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Lessons in Leadership

An Interview with Paul Hersey

Dr. Paul Hersey, Founder and CEO of the Center for Leadership Studies (CLS), is internationally known as an educator, trainer, lecturer, and conference leader. He has influenced managers and leaders in over 150 countries and has helped introduce Situational Leadership® to more than a 1000 business and industrial organizations including Mobil, IBM, Caterpillar Tractor, Harris, and Illinois Bell to name a few. Dr. Hersey (Doc to his friends) is the author of many books.

His *Management of Organizational Behavior: Leading Human Resources,* is one of the first organizational behavior books published, and is still one of the most popular texts. Doc has also written a number of books dealing with the Situational application of influence. Among the titles are *The Situational Leader, Situational Parenting®, Situational Selling®, and Situational Service®.* In each book, the practical application of the Situational model is explained. The Center for Leadership Studies, located in Escondido, California, is the hub of activity from which the training programs are delivered.

Blackwell: *Based on your many years of consulting with Fortune 500 companies and your experience teaching Organizational Behavior, have you come up with a definition of leadership that you can share with us?*

Hersey: Actually it's very simple. Leadership is simply the process of influencing someone to do something that he or she might otherwise not do. Leadership is influence. Now, many people have a problem with this definition because they equate influence with manipulation. The way I see it, there is nothing wrong with influence as long as you are influencing someone to accomplish something that advances organizational goals and their own goals at the same time. That's a winwin situation. If, however, you attempt to influence someone to do something which is harmful to them while advancing your own personal goals or even organizational goals, that is manipulation and sets up a win-lose dynamic. This is not what we mean by leadership.

Blackwell: *So, you're saying that leadership occurs every time a manager successfully influences an employee as long as it is in a win-win scenario?*

Hersey: Not just managers. Anyone can exercise leadership. As long as you are in a position to successfully influence someone else's actions, you are exercising leadership. Yes, typically we think of leadership as being exercised by managers to subordinates, but often we are in a position to influence our peers or even those who are above us in the hierarchy. Strict hierarchical considerations are not as important today as they once were. People lead based on their expertise and their relationship power, not just based on their job title.

Blackwell: *So leadership can be exercised by anyone at any level of the organization? But what do leaders actually do that set them apart from others? How do they exercise this influence?*

Hersey: The way I see it, leaders use two different types of behavior to influence others. Actually, this model goes back to the Ohio State Studies and the University of Michigan studies which began back in the late 1940s. These studies showed that leaders can engage in task behavior and relationship behavior. While the University of Michigan studies looked at leaders as predominantly using either task-focused behavior or relationship-focused behavior, the Ohio State Studies suggested that leaders could use one or the other or both in varying degrees. Task and relationship behaviors were both seen as independent variables and an infinite number of leadership styles are thus possible. To be useful, however, a model has to be simple, so the Ohio State researchers settled on a diagram with four quadrants. The X axis showed task behavior from low to high and the Y axis showed relationship behavior from low to high. Quadrant 1 or Style 1 exhibited high task behavior and low relationship behavior. Quadrant and Style 2 used high task behavior as well as high relationship behavior. Quadrant and Style 3 included low task behavior but high relationship behavior and Quadrant and Style 4 relied on low amounts of task and relationship behavior. The Situational Leadership® Model is actually based on the Ohio State Studies. Research has shown there is no one best style. Each quadrant or leadership style was the most effective leadership style in certain situations. For example, in a crisis situation when time is an important variable, Style 1 (high task, low relationship) is appropriate. When the room is on fire, there's no time to call a meeting and ask how everyone is feeling. It's time to get the heck out of the room!

Blackwell: *Can you back up for a minute and explain what you mean by task behavior and relationship behavior?*

Hersey: In terms of the Situational Leadership® Model, which also recognizes these two types of leadership behaviors, I define task behavior as directive behavior or providing guidance to employees. In other words, you are exhibiting task behavior when you tell an employee what to do, how to do it, when it needs to be done, where it should be done, and who is going to do it. This behavior provides clear and specific directions to employees. On the other hand, relationship behavior entails two-way communication, facilitating behavior, active listening, and socio-emotional support. Relationship behavior can be called supportive behavior. You are supporting the employee through interpersonal relationships. The important part is knowing when to provide each type of behavior in your influence efforts.

Blackwell: *I notice you concentrate on behavior as opposed to philosophy or even attitudes. Is there a reason for that?*

Hersey: Actually, there is a very important distinction between attitudes and behavior. Many other leadership theories concentrate on philosophy of management or attitudes – whether a leader is democratic or participative by nature, for example. In Situational Leadership®, we teach that behavior is far more flexible than attitudes or values which are internal. You can teach someone how to behave to get optimal results in a given situation. It's all a matter of analyzing the situation and providing the appropriate leadership style.

Blackwell: *You mentioned other leadership theories, and certainly there have been a lot of them over the years. Some, like the Managerial Grid, retained their popularity for quite awhile. Yet, it seems from the literature as well as the number of training programs still being conducted in Situational Leadership® that this theory has been around for more than 30 years and is still alive and well. How can you account for its endurance and adaptability?*

Hersey: Precisely because it is not a theory. It is a model. Theories are fun to read and use to conduct doctoral research, but Situational Leadership® is a practical model which is user-friendly and immediately applicable to almost all leadership scenarios. It has also proven to be applicable all over the world.

Situational Leadership® is 'organized common sense' and is centered around identifying how people learn and influence. While the model is complex in some ways, it is really culturally non-biased, thus its transferability is simple. We look at a frequency distribution of learning styles, educational levels, and organizational structure, and then apply the model. When we train people in the Situational Leadership® Model, we teach them how to match their leadership style to the readiness level of the employee. Learning to analyze employee readiness is really the key to the whole model. After all, prescription without diagnosis is malpractice!

Blackwell: *So, "diagnosis'' is an essential part of the skills you are trying to teach with Situational Leadership®.*

Hersey: Absolutely. Situational Leadership® provides a way to be just as professional as those in other disciplines, such as law and medicine. It also says that we can't just write prescriptions. What Situational Leadership® teaches is that you need to do your diagnosis first and then act on it to provide those things that can make a difference.

Blackwell: *Isn't what you now call "readiness" the same as "maturity level" in the original version of Situational Leadership®.*

Hersey: Well, yes and no. In the beginning, we sought to match leadership style to the maturity level of the employee. We categorized employees into one of three levels of maturity from M1, least mature and needing lots of guidance to M4, most mature and needing very little help from the supervisor. As our research evolved, however, we found that "employee readiness" was a richer and more appropriate category to use to diagnose the needs of the employee. For one thing, unlike maturity level, employee readiness varies depending on the task. An employee can be very "ready" to do one task, and very unprepared to do another. The leader, therefore, has to provide different combinations of relationship and task behavior according to the need of the individual employee as he or she does a specific task. So, it's not just different strokes for different folks, but different strokes for the same folks in different aspects of their lives.

Blackwell: *How exactly do you define employee readiness and how does a leader know how ready an employee is when it comes to a specific job?*

Hersey: The leader needs to learn to constantly diagnose the performance needs of followers or their readiness to perform that specific task or function. Remember, readiness applies to a specific task, job, objective or goal. Readiness is a function of ability and willingness. You need both ability and willingness for a specific task. They are interacting variables. Willingness effects ability and vice versa. To go a bit further, "ability" is the knowledge, experience and skill that the specific task requires. You might call this part of readiness "task maturity." "Willingness," on the other hand, relates to the confidence, commitment, and motivation to that specific task. This would be akin to "psychological maturity." The Situational Leadership® Model recognizes four general stages of readiness. R1 is called "unable and unwilling" or "unable and insecure." Now these are two different employee profiles. The unable and unwilling person demonstrates no current knowledge or skill for doing the job and is not the least bit interested in learning. In fact, this person may be proud of not doing the job. Often, the unable and unwilling person has regressed from a more able employee. Something has happened to tick him off with the organization and he is now an unwilling participant. On the other hand the "unable and insecure" person is also not able to currently do the job, but she is not reveling in her refusal; instead she merely lacks confidence. She feels she can't learn to do it. For example, my friend's daughter works for a Fortune 500 company and has been taking advanced training in a new computer system the company is rolling out. At this point, she feels frustrated, confused, and stressed. She is even thinking about quitting. Why? Because she feels she will never learn the new system and that everyone else knows more than she does. Here is the case of a longtime, very effective employee becoming an R1 because of the fear of failure. What she needs is a good dose of task behavior, a lot of instruction and guidance, and someone to give her a bit of confidence as well.

Blackwell: *So even with an R1, you need to lead with some relationship behavior?*

Hersey: Absolutely. If you look at the Situational Leadership® Model, the prescribed style of leadership never goes to zero. The leader always uses a combination of relationship and task behavior; the difference in the 4 styles is in the proportion of relationship and task behavior which is used. For the R1, we prescribe Style 1 (S1) or "telling." The telling style is high on task behavior and low on relationship behavior. In the example I just gave you, my friend's daughter needs a lot of specific instruction, on-the-job training, and a supervisor who will give her the time and direction she needs to do the job. The next readiness style is called R2 and this employee is "unable and willing" or "unable and confident." Here again, the skill level of the employee is not adequate to do the current task, but unlike the R1 employee, the R2 is willing, maybe anxious, to learn. Or the employee is willing and confident of his or her ability to learn. In this case, the appropriate leadership style is S2, which we call "selling." Here the leader uses much more relationship behavior and a good deal of task behavior as well. Now, with the willingness and confidence of the employee secure, the leader can supplement her instructional, task behavior with socioemotional support and explanations of why something should be done a certain way. Often a new employee starts off as an R2. They don't yet have the training to do the job well, but they are motivated to do a good job.

Blackwell: *As employees learn the job and gain more confidence, I assume they need less task behavior and more relationship behavior.*

Hersey: Yes, that is true, at least for awhile. But remember, ones readiness level changes from task to task. If you treat someone the same way all the time no matter what he or she is doing, you are not giving them what they need. I like to think of it as "reading them, leading them, and succeeding with them." Constant observation and judgment as to readiness level is key. Let's look at R3 for a minute. The R3 is "able and unwilling" or "able and insecure." This person is presently demonstrating the skills necessary to get the job done, but he or she may be unwilling or unmotivated due to some circumstance. Let's say that Tom is still doing his normal fine job but he is demotivated because of the five customer service representatives in the department, he is handling 40% of the calls and yet his raise is the same as everyone else. Tom is thinking about working less hard because he feels he is being inequitably rewarded. The S3 leadership style, participating, will use lots of relationship behavior to mend fences with Tom and show him how valuable he is. On the other hand, the able and insecure R3 also needs a high dose of relationship behavior to give him the encouragement and confidence he needs. Let's say Andy has completed the Situational Leadership® training course with flying colors and has all the skills necessary to teach the course. But, Andy, hasn't taught the course by himself before so he's nervous as to how he will do. The successful leader will offer some help, encourage Andy, remind him how much he knows and how well he did in training class, and in other ways bolster Andy's confidence until he becomes an R4.

Blackwell: *So, when someone gets to be an R4, then they really can be turned loose without much leadership intervention at all?*

Hersey: Well, yes and no. The R4 is "able and willing" or "able and confident" and the appropriate leadership style is S4 of "delegating." Relatively low amounts of task and relationship behavior are appropriate, but the supervisor still needs to keep in touch because ultimately she is responsible and accountable. Plus, remember the R4 may be self-sufficient in one task, but be an R3 or even an R2 in another task.

Blackwell: *So, the secret to effective leadership, then, seems to be matching the leadership style with the readiness level and checking this match frequently and adjusting your style as the readiness level for a given task changes. But, isn't this hard for the average manager – to change his or her style at will, sometimes many times in the same day?*

Hersey: Actually we've been very successful in teaching leaders how to diagnose readiness level. After training, leaders frequently begin thinking in the Situational Leadership® jargon. That is, they see people as R1, R2, R3, or R4 in their various tasks and they know which type of leadership style to demonstrate. It's all a matter of applying the right amounts of relationship and task behavior after a correct diagnosis has been made. It's like riding a bicycle; once you've mastered the basic principles, you rarely fall off and skin your knee.

Blackwell: *I notice that your model includes four styles. With so many styles available why did you choose four?*

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Hersey: I have often said that in order for a model to be successful it should be based on organized common sense. What we attempted to do was to provide a simple model, something that people could carry around with them. My dad worked for Bell Labs and held over 50 patents dealing with the telephone system. When people were first given telephone numbers they made all kinds of mistakes. Most numbers were five or six digits. Research proved that as long as the numbers were in sets of four or less fewer mistakes were made when dialing a number. People can handle sets of ones, twos, threes, and fours with little difficulty. So that's where the "four" came from in Situational Leadership®. It seemed to be the best number for people to remember. We didn't want the model to get too complicated. It would be used more if it was easy to remember.

Blackwell: *Fred Fiedler developed the Contingency Leadership model. What are the differences between that model and the Situational model?*

Hersey: Well, one of the major differences is that I believe we can help people learn to change their behaviors so that they don't have to be replaced. I believe that leaders can learn to positively impact different kinds of situations. I further believe that through training, individuals can become more effective leaders in a variety of situations. The similarities would include that both models conclude that both the task-oriented and relationship-oriented elements of leadership are vital to the successful leader or manager.

Blackwell: *Well Doc, our time is about up and I would like to thank you on behalf of the many readers of this interview, the many students and faculty at the Huizenga Graduate School of Business at Nova Southeastern University, and the users of the Situational Leadership® Model, for your time and wisdom. Not only for the time spent doing this interview but your willingness and ability to share your knowledge throughout the years. Thank you very much.*

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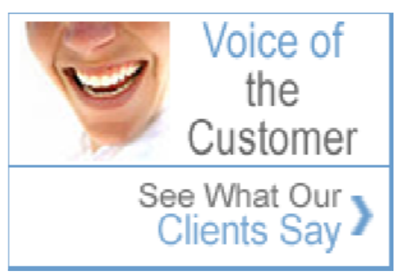

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