

In 1969, Blanchard and Hersey developed situational leadership theory in their classic book "Management of Organizational Behavior." This theory was first called the "Life Cycle Theory of Leadership." During the mid-1970s, it was renamed the situational leadership theory. Blanchard said situational leaders tend to choose between "directive behavior" (what and how) and "supportive behavior" (developing commitment, initiative, and positive attitudes).

S1: Telling / Directing

Follower: R1: Low competence, low commitment / Unable and unwilling or insecure

Leader: High task focus, low relationship focus

When the follower cannot do the job and is unwilling or afraid to try, then the leader takes a highly directive role, telling them what to do but without a great deal of concern for the relationship. The leader may also provide a working structure, both for the job and in terms of how the person is controlled. The leader may first find out why the person is not motivated and if there are any limitations in ability. These two factors may be linked, for example where a person believes they are less capable than they should be may be in some form of denial or other coping. The follower may also lack self-confidence as a result. If the leader focused more on the relationship, the follower may become confused about what must be done and what is optional. The leader thus maintains a clear 'do this' position to ensure all required actions are clear.

S2: Selling / Coaching

Follower: R2: Some competence, variable commitment / Unable but willing or motivated

Leader: High task focus, high relationship focus

When the follower can do the job, at least to some extent, and perhaps is over-confident about their ability in this, then 'telling' them what to do may demotivate them or lead to resistance. The leader thus needs to 'sell' another way of working, explaining and clarifying decisions. The leader thus spends time listening and advising and, where appropriate, helping the follower to gain necessary skills through coaching methods.

Note: S1 and S2 are leader-driven.

S3: Participating / Supporting

Follower: R3: High competence, variable commitment / Able but unwilling or insecure

Leader: Low task focus, high relationship focus

When the follower can do the job, but is refusing to do it or otherwise showing insufficient commitment, the leader need not worry about showing them what to do, and instead is concerned with finding out why the person is refusing and thence persuading them to cooperate. There is less excuse here for followers to be reticent about their ability, and the key is very much around motivation. If the causes are found then they can be addressed by the leader. The leader thus spends time listening, praising and otherwise making the follower feel good when they show the necessary commitment.

S4: Delegating / Observing

Follower: R4: High competence, high commitment / Able and willing or motivated

Leader: Low task focus, low relationship focus

When the follower can do the job and is motivated to do it, then the leader can basically leave them to it, largely trusting them to get on with the job although they also may need to keep a relatively distant eye on things to ensure everything is going to plan. Followers at this level have less need for support or frequent praise, although as with anyone, occasional recognition is always welcome.

Note: S3 and S4 are follower-led.