

# SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

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## Situational Leadership Theory

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Organizational Behavior, Management, Social Psychology

**Proponents:** Paul Hersey, Kenneth Blanchard

### 1. Foundational Context and Core Tenet

The Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) posits that effective leadership is not based on a single, fixed set of traits or behaviors, but rather relies on the leader's ability to adapt their style to the specific circumstances and, most critically, to the maturity or readiness level of the individual follower or group being led. Developed initially by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in the late 1960s, SLT fundamentally shifted focus away from static leadership styles toward a dynamic, prescriptive model. The central tenet holds that leaders must accurately diagnose the development level of their subordinates and subsequently provide the appropriate mix of directive (task) behavior and supportive (relationship) behavior. This adaptive approach ensures that the leadership style utilized is congruent with the subordinate's current ability and motivation to perform a specific task, maximizing both productivity and employee development.

Unlike earlier leadership models, such as Trait Theory or pure Contingency Theory, SLT offers clear, actionable guidance regarding which style should be deployed in a given scenario. The theory emphasizes that effective leaders are highly flexible, capable of fluidly moving between different behavioral patterns as required by the situation. The primary goal is twofold: first, to achieve the task efficiently, and second, to help the follower progress to a higher level of autonomy and competence over time. Thus, SLT is deeply rooted in development, viewing leadership as a cyclical process of growth where followers transition through stages of dependence toward independence. The ultimate success of the leader is measured not just by immediate task completion, but by the extent to which followers can eventually take ownership and responsibility for their own performance.

### 2. Dimensions of Leader Behavior

SLT defines leadership behavior along two critical, independent axes: Directive Behavior (Task) and Supportive Behavior (Relationship). Directive behavior is characterized by the leader providing specific instructions about what to do, how to do it, where to do it, and when to do it, often involving close supervision and strict performance standards. This dimension focuses squarely on task accomplishment and organizational structure. High directive behavior is necessary when followers lack technical knowledge, experience, or clarity regarding their assigned roles.

Supportive behavior, conversely, is defined by the extent to which the leader engages in two-way communication, listening, providing encouragement, facilitating problem-solving, and involving the follower in decision-making. This dimension addresses the follower's psychological well-being,

motivation, and feelings of confidence. High supportive behavior is employed when followers have the requisite skills but may lack the motivation, confidence, or psychological maturity to execute the task autonomously. SLT asserts that the four primary leadership styles are generated by combining high and low levels of these two behavioral dimensions, creating a practical framework for situational adjustment.

### 3. The Concept of Follower Readiness (Development Level)

The core innovation of SLT lies in its reliance on the follower's "readiness" or "development level" (D/R) as the primary determinant for selecting the appropriate leadership style. Readiness is a composite measure derived from two distinct components: ability (or Job Maturity) and willingness (or Psychological Maturity). Ability encompasses the technical knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to perform a specific task successfully. Willingness refers to the follower's motivation, commitment, confidence, and desire to perform the task.

SLT identifies four distinct development levels, each requiring a tailored leadership response. These levels are progressive, illustrating the journey of a subordinate from being incapable and insecure to being highly competent and confident. The accurate assessment of a follower's D/R level for a particular task--not their overall personality or job function--is the most crucial diagnostic skill required of the leader. A follower may be D4 (highly developed) for one task, such as compiling quarterly reports, but D1 (low development) for a newly assigned task, such as leading a sales presentation. The leader must therefore continually reassess the follower's needs task-by-task.

### 4. The Four Leadership Styles (S1-S4) and Matching Readiness Levels (D1-D4)

The Situational Leadership model prescribes four specific leadership styles (S1 through S4) designed to match the four corresponding follower development levels (D1 through D4). This matching process forms the prescriptive heart of the theory.

#### **S1: Directing (High Task, Low Relationship)**

This style is characterized by the leader providing explicit instructions and closely supervising performance. S1 is matched with Development Level 1 (D1), where followers have low competence and low commitment (lacking both ability and willingness). Since the follower cannot perform the task, the leader must provide the direction and structure necessary for initiation. This is often the starting point for new employees or those tackling highly unfamiliar tasks.

#### **S2: Coaching (High Task, High Relationship)**

In this style, the leader continues to direct task performance but also uses supportive behavior to reinforce willingness and enthusiasm. S2 is matched with Development Level 2 (D2), where followers have low competence but high commitment (some ability, but still insecure or struggling). The leader explains decisions, solicits clarification, and provides continuous encouragement to build confidence while maintaining structural guidance.

### **S3: Supporting (Low Task, High Relationship)**

The leader focuses primarily on facilitating the follower's efforts and sharing decision-making responsibility, while providing minimal directive behavior. S3 is matched with Development Level 3 (D3), where followers have high competence but variable commitment (they have the ability but may be insecure, hesitant, or unmotivated). The leader's role shifts to being a supportive partner, listening actively and helping the follower overcome psychological barriers.

### **S4: Delegating (Low Task, Low Relationship)**

The leader allows the follower to take full responsibility for the task and decision-making, offering only minimal guidance and support. S4 is matched with Development Level 4 (D4), where followers have both high competence and high commitment (fully capable and motivated). This is the goal of the developmental process, where the follower is autonomous and requires little interference from the leader.

## **5. Developmental Progression and Regressive Cycles**

A key implication of SLT is its focus on the developmental cycle. Leaders are expected to utilize a style that not only fits the current D/R level but also encourages progression to the next level. For a follower starting at D1, the leader begins with S1 (Directing) and gradually "moves around the curve" by increasing supportive behavior (S2, Coaching), then decreasing directive behavior (S3, Supporting), and finally decreasing supportive behavior (S4, Delegating) as the follower matures. This movement represents a planned developmental strategy aimed at fostering follower self-reliance.

However, the theory acknowledges that development is not always linear. Followers can regress in their readiness due to various factors, such as organizational changes, personal stress, unexpected failures, or assignment to new, highly complex tasks. For instance, a D4 employee who suddenly faces a major project setback might lose confidence (decreasing commitment) and temporarily revert to D3. In such a case, the effective leader must recognize this regression and temporarily shift back to S3 (Supporting) to rebuild confidence, demonstrating the necessity of the leader's constant diagnostic flexibility. In extreme cases, a failure to appropriately adapt--such as using S1 on a D4 employee--can lead to demotivation and even further regression.

## 6. Situational Leadership II (SLII) by Blanchard

Following the initial collaboration, Hersey and Blanchard developed distinct, proprietary versions of the model. While Hersey continued promoting the original framework, Blanchard and the team at the Ken Blanchard Companies refined the model into Situational Leadership II (SLII). The core principles remain the same, but SLII introduced refinements in terminology, particularly renaming the readiness dimension to the more development-focused term "Development Level." SLII strongly emphasizes the importance of contracting--the process where the leader and follower mutually agree on the follower's current developmental level for a specific task and the corresponding leadership style that will be used.

Furthermore, SLII places greater emphasis on the leader's diagnostic role, training managers extensively on how to observe and evaluate competence and commitment accurately. The model highlights the concept of "Partnering for Performance," suggesting that the interaction between leader and follower should be a collaborative effort, not a top-down imposition. While both Hersey's SLT and Blanchard's SLII share the central S1-S4 and D1-D4 framework, SLII is often preferred in corporate training environments due to its highly structured diagnostic tools and its focus on fostering an ongoing coaching relationship.

## 7. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its widespread popularity and practical applicability in management training, the Situational Leadership Theory faces several academic and theoretical criticisms. One major limitation lies in the ambiguity surrounding the precise operationalization of the readiness dimensions. Critics argue that measuring "willingness" and "ability" objectively is difficult, and the model often relies heavily on the subjective judgment of the leader, which can be prone to bias or misdiagnosis.

Another significant criticism focuses on the lack of rigorous, independent research validating the highly prescriptive nature of the model. While the correlation between leader flexibility and positive outcomes is generally accepted, empirical studies often fail to definitively prove that the prescribed match between a specific S-style and a specific D-level consistently yields better results than other combinations. Furthermore, the model tends to overlook critical organizational and environmental factors--such as team dynamics, organizational culture, time constraints, and the leader's own personality constraints--that often influence effective leadership choice, presenting a potentially oversimplified view of complex organizational realities.

## Further Reading

[Situational Leadership Theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Situational Leadership II \(SLII\) Model](#)

Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. H. (1969). Life cycle theory of leadership.

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