The Situational Leadership Model: Matching Your Style to the Person in Front of You

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Why one style does not fit everyone

Many leaders default to a single style, highly directive, or highly hands-off, based on what feels natural, then apply it to every team member regardless of context. The Situational Leadership model, developed by Hersey and Blanchard, offers a more precise alternative: the right style depends on the specific task and the individual's competence and commitment for that task, not on the leader's general preference or the person's seniority.

The four styles

Directing. High direction, low support. Appropriate for someone new to a task who needs clear instruction and close oversight, regardless of how experienced they are in other areas.

Coaching. High direction, high support. Useful when someone has some competence but is not yet confident or consistent, and benefits from both guidance and encouragement.

Supporting. Low direction, high support. Suited to someone who is competent but occasionally lacks confidence or motivation; they need encouragement and a sounding board more than instruction.

Delegating. Low direction, low support. Appropriate for someone both competent and confident, where the most valuable thing a leader can offer is trust and space.

The common mistake

Leaders often apply the same style to a person across every task, when the model is meant to be applied per task, not per person. A highly experienced team member taking on a brand-new type of project may need directing for that specific task, even though they would be firmly in delegating mode for their usual work. Missing this distinction is one of the most common sources of frustration on both sides: the leader feels micromanaging is warranted, and the team member feels undertrusted, or the reverse, a leader delegates a genuinely new task without enough support and is then surprised by a weak result.

How to use it in practice

Before assigning or reviewing a piece of work, ask two questions: how competent is this person at this specific task, and how confident or committed are they about doing it right now? The answer points to the appropriate style. Revisit the assessment regularly, since competence and confidence both change over time and with experience.

The underlying principle

Good leadership is not a fixed personality trait; it is a responsiveness to what the specific person

and specific task actually require. Leaders who develop this kind of situational judgement tend to get more accurate performance from their teams, and are seen as fairer, because their approach visibly adapts to context rather than applying a single formula to everyone.