

By **EUGENE Y.J. TEE** and **NG YIN LU**
editor@leaderonomics.com

THE best leadership style is... Well, it actually depends on the situation. While this is a rather anticlimactic answer to the age-old question, "Which leadership style is most effective?" it does raise an important point about the nature of leadership. Wherever leaders attempt to exert their influence, there will be countless factors that dictate whether their leadership style will be effective or otherwise.

Subordinate characteristics, structure of teams, nature of tasks, organisational culture, and the diversity of the workforce are just a few of these situational factors that either help, or hinder leadership effectiveness.

WHY THE BEST LEADERS ARE OFTENTIMES THE MOST ADAPTABLE ONES

Jack Welch, former chief executive officer of General Electric, stressed the importance of being responsive to change, cautioning organisations to "change, before you have to." Welch's quote can be extended to leaders as well. To be effective, leaders need to continuously adapt to, learn from, and adjust their leadership styles depending on the situations they find themselves in.

A fixed leadership style may have been useful when work revolved around routine manufacturing, or when stable, economic output was the measure of a company's effectiveness. The reality of today's work environment, however, demands that leaders be in tune with the realities of ambiguity, constant change and a diverse, evolving workforce.

Effective leaders consider the situations and tailor their leadership styles accordingly – an approach to leadership referred to as situational leadership.

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP: ARE SUBORDINATES READY OR NOT?

One useful guide for understanding situational leadership comes from the work of Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard. Hersey and Blanchard propose that the "best" leadership style depends on subordinate maturity and skill levels. See Table 1.

Both maturity and skill contribute to the readiness of subordinates to perform what is required of them.

Subordinates who are low on maturity and skill should be told what to do, and as such, leaders should adopt a more authoritarian style of leadership for these subordinates.

Subordinates low on maturity but capable of performing the task should be *sold* the task – leaders should work on increasing subordinate motivations and self-beliefs.

For subordinates low on skill but high on maturity, Hersey and Blanchard suggest that leaders adopt a *participative* style of leadership and demonstrate standards for task performance.

Finally, leaders are advised to delegate their responsibilities to subordinates high on both maturity and skill. These subordinates are considered the most ready to perform, requiring minimal direct supervision.

This situational approach to leadership is one leadership model that is associated with "contingency theories" of leadership. Such theories have been around for close to 40 years and are still relevant today.

Perhaps situational leadership is even more relevant today, given that

THE BEST LEADERSHIP STYLE AWARD GOES TO...



The best leaders adjust their leadership styles depending on the situations they find themselves in, alike chameleons.

leaders operate in environments that have increasingly diverse workforces.

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Diversity refers to the perceived differences in attributes, such as age, gender, race, personality, and values between individuals. Diversity characterises the increasingly global, interconnected nature of today's workforce.

Increased competition for talent also means that organisations are faced with the challenge of attracting and retaining the best individuals in a shrinking talent pool. The nature of the modern workplace also means that organisations need to hire and manage across age and ethnic groups.

Diversity-related forces are no longer peripheral concerns to organisations wishing to succeed in the war for talent. Rather, effectively managing diversity has become an essential part of organisations' human resource strategy.

Diversity, however, can be a double-edged sword for organisations. A diverse workforce offers a wide spectrum of knowledge, experience, and connections. A diverse team is also better able to provide creative ideas and solutions compared with non-diverse teams, leading to higher effectiveness and work performance.

However, diverse teams are also more likely to experience interpersonal conflicts and communication breakdowns. Diversity may be effective insofar as leaders are able to juggle the advantages of tapping into individual strengths and capabilities, while simultaneously managing the conflicts that may arise from interpersonal differences.

To function effectively in the modern work environment, leaders must therefore be sensitive to the diversity of talent that individuals bring to the workplace, capitalise on their unique set of skills and channel them towards the team's and organisation's success. Consistent with situational leadership, some leader

		Subordinate Skill Level	
		Low	High
Subordinate Maturity	High	Participating Leaders take part in the job and demonstrate to subordinates how to perform the task well.	Delegating Leaders allow greater autonomy and decision-making to subordinates. Subordinates perform the task as they see fit, leader oversees their progress.
	Low	Telling Leader instruct and clarify expectations of what the task entails, along with directing subordinate progress on the task.	Selling Leaders encourage subordinates to buy in to the task, motivate their belief to perform the task well and ultimately, elevating their self-efficacy.

Table 1. Situational Leadership Model by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard

behaviours may be appropriate and effective for one group, but not for another.

A GENERATIONALLY DIVERSE TERRAIN

One pervasive diversity-related issue in Malaysian organisations is age or generational differences. Today's workforce is comprised of individuals from varying age groups. A commonly held assumption about older workers is that they are resistant to change or reluctant to accept new technology. Younger workers are not exempted from being stereotyped either. We often hear claims of junior employees as technologically obsessed deviants.

Conflicts, disagreements and misconceptions between the age groups are rooted in the stereotypes people hold about each group. Ageism or age-based discrimination in the Malaysian workplace is no longer a new phenomenon, but a challenge for today's leaders.

Based on the situational leadership model, leaders might adopt *participative* approaches to older workers who, while experienced, could use some re-skilling in order to keep pace with modern work systems and demands.

Through participative leadership,

older workers are given an opportunity to advance their skills. Importantly, leaders who participate in their development also convey a genuine interest in helping this mature cohort retain their sense of significance and personal importance in the modern environment.

In essence, leaders convey to these experienced individuals that their seniority and expertise is respected, and that their contributions to the organisation are still valued. Adopting *telling* approaches to the mature workforce may be ineffective – such influence attempts may instead be seen as a challenge to their seniority and blatant disregard for their experience.

With younger workers (Gen-Y or Millennials), however, leaders may wish to adopt a different leadership style. Having recently joined the workforce, younger workers are often characterised as being tech-savvy, creative and opinionated. However, they may lack the experience required to perform tasks to their required standards.

Leaders might adopt a *selling* approach that caters to these young employees. Younger workers are often on the lookout for rapid growth opportunities, as well as opportunities for being mentored by more seasoned

individuals in their work environment. Selling the task to younger employees also conveys the message that leaders are interested in their development and growth. The opportunity to associate with a meaningful cause explains why younger workers stay with organisations. When leaders sell their ideals and vision of the organisation to younger employees, they build their motivation and enhance their self-beliefs that they are part of something greater than themselves.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Any model of leadership – even the current situational model, serves as a general guide to how leaders can manage a diverse workforce. Of course, not all young workers need to be sold on ideas, and neither would all senior staff benefit from having leaders participate along in their tasks.

That being said, understanding situational leadership helps leaders recognise that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to leading that works in every situation. That, in itself, is the key contribution of situational leadership.

In the face of an increasingly diverse workforce, perhaps the best leadership is one that is adaptable, responsive, flexible, and befitting the demands of the situation.

■ Eugene Y.J. Tee is senior lecturer at the department of psychology, HELP University. His research interests are in the area of discrete emotions and emotional intelligence, with applications towards the study of leadership and organisational behaviour. He tweets at @eugene_tee.

Ng Yin Lu is senior lecturer and deputy head at the department of psychology, HELP University. Her research interests include employee engagement, diversity management, and retention. Yin Lu is currently leading a nationwide Engagement Survey in Malaysia, and welcomes your organisation to be part of it.

To get in touch with them, e-mail editor@leaderonomics.com.