The Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership® Theory

Choosing the Right Leadership Style for the Right People

What type of leadership do your people need?

You've just finished training the newest member of your team. Now that he's ready to start working, you give him the data he needs to enter into the company's database, and you hurry off to a meeting.

When you return later that afternoon, you find that he hasn't done anything. He didn't know what to do, and he didn't have the confidence to ask for help. As a result, hours have been lost, and you have to rush to enter the data on time. Although you may want to blame the worker, the truth is that you're as much to blame as he is.

How can you avoid situations like this?

Management experts Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard argue that these things happen because leaders don't match their style of leadership to the maturity of the people they're leading. When style and maturity aren't matched, failure is the result.

In this article, we'll review the Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership® Theory, and we'll explain how it's used in different leadership situations.
Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory

The Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory was created by Dr Paul Hersey, a professor and author of "The Situational Leader," and Ken Blanchard, author of the best selling "One-Minute Manager," among others.

The theory states that instead of using just one style, successful leaders should change their leadership styles based on the maturity of the people they're leading and the details of the task. Using this theory, leaders should be able to place more or less emphasis on the task, and more or less emphasis on the relationships with the people they're leading, depending on what's needed to get the job done successfully.

Leadership Styles

According to Hersey and Blanchard, there are four main leadership styles:

- **Telling/Directing (S1)** - Leaders tell their people what to do and how to do it.
- **Selling/Coaching (S2)** - Leaders provide information and direction, but there's more communication with followers. Leaders "sell" their message to get people on board.
- **Participating/Consulting (S3)** - Leaders focus more on the relationship and less on direction. The leader works with the team, and shares decision-making responsibilities.
- **Delegating (S4)** - Leaders pass most of the responsibility onto the follower or group. The leaders still monitor progress, but they're less involved in decisions.

As you can see, styles S1 and S2 are focused on getting the task done. Styles S3 and S4 are more concerned with developing team members' abilities to work independently.

Maturity Levels

According to Hersey and Blanchard, knowing when to use each style is largely dependent on the maturity of the person or group you're leading. They break maturity down into four different levels:

- **M1** - People at this level of maturity are at the bottom level of the scale. They lack the knowledge, skills, or confidence to work on their own, and they often need to be pushed to take the task on.
- **M2** - at this level, followers might be willing to work on the task, but they still don't have the skills to complete it successfully.
- **M3** - Here, followers are ready and willing to help with the task. They have more skills than the M2 group, but they're still not confident in their abilities.
- **M4** - These followers are able to work on their own. They have high confidence and strong skills, and they're committed to the task.
The Hersey-Blanchard model maps each leadership style to each maturity level, as shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maturity Level</th>
<th>Most Appropriate Leadership Style</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1: Low maturity</td>
<td>S1: Telling/directing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2: Medium maturity, limited skills</td>
<td>S2: Selling/coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3: Medium maturity, higher skills but lacking confidence</td>
<td>S3: Participating/supporting</td>
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<tr>
<td>M4: High maturity</td>
<td>S4: Delegating</td>
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To use this model, reflect on the maturity of individuals within your team. The table above shows which leadership style Hersey and Blanchard recommend for people with that level of maturity.
Leadership Style Examples

1. You’re about to leave for an extended holiday, and your tasks will be handled by an experienced colleague. He’s very familiar with your responsibilities, and he’s excited to do the job.

Instead of trusting his knowledge and skills to do the work, you spend hours creating a detailed list of tasks for which he’ll be responsible, and give full instructions on how to do them.

The result? Your work gets done, but you’ve damaged the relationship with your colleague by your lack of trust. He was an M4 in maturity, and yet you used an S1 leadership style instead of an S4, which would have been more appropriate.

2. You’ve just been put in charge of leading a new team. It’s your first time working with these people. As far as you can tell, they have some of the necessary skills to reach the department’s goals, but not all of them. The good news is that they’re excited and willing to do the work.

You estimate they’re at an M3 maturity level, so you use the matching S3 leadership style. You coach them through the project’s goals, pushing and teaching where necessary, but largely leaving them to make their own decisions. As a result, their relationship with you is strengthened, and the team is successful.

Key Points
All teams, and all team members, aren’t created equal. Hersey and Blanchard argue that leaders are more effective when they use a leadership style based on the individuals or groups they’re leading.

Start by identifying whom you’re leading. Are your followers knowledgeable about the task? Are they willing and excited to do the work? Rate them on the M1 - M4 maturity scale, and then use the leadership style that’s appropriate for that rating.

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