Situational Leadership Theory

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In order to make it in the business world, we need strong leaders who can motivate and guide the company and its employees to success. To become a good leader, however, takes practice, experience, patience, and a lot of hard work, among other traits. To help ease this tension, a number of leadership theories have been developed to help provide some direction to the leader himself on how to best conduct his personal and professional dealings. One of these theories is known as the Situational Leadership Theory.

The Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) asserts that effective leaders do not make all decisions equally or by the same means, and a number of factors will determine the leader’s style. These include the motivation and competence of the followers, along with the relationship between them and the leader. A more determining factor than the actual reality of the situation itself may come from the leader’s assessment and perception of his followers, along with the type of situation. In addition, the leader’s mood or stress level may also play a role (Syque, n.d., “Situational Leadership”). Therefore, the SLT emphasizes that a leader’s style should be altered to reflect the follower’s developmental style or maturity, which takes into account his or her motivation and task competency. Based on these factors, then, the leader should place more or less emphasis on the task and/or the relationship between himself and his followers. Because of this, the leadership style is situation-specific. This proposed model allows for analyzing a particular situation one may be involved in and using the leadership style that is most appropriate for that situation. The style, then, may vary from person to person or even from situation to situation for the same person (12manage, n.d.; Syque, n.d., “Hersey and Blanchard’s”).

Of all the theories of managerial leadership, the Situational Leadership Theory remains not only one of the most well-known, but also one of the least validated and empirically-based
theories. However, it is still widely popular and provides a framework for the leader to choose the appropriate leadership style based on his followers’ maturity levels. This maturity is determined, in combination, by the level of the subordinates’ commitment and competence as mentioned above. The leader, then, should show fairly low consideration and high task structuring for followers with a low maturity level. In addition, he should also increase the amount of consideration while decreasing task structuring as the subordinates’ maturity level rises. Eventually, considerateness should cease as followers reach a high maturity level (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). To demonstrate this, four pairings of subordinate maturity and leadership style have been proposed and are presented in Table 1, which can be found in Appendix A.

In order to determine which style of leadership to use, it is necessary to first evaluate the followers based on their perceived level of commitment and enthusiasm about the task, which can be somewhat subjective. Employees at the M1 level are at the lowest level of maturity and lack the knowledge, skills, or confidence to work alone. They may be new employees, and they often need to be motivated and pushed to perform the task. At the next level up, those in the M2 maturity level may be accepting of the task but do not possess the skills necessary to complete it, while at M3 they are ready and willing and have greater skills but may still lack confidence. At M4, individuals have the ability to work alone and have the confidence and skills to succeed, in addition to being committed to the task (Mind Tools, n.d.).

Once the followers’ maturity levels are determined, the leader can apply the proper leadership style to suit them. In S1, the leader tells the follower exactly what to do and how to go about doing it. In S2, the leader supplies information and direction but there is greater
communication between the individuals. In this case, the leader must “sell” the message to get the individual or team involved and committed. In S3, leaders can concentrate more on the relationship and less on specific directions, working with the individual or team to share the decisions. At the most advanced level, leaders in S4 hand over the majority of the responsibility to the followers but, although they are less involved in the process, they still monitor the progress (Mind Tools, n.d.). The combination of subordinate and subsequent leadership style chosen is depicted in Figure 1 as seen in Appendix A.

The SLT, when compared with alternate leadership theories, has many distinct strengths and is easy to comprehend and apply to a great number of leadership settings. In addition, it is less descriptive and more prescriptive in nature, offering guidelines for interpersonal interactions and taking into account that there is not one universal leadership style that will suit every situation. Instead, SLT asserts the importance of defining subordinates’ different readiness levels for assuming greater responsibility and developing their individual skill sets. Indeed, these reasons are why it has been taught time and time again for many years within leadership training programs. SLT is not without criticisms, however, and a major concern is the vagueness that surrounds the concept of the followers’ development level. Initially, this was determined by the equal weight of the combination of the followers’ commitment and aptitude on a continuous scale, which was then converted to a set of distinct categories of level of development as described above. However, the manner in which the categories were to be determined was never discussed by the theory’s founders and, therefore, any empirical studies must create their own scheme (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009).
Although there has not been much effort to provide empirical evidence of the theory’s capabilities, a few major studies have been conducted. The first was published in 1987 by Vecchio and included 303 high school teachers in 14 different schools. Data was gathered based on the supervisors’ leadership styles, including consideration and initiating structure, along with subordinates’ maturity, performance, satisfaction with supervision, and quality of leader and follower interactions. It was concluded that SLT’s predicted outcomes held true only for lower follower maturity whose supervisors provided more structure and less consideration. This, therefore, may imply that new hires need more direction from the leader. However, SLT may not be relevant to predict other employees’ attitudes and performance (Vecchio, 1987). Another study by Norris and Vecchio in 1992 obtained data from 91 full-time nurses and their supervisors with respect to employee performance, maturity, and distress in relation to leadership styles. It was again found that low and moderate maturity levels had predictable results, but the extent of the relationship was not significant (Norris & Vecchio, 1992). To replicate and expound upon these studies, Fernandez & Vecchio (1997) conducted another study with 332 university employees and 32 supervisors. The purpose of this was to gather data on leader behavior and subordinate maturity to test for predicted outcomes of employee performance, satisfaction, and leader/follower interactions. Still, it was found that the Situational Leadership Theory did not have much descriptive usefulness. However, when further analysis was then completed, it was suggested that supervisory monitoring is helpful for low maturity level employees, while consideration has a greater impact on higher level individuals. A final study in 2006, which Vecchio helped conduct, looked at 860 cadets in 86 United States Military Academy squads after four weeks of intense field training. The intent was to assess leader consideration and structuring, along with follower maturity, satisfaction, performance, and leader/follower
interaction. Unfortunately, the results of the study did not provide solid evidence of the outcomes predicted by the leadership theory (Vecchio, Bullis, Brazil, 2006).

Because of the unanticipated results of prior studies and the overall conclusion that there is minimal support for low level maturity, the Situational Leadership Theory has been subject to a number of revisions. Somewhat recently, it has been restated to be more prescriptive, with a change in the interaction between the behavior of the leader in response to the followers’ developmental level. The new theory, or SLT-II, still uses competence and commitment as the bases of maturity, but these aspects are not treated equally as they were before. In addition, individuals who are considered to be autonomous and at the most advanced stage of maturity are now called “developed” instead of being referred to as high on maturity (Blanchard, 2007). These changes can be seen in Table 2, also found in Appendix A of this report, which depicts the new follower developmental levels and corresponding optimal leadership styles as adapted from Blanchard (2007).

In SLT-II, followers at the D1 level are generally inexperienced and lack the appropriate skills needed to complete the task but do have the confidence and/or motivation necessary to do so. At level D2, followers may have the correct skills but still cannot perform the job without help because the task or situation may be new to them. At the D3 level, then, individuals are experienced and competent but may not have the confidence or motivation to work alone or at a fast enough pace. Finally, at D4, employees are the most advanced in their development and are experienced at the job and comfortable enough to do it well (12manage, n.d.).

The leader’s style in SLT-II is similar to that of SLT-I, the original Situational Leadership Theory. In S1, the main emphasis is placed on the task and little on the relationship.
Leaders determine the tasks to be completed, keep a close watch over them, and make all of the decisions, thereby making communication relatively one-way. In S2, on the other hand, there is both a high relationship and task focus, and leaders still determine the roles and tasks but also ask for ideas and suggestions. Communication is more two-way, but leaders still make all the decisions. As leaders move to the S3 level, as determined by the follower being in the D3 zone, there is low task and high relationship application. Followers are able to take control and make day-to-day decisions, but leaders still facilitate and take part, as necessary. Finally, when leaders can use the S4 style, they will transfer most of the control to the follower and provide little task and relationship control themselves. Although leaders still participate in decisions and problem-solving, followers decide when and how the leader will be involved (12manage, n.d.). Again, the combination of subordinate and subsequent leadership style chosen can be seen in Appendix A in Figure 2.

In order to apply SLT, the leader should conduct the following set of steps as quoted from 12manage (n.d.):

1. Make an overview per employee of his/her tasks
2. Assess the employee on each task (D1…D4)
3. Decide on the leadership (management) style per task (S1…S4)
4. Discuss the situation with the employee
5. Make a joint plan
6. Follow-up, check, and correct. (¶ 9)

A final, more recent study conducted by Thompson & Vecchio (2009) attempted to determine the validity of SLT by contrasting the predictive capability of the theory’s different versions, replicating previous findings of SLT-I and performing the first empirical study of SLT-II. Additionally, the study aimed at confirming the most crucial prediction of SLT, which is
whether leader autonomy and follower experience work in tandem to predict follower performance and attitude. Data from 357 subordinates and 80 supervisors in 10 Norwegian financial institutions were collected because previous studies had been done on service-oriented companies, and for-profit businesses had generally been neglected. Again, however, it was found that there was no strong evidence of the validity of SLT’s predictions in this setting either (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009).

As a human resource development professional attempting to educate and mold current and future leaders, the Situational Leadership Theory is important to understand, but only holds limited merit. Due to prior studies, it is hard to endorse the theory’s use in leadership training programs. It is good for discussing interpersonal relations but is not empirically significant to justify closely following its prescriptive guidelines, either for SLT-I or SLT-II. “At best, there is some evidence to support the original theory’s prescriptions for dealing with newer employees with greater directiveness and then substituting directiveness with supportiveness as employee seniority increases,” but there is no validation otherwise (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009, p. 846). Although it is a highly fascinating and attractive theory, leadership trainers should warn students about the lack of its empirical foundation. There may be some value, however, in teaching SLT as a foundation for discussing leader/follower social interaction and modifying a leader’s actions to match subordinate attributes. Trainers should also discuss the fact that employees with greater experience generally profit from greater autonomy, as this is not only one of the small facets supported by SLT, but other leadership theories as well (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009).

As we can see, of all the leadership theories, SLT is one of the most well-known but least reliable. Although it has been around for decades and has psychological appeal due to its ease of
understanding and common sense nature, there is little empirical evidence to support its prescriptive use. It should not be completely discredited, however, as it may provide a foundation of social interaction skills, but warning should be given during leadership training to these effects. Further longitudinal studies may prove to be beneficial by carefully following new hires from the time they start through to their greatest level of experience. In this way, we can determine whether or not changes in leadership style have an effect as the follower becomes more mature in his job.
Resources


### Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subordinates’ Maturity Level</th>
<th>Most Beneficial Leadership Style</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1 (or R1): Low/Very low</td>
<td>S1: “Telling” (directing) style</td>
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<tr>
<td>M2 (or R2): Medium/Moderately low; limited skills</td>
<td>S2: “Selling” (coaching) style</td>
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<tr>
<td>M3 (or R3): Medium/Moderately high; higher skill but lack of confidence</td>
<td>S3: “Participating” (supporting) style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4 (or R4): High/Very high</td>
<td>S4: “Delegating” style</td>
</tr>
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Table 1. SLT’s subordinate maturity level versus leadership style.

Adapted from Thompson & Vecchio, 2009; Mind Tools, n.d.

![Situational Leadership model](image)

Figure 1. Situational Leadership model.

Manage Well, 2009.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>---------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>D1: Enthusiastic beginner with low competence and high commitment</td>
<td>S1: Directive style with low supportive and high directive behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td>D2: Disillusioned learner with low competence or some competence but low commitment</td>
<td>S2: Coaching style with high supportive and directive behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td>D3: Capable but cautious follower with moderate to high competence but inconsistent commitment</td>
<td>S3: Supportive style with high supportive behavior and low directive behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4: Self-reliant achiever with high competence and commitment</td>
<td>S4: Delegating style with low supportive and directive behaviors</td>
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Table 2. SLT-II’s subordinate developmental level versus leadership style.

Adapted from Blanchard, 2007; 12manage, n.d.

![Situational Leadership Theory-II Model (Blanchard)](image)

Figure 2. Situational Leadership Theory-II model.

12manage, n.d.