

The Situational Leadership Theory: A Critical View¹

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Theoretical issues undermining the robustness of the situational leadership theory and the utility of its prescriptive model are discussed. More specifically, conceptual ambiguity associated with the mechanics of applying the concept of job-relevant maturity and other problems with the normative model are seen as seriously limiting its pragmatic utility. In addition, problems with the LEAD instrument are identified and discussed.

Casual conversations with organization development consultants and/or industry personnel such as training directors and personnel managers quickly reveal the enormous popularity of the situational leadership theory. Indeed, an unobtrusive measure of its sustained popularity in industry is its ability to support three full pages of advertising extolling its virtues in the center of a leading practitioner's journal of training and development (*Training and Development Journal*, 1981). Moreover, given the increasing frequency with which the situational leadership theory is surfacing in academically oriented textbooks (Connor, 1980; Glueck, 1980; Hodgetts, 1979; Yukl, 1981) and journals (Barrow, 1977), an academic review of its theoretical robustness and normative prescriptions seems appropriate.

Background

Building on the 3-D leadership framework presented by Reddin (1967), Hersey and Blanchard (1969) developed a life cycle theory of leadership, which they later renamed the situational leadership theory (1977). Using the traditional categories of leader behavior, initiating structure (IS), and consideration (C), they formulated a situational theory of leadership in which the primary situational determinant of leader behavior is the task-relevant maturity of the subordinate(s). Subordinate task-relevant maturity is argued to consist of two factors—job maturity and psychological maturity (1982, p. 157).

Job maturity is argued to reflect the capacity or ability of the individual to perform the job. It is hypothesized to result from the amount of education and/or experience that the individual has acquired. Psychological maturity appears to reflect the motivational state of the person via the individual's level of self-esteem and confidence. This dimension is argued to be associated with an achievement orientation and a willingness and ableness to accept responsibility. Consistent with the common assertion that performance is determined mainly by ability times motivation (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976; Davis, 1957; Lawler, 1966; Maier, 1955; Mitchell, 1982; Porter & Lawler, 1968; Viteles, 1953; Vroom, 1964), Hersey and Blanchard identify performance as the behavioral manifestation of job-relevant maturity.

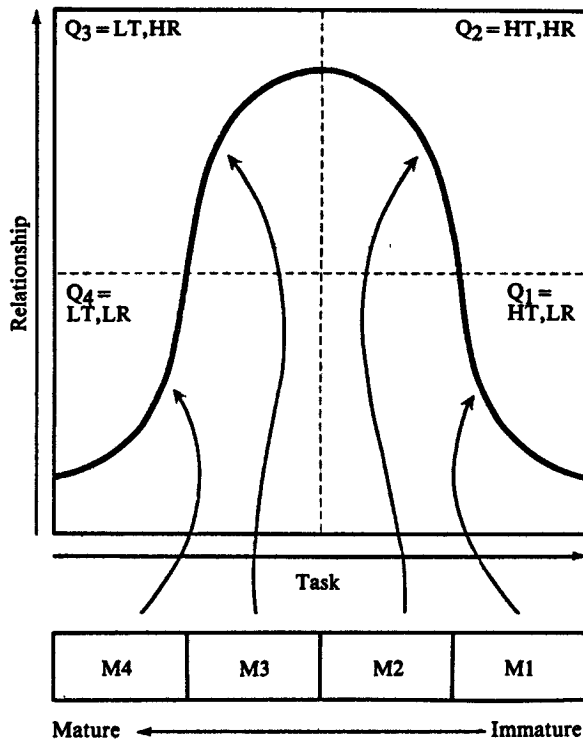
Problems with the Normative Model

Several aspects of the Hersey-Blanchard prescriptive model for applying the job-maturity notion of situational leadership theory appear to discredit its theoretical robustness and to restrict severely its pragmatic utility.

Because the bell-shaped "prescriptive curve" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982), illustrated in Figure 1, in the normative model of the situational leadership theory is central to applying the theory, it is appropriate to review arguments presented as its theoretical justification. Citing Korman's (1966) review of initiating structure and consideration literature, Hersey and Blanchard argue that Korman suggests "the possibil-

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Figure 1
The Situational Leadership Model^a



^aAdapted from Hersey and Blanchard (1977).

ity of a curvilinear relationship rather than a simple linear relationship between initiating structure and consideration and other variables" (1977, p. 160). In their latest version of the theory Hersey and Blanchard assert only that "Situational Leadership Theory has identified such a curvilinear relationship" (1982, p. 150). This is a more ambiguous statement than were their 1977 arguments, and it is one that constitutes essentially no theoretical justification for the "prescriptive curve." In their earlier version they stated that situational leadership theory "is based on a curvilinear relationship between task behavior and relationship behavior and maturity" (1977, p. 160). Subsequently, Graeff noted: "Since the preposition *between* is appropriate for linking any two variables, and because Korman did not suggest a curvilinear relationship between initiating structure and consideration, but rather a curvilinear relationship between IS and other variables, and C and other variables (most likely performance and satisfaction), Hersey and Blanchard appeared to be arguing for a curvilinear relationship *between* maturity and relationship

behavior, and *between* maturity and task behavior" (1981, p. 204). Unfortunately, examination of their earlier model (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) or their more recent prescriptive model (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) for applying situational leadership theory reveals that the task behavior dimension and maturity variables are all exhibited on the horizontal axis (Figure 1). An inverse *direct* relationship between the task dimension and either or both of the components of maturity is thereby indicated.

Graeff (1981) suggested that the significance of the inverse, direct relationship is best elucidated in relation to the conceptual ambiguity of job-relevant maturity as it was used in the 1977 normative model. In the 1977 version of situational leadership theory, both motivation and ability were compressed into a global measure of maturity; it was impossible to determine which was the debilitating influence (if both were not responsible) at extremely low levels of performance (i.e., low maturity). Also, in the 1977 version of situational leadership theory Hersey and Blanchard offered mainly examples and illustrations that suggested or stated that ability is the debilitating influence at extremely low levels of performance. Graeff argued "that the negative inverse relationship between task behavior and maturity implicitly weighs ability as the performance determinant given greater importance in situational leadership theory, if a positive causal relationship between task behavior on the part of the leader and an increase in subordinate ability is assumed" (1981, p. 205).

In the 1982 version of situational leadership theory Hersey and Blanchard attempt to reduce the conceptual ambiguity inherent in the unidimensional scale of maturity used in the 1977 normative model. They dichotomize maturity into its respective components and promulgate the manner in which these components combine at the four levels of maturity. Unfortunately, the new model suffers from internal consistency problems (Aldag & Brief, 1981), exhibited by a conceptual contradiction and seemingly no theoretical or logical justification for the way the components of maturity combine in the center two levels of maturity. The conceptual contradiction is revealed by a comparison of their descriptions of the four levels of maturity with the normative model. Using a present-absent dichotomy for each of the two components of maturity, their descriptions of each of the four levels reveal that the subordinate(s) is/are presumed to be "unwilling" (not motivated) at the

M-1 and M-3 levels and "willing" (motivated) at the M-2 and M-4 levels of maturity. These assertions are inconsistent with the *linear* "psychological maturity" scale (willingness) exhibited in the normative model.

Further, Hersey and Blanchard argue that the subordinate(s) is/are "unable" to perform at the M-1 and M-2 maturity levels and "able" at the M-3 and M-4 levels. Considered with the motivation dimension, then, the subordinate(s) is/are argued to be *less mature* when s/he is "willing" but "unable" to perform at the M-2 level than at the M-3 level at which s/he is "unwilling" but "able." Essentially, they argue that a motivated person without ability is *less mature* than an unmotivated person with ability. This gives "causal priority" to ability as the first-or-strongest-to-impact debilitating influence on performance (maturity), but a number of logical arguments could be made for just the opposite situation. For example, a motivated person who lacks ability (M-2) might be considered *more* mature than an unmotivated person with talent (M-3), especially if s/he is willing (motivated) to acquire the necessary skills. It seems logical to argue that in simple, routine, easy-to-learn tasks, performance will be negatively impacted (reflecting low maturity) more strongly by motivation problems than by the lack of ability. This belief is inherent in the folk-management Peter Principle (Peter & Hull, 1969) that suggests that the lack of ability, not motivation, comes into play as one encounters more complex tasks with greater responsibility.

It is widely asserted and considerable evidence confirms that ability and motivation combine interactively and not additively as performance determinants (Chung, 1977; Lawler, 1971; Lawler, 1973). Therefore, the absence of or a very low level of either would strongly influence performance in a negative fashion. A simple example reveals how overemphasis on the ability dimension severely limits the theoretical robustness of the prescriptive model and, therefore, the situational leadership theory. If a subordinate displays a very low level of self-esteem resulting in no self-confidence, which reduces his/her motivation to zero, s/he will perform very poorly. This, in turn, would reflect a zero or very low maturity level. At low maturity, however, the model advocates high task (HT) and low relationship (LR) as appropriate behaviors ($M - 1 = HT, LR$), with coercion as the appropriate power base, the exact opposite of what Hersey and Blanchard advocate as appropriate for

the "shy or insecure employee" (1982, pp. 151, 183). High relationship and either low (LT) or high task (HT) behavior would seem more appropriate to boost the employee's self-image, confidence, and motivation.

The definition of relationship behavior as it is operationalized in the model also is problematic. The definition of high-relationship (HR) behavior switches from two-way communications and socioemotional support in Quadrant (Q) 2 (HT, HR) to participative decision making (participation via two-way communication) in Q3 (HR, LT). If these leader behaviors are all thought to impact primarily on psychological maturity (subordinate motivation) through "reinforcement," there ostensibly is no justification by Hersey and Blanchard for this dichotomy regarding the operational definition of "high relationships." In other words, no rationale is presented for offering "socioemotional support" as appropriate high relationship behavior (motivation technique) in Q2 and participative decision making as appropriate high relationship behavior (motivation technique) in Q3, and not vice versa. Further, and in a pragmatic sense, the leader engages in lots of behavior in the former (stroking, counseling, coaching, communicating, or reinforcing). Much the opposite is true for participative decision making in the latter because the absolute amount of leader behavior required is lower or minimal. The subordinates now are making decisions. The leader's actions are defined in the obverse of subordinate(s) behavior. Consequently, the definition of high relationship behavior can be determined precisely in the normative model only in relation to a value of either high or low on the other dimension of maturity, task behavior.

The prescriptive model applying situational leadership theory argues that participative decision making as a management technique has "a higher probability of success as one moves from low to moderate levels of maturity, and then begins to plateau in effectiveness as followers become high in task-relevant maturity" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 169). This assertion is ambiguous, if not invariant, with regard to two other arguments on the same page. First, it clearly disagrees with their linear argument that "the higher the level of task-relevant maturity of an individual or group, the higher probability that participation will be an effective management technology" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 169). Second, they argue that the effectiveness of participa-

tion reaches its apex in Q3 (HR,LT), and decreases in Q4 because of potential "group-think" problems (Janis, 1971). If a group is conceptualized as at least one more than a dyad (the leader and one follower), this theoretical justification seems incomplete and seriously weakened. Several theorists (Patchen, 1970; Vroom & Jago, 1974; Vroom & Yetten, 1973), including Hersey and Blanchard (1977), explicitly recognize that participative decision making also can occur in a one-on-one situation between *one* subordinate and a leader.

Finally, situational leadership theory argues that a high-task-low-relationship combination of leader behaviors is appropriate when the subordinate(s) is/are highly immature. This is because providing very much relationship behavior is likely to cause the subordinate(s) "to take advantage of a permissive leader" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, pp. 170-171), much the same as a child might exploit a parent. At the other end of the maturity continuum, at which situational leadership theory advocates a low-task-low-relationship combination of leader behavior, the normative model would advocate that a *slight* decrease in the motivation level of the subordinate(s), resulting in a moderately high level of maturity (M3), be met with a change in leader behavior to a combination of low-task-high-relationship behaviors. Increasing relationship behavior (especially an increase in participative decision making), according to the logic and arguments presented above, might reinforce the decrease in performance that was caused by a decrease in motivation and, as a consequence, contribute to an even greater decrease in performance via further deterioration of subordinate(s) maturity to the M3 level. Hersey and Blanchard (1974) describe a situation essentially similar to the regression illustration just cited, in which decreased motivation appears to be lowering performance. They identify the Q2 combination of HR,HT behaviors as most appropriate and the Q1 combination of HT,LR behaviors as least appropriate. However, an argument could be made, consistent with expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), that the HT,LR (Q1) combination is best for dealing with this type of motivational problem because clarifying instrumentalities (P-O expectations) might provide the greatest leverage for restoring motivation levels. Accepting the expectancy argument makes the situational leadership theory normative model much less useful diagnostically: a slight decrease in performance via a decrease in motivation

at the Q4 level of maturity could possibly necessitate regression through the entire range of combinations of leader behaviors to the Q1 position of HT,LR behavior. Besides the problem identified in Situation 10, there are other aspects of the situations described in the LEAD instrument that merit discussion because of apparent inconsistencies or contradictions between the instrument and arguments presented in the situational leadership theory.

Problems with the LEAD Instrument

Hersey and Blanchard (1974) developed the leader adaptability and style inventory (LASI), which they later (1977) renamed the leader effectiveness and adaptability description (LEAD) instrument. Initially, the instrument was designed to provide insight into one's perception of how he/she behaves as a leader, especially with respect "to three aspects of leader behavior: (1) style, (2) style range, and (3) style adaptability" (1977, p. 225). The 12 situations described in the instrument require the respondent to select, from among four alternative solutions, the one that s/he believes is most appropriate for the situation as it is described. The four alternatives listed for each situation are argued to represent each of the four combinations of high or low task and relationship behaviors. The respondent's leadership style is determined by counting the number of respondent choices reflecting each of the four combinations (HT&LR, HT&HR, LT&HR, LT&LR).

One problem with the LEAD instrument as a measure of perceived leadership style is that the low task-low relationship style appears to be seriously underrepresented, or at least inadequately described, in solutions offered in several of the situations. They describe alternative actions, such as intentionally do not intervene, take no definite action, avoid confrontation, leave things alone, and leave the group alone in situations 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8, respectively. Descriptions of these actions seem to reflect extreme delegation if not abdication of the leadership role, or *no* leadership at all, instead of an adequate description of the *low* task-*low* relationship behaviors. Perhaps a more appropriate description of the low task-low relationship behavior combination might be something like: take *little* definite action, intervene *only* at a *minimum*, *minimize* interference into the group's functioning. The Hersey-Blanchard take-no-action-on-the-part-of-the-leader alternatives con-

tribute to an implicit bias away from selecting LT,LR style. They therefore reduce the diagnostic utility of the instrument to an overinflated measure of the remaining three styles.

In addition to measuring the respondent's dominant and supporting styles from essentially three categories of leader behavior, the LEAD instrument purports to measure the respondent's style adaptability or effectiveness. The effectiveness score can range from +24 to -24. It is determined by summing the values assigned to the alternatives chosen in each of the 12 situations. The most to least appropriate alternatives from among four in each situation are scored +2, +1, -1, and -2, respectively. Insufficient justification for the values assigned to alternatives in several situations makes the validity of the effectiveness score highly suspect. For example, Situation 3 of the LEAD instrument reports:

Members of the group are *unable* to solve a problem themselves. Their leader has normally left them alone. Group performance and interpersonal relations have been good (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, p. 260, emphasis added).

Hersey and Blanchard's diagnosis of this situation reiterates that "the group is now *unable* to solve a problem" and it needs "an intervention from the leader" (1977, p. 260). They promulgate that the high relationship-low task alternative is superior to the other three alternatives. Simultaneously, they state that the high task-low relationship combination is the *least* desirable of the four alternatives. Because it clearly is a lack of *ability* that is hampering performance, the leader intervention probably should be at least substantially task-oriented in nature, such as defining and/or clarifying roles, assigning tasks, coordinating efforts, and providing direction.

Situation 4 and Situation 7 in the LEAD instrument are extremely similar, if not identical. Yet, each is associated with a different leader behavior combination as the preferred alternative. In Situation 4 "the leader is considering a major change" with a group that has been performing well and "respects the need for change." In Situation 7, "the leader is considering changing to a new structure," and in the diagnosis of this situation Hersey and Blanchard note that this constitutes "major changes in the situation." Also in 7, "members of the group have made suggestions about needed change," which sounds very much like "reflects the need for change" in Situation 4. In both situations, the group members

are described as having been productive and flexible in the past. It is noted that the most preferred solution in Situation 4 is low relationship-low task. In Situation 7 the most preferred solution is high relationship-low task behaviors. This apparent arbitrary assignment of values to the alternatives does little to promote confidence in the validity of the LEAD instrument.

Situation 5 in the LEAD instrument implies that only decreased motivation is contributing to a decrease in performance, because employee attitudes (unconcerned with meeting objectives) are targeted as the problem. In their diagnosis, however, Hersey and Blanchard state that "the group is relatively immature, not only in terms of willingness to take responsibility, but also in experience" (1977, p. 262). Ability and/or experience is not explicitly or implicitly considered in the description of Situation 5. It thus would appear that Hersey and Blanchard are reading substantially more into their diagnostic assessment of the situation, perhaps to justify selection of the high task-low relationship alternative as most appropriate for a group they identify (after the fact) as deficient in both ability (experience) and motivation.

A review of Situation 11 of the LEAD—including comparison of the situation description, situation diagnosis, and rationale for alternatives reflecting different combinations of leader behaviors—reflects ambiguity, if not inconsistent logic, in advocating high relationship-low task as the best alternative. Their rationale for the two alternatives advocating low task leader behavior (which are preferred over *both* of the two high task alternatives) is that "some additional structure may be needed to improve the group's handling of tasks and directions" and there is need "to focus on increasing productivity" (1977, p. 269).

Finally, Situation 12 clearly reveals that problems with interpersonal relations in the group most likely are affecting group performance via an impact on group cohesion and perhaps the motivation of group members. Hersey and Blanchard declare that the best alternative is to allow the group members to work it out themselves; hence, the low task-low relationship alternative is argued to be the best. The logic of this assertion is not obvious in their diagnostic explanation of why this is the preferred alternative.

Conclusions

The Hersey and Blanchard situational leadership theory makes minor contributions to the leadership literature. Perhaps most important is their focus on the truly situational nature of leadership and their recognition of the need for behavior flexibility on the part of the leader (Yukl, 1981). In addition, their recognition of the subordinate as the most important situational determinant of appropriate leader behavior is a perspective that seems justified and highly appropriate if leadership is defined conceptually as usually is the case (Barrow, 1977), as an interpersonal phenomenon involving influence and collective efforts toward goal attainment.

The prescriptive model for applying situational leadership theory and the diagnostic instrument for measuring leader style, style range, and effectiveness merit much less favorable evaluations. The concept of task-relevant maturity that has been noted to be conceptually ambiguous (Barrow, 1977; Yukl, 1981) also exhibits serious internal consistency problems,

including a substantial conceptual contradiction. An absence of any theoretical explanation or justification for how the two components of maturity combine in the important middle range levels of maturity (M-2 and M-3) not only represents a serious weakness of the model, but it suggests the failure to recognize the commonly accepted notion about the multiplicative fashion in which the two primary determinants of performance usually combine. The diagnostic curve used to link maturity to task and relationship leader behaviors lacks theoretical justification, and the prescriptive model clearly is unable to handle some situations logically. Problems with the conceptual definition of relationship behavior and inconsistent arguments regarding the appropriateness of participative decision making contribute to a further erosion of the utility of the prescriptive model for use by the practitioner. The many problems inherent in the LEAD instrument render its utility more appropriately, perhaps, to an item for eliciting discussion about leadership issues with students or management-seminar participants.

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