Great ideas revisited: Life-cycle theory of leadership
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Life-Cycle Theory of Leadership

BY KENNETH H. BLANCHARD AND PAUL HERSEY

In 1969, Training and Development Journal *was first to publish Blanchard and Hersey's innovative leadership theories. The article was reprinted in June, 1979. Here's a condensed version of the original.*

Over the years, recognizing task and relationships as important dimensions of leader behavior has pervaded the works of management theorists. These dimensions have been labeled variously as:

- autocratic and democratic
- authoritarian and equalitarian
- employee- and production-oriented
- goal achievement and group maintenance
- task ability and likability
- instrumental and expressive
- efficiency and effectiveness.

The differences seem more semantic than real.

It was believed that task and relationships were styles of leader behavior and, therefore, should be depicted as a single dimension along a continuum, moving from very authori-

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Revisiting the Life-Cycle Theory of Leadership

BY PAUL HERSEY AND KEN BLANCHARD

In the past decade, Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard haven't worked together much and have taken different stands on leadership. But on this occasion, they reunite to revisit their early ideas about leadership.

Hersey: I'm concerned that people who are reading the title of our 1969 article, "Life-Cycle Theory of Leadership," for the first time may mistakenly think it's about how someone leads from atop a popular piece of fitness equipment.

Now, most people refer to the life-cycle behavioral model as "situational leadership." People have described the model variously as a touchstone, cornerstone, map, compass, sextant, and powerful lens. That said, it's a pleasure to pick up a pen (now computer) again with Ken Blanchard.

Blanchard: When I was asked to write a commentary to our original article, I was thrilled to know that situational leadership is still alive and well, 25 years after the idea was born. I began to reminisce.

The article was written when Paul and I were both at Ohio University. I was an administrative assistant to the dean of the business college;

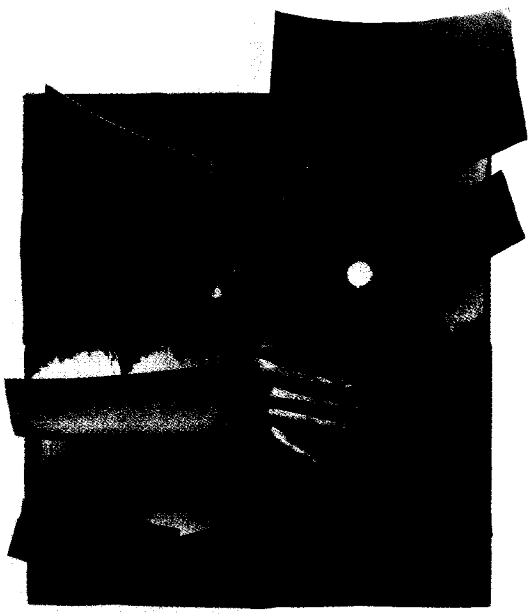
Revisited

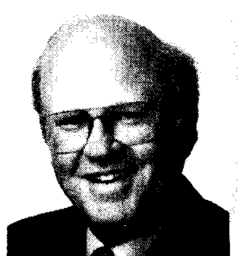
tarian (task) to very democratic (relationships). Later, that idea was dispelled. In 1945, studies by the Bureau of Business Research at Ohio State University questioned whether leader behavior could be depicted on a single continuum. The studies identified "initiating structure" (task) and "consideration" (relationships) as the two most important dimensions of leadership.

"Initiating structure" refers to a leader's behavior in delineating the relationship between himself and staff members and in endeavoring to establish well-defined patterns of organization, communication, and procedures. "Consideration" refers to behavior indicative of friendship, mutual trust, respect, and warmth in the relationship between a leader and his subordinates.

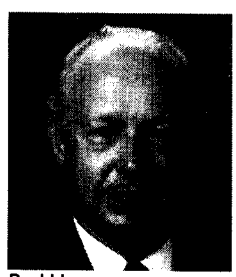
Follow-up studies found that people's leadership styles varied considerably. Some leaders rigidly structure followers' activities in terms of task accomplishments; others concentrate on building and maintaining good personal relationships with followers. Some leaders exhibit both task and relationships behavior. And some provide little structure and don't develop interpersonal relationships. The overall conclusion: Patterns of leader behavior are separate and distinct dimensions plotted on two separate axes rather than a single continuum.

In their Managerial Grid, Robert R. Blake and Jane S. Mouton popularized the task and relationships dimensions of leadership, using them extensively in organization- and management-development programs. On the grid, five types of leadership based on concern for production (task) and concern for people (relationships) are located in a four-quadrant matrix that was created by the





Ken Blanchard



Paul Hersey

Paul was chairperson of the management department. I heard about an organizational behavior course Paul taught, so I asked if I could sit in. "No one audits my course," he said. "If you want to take it for credit, you're welcome." I was taken aback, but my wife Margie helped me get my ego out of the way, and I signed up.

The course ended with a presentation of William Reddin's 3-D model, an outgrowth of Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid. The 3-D model suggested that there was no best leadership style. Later, Paul and I began developing the "Life-Cycle Theory of Leadership," as a model and as an article for *Training & Development.* The theory's name was inspired by parents' need to change their "leadership" styles as their children progress through infancy, adolescence, and adulthood. We felt that the same logic held true for managing new, developing, and experienced workers.

From life-cycle to situational leadership

In the 1972 edition of our book, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources,* we began using the term "situational leadership" rather than "life-cycle theory of leadership." And we made other important changes.

With the development of situational leadership, we emphasized that the dimensions of leadership were "task behavior" and "relationship behavior." Earlier models—such as Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid and Reddin's 3-D Management-Style Theory—used attitudinal dimensions, such as "concern for production," "concern for people," "task orientation," and "relationship orientation." We argued that there could be best attitudes for managers but that there was no best leadership style. For example, all

Illustration by Ellen Weinstein

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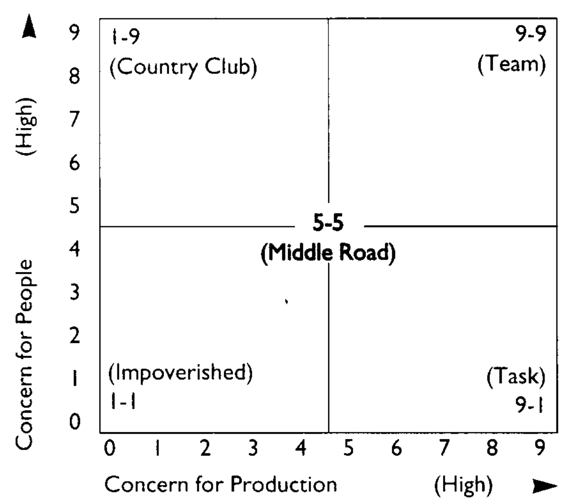
Figure 1: The Managerial Grid

The following quadrants represent degrees of the leadership styles, "concern for people" and "concern for production."



Ohio State studies. (See figure 1 on this page.)

Concern for production becomes more important to a leader as his rating advances on the horizontal scale; concern for people becomes more important as his rating progresses up the vertical axis. On both axes, a rating of "9" reflects maximum concern.

Some experts support either an integrated-leader style (high task and relationships) or a permissive, democratic, and human-relations approach (high relationships).

In the Ohio State studies, Andrew W. Halpin said, "Effective or desirable leadership behavior is characterized by ratings on both "initiating structure" and "consideration." Halpin concluded that the ideal or best leader style combines both.

Blake and Mouton's grid implies that the most desirable leadership style is "team management" (maximum concern for production and people) and that the least desirable is "impoverished management" (minimum concern for production and people).

Style to fit

Recent empirical studies show that no single all-purpose leadership style is universally successful.

In 1966, psychologist A. K. Korman reviewed studies on the relationship between the dimensions "initiating structure" and "consideration" and studies on various measures of leader effectiveness, including group productivity, performance under stress, absenteeism, and turnover. Korman concluded, "Despite that 'consideration' and 'initiating structure' have become bywords in American industrial psychology, little is known how those variables predict work performance."

Fred E. Fiedler—in testing his contingency model of leadership in more than 50 studies from 1951 to 1967—concluded that both directive, task-oriented leaders and

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managers should be concerned about production and people. But that concerned attitude can be expressed in different leadership styles, depending on the situation.

In the 1969 article, we didn't label the four leadership quadrants. With the development of situational leadership, we called quadrants 1 through 4 "telling," "selling," "participating," and "delegating."

In the past 30 years, situational leadership has undergone several advancements. We continued to work together on the model until 1979. Since then, our separate clients and colleagues have helped us grow with the model, relearn it, and gain a new and deeper appreciation of the subtle dynamics of influence and leadership. At times, our separate journeys have taken us down different paths, with diverse conclusions. In a way, the journey has been similar to raising a child. Most children have a unique relationship with each parent. One can argue the differences, or celebrate them. We've chosen to celebrate. Having respect for each other's opinions provides a common ground from which we can continue to develop situational leadership and its applications.

Then and now

When the "Life-Cycle Theory of Leadership" article was published in 1969, management hierarchy and the command-and-control approach to people management were alive and well. When situational leadership came along, some managers and trainers got excited. But the managers were still considered to be in charge. In fact, it was rare to involve followers in discussions about their own development level and readiness. The terminology used then—superior, subordinate, department head, hired hand, supervisor, and laborer—would probably have rendered such discussions fruitless.

Now, managers speak of change as a constant process. Many can provide detailed explanations of empowerment, total-quality control, team development, and partnering for performance. In essence, a transformation has occurred since the original article. Now, it's generally accepted that leadership is done *with* people, not *to* people.

As for us, now we may use different labels to conceptualize the leadership styles of situational leadership. But we feel that our approaches aren't that different. The years have taught us that within the simple and useful model, artistry and sophisticated skills are needed within each of the four styles:

- telling or directing
- persuading or coaching
- participating or supporting
- delegating.

To understand the available options within the four quadrants, just ask several leaders to describe each style. You'll get pages. The critical point: Leaders select the descriptors that best draw them into the appropriate style for a particular situation. For example, both coaching and persuading are types of style 2. Yet, when you think of someone coaching or persuading, different mental pictures come to mind. We need such variety to meet the moment-to-moment changes now required of leaders.

In the current workplace, applying situational leadernondirective, human-relations-oriented leaders are successful under some conditions. Other investigators have also shown that different leadership situations require different leader styles.

Empirical studies support the idea of no normative or best style of leadership. Successful leaders can adapt their behavior to meet followers' needs and the particular situation. Effectiveness depends on the leader, the followers, and situational elements. Leaders must be able to diagnose their own behavior in light of their environments. Variables include a leader's organization, superiors, associates, and job demands.

For example, in crisis-oriented organizations such as the military or police, evidence shows that the most appropriate leader style is high task. There's no time for talking things over or explaining decisions. Behavior must be automatic.

But a high-task style might not be effective in all military situations, as when officers trained at West Point were sent to command outposts in the Arctic. The scientific personnel there didn't respond favorably to the task-oriented behavior of the combat-trained officers. In such cases, a theoretically poor leadership style may be appropriate.

Effective leaders must be able to diagnose the demands of their environments and adapt their leader styles to fit. Or, they must change some or all of the variables.

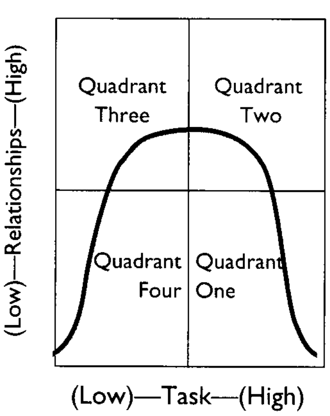
Attitude versus behavior

The dimensions of the Managerial Grid are attitudinal, a concern for feeling or emotion toward something. The dimensions in the Ohio State studies measure how people behave. A conflict develops when one draws behavioral assumptions from analyses of the grid's attitudinal dimensions. In many organizations, a high concern for both production and people is desirable. But managers with a high concern don't always find it appropriate to provide high structure or socio-emotional support.

For example, if a manager's subordinates are emotionally mature and able to take responsibility for themselves, the appropriate leadership style may be low task and low relationships. In such cases, a manager permits subordinates to participate in planning, organizing, and controlling their own operations. He plays a background role and provides socio-emotional support only when necessary.

Figure 2: The Life-Cycle Theory of Leadership

The quadrants represent degrees of the dimensions, "task" and "relationships."



ship means more emphasis on the tasks or activities targeted for change or improvement. The first step in using the model has always been to decide on the task. But for a host of reasons, people tend to generalize or look at too large a piece. To effectively assess an employee's needs, a leader may have to break a job into smaller elements.

As times changed, so did our thinking about diagnosing peoples' abilities to perform a specific task and the terminology used. During the 1960s, the term "maturity" in reference to assessing people didn't seem offensive. Now, it does. In the area of assessing job-performance needs, we have drawn diverse conclusions.

But first, the common ground. We would both state with conviction that situational leadership isn't as much about leadership as it is about meeting followers' (employees') needs. Getting people to focus on followers can improve leadership skills more than trying to teach a particular leadership style.

But we now frame our content in the context of separate life experiences. We serve best by not becoming prisoners of our own doctrines and by not letting commercial reasons cause us to give a false appearance of unity.

Group development and leadership

Blanchard: The work of colleagues Donald and Eunice Parisi-Carew on group-development theory was the initial impetus for me to create phase 2 of situational leadership. The Parisi-Carews cited the research of Lacoursiere, who studied the development stages of groups over time and perceived a sequence:

- orientation. When group members first convene and are eager to participate but unsure how to work together.
- dissatisfaction. When working together turns out to be more difficult than anticipated.
- resolution. When group members learn how to work together well.
- production.

The Parisi-Carews showed that the necessary leadership styles for moving a group through those stages correspond to the flow of the four situational-leadership styles: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating.

Style 1, directing, is appropriate for the orientation stage in which goals and roles must be clearly defined. Style 2, coaching, is essential for moving through the dissatisfaction stage in which the group needs direction, support, encouragement, and listening to. Once a group reaches the resolution stage, the leader's role can change to style 3, supporting. By then, the group provides its own direction. In the final production stage, an outside observer shouldn't be able to determine the designated leader. Then style 4, delegating, is appropriate.

The Parisi-Carews argued that if groups go through these stages, why would the development process for individuals be different? They were especially concerned about our original model's first two levels of maturity: "unwilling and unable" and "unable but willing." They thought that the first level of development or maturity should be "willing but unable," in order to correspond with the initial orientation stage of group development. In talking with practicing managers, that made sense. Most of

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The life-cycle theory

Korman has said, "What's needed is a systematic conceptualization of situational variance as it might relate to leadership behavior." He suggests a curvilinear relationship between two dimensions ("initiating structure" and "consideration") and other variables. We've developed the Life-Cycle Theory of Leadership, based on a curvilinear relationship between two dimensions (task and relationships) and maturity, in an attempt to provide leaders with some understanding of the relationship between an effective leadership style and followers' level of maturity. The theory emphasizes the followers. (See figure 2.)

Followers are vital because individually, they accept or reject a leader. As a group, they determine a leader's degree of personal power. As followers' level of maturity increases, appropriate leader behavior requires less structure and less socio-emotional support. Maturity is achievement, relative independence, and the ability to take responsibility. These components are often influenced by people's education and experience. Age may be a factor, but it's not directly related to maturity in the Life-Cycle Theory.

■ *Maturity is achievement, relative independence, and the ability to take responsibility* ■

Structured task behavior is appropriate for working with "immature" people. Leader behavior should move from high-task/low-relationships behavior to high-task/high-relationships behavior. As followers mature, a leader should move from high-relationships/low-task behavior to low-task/low-relationships behavior.

The Life-Cycle Theory suggests a basic style for different levels of maturity in meeting specific contingencies. Still, it may be necessary to vary one's style within the four quadrants. For example, when parents are using a high-relationships style with a child in college, it still might be appropriate to initiate some structure if they discover the child isn't behaving as maturely as expected.

The Life-Cycle Theory is evident in organizations in the interaction between superiors and subordinates. In working with highly trained and educated research-and-development people, the most effective leader style might be low-task/low-relationships behavior. But in the early stages of a project, the leader must impose a certain amount of structure as the project's requirements and limitations are established. Then the leader can move rapidly through the project cycle back to a mature low-task/low-relationships style.

Most groups in our society don't reach the backward-bending aspect of the cycle. Some evidence suggests that as people's level of education and experience increases, appropriate movement in that direction will take place. Yet, job demands might be a limiting factor in the development of workers' maturity.

For example, an assembly-line operation in an automobile plant is highly structured. It offers little opportunity for workers' maturation. They have minimal control over

us hire winners—people who are experienced and already developed in a particular job and who can operate effectively using style 3 or 4. Or, we hire potential winners in need of training, who may be low in ability (knowledge and skills) but high in willingness to learn a particular job.

The Parisi-Carews also thought that the second level of development or maturity should be "unwilling and unable," in order to correspond with the dissatisfaction stage of group development. Many managers told us that when people take on a new task in which they're inexperienced, disillusionment often sets in because they find that they need more time and energy than they anticipated to gain competence.

This new thinking required us to reconstruct how we looked at people and how we represented their development stages. We needed to depict individual growth in a way that moved from an enthusiastic beginner to a disillusioned learner to a capable-but-cautious performer to a self-directed achiever—from developing to developed.

Solid touchstones

Hersey: The term "maturity" became obsolete when the model evolved from a life-cycle, broad view of leadership to a situational-leadership, task-specific view. It took a few years for us to abandon the attempt to explain what we meant by "maturity." But in the effort to explain it, we came to understand followers better. A profound insight for me was realizing that managers embrace complex learning willingly, if one provides a few solid touchstones. After creating such well-researched, sophisticated explanations as "psychological maturity" and "job maturity," we were humbled to find that managers frequently distilled these elaborate terms into the simple and timeless phrase "ready, willing, and able."

Generally, "readiness" is the amount of willingness and ability a follower demonstrates while performing a specific task. We previously understated the degree to which willingness and ability interact to determine readiness. Discovering more about that interaction has resulted in significant refinements in our thinking.

The number one error in diagnosing willingness is to view someone who is insecure or apprehensive as unmotivated. Willingness is a combination of varying degrees of confidence, commitment, and motivation. Any one of those variables can be prepotent—have influence over the others. For example, I may be completely committed to a job, quality, and the organization. I may be motivated to do well. But if I'm insecure about my ability to do the job, my insecurity must be addressed before I can move toward full readiness. Someone or something will have to help me over the hurdle.

Ability is determined by the amount of knowledge, experience, and demonstrated skills a follower brings to a task. A diagnosis is based on the actual display of ability. It's important not to select a leadership style based on beliefs about what followers should know. A frequent error is to affect knowledge and then hold followers accountable for skills they haven't had an opportunity to demonstrate.

Being task-specific is critical to the success of a correct diagnosis, surpassing the implication that readiness is linear or that it's accomplished in a highly predictable progression. I would agree with Ken: Most people enter a their environment. And they're often encouraged to be passive, dependent, and subordinate.

For years, experts have argued that because one man can supervise only a few people, managers should have limited control. The suggested number of subordinates per supervisor ranges from 3 to 30. Generally, the belief is that the number should decrease as a supervisor moves higher in the organization. Yet, the Life-Cycle Theory suggests that control may not depend on management level but on subordinates' maturity.

The more independent, able to take responsibility, and achievement-motivated subordinates are, the more of them a manager can supervise. It's theoretically possible to supervise an infinite number of subordinates, if all are completely mature and responsible for their jobs. That doesn't mean there's less control; such subordinates are self-controlled.

Because people at higher organization levels tend to be more mature and need less supervision, it seems reasonable that top managers should be able to supervise more subordinates than their lower-level counterparts.

Rensis Likert has found that high-performing supervisors tend to be employee-centered (high relationships); job-centered (high task) supervisors tend to supervise low-producing sections. Likert asked which variable was causal: Is the supervisor's style causing the level of production? Or, is the production level encouraging the style?

A problem lies in implementing these findings. Practitioners may read that employee-centered supervisors tend to have higher-producing sections than job-centered supervisors. So, they encourage supervisors to become more employee-oriented. A foreman who has been operating as task-oriented and authoritarian for years may be encouraged to "get in step with the times."

Returning from a human-relations training program, the foreman will probably try to utilize some of the new techniques, even though they're not compatible with his personality. As long as things run smoothly, there's no difficulty. But the minute a crisis develops, he reverts to his old style. Then he becomes inconsistent, vacillating between the new and old styles.

Changing a manager's style is difficult and takes considerable time. Yet, industry invests millions in training to change their managers' styles. Fielder has said that a person's leadership style reflects his or her basic motivational and needs structure. "At best, it takes one to three years of intensive psychotherapy to effect changes in personality structure."

Likert has said that it takes from three to seven years, depending on the size and complexity of the organization, to implement a new management theory. The effort might not even be appropriate. It's questionable whether a low-performing work group will suddenly leap to high productivity with an employee-centered supervisor. In fact, they might view him as a soft touch. The supervisor must bring them along slowly, becoming more employee-centered and less job-centered as they mature. The key is reinforcing "successive approximations," behavior that comes closer to a supervisor's expectations of good performance.

Change must be gradual, a result of planned growth and creating mutual trust and respect. ■

Additional Reading

Everyone's a Coach, by Don Shula and Ken Blanchard. 1995. Harper's Business, New York.

Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources, 6th edition, by Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard. 1993. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

Raving Fans, by Sheldon Bowles. 1993. William Morrow, New York.

"Situational Leadership After 25 Years: A Retrospective," by Kenneth H. Blanchard, Drea Zigarmi, and Robert B. Nelson. 1993. Blanchard Training and Development, Escondido, California.

The One-Minute Manager Meets the Monkey, by William Oncken, Jr. 1989. William Morrow, New York.

The One-Minute Manager, by Kenneth H. Blanchard and Spencer Johnson. 1982. William Morrow, New York.

new job position or task at readiness level 2 instead of 1, which improves their accuracy in diagnosing development and helps them become more responsive in dealing with a regression in performance. Leadership intervention can occur anywhere along the readiness continuum.

The next phase

Blanchard: When I developed phase 2 of situational leadership, generating a debate with Paul Hersey was the furthest thought from my mind. I'd rather beat him in golf.

The book *Ordering Your Private World* (Oliver-Nelson, Nashville, Tennessee, 1985), by Gordon McDonald, describes the difference between people who are "driven" and people who are "called." Driven people think that they own everything, including relationships, possessions, and ideas. They spend all of their time defending what they own. Called people think everything is on loan. They shepherd and nurture what comes into their lives. Situational leadership has been on loan to Paul and me for a long time. Even though we've shepherded it differently over the past 10 years or so, I hope we've nurtured it well.

Blanchard and Hersey: Responding to followers' needs is the surest way to achieve effectiveness and success. If a model provides a better understanding of people with whom you work, and if communications improve, the model is a great leadership model. If either version of our model encourages you to be follower-driven, celebrate! ■

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