



Ignite! Newsletter –May 2007

A Situational Approach to Managing People

Effective leaders know that there is no one best way to manage people. Instead, they adapt their style according to the development level of the people they are managing

No One "Best" Leadership Style



Research over the past couple of decades has made it clear that successful leaders adapt their leadership style to the needs of the situation. They recognize that there is no one best style. In fact, as depicted in The Ken Blanchard

Companies' Situational Leadership II Model, there are four leadership styles representing different combinations of directive and supportive leader behaviors from which to choose for any given situation.

Directive behavior is defined as the extent to which a leader engages in one-way communication; spells out the employee's role and tells the employee what to do, where to do it, when to do it and how to do it; and closely supervises performance. Three words can be used to define directive behavior: structure, control, and supervise.

Supportive behavior is defined as the extent to which a leader engages in two-way communication, listens, provides support and encouragement, facilitates interaction, and involves the employee in decision making. Three words can be used to define supportive behavior: praise, listen, and facilitate.

The combination of high directive and low supportive leader behavior is referred to as Directing. The leader tells the subordinate what, how, when, and where to do various tasks.

High directive/high supportive behavior is referred to as Coaching. In this style the leader still provides a great deal of direction, but he or she also attempts to hear the employee's feelings about decisions as well as their ideas and suggestions.

High supportive/low directive leader behavior is called Supporting. The leader's role is to provide recognition and to actively listen and facilitate problem solving and decision making by the employee.

Low supportive/low directive leader behavior is labeled Delegating. In this style employees are allowed greater autonomy because they have both the competence and confidence to accomplish the task on their own.

When to Use Each Style

The key to being a situational leader is knowing when to use each style. The decision is primarily a function of two variables: the degree of difficulty of the task and the development level of the person doing the task.



Development level is the degree of competence and commitment an employee has to perform a particular task without supervision. Competence is a function of the knowledge or skill that can be gained from education, training, and/or experience. Commitment is a combination of confidence (self-assuredness) and motivation (interest and enthusiasm).

The amount of direction or support that a leader should provide depends on the development level of the employee for the task at hand. There are four development levels.

When first beginning a new task where they have had little, if any, prior knowledge or experience,

most individuals are enthusiastic and ready to learn, but at a low development level for the task. Such a staff member should be led by a Directing style. They need to know what to expect and how to do the task at hand.

As the development level of an employee increases, his or her competence and commitment fluctuate. When people begin to learn a task, they find it is either more difficult to learn to do than they thought it was going to be or less interesting. Thus, they become disillusioned, which decreases their commitment. People who are disillusioned need Coaching--high direction to continue to build skills as well as high support to address their low commitment.



As competence continues to improve, most individuals go through a self-doubt state where they question whether they can perform the task on their own. Their boss says they're competent but they're not so sure. These alternating feelings of competence and self-doubt are indicative of a higher level or development. Here a

Supporting style is most appropriate. These individuals need to be listened to and encouraged but do not need much direction, since they have demonstrated competence to do the task.

Finally, in the highest level of development, employees usually demonstrate high levels of competence and commitment. The corresponding leadership style to use is Delegating--giving the employee increased autonomy for doing the job he or she has demonstrated both competence and commitment in doing.

Developing More Effective Leaders

There are still people out there who think there is only one best way of leading people. Research and practice indicate, however, that this is not the case. Take a look in your own organization. Notice what the best managers in your company are doing. Chances are you will see them adjusting their management style to meet the needs of the people they are working with. Effective leaders know that there is no one best way to manage people. Managers looking to improve their ability to lead people to higher levels of performance need to adapt their style to match the development level of the people they are managing. It is a proven approach that will help managers lead people to their best performance every time.