

The Flip Side of Situational Leadership

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Early Friday afternoon. A drink with the traditional speeches of all the good things the retirees did during their military career. Not a real inspiring moment. All are waiting patiently to do what they were coming for. After the first glasses are emptied and the chats out of respect and politeness are fading, the first people are getting out. Next to me stands a retiree from my class at the Military School. He states that the social gathering will not last long casually mentioning that compared to the 'old days' drinks nowadays do not last long. As he wonders why that is some enjoy a second drink. Soon there are more tables than people in the room. Unlike the furniture, we do not tend to stick long.

Leaving the drink with the last bunch, I ponder on his question. Leaving a social activity soon in favor of one's family is not a bad thing, but that is not an acceptable explanation as there is no evidence that military do love their family more now than then. The 'early leavers' must be a symptom for something else. Some think it is related to the waning 'esprit de corps'. While social activities should enhance just that kind of spirit, they fail. What went wrong? And how to stop it?

Before we start with a social experiment that may give a clue about what is going on, I need to refresh your knowledge on Situational Leadership¹. The Situational Leadership Model was developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard, while working on Management of Organizational Behavior. It is arguably the most recognized, utilized and effective leadership and influence tool in the history of the behavioral sciences.

The fundamental underpinning of the Situational Leadership Model is that there is no single 'best' style of leadership. Effective leadership is task-relevant, and the most successful leaders are those who adapt their leadership style to the Performance Readiness, a combination of ability and willingness, of the individual or group they are attempting to lead or influence. Effective leadership varies, not only with the person or group that is being influenced, but it also depends on the task, job or function that needs to be accomplished and its relationship with the group's maturity.

A good leader develops "the competence and commitment of their people so they're self-motivated rather than dependent on others for direction and guidance." According to Blanchard, "Four combinations of competence and commitment make up what we call 'development level.'"

- D1 - Low competence and high commitment
- D2 - Low competence and low commitment
- D3 - High competence and low/variable commitment
- D4 - High competence and high commitment

The Situational Leadership Model serves as a framework to analyze each situation based on: the amount of guidance and direction (task behavior) a leader gives; the amount of socio-emotional support (relationship behavior) a leader provides and the readiness level that followers exhibit in performing a specific task, function, or objective.

¹ Experts may skip the following paragraphs, others just keep on reading.

The main consequence is that when a leader motivates followers properly, i.e. in relation to the situation, they will turn into better collaborators.

But this model has a flip side. Let's do a little experiment. Take a leader – of course in our experiment this person does not deserve that title – and some collaborators. According to the Situational Leadership Model a leader can enhance the performance of the individuals as well as the whole team by applying the right leadership style in relation to the skill level for the task at hand. Done correctly the team will evolve in the direction D1 to D4.

Once our team has reached the desired development level, we tell the 'leader' to use a style that corresponds to a much 'higher' development level. What will happen? The group will not evolve to that level, but will fall back to some lower level of performance. Its members will get frustrated and do a worse job. Improving a group is not done in quantum leaps, but in baby steps. You have to give them a reasonable challenge. Enough to be challenging, too much can be scary.

At an organizational level you can observe this transgression to a lower state too. If top management is driving a too big change, people tend to disengage and do less than business as usual. Disengagement is also the result when a strategic department is too far ahead of the normal approach. Yes, such a department should look into the future, but its advice must make a connection with today's real world to assure that the rest of the organization is following. It is like a rubber band, a good stretch will provide a pull, too much will cause it to break.

Let's go back to our test group. We ask the leader to use a style that corresponds to a 'lower' development level. Guess what will happen. Right, the team will fall back on a lower level. Not without trouble and interpersonal tensions, but that is besides the point here. What is important is that they will return to the level of the applied leadership style. This fallback does not mean that the individuals will unlearn the acquired competencies, but they will no longer use them and as a collective they will behave in relation to the style of the leader. According to Hersey, a leader's high, realistic expectation causes high performance of followers; a leader's low expectations lead to low performance of followers. Not convinced? I would not recommend actually holding the experiment but I'm sure when you reflect on it you will remember an instance of this kind of adaptive behavior in real life. Officers behaving like high school kids during staff courses?

Conclusion of our experiments is that to improve a group of people the leader must present a reasonable challenge to the individuals. Expecting too much will cause the group to drop to a lower level than they were. Expecting too less will push the behavior of the group to the lower performance level corresponding to the employed leadership style.

This kind of adaptation is also valid at the organizational and cultural level. The collective behavior is continuously influenced by daily actions. These influences can support or change a culture. Words, directives and speeches may be important but deeds make an indelible impression. A leader's actions, with emphasis on the occasionally unorthodox to make them memorable, are the ingredients that contribute to molding a company's culture. And in our case these actions should point in the direction of particularities of the military to sustain the 'esprit de corps'.

Unfortunately, budget cuts have opened the gates of a more managerial approach in favor of efficiency. Armed Forces are more run like a modern company² and less as what they are. Total Quality Management, Internal Control Systems ... were introduced to help us to do more with less, or at least to do the same with less. But the way to hell is paved with good intentions. With the introduction of good management practices and its benefits also comes a shift in culture. The 'band of brothers' is slowly, but steadily replaced by a collection of human resources whereby resources need to be used in an efficient way. As Defense starts mirroring for-profit companies, military personnel start to behave like the bleu-collar workers who earn their money in factories.

² The fact that I wanted to use the word 'niche' in the former paragraph shows how deep this change has already affected my thinking.

There too, social activities are needed to 'bond' and attended as long as the end of the work day. Smart managers understand that a team is more than the sum of the employees and they refer to the military as an example. While they rediscover 'teams', we drift away from it towards a civilian mentality with some pockets of teamwork.

It is time to reconsider the desire to resemble a modern company in our way to do things and to focus on what we are: a military organization. An organization at the service of the nation(s) with a special 'esprit de corps' and a keen sense of effectiveness.