



# When should a leader be directive or empowering? How to develop your own situational theory of leadership

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**Abstract** A situational theory of leadership attempts to match a particular leadership style or type to specific external circumstances. The general idea is that one type of leadership will be effective in one situation, but a different type of leadership will be effective in another situation. Historically, situational theories of leadership have been too abstract to apply to specific situations. Nevertheless, the concept of situational leadership retains considerable intuitive appeal. In this article we draw on our previous research about situational leadership during resuscitation in a trauma center, in order to derive a general strategy of how a leader can best develop his or her own personal theory of leadership which best works for their unique circumstances. The core of the strategic approach involves: (1) defining goals for a specific situation, (2) defining potential leadership types, (3) identifying situational conditions, (4) matching a leadership style to the particular situation, and (5) determining how the match between leadership style and situation will be made. The medical trauma center we profile provided an interesting example of how leaders considered elements of the situation to guide their own leadership.

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## 1. Follow the leader

*Q: What style of leadership is best?*

*A: It depends on the situation!*

We've all heard that same old question hundreds of times, just as we've heard that same answer.

What we really want to know is how a leader should behave. We want good leaders to lead us, and we want to be good leaders to others in turn.

There is an Old Norse word, *laed*, which means "to determine the course of a ship." We can easily see how our modern word, *lead*, comes from this ancient expression. In our imagination, we may actually picture ourselves standing at the stern, handling the tiller, and directing the rowers as we embark on our great adventure. This is classic leadership, command, and control: giving instruction and

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directions to others to achieve a common goal. We can even visualize the modern version of a leader as the person who determines the course of an organization.

But aren't there other types of leadership? For example, when we think of the charisma that Martin Luther King, Jr. displayed in his "I Have A Dream" speech, we intuitively recognize that as leadership. Moreover, in today's contemporary organizations, the notion of being "empowering" has received wide attention. Is leadership also the capability to empower others?

There are hundreds of definitions of leadership. No single description can completely encompass the concept; however, for the purposes of this article, we define leadership rather broadly as "influencing others." The main idea is that a leader is one who uses a variety of styles or behaviors to influence the behavior and thoughts of others. Further, based on our own research, we believe that specific leadership behaviors can be clustered together to form a "type" or a "style" of leadership.

The notion that a particular type of leadership might be best for a particular situation has been around for a long time. This concept is often called a "contingency" theory of leadership, or is sometimes referred to as a "situational" view of leadership. The fundamental assumption is that a specific type of leadership is likely to be more effective in a specific kind of situation. That is, leadership should be contingent upon the factors within the specific situation. Historical examples of contingency theories of leadership would include Fiedler's Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967), House's Path-Goal Theory of Leadership (House, 1971), and—especially in the popular literature—the Hersey and Blanchard Situational Theory of Leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1984). These theories have added to the leadership literature; yet, practicing managers often feel a need for more guidance when applying these theories to their own specific situations.

Herein, we deal with this problem by deriving a pragmatic strategy by which individuals can define their own situational theory of leadership to fit their particular circumstances. To accomplish this objective, we will first define five types of leadership which are well grounded in the research and leadership literature. Then, using a case approach based on real life situations, we will demonstrate how these types of leadership have been applied in a situational manner to a particular environment; that is, leadership in a medical trauma center. Finally, we will use the specific example of the trauma center to derive a more general approach so that any leader can define a personal situational theory of leadership.

## 2. Leadership types

Fundamentally, leadership means influence, or the ability to influence others. This is a broad definition, and includes a wide variety of behaviors intended to influence others. Typically, various kinds of leadership are categorized into typologies. These typologies specify different types of leadership whereby particular leaders' behaviors cluster together to form a type. Over the years, a myriad of leadership typologies have been proposed, and there is a wide variety of theories and typologies that one might choose as a fundamental framework. For example, Yukl (2001) discussed 10 different ways that leadership types or styles could be categorized. The use of types or styles is valuable because it enables all of us to develop a quick way of thinking about leadership. Each of us usually has our own version of leadership type that consists of a label or overall definition of that type, and also some notion of specific behaviors that make up that type. Almost everyone can begin with a simple categorization system that defines a task-oriented type of leadership versus a people-oriented type of leadership. However, most theories in both the academic and popular literature are somewhat more complex than this simple approach.

Currently, the leadership literature is dominated by the transactional-transformational paradigm. This categorization system defines two major types of leadership. *Transactional leadership* depends on the administration of rewards by a leader to influence a follower. In contrast, *transformational leadership* entails inspiration, and the transformation of a follower's motivational state. While there is some debate in the literature, many see charismatic leadership as a part of transformational leadership.

Recently, a theoretical and empirical analysis was conducted by Pearce et al. (2003) which articulated an extension of the transactional-transformational paradigm. Based on the historical literature and their research, they suggested five major types of leadership: (1) Aversive, (2) Directive, (3) Transactional, (4) Transformational/Charismatic, and (5) Empowering. The major contribution of their analysis was to clearly distinguish Empowering as a distinctive type of leadership that focuses on influencing others by developing and empowering follower self-leadership capabilities. The major advantage of using this typology is that it incorporates classical views of leadership (i.e., Directive and Transactional), the dominant contemporary view (i.e., Transformational/Charismatic) and, finally, a newer view (i.e., Empowering) based on modern theories of participation and self-management. We begin by presenting these five main leadership types: the Aversive, the Directive, the Transactional, the

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