

Situational Leadership

A Summary

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Over the last few decades, people in the field of management have been involved in a search for the “best” style of leadership. Yet, the evidence from research clearly indicated that there is no single app-purposed leadership style. Successful leaders are those who can adapt their behavior to meet the demands of their unique situation.

Situational Leadership Model

A Situational Leadership Model helpful to managers in diagnosing the demands of their situation has been developed as a result of extensive research. This model is based on the amount of direction (task behavior) and the amount of socioemotional support (relationship behavior) a leader must provide given the situation and the level of “readiness” of the follower or group.

Task Behavior and Relationship Behavior

The recognition of task and relationship as two critical dimensions of a manager’s behavior has been an important part of management research over the last several decades. These two dimensions have been given various labels ranging from “autocratic” and “democratic” to “employee oriented” and “production oriented”

For some time, it was believed that task and relationship behaviors were either/or styles of leadership and, therefore, could be represented by a single continuum, moving from *very authoritarian* leader behavior (task) at one end to *very participative* leader behavior (relationship) at the other end.

In more recent years, the idea that task and relationship behaviors were either/or leadership styles has been dispelled. In particular, extensive leadership studies at Ohio State University questioned this assumption and showed that other assumptions were more reasonable and would lead to more useful theories in leadership.

By spending time actually observing the behavior of leaders in a wide variety of situations, the Ohio State staff found that they would classify most of the activities of leaders into two distinct and different behavioral categories or dimensions. They named these two dimensions “Initiating Structure” (task behavior) and “Consideration” (relationship behavior). These two dimensions can be defined in the following way:

Task behavior is the extent to which a leader engages in one way communication by explaining what each follower is to do as well as when, where and how tasks are to be accomplished.

Relationship behavior is the extent to which a leader engages in two-way communication by providing socioemotional support, “psychological strokes” and facilitating behaviors.

In the leadership studies mentioned, the Ohio State staff found that leadership styles tended to vary considerably. The behavior of some leaders was characterized mainly by structuring activities for their followers in terms of task accomplishment, while other leaders concentrated on providing socioemotional support in terms of personal relationships between themselves and their followers. Still other leaders had styles characterized by both high-task and high-relationship behavior. There were even some leaders whose behavior tended to provide little task or relationship for their followers. No dominant style of leadership emerged across a wide range of leaders working in many different work settings. Instead, various combinations were evident. These observed patterns of leader behavior can be plotted on two separate and distinct axes as shown in figure 1.

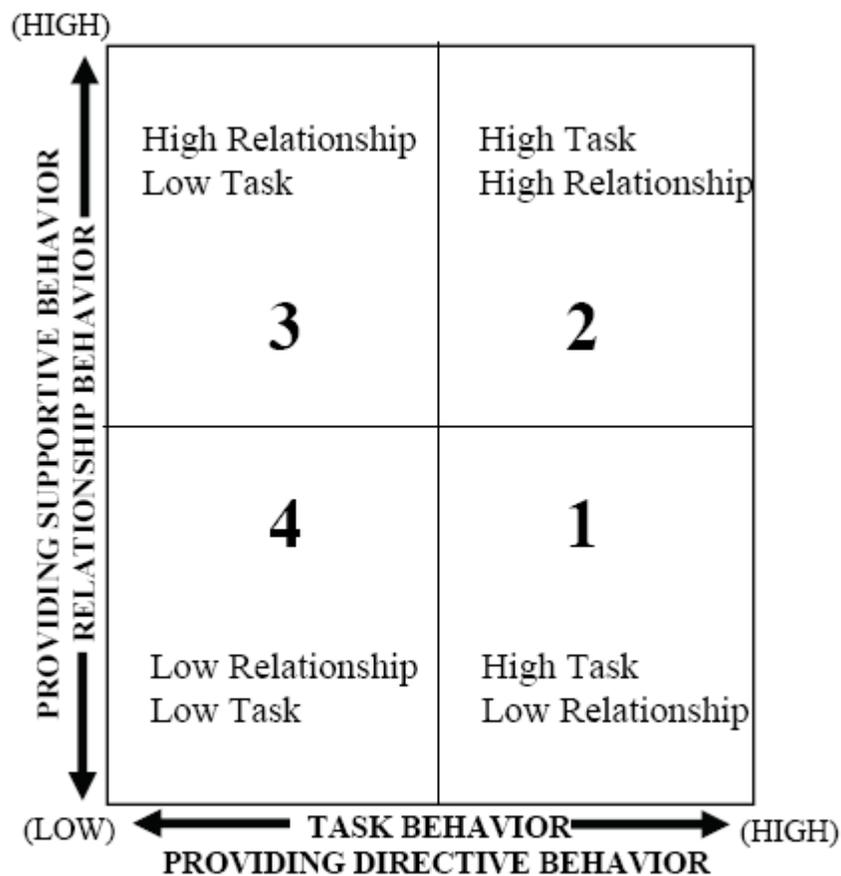


Figure 1. Four basic leader behavior styles

Since research in the past several decades has clearly supported the contention that there is no “best style of leadership,” any of the four basic styles shown in Figure 1 may be effective or ineffective depending on the situation in which it is being applied.

Situational Leadership is based on an interplay among (1) the amount of direction (task behavior) a leader gives, (2) the amount of socioemotional support (relationship behavior) a leader provides, and (3) the “readiness” level that followers exhibit on a specific task, function, activity

or objective that the leader is attempting to accomplish through the individual or group (followers).

Level of Readiness

Situational Leadership defines readiness as the ability and willingness of a person to take responsibility for directing their own behavior. *These variables of readiness should be considered only in relation to a specific task to be performed.* That is to say, an individual (or a group) is not at a level of readiness in any *total* sense. People tend to have vary degrees or readiness depending on the specific task, function or objective that a leader is attempting to accomplish through their efforts.

Thus, a sales representative may be at high levels of readiness for conducting sales calls but may not demonstrate the same degree of readiness in developing and writing customer proposals. As a result, it may be quite appropriate for this individual's manager to provide little direction and help on sales-call activities, yet provide a great deal of direction and close supervision over the individual's proposal-writing activity.

The Basic Concept

According to Situational Leadership, as the level of readiness of a follower continues to increase in terms of accomplishing a specific task, the leader should begin to *reduce* task behavior and *increase* relationship behavior. This should be the case until the individual or group reaches a moderate level or readiness, it becomes appropriate for the leader to decrease not only task behavior but relationship behavior as well. Now the follower is not only ready in terms of the performance of the task but is also confident and committed.

Since the follower self-generates "strokes" and reinforcement, a great deal of socioemotional support from the leader is no longer necessary. People at this level of readiness see a reduction of close supervision and an increase in delegation by the leader as a positive indication of trust and confidence. Thus, Situational Leadership focuses on the appropriateness or effectiveness of leadership styles according to the task-relevant readiness of the follower. This cycle can be illustrated by a bell-shaped curve superimposed on the four leadership quadrants as shown in figure 2.

Style of Leader vs. Readiness of Followers

Figure 2 relates the readiness level of a follower for completing a particular job objective to the "optimum" leadership style of a manager for maximizing follower job performance. Keep in mind that the figure represents two different phenomena. The appropriate leadership style (leader behavior) for given levels of follower readiness is portrayed by the curved line running through the four leadership quadrants. The readiness level of the individual or group being supervised (follower readiness) is depicted below the leadership model as a *continuum* ranging from low-level to high-level readiness.

In referring to the leadership styles in the model, we use the following shorthand designations: (1) high risk/low-relationship will be referred to as leader behavior style S1; (2) high-task/high-

relationship behavior as leader behavioral style S2; (3) high-relationship/low-task behavior as leader behavior style S3; and (4) low-relationship/low-task behavior as style R4.

In terms of follower readiness, it is not simply a question of being ready, but a question of degree. As can be seen in Figure 2, some benchmarks of readiness can be provided for determining appropriate leadership style by dividing the readiness continuum into four levels. Low levels of task-relevant readiness are referred to as readiness level R1; low to moderate as level R2; moderate to high as readiness level R3, and high levels to task-relevant readiness as level R4.

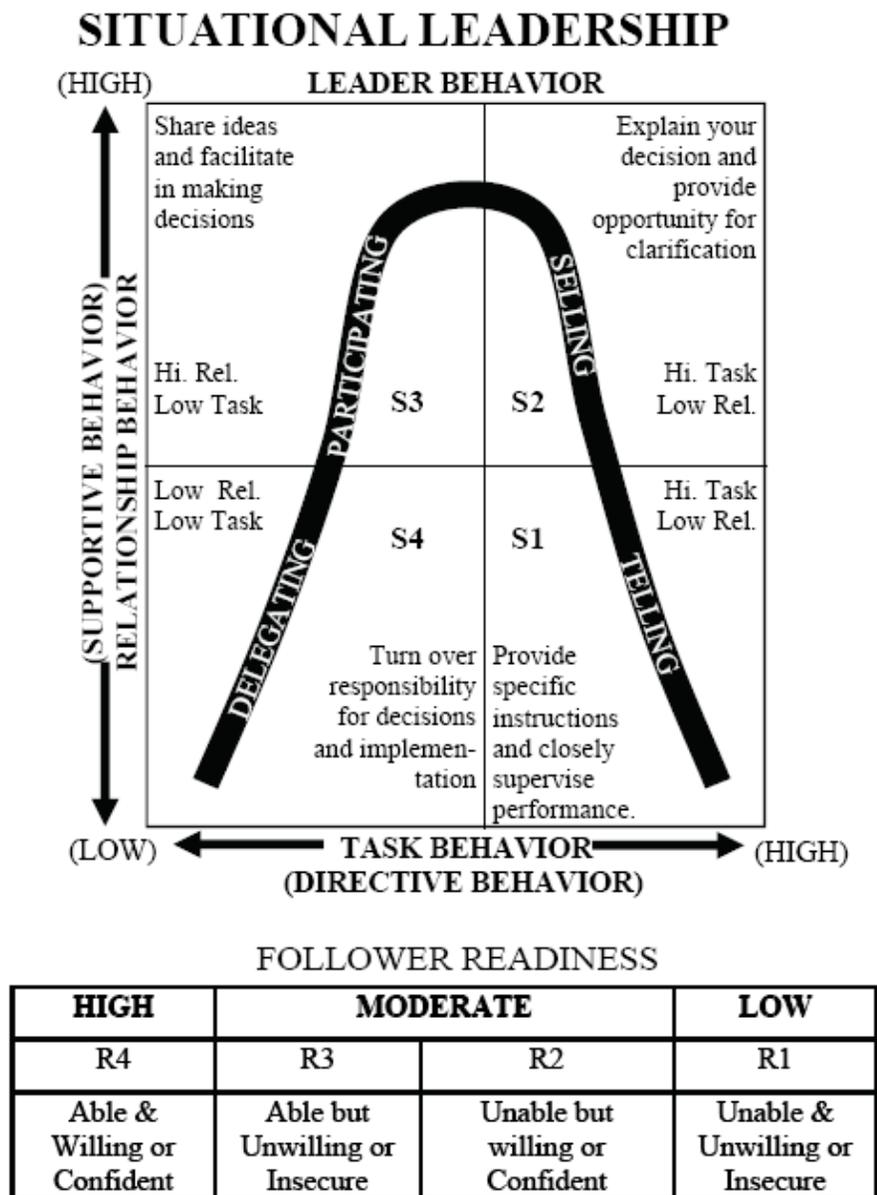


Figure 2. Situational Leadership Model

Application

What does the bell-shaped curve in the leader behavior portion of the model mean. It means that the readiness level of one's followers develops along the continuum to higher levels, the appropriate style of leadership moves accordingly along the curvilinear function.

Determining Appropriate Style

To determine what leadership style is appropriate to use in a given situation, one must first determine the readiness level of the follower in relation to a specific task that the leader is attempting to accomplish through the follower's efforts. Once this readiness level is identified, the appropriate leadership style can be determined by constructing a right angle (90 degrees) from the point on the continuum that identifies the readiness level of the follower to a point where it intersects on the curvilinear function in the leader behavior portion of the model. The quadrant in which that intersection takes place suggests the appropriate style to be used by the leader in that situation with a follower of that readiness level. Consider the example in figure 3.

Suppose a manager has determined that a follower's readiness level in terms of administrative paperwork is low. Using Situational Leadership, the leader would place an X on the readiness continuum as shown in Figure 3 (below R1). Once the manager had decided to influence the follower's behavior in this area, the manager could determine the appropriate initial style to use by constructing a right angle from the X drawn on the readiness continuum to a point where it intersects the bell-shaped curve (designated in Figure 3 by O). Since the intersection occurs in the S1 quadrant, it is suggested that when working with this follower who demonstrates R1 readiness on this particular task, the manager should use an S1 style (high-task/low-relationship behavior). If one follows this technique for determining the appropriate leadership style for all four readiness levels, it will become clear that the four readiness designations (R1, R2, R3, R4) correspond to the four leader behavior designations (S1, S2, S3, S4); that is, R1 readiness requires an S1 style, R2 readiness requires an S2 style, etc.

In this example, when we say "low-relationship behavior," we do not mean that the manager is not friendly or personable to the follower. We merely suggest that the manager, in supervising the follower's handling of administrative paperwork, should spend more time directing the person in what to do and how, when, and where to do it, than providing socioemotional support and reinforcement. Increased relationship behavior should occur when the follower begins to demonstrate the ability to handle necessary administrative paperwork. At the point, a movement from S1 to S2 would be appropriate.

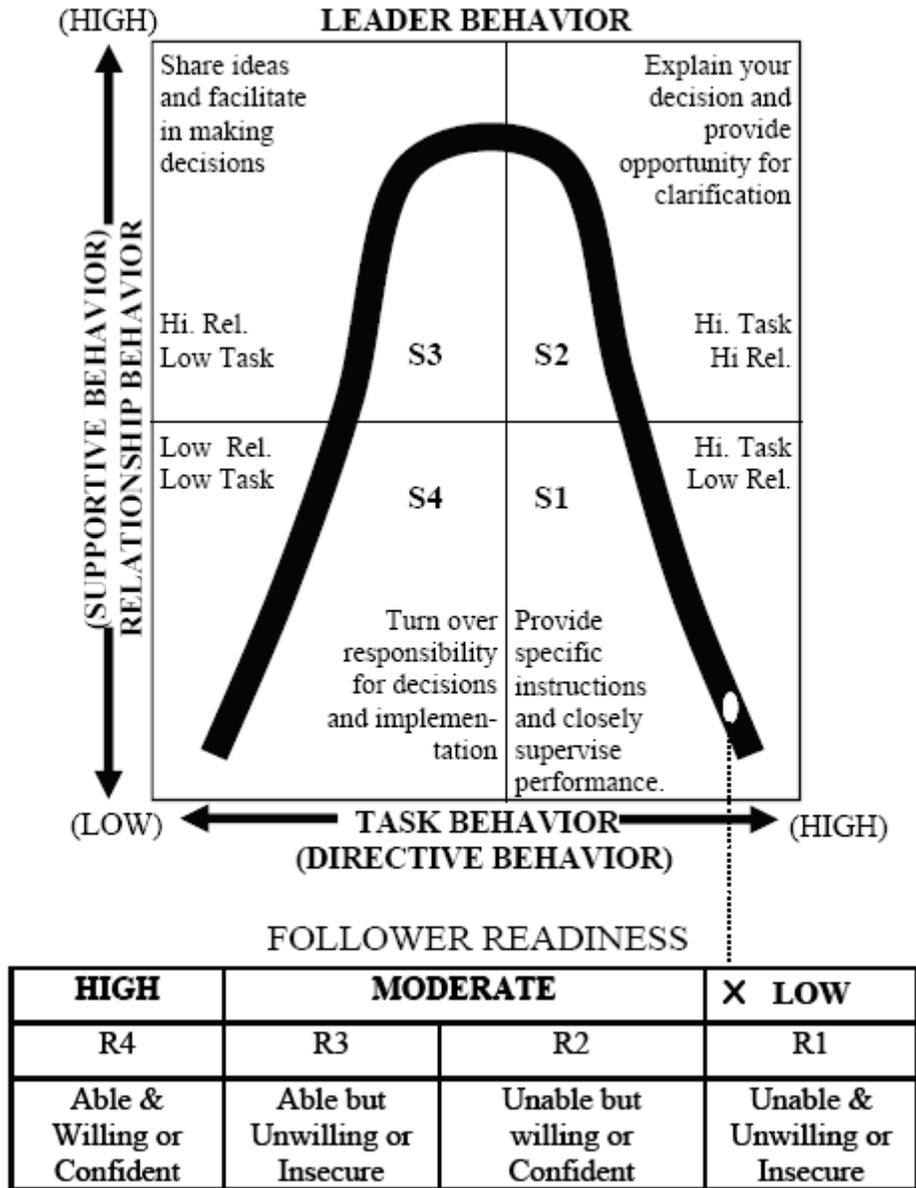


Figure 3. Determining an appropriate leadership style

Thus, Situational Leadership contends that in working with people who are low in readiness (R1) in terms of accomplishing a specific task, a high-task/low-relationship style (S1) has the highest probability of success; in dealing with people who are of low to moderate readiness (R2), a moderate structure and socioemotional style (S2) appears to be most appropriate. In working with people who are of moderate to high readiness (R3), a high-relationship/low-task style (S3) has the highest probability of success; and finally, a low-relationship/low-task style (S4) has the highest probability of success in working with people of high task-relevant readiness (R4).

While it is important to keep in mind the definitions of task and relationship behavior given earlier, the labeling of the four styles of Situational Leadership shown in Figure 4 is sometimes useful for quick diagnostic judgments.

High-task/low-relationship leader behavior (S1) is referred to as “telling” because this style is characterized by one-way communication in which the leader defines the roles of followers and tells them what, how, when, and where to do various tasks.

High-task/high-relationship behavior (S2) is referred to as “selling” because with this style most of the direction is still provided by the leader. The leader also attempts through two-way communication and socioemotional support to get the followers psychologically to “buy into” decisions that have to be made.

High-relationship/low-task behavior (S3) is called “participating” because with this style the leader and followers now share in decision making through two-way communication and much facilitating behavior from the leader, since the followers have the ability and knowledge to do the task.

Low-relationship/low-task behavior (S4) is labeled “delegating” because the style involves letting followers “run their own show.” The leader delegates since the followers are high in readiness, have the ability, and are both willing and able to take responsibility for directing their own behavior.

Modifying Levels of Readiness

In attempting to improve the readiness of a follower who has not taken much responsibility in the past, a leader must be careful not to increase socioemotional support (relationship behavior) too rapidly. If this is done, the follower may view the leader as becoming a “soft touch.” Thus, the leader must develop the follower slowly, using a *little* less task behavior and a *little* more relationship behavior as the follower increases in readiness. When an individual’s performance is low, one cannot expect drastic changes overnight. For more desirable behavior to be obtained, a leader must reward as quickly as possible the slightest appropriate behavior exhibited by the individual in the desired direction. This process continues as the individual’s behavior comes closer and closer to the leader’s expectations of good performance. This is literally a behavior-moderation concept called positive reinforcement. For example, if a leader wants to improve the readiness level of a follower so this follower will assume significantly more responsibility, the leader’s best bet initially is to *reduce* a little of the structure or direction (task behavior) by giving the follower an opportunity to assume some increased responsibility. If this responsibility is well handles, the leader should reinforce this behavior with increases in relationship behavior. This is a two-step process: first, reduction in structure, and *if adequate performance follows*; second, increases in socioemotional support as reinforcement. This process should continue until the follower is assuming significant responsibility and performing as an individual of moderate readiness. This does not mean the individual’s work will have less structure, but the structure now will be internally imposed by the follower rather than externally imposed by the leader. When this happens, followers are not only able to provide their own direction and structure for many of the activities in which they engage, but also to begin to be able to provide for their own satisfaction for interpersonal and emotional needs. At this stage the followers are

positively reinforced for their accomplishments by the leader *not* looking over their shoulders and by the leader leaving them more and more on their own. It is not that there is less mutual trust and friendship (in fact, there is more) but it takes less direct effort on the leader's part to prove it with followers at high levels of readiness.

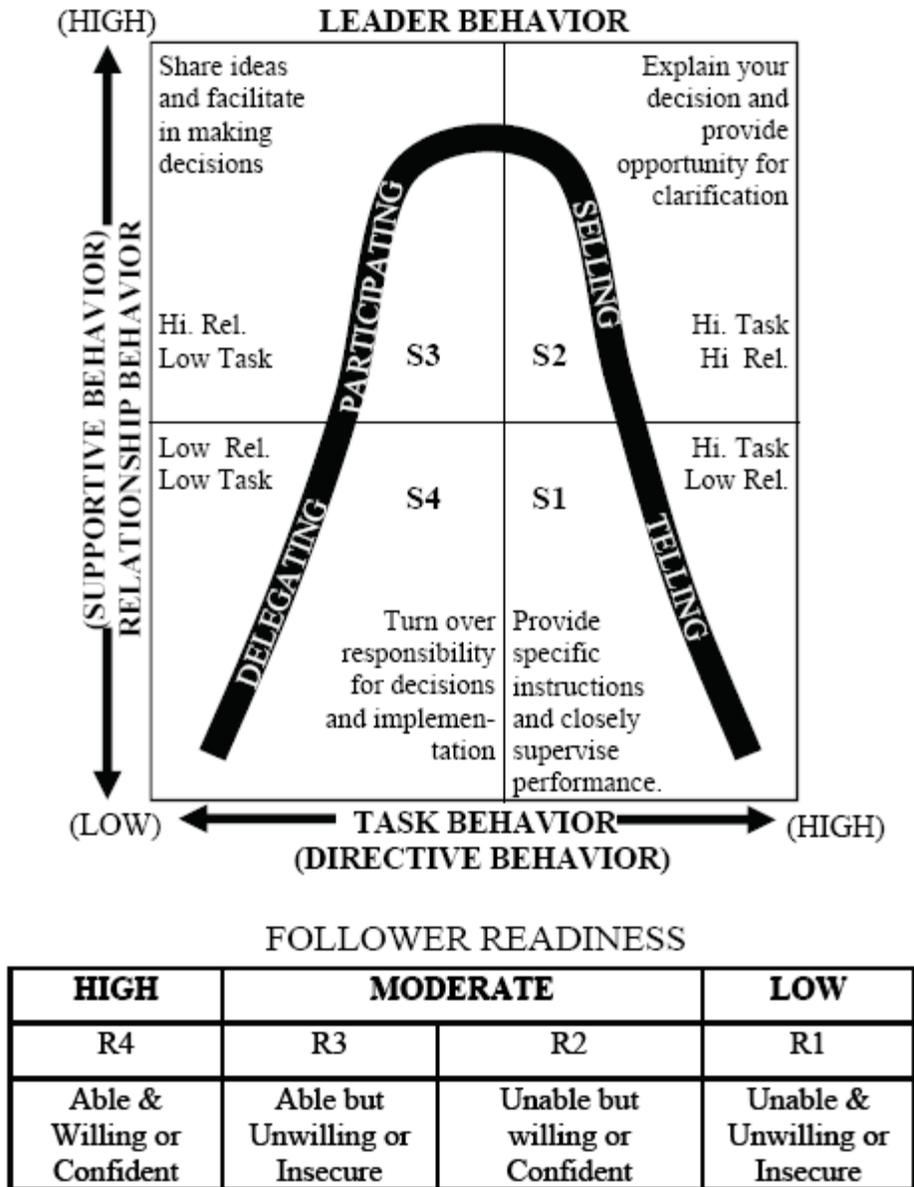


Figure 4. Situational Leadership

Although this model seems to suggest a basic style for different levels of readiness, it is not quite that simple. When a follower begins to behave less ready, for whatever reason, i.e., crisis at home, change in work, technology, etc., it becomes appropriate and necessary for the leader to adjust behavior backward through the bell-shaped curve to meet the present readiness level of the follower. For example, take a follower who is presently working well alone. Suppose, suddenly,

a family crisis begins to affect this person's performance on the job. In this situation, it might be very well appropriate for the manager to *moderately* increase both task (direction) and relationship (support) until the follower regains composure.

Take another example of a teacher who was highly motivated and competent (R4) and therefore could be left alone. Suppose this teacher is promoted to principal. While it may have been appropriate for the leader to use S4, now as a principal, a task for which this person has little experience, it may be appropriate for the leader to change styles by providing more socioemotional support and then increasing the direction and supervision of activities (S4 to S3 to S2). This high-task/high-relationship style should continue until the person is able to grasp the new responsibilities. At that time, a movement back from S2 through S3 to S4 would be appropriate. Starting off with the same leadership style that was successful in the teacher role may now prove devastating because it is inappropriate for the needs of the situation.

In summary, effective leaders must know their staff well enough to meet their ever-changing abilities and demands placed upon them. It should be remembered that over time followers as individuals and as groups develop their own patterns of behaviors and ways of operating, i.e., norms, customs, and mores. While leaders may use a specific style for the work group *as a group*, they may quite often have to have differently with individual followers because of different levels of follower readiness. In either case, whether working with a group or an individual, changes in leadership style from S1 to S2, S3 and S4 *must be gradual!* This process by its very nature cannot be revolutionary but must be evolutionary; gradual development changes, a result of planned growth, and the creation of mutual trust and respect.

References

For a more detailed discussion of the Situational Leadership Model and other related behavioral science frameworks see Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, *Management of Organization behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988).