

Ignite Newsletter November 2007(a)

Bringing Out the Best In Others

Over-supervising or under-supervising—that is, giving people too much or too little direction—has a negative impact on people’s development. That’s why it’s so important to match leadership style to development level. This matching strategy is the essence of Situational Leadership®, a leadership model originally created by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey at Ohio University in 1968. The revised model, Situational Leadership® II, has endured as an effective approach to managing and motivating people because it opens up communication and fosters a partnership between the leader and the people that the leader supports and depends upon.

The Situational Leadership® II Model

Situational Leadership® II (SLII®) is based on the beliefs that you should tailor leadership style to the situation. There are four basic development levels in the Situational Leadership® II Model: Enthusiastic Beginner, Disillusioned Learner, Capable but Cautious Performer, and Self-Reliant Achiever.

Can you remember when you first started to learn to ride a bicycle? You were so excited sometimes that you couldn’t even sleep at night, even though you didn’t have a clue how to actually ride a bike. You were a classic Enthusiastic Beginner who needed direction.

Remember the first time you took a fall on your bike? As you were picking yourself up off the pavement, you might have wondered why you decided to learn to ride in the first place and whether you would ever really master it. Now you had reached the Disillusioned Learner stage, and you needed coaching.

Once you were able to ride your bike with your dad cheering you on, that confidence probably became shaky the first time you decided to take your bike out for a spin without your cheerleader and supporter close at hand. At this point, you were a Capable but Cautious Performer in need of support.

Finally, you reached the stage where your bicycle seemed to be a part of you. You could ride it without even thinking about it. You were truly a Self-Reliant Achiever, and your parents could delegate to you the job of having fun on your bike.

Matching Leadership Style to Development Level

Suppose you have recently hired a 22-year-old salesperson. There are three key responsibilities required of an effective salesperson besides selling: service, administration, and team contribution.

Having worked in the hotel industry during the summer, your new salesperson seems to have good experience in service. Since he was the treasurer of his fraternity and captain of his college soccer team, it looks like he also has some experience in administration and team contribution. As a result, your initial training focus with him will be in the sales part of his job, where he is an Enthusiastic Beginner.

In this area, he is enthusiastic and ready to learn, despite his lack of skills. Because of his high commitment to becoming a good salesperson, he is curious, hopeful, optimistic, and excited. In this area of his job, a Directing leadership style is appropriate. You teach your new hire everything about the sales process, from making a sales call to closing the sale. You take him on sales calls with you so that you can show him how the sales process

Situational Leadership® II Ignite! Newsletter Archive



November 2007 (a)
Bringing Out the Best In Others

October 2007 (b)
Communication is the Key to
Great Frontline Leadership

October 2007 (a)
Leadership: The Key To
Organizational Vitality

September 2007 (a)
Leadership and Vision

August 2007 (b)
Managing Up to Get What You
Need

August 2007 (a)
What is Leadership?

July 2007 (b)
Dealing with Declining
Performance

July 2007 (a)
A Future Look at the Trends
and Issues Organizations and
Leaders Face in 2010

June 2007 (b)
Manage & Develop People to
be Their Best

June 2007 (a)
Improving Performance at All
Levels in Your Organization

May 2007
Great Leadership Begins with a
Serving Heart

April 2007
No One Best Leadership Style

[More SLII® Articles](#)

works and what a good job looks like. Then, you lay out a step-by-step plan for his self-development as a salesperson.

In other words, you not only pass out the test, but you also are involved in teaching him the answers. You provide specific direction and closely supervise his sales performance, planning and prioritizing what has to be accomplished for him to be successful. Teaching and showing him what experienced salespeople do—and letting him practice in low-risk sales situations—is the appropriate approach for this Enthusiastic Beginner.

Disillusioned Learners Need a Coaching Style

Now, suppose that your new hire has a few weeks of sales training under his belt. He understands the basics of selling but is finding it harder to master than he expected. You notice that his step has lost a little of its spring, and he's looking a bit discouraged at times. While he knows more about sales than he did as a beginner and has flashes of real competence, he's sometimes overwhelmed and frustrated, which has put a damper on his commitment. A person at this stage is a Disillusioned Learner.

What's needed now is a Coaching leadership style, which is high on direction and support. You continue to direct and closely monitor his sales efforts, but you now engage in more two-way conversations, going back and forth between your advice and his questions and suggestions. You also provide a lot of praise and support at this stage, because you want to build his confidence, restore his commitment, and encourage his initiative. While you consider your salesperson's input, you are the one who makes the final decisions, since he is learning on actual clients.

Capable but Cautious Performers Need a Supporting Style

Fast forward a couple of months. Now the young man you hired knows the day-to-day responsibilities of his sales position and has acquired some good sales skills. Yet he still has some self-doubt and questions whether he can sell well on his own, without your help or the support of other colleagues. While you say he's competent and knows what he's doing, he is not so sure. He has a good grasp of the sales process and is working well with clients, but he's hesitant to be out there completely on his own. He may become self-critical or even reluctant to trust his own instincts. At this stage, he is a Capable but Cautious Performer whose commitment to selling fluctuates from excitement to insecurity.

This is when a Supporting leadership style is called for. Since your direct report has learned his selling skills well, he needs little direction but lots of support from you to encourage his wavering confidence. Now is the time to stand behind his efforts, listen to his concerns and suggestions, and be there to support his interactions not only with clients, but also with others on your staff. You encourage and praise, but rarely do you direct his efforts. The supporting style is more collaborative; feedback is now a give-and-take process between the two of you. You help him reach his own sales solutions by asking questions that expand his thinking and encourage risk taking.

Self-Reliant Achievers Need a Delegating Style

As time passes, your former new salesperson becomes a key player on your team. Not only has he mastered sales tasks and skills, but he's also taken on challenging clients and has been successful with them. He anticipates problems and is ready with solutions. He is justifiably confident because of his success in managing his own sales area. Not only is he able to work on his own, but he is also able to inspire others. At this stage, he is a Self-Reliant Achiever in the sales part of his job. You can count on him to hit his sales goals.

For a person at this level of development, a Delegating leadership style is best. In this situation, it is appropriate to turn over responsibility for day-to-day decision making and problem solving to him by letting him run his own territory. Your job now is to empower him by allowing and trusting him to act independently. What you need to do is acknowledge his excellent performance and provide the appropriate resources he requires to carry out his sales duties. It's important at this stage to challenge your high performing salesperson to continue to grow in his sales ability and cheer him on to even higher levels of sales.

Getting Started as an Organization

Leaders looking for a comprehensive and practical method of creating open communication and developing self-reliance among managers and direct reports should strongly consider adopting a situational approach. Get your organization started on this path by teaching the managers in your company how to diagnose the needs of an individual or a team and then how to use the appropriate leadership style to respond to the needs of the person and the situation. The result is an organization where employee competence is developed, commitment is gained, and talented individuals are retained.

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