ABSTRACT: Situational Leadership® was introduced in a Training Magazine article published over 40 years ago. Since that point in time, literally millions of managers have been trained around the world, across industries and in both the private and public sectors. This article revisits the foundation of The Situational Leadership® Model, addresses the similarities and differences between Situational Leadership® and SLII®, and presents The Center for Leadership Studies’ updated and recently validated competency model as a basis for future development.

At The Center for Leadership Studies – We Build Leaders™!
SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP®: THE FOUNDATION

In May of 1969, an article was published in the Training and Development Journal that would wind up impacting millions of practicing managers around the world. The title of that article was “Life Cycle Theory of Leadership,” and it was authored by Drs. Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard. The article served as a foundation for the future development of Situational Leadership®, as well as the core of what would become the best-selling organizational behavior text of all time: “Management of Organizational Behavior” (M.O.B.).

In retrospect, the success of M.O.B. was (and still is) a function of three, highly interdependent forces:

1. **CONTENT**: In addition to formally introducing Situational Leadership® to the world, M.O.B. comprehensively reviewed classic research in the applied behavioral sciences. Beyond review, M.O.B. emerged as an integrative body of work that established common ground among a wide spectrum of foundational contributors. Starting with the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor3 on scientific management (1911) and Elton Mayo4 at the Western Electric’s Hawthorne Plant (1933), M.O.B. integrated the work of giants like Abraham Maslow5, Chris Argyris6, Frederick Herzberg7 and David McClelland8 on motivation with the contributions of Douglas McGregor9, Tannenbaum and Schmidt10, Blake and Mouton11, Fred Fielder12, William Reddin13 and a host of others on leadership.

2. **VOICE**: Leveraging the analogy of “the tree falling in the forest with no one around to hear it,” we would respectfully suggest that, up to the first publication of M.O.B., in large part, academicians doing research in the applied behavioral sciences wrote for other academicians that had a vested interest in reviewing that research. In other words, outside of the academic community, in the late 1960s and early 1970s the contributions of those previously listed went largely unnoticed. M.O.B. changed that and has been routinely described as the first book on organizational behavior that anybody actually ever read.
3. VALUE: In addition to coalescing the groundbreaking contributions of the giants that shaped the discipline of organizational behavior, Hersey and Blanchard refined and presented a foundational contribution of their own: Situational Leadership®. In essence, Situational Leadership® integrated decades of research on human motivation with decades of research on the success and effectiveness of different leadership approaches. In its most simplistic form, Situational Leadership® presented practicing managers with an actionable timing mechanism of sorts (i.e., When does a directive approach make the most sense? A participative approach? Empowerment?). It is worth noting that, between the publication of “The Life Cycle Theory of Leadership” and the third edition of M.O.B., Situational Leadership® transformed from a “theory” to a “model.” And, many of us will forever hear the echoes of Dr. Hersey as he explained the distinction, “...a theory gives you something interesting to think about ... a model provides you with something you can actually use!”

At The Center for Leadership Studies (CLS), we take great pride in this heritage and hope you can both understand and appreciate that sentiment. We consider the position Situational Leadership® occupies in the progression of organizational behavior to be special given its direct connection to the giants that literally established our industry during its formative stages. Simply stated: our challenge at this juncture in the evolutionary process is to ensure Situational Leadership® continues to remain relevant to practicing managers around the world and that we remain responsive to emerging research that extends the reach of applied behavioral science.
SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP® and SLII®

In 1979, Ken Blanchard left CLS and (with his wife Marge) started Blanchard Training and Development, Inc. (known today as The Ken Blanchard Companies). In 1985, Blanchard coauthored “Leadership and the One Minute Manager” with Pat and Drea Zigarmi which introduced SLII®. The similarities and differences between the two models have been well-documented over the years. We will confine our discussion on the topic here to “hitting the high notes” on both fronts.

SIMILARITIES

Leadership Styles

In large part, the leadership style portions of both models remain substantially similar (see figures 1 and 2). In keeping with the notion that words are, in fact, “packages of ideas,” it is important to ensure those receiving the Situational Leadership® message understand the operational definitions of the parameters that house the matrix:

- Task or directive behavior is the extent to which the leader engages in spelling out duties and responsibilities to include telling people what to do, how to do it, when to do it, where to do it and who is to do it.

- Relationship or supportive behavior is the extent to which the leader engages in two-way or multiway communication to include listening to and facilitating the behavior of others.

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<tr>
<th>SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP®</th>
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<td>Telling (S1) [Guiding; Directing]</td>
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Figure 1
Original Situational Leadership® Model Leadership Styles

Figure 2
Original Situational Leadership® - SLII® Leadership Styles
Comparative Descriptors
The importance of language and context (especially when working cross-culturally) cannot be underestimated. In that regard, we have found it is important to present and discuss a number of descriptors for each of the four styles (e.g., Style 1 [S1]: High Task and Low Relationship may best be described as “Telling,” “Guiding,” “Directing” or “Structuring”).

**High-End Performance Readiness®/Development Levels**

Along similar lines, there is large-scale compatibility between the manner in which both models view followers with moderate to high ability/competence (see figures 3 and 4).

- Both models define commitment or willingness as a function of the interplay between confidence and motivation. The directional arrows imbedded in the Performance Readiness® continuum of Situational Leadership® are intended to reflect the following:
  - When people are developing (e.g., learning a task for the first time) the confidence of the follower is typically the primary point of emphasis (e.g., “Can I do this?”).
  - When regression is in play (e.g., performance slippage) the motivation of the follower takes center stage (e.g., “I am really getting bored doing this over and over again.”)
  - While the Situational Leadership® Model describes moderate to high levels of Performance Readiness® as “self directed,” SLII® depicts moderate to high levels of competence and commitment as “developed.” From our perspective, both sets of descriptors are like-minded.
DIFFERENCES
Low to Moderate Performance Readiness®/Developmental Levels

Situational Leadership® would suggest followers beginning a new task (i.e., those with limited if any task-specific knowledge, experience or skill) are either:

- Willing and Confident (R2) or
- Unwilling or Insecure (R1)

Once that determination has been made, the leader needs to meet those followers “where they are” and begin the developmental process (e.g., S2 for the R2 with a focus on furthering development or S1 for the R1 with a focus on building confidence).

Comparatively, SLII® views development as “both linear and evolutionary with followers approaching a new task for the first time as enthusiastic, motivated and committed.”

Clearly, this is a critical distinction and would suggest followers, responsible for performing a new task for which they have limited knowledge, ability or skill, will predictably initiate as “enthusiastic beginners” (D1) and respond to a leader’s directive approach (S1) by transitioning to “disillusioned learners” (D2). For the sake of active comparison, Situational Leadership® would propose that an “enthusiastic beginner,” by definition, is R2 and migration to a status of “disillusioned learner” suggests R2-R1 regression (see figures 5 and 6).

Beyond that, and to the notion that the process of task-specific development unwaveringly commences with followers presenting both motivation and enthusiasm, we would ask this question: Is there something we could ask you to do that you have never done before that would produce a state of psychological predisposition that could be described as anything but “motivated and enthusiastic?”

Most people we ask that question to nod their heads in the affirmative (quite aggressively) then supply several examples with limited (if any) hesitation.
**Interpretation and Applicability of Research Cited for SLII®**

Blanchard cites the work of Malcolm Knowles on adult learning theory, Kanfer and Ackerman’s study of motivation and cognitive abilities, Tuckman and Lacoursiere in the field of group development as the primary sources influencing the development of SLII®. We will briefly address each here and offer our perspective. **Beyond that, we would actively encourage each reader to review these sources in their original forms and draw their own conclusions.**

**Malcolm Knowles**

Dr. Knowles made many contributions to the field of adult learning but is primarily recognized for establishing two models of learning (pedagogy and andragogy) based on five critical assumptions for each. These assumptions centered on the learner’s orientation and experience with the subject being taught. Knowles concluded in *“The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy”* that learners, whether they are adults or children, can be “self directed if they possess the necessary base of experience relative to the task or subject being taught.” CLS wholeheartedly concurs and evidence of that alignment is displayed on the Situational Leadership® Model itself (“Leader Directed” versus “Follower Directed” descriptors).

**Kanfer and Ackerman**

Ruth Kanfer and Phillip Ackerman studied the relationship between motivation and cognitive ability. Subjects for their study were Air Force trainees and the tasks evaluated were related to air traffic control. In brief review, results could be encapsulated as follows:

- “Smarter people” (as measured by a validated IQ test) performed better on the tasks assigned during investigation and, in general, skill acquisition was seen as a function of both wide-ranging and task-specific intelligence.
- High levels of personal motivation can offset lower levels of innate intelligence as it applies to the performance of a specific task.

CLS also accepts the results offered by Kanfer and Ackerman as validation of Situational Leadership®.

**Susan Wheelan**

Wheelan’s research focused on distinguishing “work groups” from “high-performing teams” and suggests that “early stages of development are categorized by the group’s dependency on the leader and need for inclusion, while high performing teams are categorized by trust, productivity and effectiveness.” In general, CLS would agree with Wheelan’s identified stages of development and corresponding leadership approaches (e.g., leader dependence in formative stages transitioning over time to high amounts of confidence and trust in a team-driven mode of operation).
Tuckman and Lacoursiere

As previously documented, the core differences between Situational Leadership® and SLII® center around the early stages of Performance Readiness® (R1/D1 and R2/D2). While CLS acknowledges the contributions of Tuckman and Lacoursiere to the field of group and team development, the question we have found ourselves asking since SLII® was introduced is: Are the dynamics of joining a new team a useful, predictive indicator of task-specific development? Put another way: Is it possible to enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to join a new team or group (e.g., receive a promotion) and still (on the basis of objective analysis) be accurately assessed as “R1: Unable and Insecure” to perform a specific task that you are now required to perform?

We would answer that query in the affirmative, and offer that assimilating into a new team or group is by no means guaranteed to progress on a parallel track with mastery of the job-related requirements associated with that assimilation. And, from our perspective, therein lies the “apples and oranges distinction” between Situational Leadership® and SLII®: Teams are not tasks! Beyond that, we are compelled to question the validity – or perhaps better stated, the applicability – of the studies cited by Blanchard as the impetus for SLII®.

For example, Tuckman’s original research featured 26 “therapy groups,” 11 “human relations training groups” and 13 “natural and laboratory groups.”

Lacoursiere studied:

- Problem-solving groups (e.g., chess and human relations problems)
- T-groups (e.g., personal growth)
- Encounter groups (e.g., focused on human potential and body awareness)
- Therapy groups (e.g., clinically delinquent teenage boys)

Tuckman himself was clear in citing the limitations of his work based on the target of his investigation (“therapy-based group settings”). Lacoursiere concluded, on the basis of his studies with the groups identified, that “most groups across most settings develop in a consistent and predictable manner.” We would like to stipulate (in the strongest of terms) that conclusion in no way matches up with our reality or base of experience.
SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP® AND THE FUTURE

There are only a handful of organizations that can say they have been around since the 1960s. We are honored to say that we are one of them. Our founder, Dr. Paul Hersey, was an incredibly insightful innovator that contributed as much as anyone to our dynamic industry. Moving forward, CLS is committed to staying true to our foundation, focusing on the development of training that is multidirectional and ensuring that all we do is both practical and behavioral.

OUR FOUNDATION

Dr. Hersey originally identified three leadership competencies that formed the basis of Situational Leadership® (Diagnosing, Adapting, Communicating). In the process of re-validating our competency framework in October of 2011, a fourth (Advancing) was identified.

1. **Diagnosing:** “Understanding the situation you are trying to influence.” While the stakes may or may not be as high (depending on what the leader is trying to accomplish) getting an accurate diagnosis is as important to the leader attempting to influence as it is to the physician preparing for a medical procedure. There are multiple variables to consider and a variety of different contingencies to proactively take into account. How much time should a leader take in gathering information to ensure an accurate diagnosis? We are confident it will come as no surprise that our stock answer to that question is: it depends. Leadership, by its very nature, does depend on a number of factors that are unique to each influence opportunity. Further, we can state on the basis of six decades of experience working with leaders at all levels around the globe and across industries, that when unsuccessful leadership interventions are being retroactively critiqued, “inaccurate diagnosis” is by far the biggest culprit (the term “Ready, fire, aim” was coined to describe this recurring problem). So, how much time does it take to effectively “diagnose?” Consider the guidelines provided by a famous basketball coach and a decorated Army General:

- **John Wooden (UCLA Basketball Coach 1948-1975):** “Be quick … but don’t hurry.”
- **Colin Powell (Retired Four-Star General and the 65th Secretary of State):** “I never made a decision of consequence if I didn’t have at least 40% of the necessary information … to do so would have been irresponsible. Conversely, I also never implemented a decision if I had accumulated more than 70% of the available information. If I waited that long, I had clearly relinquished any advantage I might have had.”
2. **Adapting:** “*Adjusting your behavior in response to the contingencies of the situation.*” We had a recent audience with a retired senior executive who had a distinguished career in the pharmaceutical and biotech industries. Among other things, he offered that, “As much as anything I can point to, Situational Leadership® had a profound impact on the manner in which I influenced people. And, the further I made my way up the ladder, influencing people was really about 80 or 90% of what I was expected to do.” This story is by no means atypical. Situational Leadership® is among a handful of “core, common and critical” offerings most organizations offer newly promoted managers in one form or another. As this executive expanded on the specifics of Situational Leadership’s® “profound impact” he articulated that, as a newly promoted manager with no prior training, he found himself reacting to emerging circumstances on the basis of “managerial instinct.” We would suggest that all other things being equal, this is true for most of us. When tasked with the responsibility of leading others for the first time, we respond with the best of intentions and implement an approach that “feels right” on the basis of our own personal value programming. Some of us find out we are naturally directive, and when a leadership opportunity presents itself, we respond by taking control, making decisions and seeing that those decisions are implemented. Others (although statistically far fewer) intuitively respond to leadership opportunities or challenges by empowering others to make and implement decisions. Still, others fall somewhere between direction and empowerment and instinctively pursue the participative path (e.g., discuss options, brainstorm ideas, mutually decide on a course of action, etc.). “Adapting” is all about recognizing your natural, behavioral response to leadership opportunities, then consciously expanding your personal mastery of alternative approaches (regardless of how uncomfortable they may be) in an effort to expand your range of personal effectiveness as a leader.

3. **Communicating:** “*Interacting with others in a manner they can understand and accept.*” It’s unfortunate, but many associate communication solely with the ability to “stand and deliver.” If that were the case, any politician that could read a teleprompter (and pound his or her fist on a podium at the appropriate time) would have an approval rating well north of 50%. Effective communication is ultimately determined by followers and is primarily a function of:

- **Understanding:** Leaders need to be able to articulate the gap between “what is” and “what is needed or desired” in a manner that is both clear and actionable. Followers need to be clear on the challenge or opportunity that presents itself and the role they can/will play in response. The language the leader uses is critical as the same words can mean different things to different people. Beyond language, the tone, delivery and all around effect of leader-initiated communication needs to be considered and customized based on the individual or group receiving the message.
• **Buy-In:** Leaders need to be credible, believable and trustworthy. Ever try “participating” with someone that didn’t trust you? We would suggest those conversations could be categorized as frustrating, time-consuming and largely unproductive. Communication is much more about “what followers hear” than it is about “what leaders say.” Effective leaders build credibility day in and day out with those they attempt to influence. That credibility translates to buy-in and buy-in translates into vision being placed into action.

4. **Advancing: “Managing the movement.”** Dr. Hersey described Situational Leadership® as a dynamic model. In his words, “Things are either getting better (development), or they are getting worse (regression); nothing stays the same.” From our perspective, truer words were never spoken.

• **Development:** When an individual or group is learning something for the first time, confidence is usually the most important element of willingness that needs to be monitored. The more a follower sees him or herself “having what it takes” to effectively perform a particular task, the more insecurity gives way to confidence and motivation. This is the case for R1 to R2 development, as well as the transition from leader directed to follower directed development (R2 to R3), which culminates with the transition from R3 to R4.

• **Regression:** With regression, motivation is frequently the component of willingness that is most in play. In its most typical form, a follower has mastered a task and has lost a certain amount of enthusiasm or dedication to continue to perform it. In that regard, it is not a question of the follower asking himself or herself the question, “Can I do this?” but, conversely, asking the question (one way or another), “Is there something else I can do?” When leaders see regression, they need to intervene in a timely manner. If done quickly enough, that intervention typically takes the form of a candid discussion focused on performance slippage with a high probability of effective resolution.

Follower progress and derailment are both organizational realities. Ultimately, leaders bear responsibility for “managing that movement” by acting as catalysts for development and collaborative impediments for regression.
**Multidirectional**: We run an exercise in our *Situational Leadership®: Building Leaders* program where we ask learners to chart the direction of their influence attempts:

When you are engaged in the practice of leadership, what percentage of your attempts are focused on:

- Direct reports?
- Peers?
- Up (e.g., your boss or your boss’ boss)?
- Customers

Usually, learners identify that 50% or more of their influence attempts are lateral or up in the organization (sometimes those percentages are far greater than 50%). For us, this is ongoing confirmation that leadership is most accurately defined as “an attempt to influence” and that influence is multidirectional. In that regard, we distinguish leaders in organizations as follows:

- **Personal Leaders**: Individual contributors with no direct reports or formal authority
- **Team Leaders**: Managers or supervisors with formal responsibility for any number of individual contributors
- **Organizational Leaders**: Directors or managers of other managers with formal responsibility for a region, division or business unit

Team and Organizational Leaders (e.g., managers, supervisors and directors) are distinguished from Personal Leaders (individual contributors) by their formal responsibility to manage the performance of employees/direct reports. Each level identified routinely attempts to influence both laterally and up. These three subsets of leaders, in combination with our four primary leadership competencies, form the parameters of a matrix we at CLS view as our road map for the future (see figure 8).
**Practical and Behavioral:** The easiest way to make sense of our road map is to start with the bold words on the yellow tab on the left (primary competencies) and read across and to the right. The bullets listed under each leadership level are what we refer to as “enabling competencies.” Think of an enabling competency as “the parts that make up the whole.” For instance, if you seek to master all that is entailed with “Diagnosing,” we would suggest initiating development with a deep dive into *Emotional Intelligence (EQ)* and *Business Acumen* as early as possible in your career. If Diagnosing is defined as “understanding the situation you are trying to influence,” what better place to begin the journey than to increase awareness of yourself and your impact on others (e.g., self-perception, self-expression, decision making, etc.) as well as continuously learning about “business” (e.g., your industry, company, competition, value proposition, etc.).
From our experience, building diagnostic skills is similar to peeling back the layers of an onion. A baseline understanding of, and experience with, EQ and Business Acumen can be leveraged to help fine-tune your cue sensitivity when observing, monitoring and analyzing performance as a manager – or determining the readiness of your division or department to respond to an emerging challenge as a director or executive-level decision maker. A similar review, from left to right, can be used for the “Adapting, Communicating and Advancing” competencies.

Continuing to ensure the original Situational Leadership® Model remains relevant moving forward is at the core of the CLS mission and vision. Suffice it to say we are excited about leveraging the expanded matrix of our competency framework in the design and development of curriculums and training that:

- Integrates Situational Leadership® with other foundational contributions like Emotional Intelligence and DiSC®.
- Expands the reach of Situational Leadership® by designing programs that target individual contributors and Organizational Leaders in addition to Team Leaders.
- Leveraging Situational Leadership® to help managers lead teams, lead change and coach their direct reports to achieve outcomes of significance.

And, true to form, all of our offerings moving forward will continue to be grounded in the foundational contributions of those that have come before us and remain both practical and behavioral in their design.

CONCLUSION: Situational Leadership® is a timeless influence model that integrates foundational research in the field of organizational behavior. This white paper reviewed the rich history of Situational Leadership® to include an analysis of the similarities and differences between the original Situational Leadership® Model and SLII®. In that regard, CLS would offer that most of the references identified as the impetus for the development of SLII® are, from our perspective, confirmation of, and for, the original model. And, while CLS readily acknowledges the contributions of Bruce Tuckman19, in particular, we wholeheartedly believe “team development” and “task-specific development” to be two, very different things. In that regard, we would ask the reader to consider, on the basis of the comparisons provided, that the success of SLII® is more a function of its close association with the original Situational Leadership® Model than any breakthrough research in the fields of group or team development. Primarily, this white paper introduced and explained CLS’ recently validated Leadership Competency Model and positioned it as a basis for future design and development activity.
References


