The leader leads by example. This style is used sparingly since it can lead to follower burnout.
3. **Democratic leaders**, who give followers a vote in almost all decisions. When used in optimal conditions, it can build flexibility and responsibility within the group. This style is, however, time consuming and is not the best style if deadlines are looming.
4. **Affiliative leaders**, who put employees first. This style is used when morale is very low. The leader uses praise and helpfulness to build up the team’s confidence. This style may risk poor performance when team building is happening.
5. **Authoritative leaders**, who are very good at analyzing problems and identifying challenges. This style is good in an organization that is drifting aimlessly. This leader will allow

his or her followers to help figure out how to solve a problem.

6. **Coercive leaders**, who tell their subordinates what to do. They have a very clear vision of the endgame and how to reach it. This style is good in disasters or if an organization requires a total overhaul.

Situational leadership according to Blanchard and Hersey

The second model is based on the work done by Blanchard and Hersey. Their theory is based on two concepts: leadership itself, and the developmental level of the follower. Blanchard and Hersey developed a matrix consisting of four styles:

1. **Telling leaders = S1** (specific guidance and close supervision): These leaders make decisions and communicate them to others. They create the roles and objectives and expect others to accept them. Communication is usually one way. This style is most effective in a disaster or when repetitive results are required.
2. **Selling = S2** (explaining and persuading): These leaders may create the roles and objectives for others, but they are also open to suggestions and opinions. They “sell” their ideas to others in order to gain cooperation.
3. **Participating = S3** (sharing and facilitating): These leaders leave decisions to their followers. Although they may participate in the decision-making process, the ultimate choice is left to employees.
4. **Delegating = S4** (letting others do it): These leaders are responsible for their teams, but provide minimum guidance to workers or help to solve problems. They may be asked from time to time to help with decision-making.

Stages of employee development in situational leadership

Along with leadership qualities, Blanchard and Hersey defined four types of development for followers or employees:

1. Low Competence; High Commitment
2. Some Competence: Low Commitment
3. High Competence: Variable Commitment
4. High Competence: High Commitment

Blanchard and Hersey also suggest that each of the four approaches should be paired with different “maturity levels” among team members. For example, the lowest maturity level (M1) should work best with the “telling” style (S1), while the highest maturity level (M4) should be most responsive to the “delegating” approach (S4).

Differences between situational leadership and other leadership styles

The difference between situational leadership and other leadership styles is that situational leadership incorporates many different techniques. The style of choice depends upon the organization’s environment and the competence and commitment of its followers.

History of situational leadership

In 1969, Blanchard and Hersey developed situational leadership theory in their classic book “Management of Organizational Behavior.” This theory was first called the “Life Cycle Theory of Leadership.” During the mid-1970s, it was renamed the situational leadership theory.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the two developed their own styles. Blanchard’s first book, “The One-Minute Manager,” came out in 1982.

Hersey further developed the situational leadership model in his 1985 book “The Situational Leader.” Both men have continued to refine and update their situational leadership theories.

Blanchard said situational leaders tend to choose between “directive behavior” (what and how) and “supportive behavior” (developing commitment, initiative, and positive attitudes). The maturity level concept for Situational Leadership II was revised to incorporate individual development levels.

Examples of situational leadership

Blanchard and his situational leadership collaborators have provided detailed case studies involving companies and public institutions. Prominent examples include Adobe, WD-40, Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, British Telecom, the city of Battle Creek, Michigan, Genentech, the San Diego Padres, and the Royal New Zealand Navy.

Any team environment that has frequent turnover provides an opportunity to apply situational leadership principles. Sports teams, for instance, represent clear examples of situational leadership because team rosters are constantly changing.

One president and two of the most successful coaches in college basketball history have attributed much of their success to how they adapted to changing players and circumstances.

Dwight Eisenhower

Dwight D. Eisenhower was the president of the United States after World War II. He was also the Allied Commander during the war. He was known for his diplomacy and his ability to get the allied leaders to work together to defeat the Nazi war machine. His background in the military taught him how to order and direct military exercises, and he needed to be a statesman not only to manage the strong per-

sonalities of the allied leaders, but to run for president and then win two terms of office.

Pat Summitt

Patricia Sue Summitt was the head coach of the Tennessee Lady Volunteers for over 38 years. Every few years, she was faced with building a whole new basketball team. Despite that, she ended her career with a 1,098-208 overall record as a basketball coach. She was named head coach for the U.S. women's basketball team in the 1984 Olympics, where the team won a gold medal.

John Wooden

John Wooden was named the head coach of UCLA's men's basketball team. In his first eight years, he won three Pacific Coast championships. During that time he had team members graduate and new members start on the team. Beginning with the 1963-64 season, the team won seven straight championships.

UCLA's record 88-game winning streak and string of championships ended in 1974. One of his quotes reflects his adaptive and situational leadership philosophy: "When you're through learning, you're through."

Situational leadership quotations

How do professionals become better situational leaders? It might be helpful to consider these quotes from experienced leaders and apply them to your circumstances:

- **Margaret Wheatley:** "Leadership is a series of behaviors rather than a role for heroes."
- **Colin Powell:** "Leadership is solving problems."
- **Mahatma Gandhi:** "I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles, but today it means getting along with people."

- **John D. Rockefeller:** “Good leadership consists of showing average people how to do the work of superior people.”
- **Margaret Thatcher:** “You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it.”
- **John Wooden:** “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.”

Situational leadership style requirements

Here are some of the characteristics of the situational leadership style:

- **Insight:** The situational leader must be able to understand the needs of the followers, then adjust his or her management style to meet those needs
- **Flexibility:** Situational leaders must be able to move seamlessly from one type of leadership style to another
- **Trust:** The leader must be able gain his or her followers’ trust and confidence
- **Problem solving:** The situational leader must be able to solve problems, such as how to get a job done using the best leadership style available
- **Coach:** The situational leader must be able to evaluate the maturity and competence of the followers and then apply the right strategy to enhance the follower and their personal character

Advantages and disadvantages of situational leadership

Situational leadership does not work well in all circumstances. Let’s look at the advantages and disadvantages of the leadership style:

Situational leadership pros:

- Easy to use: When a leader has the right style, he or she knows it
- Simple: All the leader needs to do is evaluate the situation and apply the correct leadership style
- Intuitive appeal: With the right type of leader, this style is comfortable
- Leaders have permission to change management styles as they see fit

Situational leadership cons:

- This North American style of leadership does not take into consideration priorities and communication styles of other cultures
- It ignores the differences between female and male managers
- Situational leaders can divert attention away from long-term strategies and politics

Benefits of situational leadership

“What is the best leadership style?” Hersey and Blanchard found it fruitless to provide one answer to this question. Everything depends on the specific situation, which is why they collaborated to develop the situational leadership model.

Situational leadership means “choosing the right leadership style for the right people,” according to Blanchard and Hersey. It also depends on the competence and maturity of the followers. This is a time in history when leaders look less like bosses and more like partners.

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