# ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCY:

## A FUNCTION OF LEADER ADAPTABILITY AND VERSATILITY

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In the modern era, leadership has become more complex than ever before. Organizations want leaders with versatile skill sets, combining technical and functional expertise, emotional intelligence, creativity, critical thinking and the ability to recognize and respond to employees' abilities for any given assignment. With so many objectives and demands on leaders, organizations invest considerable budgets for leadership training, often using multiple commercial programs to fulfill their curricula, but without any evidence for how these programs complement one another to achieve their objectives. Different models have unique goals or theories and sometimes these models may have elements that are theoretically unaligned or even opposed with one another, leaving leaders confused about when to use each model or how to use them together.

Two models that are often used in conjunction are Situational Leadership® and SOCIAL STYLE®. While these models target distinct areas of leader performance, a question that has never been addressed is whether there are any unknown benefits when the two programs are combined. Can leaders gain insights from both models, when used together, that could improve their effectiveness?

To answer this question, The Center for Leadership Studies (CLS) and TRACOM Group partnered to conduct research with 4,237 people who were profiled on each model. We used a multi-rater assessment method, meaning that leaders were profiled by their teams and other coworkers, to more effectively determine their leadership style and individual behavioral preferences.

> ## LEADERS GRAVITATE TOWARD THE LEADERSHIP APPROACH THAT IS MOST NATURAL FOR THEM.

We found that leaders' natural behavioral styles can influence which leadership approach they prefer to use, but that leaders with high adaptability and versatility adjust their approach when followers require a high degree of relationship support. For leaders, particularly emerging leaders, this dual insight into their natural behavioral style and the conditions under which they need to alter their behavior to fit their followers' needs makes both programs a complementary match that enhances their overall development as a leader. When leaders consistently practice both models, they are earning the trust of their followers — a critical aspect of leader effectiveness.

## Situational Leadership®

Situational Leadership® is a model developed by Dr. Paul Hersey that, in 2019, is celebrating its 50th year of active use (see Figure 1 on page 30). It is a contingency model that sits on a foundation of pioneering research in the field of organizational behavior. Its repeatable, practical use is driven by leaders reviewing the following three questions:

- What is the specific task?

- What is the follower's level of ability and willingness to perform that task; what is their Performance Readiness®?

- What leadership style approach has the highest probability of success given the answers to the first two questions?

This model helps leaders adapt their approach regardless of the circumstances they attempt to influence. In addition to leadership style, adaptability is also measured. Adaptability means that, regardless of what comes naturally or is most comfortable, the leader can employ whatever approach has the highest probability of success.

## SOCIAL STYLE®

The SOCIAL STYLE Model® was developed in the 1960s by Dr. David Merrill and Roger Reid and describes behavior along two continuums: assertiveness and responsiveness. By plotting these two independent dimensions together, the model is formed and results in four social styles (see Figure 2). Each style describes a

person's preferred way of communicating, making decisions and achieving work goals. For leaders, recognizing their own style and the styles of followers helps them determine how best to communicate priorities and schedule work to fit the natural styles of team members.

The profile also measures versatility, an indicator of a leader's interpersonal effectiveness when working with others. High versatility means a leader consistently interacts with others by focusing not only on their own needs and the situational requirements, but also on others' concerns and preferences. When leaders regularly practice high versatility, followers develop trust that the leader understands them and their needs, along with the situational requirements and work priorities.
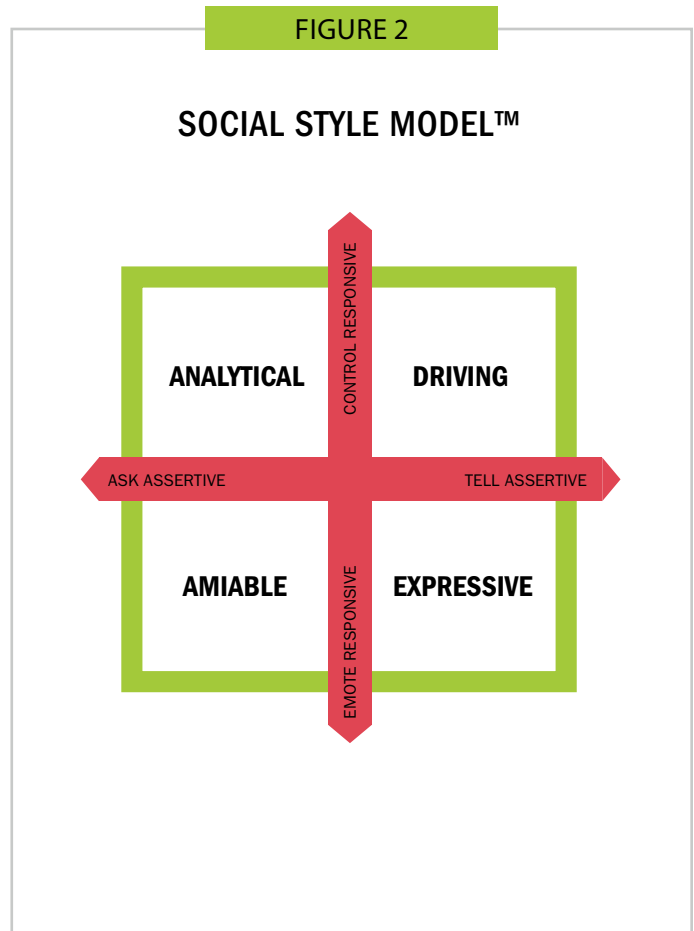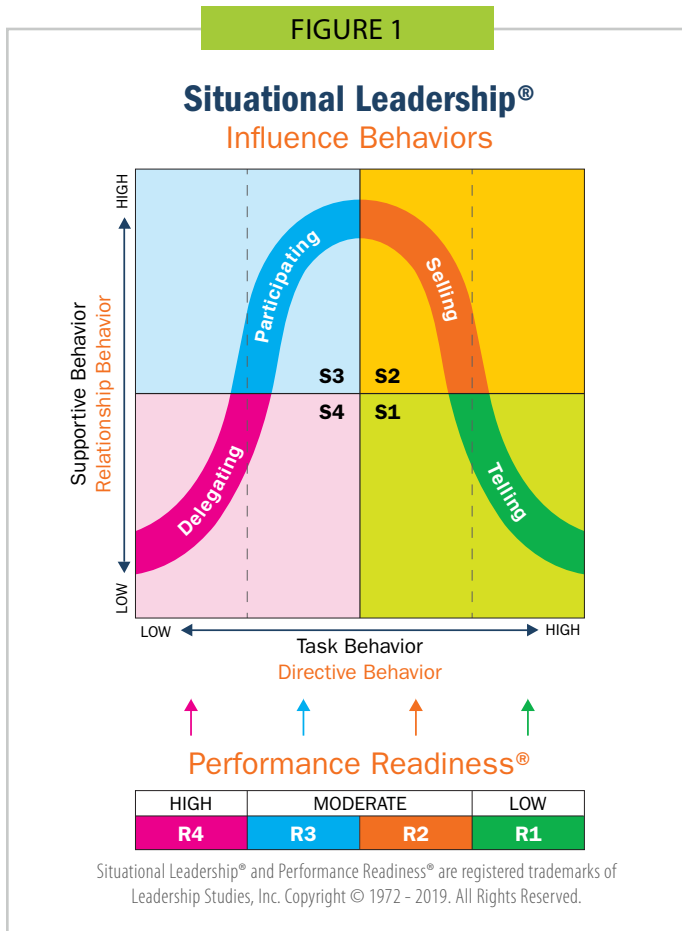
## Research Findings

The research project was conducted over the course of 18 months and sought to understand the relationships among:

- The four Situational Leadership® styles and the four SOCIAL STYLES

- The four Situational Leadership® styles and versatility

- The four SOCIAL STYLES and adaptability

- Adaptability and versatility (Is the ability to match your leadership style to a follower's Performance Readiness® level correlated with the perception of your overall interpersonal effectiveness?)

The SOCIAL STYLE Model® suggests that people have natural behavioral tendencies and preferences, and leaders should adjust their behavior and communication to followers' styles and preferences to help each other achieve goals. Situational Leadership® indicates that leaders should adjust their leadership style based on the situational needs and performance abilities of followers.

Our research found, with statistical significance, that a leader's SOCIAL

### FIGURE 1

**Situational Leadership®**
Influence Behaviors

Performance Readiness®

| HIGH | MODERATE | | LOW |
|------|----------|------|-----|
| R4 | R3 | R2 | R1 |

### FIGURE 2

**SOCIAL STYLE MODEL™**

ANALYTICAL | DRIVING

AMIABLE | EXPRESSIVE

CONTROL RESPONSIVE / EMOTE RESPONSIVE

ASK ASSERTIVE — TELL ASSERTIVE

STYLE® influences their comfort with certain leadership approaches. Leaders practicing leadership style S1 (telling), are more comfortable with the "tell assertive" styles (driving and expressive). This leadership approach is "high task," meaning leaders need to direct and guide followers. This method is simply more natural for driving and expressive people who prefer to be active and directive when working with others.

On the flip side, leaders practicing leadership style S4 (delegating), are more comfortable with the "ask assertive" styles (amiable and analytical). These situations are "low task" and require observing and monitoring followers. Again, this approach is a natural fit for amiable and analytical people who prefer a less direct, more hands-off technique when working with others.

Importantly, leadership styles S1 and S4 are both "low relationship" strategies, meaning that, from an interpersonal relationship-building perspective, they require less effort. Therefore, these findings make intuitive sense; leaders gravitate toward the leadership approach that is most natural for them, especially under situations where the effort to build a relationship is less important. For example, driving and expressive people are more hands-on whereas amiable and analytical people are more detached. However, this natural tendency is only effective when the situation calls for it.

What about situations where followers require more personal involvement from leaders, namely leadership styles S2 (selling) and S3 (participating)? While we found that amiable leaders had a slight preference for the participating approach, our research didn't find any other SOCIAL STYLE®-specific preferences. However, what we did discover is that the selling and participating strategies are highly related to leaders' versatility: leaders who practice a high level of interpersonal versatility are more likely to use the leadership styles S2 and S3 approaches than leaders who lack versatility. Again, this makes intuitive sense; due to the heavier focus on building relationships with followers, these two leadership approaches require more "interpersonal work" of leaders. Further, we discovered that versatility and adaptability

are strongly correlated, meaning that highly versatile leaders are also skilled at adapting their leadership style to the needs of the situation. This is a win-win, since leaders who learn both skills are learning to interact with their natural social styles in ways that also achieve leadership demands and organizational objectives.

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> HIGHLY VERSATILE LEADERS ARE ALSO SKILLED AT ADAPTING THEIR LEADERSHIP STYLE TO THE NEEDS OF THE SITUATION.

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## Building Trust

The implications of these findings are that leaders will benefit from both programs when used together. In addition to the standard benefits leaders gain when learning about their social styles and situation-based leadership, in isolation, a critical insight for leaders is that they need to be very cautious not to rest on their behavioral laurels. It's easy for leaders to default to their comfort zones, especially when it comes to natural behaviors and communication styles. This was proven through the research. However, the danger is that leaders may default to their standard social style preferences when the situation calls for a different leadership approach. An analytical leader who uses a delegating approach when the situation clearly calls for a participating approach will likely fail. The same is true for an expressive leader who naturally prefers the telling approach when the situation requires a selling approach.

To be effective leaders, people across individual behavioral preferences must recognize when followers require more relationship support, which requires a higher level of interpersonal versatility and adaptability. When leaders experience both programs, making the switch to a different leadership approach is easier. The combination of understanding followers' Performance Readiness®,

along with their social and behavioral preferences, magnifies leaders' abilities to lead effectively in any given situation.

Another important benefit is the creation of trust among leaders. One of the ultimate goals of all leadership development programs is to help leaders build the skills needed to develop trust among their followers. After all, if leadership is an attempt to influence, trust is a leader's primary source of influence potential. Practicing versatility, along with recognizing followers' task-related performance abilities and needs, helps leaders gain the trust of followers. As a result, followers will feel supported because their leader cares about their technical and task-related needs, and provides coaching and interpersonal support in their preferred style. In short, leaders gain trust by communicating and working with people in the ways they prefer and by guiding followers' performance according to their individual needs and situational requirements. This leads to better relationships, more trust and greater effectiveness — essential goals of any leadership development strategy.

## Implications for Ongoing Leadership Practices

So, what are the implications for L&D leaders who are trying to get the most out of their training dollars? When trying to fulfill multiple criteria in leadership programs, this research makes clear that the Situational Leadership® and SOCIAL STYLE® models, when offered together, develop leadership skills that are greater than those achieved in isolation. By integrating the knowledge gained from both programs, leaders' skills are multiplied. In the modern era where change is fast-paced and organizations are increasingly challenged to collectively demonstrate resilience, developing leaders firmly grounded in the tenets of personal adaptability and versatility merits strong consideration. ↻

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