Leadership Theory Connection: Situational

Erica Garnett

Missouri State University
Peter G. Northouse (2013) described leadership as a “process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 5). There are several mechanisms through which a leader can be effective or demonstrate his leadership abilities. Northouse describes several approaches through which to analyze the leadership style of an individual. However, this paper will focus mainly on the “Situational Approach” to leadership.

**Synthesis of Key Concepts**

The situational leader is flexible and adapts his approach in accordance with the needs of his followers. Northouse (2013) described situational leadership as being “composed of both a directive and supportive dimension, and that each has to be applied appropriately in a given situation” (p. 99). Directive behaviors are used to “help members in goal achievement via one-way communication” (Lane, Northouse Chapter 5 – Situational public presentation, September 23, slide 5). When being directive, leaders typically give directions and concise methods of how to achieve a particular goal. Supportive behaviors are used to “assist group members via two-way communication in feeling comfortable with themselves, co-workers, and the situation” (Lane, Northouse Chapter 5 – Situational public presentation, September 23, slide 6). Leaders can use a combination of high and low levels of each behavior in order to help their followers achieve a common goal.

The Situational Leadership II (SLII) Model can be used to understand the four main leadership styles (a) Delegating – low supportive and low directive behavior; (b) Supporting – high supportive and low directive behavior; (c) Coaching – high directive and high supportive behavior; (d) Directing – high directive and low supportive behavior (Northouse, 2013).

Situational leadership is a multi-dimensional approach to leadership, in which leaders not only have to consider their own approach but also recognize the development level of their
followers. On a particular task, followers can be classified as belonging to one of the four developmental category levels (a) D1 – low competence and high commitment; (b) D2 – some competence and low commitment; (c) D3 – moderate-high competence and low commitment; (d) D4 – high competence and high commitment (Northouse, 2013). According to Northouse (2013) and the SLII model, in any given situation the leader needs to first assess the nature of the situation. Then he has to adjust his approach in accordance with the needs of his follower.

**Compare and contrast.** The situational leadership approach is different from approaches to leadership which focus solely on the leader (i.e., “trait approach,” the “skills approach,” the “style approach,” and the “contingency theory”). The trait approach (sometimes referred to as the “Great Man” theories) “focuses on identifying innate qualities and characteristics possessed by great social, political, and military leaders” (Lane, Northouse Chap 2 Traits public presentation, August 26). The skills approach is a prescriptive approach to leadership development which focuses on the leader’s ability to solve problems and acquire specific skills and abilities, throughout his career (Northouse, 2013). The style approach focuses more on leader behaviors, in regard to tasks and relationships (Northouse, 2013). Although this approach emphasizes the leader’s interaction with his followers, it still maintains a sole focus on the leader. Although the contingency theory focuses on how well the leader’s style matched the situation, it does not take into account the developmental level of the subordinates.

The situational approach also differs from the theories which focus on leader motivation. The “authentic leader” and “servant leader” both focus primarily on the feeling of purpose and motivation that a leader may feel, and how that feeling affects his leadership approach. A servant leader attempts to serve and influence his followers, while the authentic leader operates through intrinsic motivation and focuses on being genuine (Northouse, 2013).
The situational approach largely focuses on the leader-follower relationship and task completion, which is similar to the “Path-Goal Theory” and the “Leader Member Exchange” approach to understanding leadership. The Path-Goal Theory focuses on “how leaders motivate subordinates to accomplish designated goals” (Northouse, 2013, p. 137). Although the Leader Member Exchange theory does not emphasize task completion, there is a major focus on the interactions between leaders and followers, and the impact of that association.

**Application**

In order to better understand situational leadership, I have chosen to apply the concept to interactions I have observed with my current practicum supervisor, Courtney Swan. Courtney serves as the Director of the Community Outreach and Leadership Development office at Drury University. I think her approach to leadership is best viewed with a situational leadership lens because she interacts with a variety of students, administrators, and community members, each with their own varying level of development, and is still able to effectively lead the organization.

During the first few weeks of my practicum, I observed an interaction between Courtney and a student. The student was the newly appointed president of the Drury Volunteer Corps (DVC), and was having trouble motivating his followers to be committed to the organization. From what I could hear, the student was well prepared to be the president of the DVC. He was the former president of his social fraternity and had been involved in the DVC for the past three years. However, he was discouraged by the lack of enthusiasm and involvement from his peers, so much so that he was not sure if he could continue to serve as president. According to the SLII Model, this student was at a D3 developmental level. He had a moderate-high level of competence to motivate his peers, yet a low level of commitment to the task. Since the student had been discouraged about the participation levels he was experiencing, he had already started
to withdraw from the task and no longer desired to be committed. However, again I think this is an excellent example of how Courtney demonstrated her situational leadership approach. Her method to helping the student was to engage in a two-way problem solving conversation with him. They both discussed options that he could use to possibly encourage the DVC membership to be engaged. Courtney also attentively listened to the student, allowed for him to divulge his true feelings about the situation, and continually asked for his input. From a situational leadership perspective, Courtney utilized a “Supporting” style to assist the student. She presented him with a high supportive and low directive environment, after assessing his developmental level.

About five weeks ago, I was sitting at my desk in the office when a lady from the Student Success office came to see Courtney. The lady was interested in partnering with our office for a program to help first year students; however she was unsure of the policies and procedures needed to implement the program. According to the situational leadership approach, as a follower the lady was at a D1 developmental level. She had a high level of commitment to seeing the project through, but a low level of competence in creating the program. Conversely, Courtney was able to assess the situation and provide a “Directive” style of leadership. She gave the lady specific instructions on how to secure funding for the program, which paperwork she needed to file, and defined the next steps.

About two weeks ago, I met with Courtney to discuss a project, which was to create a Senior Exit retreat for all of the graduating Drury seniors. Courtney was aware that through past employment and volunteer opportunities I have had a significant amount of experience planning leadership retreats and conferences. I was highly committed to the project, as it was an interest I had discussed in my initial interview for the practicum. Courtney had put me as the lead person
on the project, and only provided me with program outcome expectations. She then gave me free
reign to design the retreat in any manner that I saw fit. According to the situational leadership
approach, Courtney assessed the situation and recognized that I was at a D4 development level. I
had a high level of competence and a high level of commitment to accomplishing the task.
Therefore, she responded with a “Delegating” leadership style. She created a low supportive and
low directive environment, and allowed me to make the majority of the decisions.

As a situational leader, I have observed Courtney quickly switch from one leadership
style to another within a matter of minutes. I think she is an excellent example of how a
situational leader should operate, and she demonstrates how the process can be effective when
working with a wide variety of individuals. By viewing Courtney’s actions through a situational
leader lens, I am better able to understand how she operates as a leader, and why her leadership
style frequently changes.

Conclusion

In order to be an effective leader, individuals need to be cognizant of their followers’
competencies and capabilities. Leaders can utilize the situational approach in a variety of
scenarios, and can be especially effective when working with a diverse group of individuals.
The situational approach can help leaders learn to be mindful of developmental differences
within an organization and respond appropriately, so that tasks can be accomplished more
effectively and efficiently.
References