

# Hersey and Blanchard

## Situational Leadership

The theory suggests that successful leadership is achieved by selecting the right leadership style, based on followers' needs.

Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard developed a leadership model that has gained a strong following among management development specialists.<sup>1</sup> This model--called **situational leadership theory**--has been incorporated into leadership training programs at over 400 of the Fortune 500-companies; and over one million managers a year from a wide variety of organizations are being taught its basic elements.<sup>2</sup> Although the theory has undergone limited evaluation to test its validity, it has received wide acceptance and has strong intuitive appeal.

Situational leadership is a contingency theory that focuses on the followers. Successful leadership is achieved by selecting the right leadership style, which Hersey and Blanchard argue is contingent on the level of the followers' readiness. Before we proceed, we should clarify two points: Why focus on the followers? What is meant by the term *readiness*?

The emphasis on the followers in leadership effectiveness reflects the reality that it is the followers who accept or reject the leader. Regardless of what the leader does, effectiveness depends on the actions of his or her followers. This is an important dimension that has been overlooked or underemphasized in most leadership theories. The term *readiness*, as defined by Hersey and Blanchard, refers to the extent to which people have the ability and willingness to accomplish a specific task.

Situational leadership uses the same two leadership dimensions that Fiedler identified: task and relationship behaviors. However, Hersey and Blanchard go a step further by considering each as either high or low and then combining them into four specific leader behaviors: telling, selling, participating, and delegating. They are described as follows:

*Telling* (high task-low relationship). The leader defines roles and tells people what, how, when, and where to do various tasks. It emphasizes directive behavior.

*Selling* (high task-high relationship). The leader provides both directive behavior and supportive behavior.

*Participating* (low task-high relationship). The leader and follower share in decision making, with the main role of the leader being facilitating and communicating.

*Delegating* (low task-low relationship). The leader provides little direction or support.

The final component in Hersey and Blanchard's theory is defining four stages of follower readiness:

**R1.** People are both unable and either unwilling or too insecure to take responsibility to do something. They are neither competent nor confident.

**R2.** People are unable but willing to do the necessary job tasks. They are motivated but currently lack the appropriate skills.

**R3.** People are able but unwilling

or too apprehensive to do what the leader wants.

**R4.** People are both able and willing to do what is asked of them.

Exhibit 1 integrates the various components into the situational leadership model. As followers reach high levels of readiness, the leader responds by not only continuing to decrease control over activities, but also by continuing to decrease relationship behavior as well. At stage R1, followers need clear and specific directions. At stage R2, both high-task and high-relationship behavior is needed. The high-task behavior compensates for the followers' lack of ability, and the high-relationship behavior tries to get the followers psychologically to "buy into" the leader's desires. R3 represents motivational problems that are best solved by a supportive, nondirective, participative style. Finally, at stage R4, the leader doesn't have to do much because followers are both willing and able to take responsibility.

For those familiar with the Managerial Grid, you might have noticed the high similarity between Hersey and Blanchard's four leadership styles and the four extreme "corners" in the Managerial Grid. The telling style equates to the 9,1 leader; selling equals 9,9; participating is equivalent to 1,9; and delegating is the same as the 1,1 leader. Is situational leadership, then, merely the Managerial Grid with one major difference--the replacement of the 9,9 ("one style for all occasions") contention with the recommendation that the "right" style should align with the readiness of the followers? Hersey and Blanchard say "No!"<sup>3</sup> They contend that the grid emphasizes *concern* for production and people, which are attitudinal dimensions. Situational leadership, in contrast, emphasizes task and relationship *behavior*. In spite of Hersey and Blanchard's claim, this is a pretty minute

differentiation. Understanding of the situational leadership theory is probably enhanced by considering it as a fairly direct adaptation of the grid framework to reflect four stages of follower readiness.

Situational Leadership Theory has an intuitive appeal. It acknowledges the importance of followers and builds on the logic that leaders can compensate for ability and motivational limitations in their followers. Yet research efforts to test and support the theory have generally been disappointing.<sup>4</sup> Why? Possible explanations include internal ambiguities and inconsistencies in the model itself as well as problems with research methodology in tests of the theory. So in spite of its intuitive appeal and wide popularity, at least at this point in time, any enthusiastic endorsement has to be cautioned against.

## Sources:

<sup>1</sup>P. Hersey and K.H. Blanchard, "So You Want to Know Your Leadership Style?" *Training and Development Journal*, February 1974, pp. 1-15; and P. Hersey and K.H. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Cited in C.F. Fernandez and R.P. Vecchio, "Situational Leadership Theory Revisited: A Test of an Across-Jobs Perspective," *Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1997, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup>P. Hersey and K. H. Blanchard, "Grid Principles and Situationalism: Both! A Response to Blake and Mouton," *Group and Organization Studies*, June 1982, pp. 207-10.

<sup>4</sup>See for instance, C.F. Fernandez and R.P. Vecchio, "Situational Leadership Theory Revisited: A Test of an Across-

There are four categories of follower readiness:

R1. People are both unable and either unwilling or too insecure to take responsibility to do something. They are neither competent nor confident.

R2. People are unable but willing to do the necessary job tasks. They are motivated but currently lack the appropriate skills.

R3. People are able but unwilling or too apprehensive to do what the leader wants.

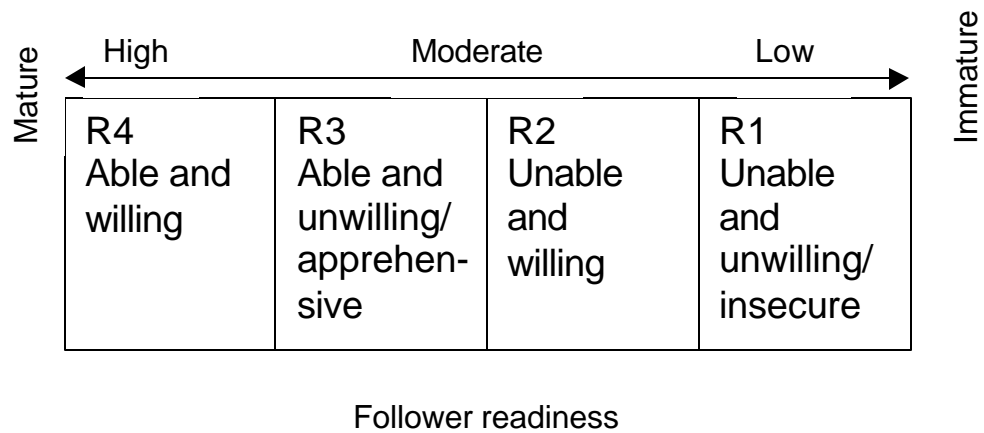
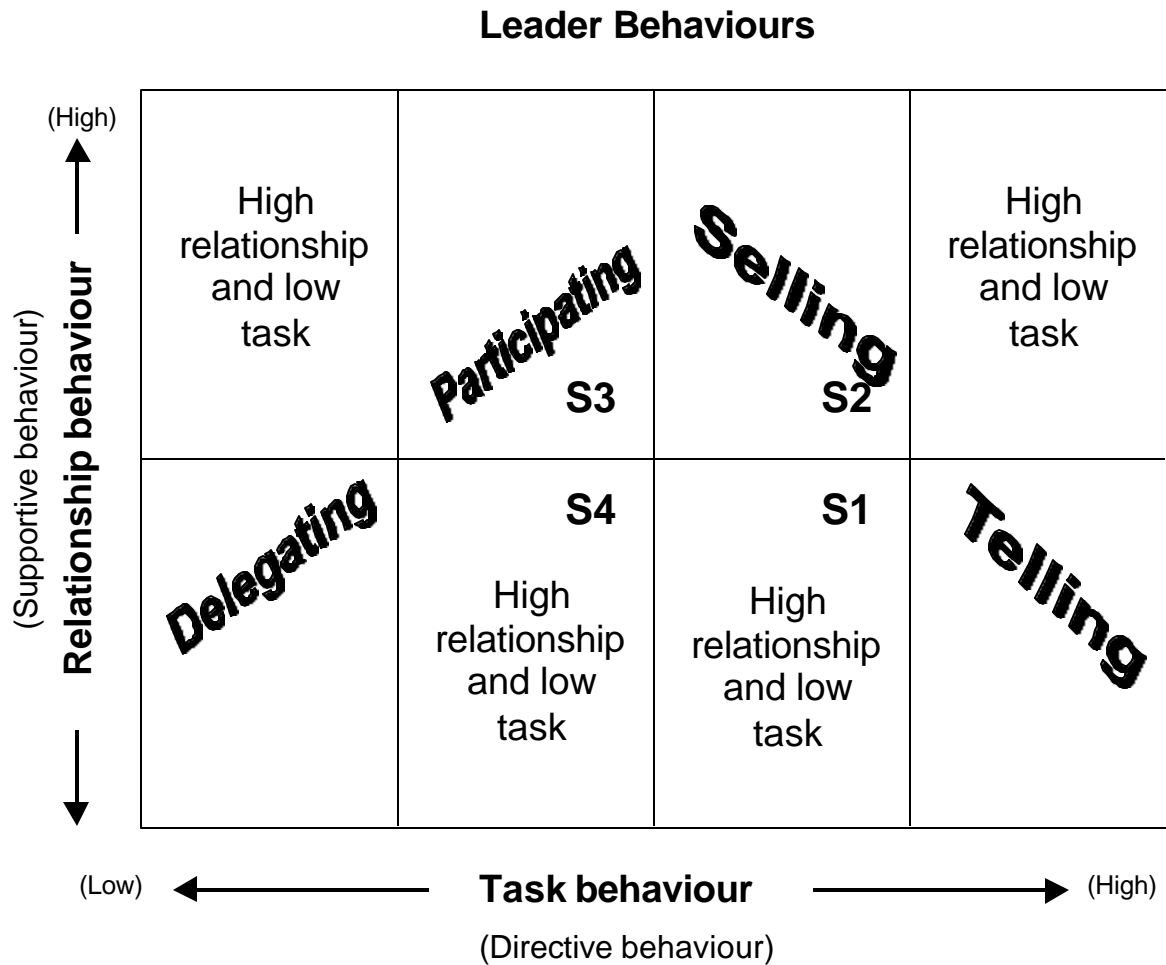
R4. People are both able and willing to do what is asked of them.

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The theory remains popular in some organizations, though it has received little research support.

Jobs Perspective," *Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1997, pp. 67-84; and C.L. Graeff, "Evolution of Situational Leadership Theory: A Critical Review," *Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1997, pp. 153-70.

**Exhibit 1  
Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model**



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