Why a Situational Approach to Leadership Matters

The period from the early 1940s through the late 1950s marked an important evolutionary time for the concept of leadership. During these two decades, researchers developed and refined several leadership contingency theories that introduced the concepts of *initiating structure* (the degree to which a leader defines, directs, and organizes his or her role and the roles of followers) and *consideration* (the degree to which a leader shows concern and respect for followers, looks out for their welfare, and expresses appreciation and supports them) as distinct leader behaviors that were important for leader success.

However, by the 1990s researchers began to view these leader behaviors as outdated historical artifacts, instead favoring emerging leadership constructs like transformational leadership and full-range leadership. Therefore, consideration and initiating structure began to be viewed as forgotten constructs in both the academic and commercial literature.

But ever since the groundbreaking meta-analysis by Judge, Piccolo, and Ilies, there has been a revival in the study of the two traditional leadership behaviors: initiating structure (direction) and consideration (support). In their meta-analysis, the researchers examined 163 independent correlations for consideration and 159 correlations for initiating structure; they revealed that both consideration and initiating structure had reasonably strong, nonzero relationships with leadership outcomes.

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With the publication of Judge's work that showed these leader behaviors were strongly correlated with desirable organizational outcomes, research involving consideration and initiating structure has begun to reappear in the psychological and leadership literature. And as the research team of Schurer-Lambert et al. so aptly put it recently, "the abandonment of scholarly interest in consideration and initiating structure may have been unwarranted."

Historically, there had been very little examination of the interactive effects of initiating structure and consideration on employee outcomes. Furthermore, previous research showed few consistent correlations between various impact measures and initiating structure and consideration.

For these reasons, researchers at Blanchard® embarked on a research project to build upon the resurgence of studies examining the relevance of initiating structure and consideration as effective leader behaviors—especially since the two constructs are the foundation for direction and support, which are the underpinnings of the four leadership styles presented in Blanchard's SLII® framework and model. In this study, we were not testing the validity of the SLII model, but the outcome resulting from a fit of an individual's perception of the leadership style that was wanted and the one that was received.

The purpose of the study was threefold in its design for investigating the four leadership styles found in the SLII model, which evolved from initiating structure and consideration. We formed three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: All four leadership styles will be reported as being received by a cross-sectional survey population.

Hypothesis 2: All four leadership styles will be reported as being needed by a cross-sectional survey population.

Hypothesis 3: Followers reporting a fit between their needed leadership style and the leadership style they received from their manager will demonstrate more favorable scores on selected employee-outcome variables.

SLII® – An Overview

The SLII framework proposes that there are four leadership styles representing different levels of supportive (consideration) and directive (initiating structure) behaviors.

The theory designates the four styles as Directing (S1; high directive and low supportive behaviors); Coaching (S2; high directive and high supportive behaviors); Supporting (S3; low directive and high supportive behaviors); and Delegating (S4; low directive and low supportive behaviors).

The usage and implications of the four prescribed leadership styles in the SLII model depend on the follower's development level on a specific task. There are four follower development levels ranging from Developing (D1; low competence and high commitment) to Developed (D4; high competence and high commitment).

Effective leader behaviors are context-specific, depending on the development level of the follower on a particular goal or task. The SLII framework proposes that the leader matches leadership style with the requirements of the situation (development level) to ensure greater performance and satisfaction from their followers.

The SLII framework suggests that no single-best leadership style exists; rather it prescribes that any one of the four leadership styles can be appropriate, depending on a diagnosis of the situation. This leadership framework advocates that leaders change their leadership style depending on the situation and the person whom they are leading, and, as a result, this model puts leadership style flexibility at the top of the list for leadership effectiveness.

Why This Study Used the SLII® Model

We chose to examine the SLII framework in this study for four reasons. The first reason is that the framework builds on the models that precede it, and uses the initiating structure and consideration concepts of the Ohio State studies, as did other contemporaneous contingency leadership models.

SLII, along with the Reddin 3-D Management Style Theory developed in 1969, put initiating structure and consideration into a quadrant diagram, thereby inviting the exploration of leadership styles based on the frequent or the infrequent use of the two leadership behaviors in combination.

The SLII model, developed by Ken Blanchard and his associates at Blanchard, reframed initiating structure and consideration as directive and supportive behaviors. Thus, SLII reflects the rich history and evolution of the initiating structure and consideration constructs.

The second reason for using the SLII framework, as noted above, is that the framework offers four styles. The leader styles depicted by the quadrants are prescriptive but not normative. Unlike other grid theories (Blake and Mouton), it does not advocate one style over the others. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the SLII framework proposes that no single-best leadership style exists, but prescribes that any one of the four leadership styles, depending on a diagnosis of the situation, could have merit and could be used. As a result, this model puts leadership style flexibility at the top of the list for leader effectiveness. Because we are proposing in this study an examination of four distinct leadership styles generated from combining initiating structure and consideration, all four styles must be included.

The third reason for using the SLII framework is to examine initiating structure and consideration *in combination*, which has not been frequently studied in the literature thus far. In previous studies on initiating structure and consideration (DeRue et al., Judge et al., Schurer-Lambert et al.), the two constructs were not empirically combined and analyzed as four distinct leader styles. Studying initiating structure and consideration as four styles of leader behavior would shed light on the efficacy of the styles.

Our study aimed to extend that line of research. Additionally, our study contributes to a line of empirical research brought forth through the examination of the "forgotten" constructs of initiating structure and consideration by using the four leadership styles of the SLII framework derived from the initiating structure and consideration constructs.

Fourth and finally, the SLII framework was used because it includes several assumptions about the combinations of various forms of initiating structure and consideration that need to be tested, regardless of the proposed contingent-moderating variables of employee development levels.

Study Methodology and Measures Used

The sample used for this study was generated from a database of professionals working across various industries. The database is housed and maintained by Blanchard. The cross-sectional convenience sample was made up of 573 people who chose to participate, a two-percent response rate from the full database of professionals who were emailed.

Seventy-four percent of participants were from the United States or Canada and the remainder were from elsewhere in the world (e.g., Asia Pacific, Europe, Africa, Latin America). Thirty-two percent worked for organizations with 500 employees or fewer, 30 percent worked for organizations with 500–5,000 employees, and 38 percent were from organizations with more than 5,000 employees. Fifty-eight percent of the sample were female, and 63 percent were born after 1960. Approximately 74 percent of the respondents reported managing or supervising others.

To identify followers' needed and received leadership styles from their leaders, as described by the SLII model, scales from the Leadership Action Profile (LAP) were used. In this study, respondents were not given explicit definitions of supportive and directive behaviors within the context of SLII, nor did they have formal knowledge of SLII. Instead, respondents were asked to rate sub-constructs of both direction and support (initiating structure and consideration). Three items on goal setting and three items on showing how were used to measure the direction (initiating structure) construct. Three items for facilitating problem solving and three items for listening were used to measure the support (consideration) construct on items in subscales provided by the LAP. Along with initiating structure and consideration concepts, the respondents were asked to share their perceptions regarding five organizational work intentions, their positive and/or negative feelings about their work experience, and their perceptions of cognitive/affective trust in their leader.

The Leadership Action Profile. The LAP assessment originates from the SLII framework and measures how often respondents' managers demonstrate directive and supportive leadership behaviors. The LAP features 16 subscales and 50 questions, with six-point response options with anchors ranging from 1 (almost never—less than 10 percent of the time) to 6 (almost always—more than 90 percent of the time). The LAP divides direction and support into 14 subscales. The seven micro-behaviors of direction (initiating structure) are goal

setting, planning work in advance, showing and telling how, setting deadlines, setting priorities, defining roles, and defining methods of evaluation. The seven micro-behaviors of support (consideration) are listening, rationale building, sharing information about self, sharing information about the organization, facilitating problem-solving, encouraging, and asking for input. LAP alpha coefficients for the total directive and total supportive scales are 0.72 and 0.91, respectively. The higher-order scales of direction and support each are broken down into four specific behaviors.

Because the respondents are asked to rate leader behaviors twice (needed and received), a reduction in the total number of items was required to reduce rater fatigue. Goal setting, showing and telling how, listening, and facilitating problem solving were chosen to represent the dimensions of direction and support.

In this study, respondents were asked to rate how frequently their leader exhibited (and they received) goal setting, showing and telling how, listening, and facilitating problem-solving leader behaviors described by the LAP in addition to how much they wanted (needed) their leader to exhibit each behavior. Thus, respondents rated each question on the LAP twice, once indicating *received* leadership behavior and once indicating *needed* leadership behavior.

The LAP was chosen over the traditional 30-item Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) measure because the concept of direction and support, while similar to initiating structure and consideration, has items which are concerned only with direct interaction with employees in a one-to-one context. A close examination of the LBDQ shows items concerned with both the team context and the one-to-one context, yet are not reported as such. As the full-range leadership research is sensitive to the limitations of context, we are correlating various employee outcomes to employee perceptions of leader behaviors; we decided not to complicate the possibilities by including employee perceptions that would have to be made in both team and one-to-one contexts.

Work Intention Inventory. The five work intentions were measured with the Work Intention Inventory (WII) developed by Nimon, Zigarmi, et al., a 15-item assessment providing a six-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 (no extent) to 6 (the fullest extent). The WII has been shown to demonstrate good internal consistency and construct validity. This version of the WII has three items representing each of five work intention subscales: intent to endorse the organization, intent to perform, intent to use discretionary effort, intent to stay with the organization, and intent to be an organizational citizen.

Positive and Negative Affect Scale. The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) short form measures respondents' subjective feelings about their job (Thompson). The scale used for this study was a shortened form of the PANAS with ten items and a five-point scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). Respondents determined how well ten words (e.g., inspired, determined, hostile, nervous) described how they felt about their job.

Affective and Cognitive Trust Scale. To assess direct reports' perceptions of their level of affective and cognitive trust in their leader, we used the affect- and cognitive-based trust instrument by McAllister. There are two subscales: an affect-based measure of trust composed of five items and a cognitive-based measure composed of six items. Response possibilities ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). McAllister (1995) builds a rationale for affect-based trust and cognitive-based trust representing two distinct forms of interpersonal trust.

Study Findings

Hypothesis 1: All four leadership styles will be reported as being received by a cross-sectional survey population

Regarding Hypothesis 1, in the proportional breakout for received leadership styles (Table 1), only 3 percent of employees reported receiving Style 1 (S1, high direction/low support), while 33 percent reported receiving Style 2 (S2, high direction/high support), 22 percent reported receiving Style 3 (S3, low direction/high support), and 42 percent reported receiving Style 4 (S4, low direction/low support). Three out of the four leadership styles were used frequently by managers. Thus, we note the lack of reported use of direction without an accompanying frequency of support behaviors; it seems that providing only highly directive (task) behaviors occurs, but very infrequently.

This is in keeping with the findings of Schurer-Lambert et al. that showed adverse effects when the level of directive or task behavior exceeded the perceived need of the respondent, although they found this was not the case when support or consideration exceeded the respondent's perceived need. It is possible that managers are very sensitive to the sole use of directive behaviors.

Style 4 (low directive and low supportive leader behaviors) was the most frequent style received (42 percent). Also, it is important to note that while 42 percent of the respondents reported receiving Style 4, only 12 percent of the respondents reported needing Style 4. An explanation for this disparity may lie in the span of responsibility many managers have. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, many corporations reduced the number of middle managers in their organizational structure, thereby widening the span of control. In fact, while organizational size and industry may influence span-of-control ratios, the trend has been moving from a ratio of four direct reports to one manager to as many as eleven direct reports to one manager (Davison). Some managers may be rated by their followers as providing S4 because they are stretched to their limits and do not have the time to be more than an S4 leader.

Table 1. Percentages of Needed versus Received Leadership Styles

Style type	Received (n=564)	Needed (n=550)[a]	No. of resp. reporting
S1	*3(16)*	*2(13)*	*4*
S2	*33(187)*	*59(325)*	*164*
S3	*22(122)*	*26(144)*	*68*
S4	*42(239)*	*12(68)*	*59*

Note: [a]=Column adds up to 99% due to rounding

Hypothesis 2: All four leadership styles will be reported as being needed by a cross-sectional survey population

Regarding Hypothesis 2, which proposed there would be a proportional breakout for needed leadership styles, 2 percent of the respondents reported needing S1 (high direction/low support), 59 percent reported needing S2 (high direction/high support), 26 percent reported needing S3 (low direction/high support), and 12 percent reported needing S4 (low direction/low support). Research on personal characteristics such as work values, dispositions, personal histories, and past experiences has shown employees tend to prefer different behaviors from their leaders (Ehrhart and Klein, Kristof-Brown et al., Schurer-Lambert et al., Zigarmi and Roberts). Ehrhart and Klein reported 50 percent of their sample chose relationship-oriented leaders, 30 percent chose charismatic leaders, and 20 percent chose task-oriented leaders. In the same study, respondents' personality characteristics such as achievement orientation, self-esteem, and work values such as intrinsic rewards, interpersonal relations, security, and network participation were predictive of the respondent's preference for the leader's style (i.e., a relationship-oriented leader, a charismatic leader, or a task-oriented leader). As can be noted, the Ehrhart and Klein design did not specifically investigate the four leadership styles within this research; however, descriptions of the charismatic leader have a great deal in common with the Style 2 choice. The current study showed less preference for task or directive behaviors than did Ehrhart and Klein.

Hypothesis 3: Followers reporting a fit between their needed leadership style and the leadership style they received from their manager will demonstrate more favorable scores on selected employee-outcome variables.

Regarding Hypothesis 3 (see Table 2), overall, the pattern of ANOVA results across our outcome variables was consistent with the theory, as proposed by the SLII framework; means were interpretable due to adequate sample size. Mean differences observed in outcomes were in the direction anticipated according to theory. For nine out of ten organizational outcomes, when followers reported a fit between their manager's leadership style and their needed leadership style, they demonstrated more favorable scores on outcome variables regarding trust in their leaders, and positive feelings

People who get the direction and support they need have higher trust in their leaders, are happier in their jobs, and are more likely to perform at high levels, remain in their organizations, and behave in ways that support the organization.

about their job and work intentions. The results provide empirical evidence supporting the practical relevance of employee–manager fit for the perceived needed leadership style, particularly for the following sustained outcomes: work intentions (total score), intent to perform, intent to endorse, intent to stay, intent to be a good organizational citizen (OCB), positive affect (feelings), negative affect (feelings), affective trust, and cognitive trust.

Table 2. ANOVA for the Dependent Variable Subscales with Fit vs. Non-Fit with Manager

Dependent variable	Fit mean (SD)	Non-fit mean (SD)	Mean difference	Total standard error	*p*-value
Work intentions	72.77 (12.11)	67.07 (11.47)	5.7	0.518	<0.001
Intent to use discretionary effort	12.11 (3.17)	11.61 (3.01)	0.5	0.132	0.061
Intent to perform	16.08 (2.53)	15.61 (2.38)	0.47	0.106	<0.05
Intent to endorse	15.21 (3.29)	13.31 (3.79)	1.9	0.156	<0.001*
Intent to stay	12.84 (4.03)	10.50 (4.36)	2.34	0.185	<0.001
Intent to use OCB	16.53 (2.26)	16.03 (2.21)	0.5	0.096	<0.05
Positive effect	20.12 (3.61)	19.02 (3.46)	1.1	0.153	<0.001
Negative effect	7.42 (3.16)	8.99 (4.08)	-1.57	0.158	<0.001*
Affective trust	21.98 (8.08)	13.85 (7.62)	8.13	0.379	<0.001
Cognitive trust	29.72 (7.07)	22.57 (8.66)	7.15	0.369	<0.001*

Note: *=p-value estimated from robust tests of equality of means

Implications for Human Resource Development Practitioners

At least three implications for HRD practitioners can be garnered from this research. First, if an employee receives a leadership style they perceived they needed, their affect toward the job; trust in their manager; intent to remain; and willingness to endorse their leader, perform at a higher-than-average level, and be an organizational citizen will likely be significantly higher than those of employees who do not receive the leadership style they perceived they needed. When HRD practitioners purchase and present programs that teach desirable leadership behaviors, it would serve them to consider programs that encourage dialogue between direct reports and their managers that could result in a congruence between which leadership style is needed and which style is received.

At a minimum, it is helpful if managers seek to understand what their direct reports perceive as needed leader behaviors. If conscious efforts could be made to increase the fit between needed and received leadership behaviors, the work environment would become more emotionally enjoyable and productive. Also, this study's findings emphasize the importance of 360° feedback or, at a minimum, the benefits of gathering precise feedback from direct reports.

The second implication that may be drawn from this study is that direct reports may hold *implicit* theories of what good leadership is, and those implicit ideas about what a manager should do may, in part, involve both directive and supportive behaviors.

As 59 percent of the respondents "needed" Style 2, which offers both high direction and high support, it serves to remind practitioners that any leadership program should involve the development of directive and

supportive skills. The micro-skills of directive behaviors (e.g., goal setting, showing and telling how, defining methods of evaluation, and defining roles) and supportive behaviors (e.g., listening, facilitating problem-solving, building rationale for decisions, and asking for input) are often underemphasized in management or leadership training.

The results of this research may caution HRD practitioners to not assume leaders know how to implement certain micro-skills. To use contingency models such as the SLII framework, individual managers must know how to use the micro-skills mentioned above.

The third thing for HRD practitioners to be conscious of is that many managers inappropriately fall back on using a delegating style (low direction and low support) for reasons that are unconnected to what their employees need. Forty-two percent of the respondents perceived their managers were using Style 4, which was almost four times more than respondents' perceived need (12 percent). Reasons for using a delegating style might be beyond leaders' control if, for instance, the span of control requires managing 10 direct reports or more (Davison). Also, managing others may be difficult if leaders are in charge of direct reports whose jobs include tasks the leader does not personally know how to do or expertise the leader does not have. In some cases, over-delegation not only results in lower performance but also could be seen by the direct report as abdication. Practitioners could consider looking at various performance problems as a two-way street in which both the leader and direct report have some changing to do.

About the Researchers

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