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# Situational Leadership in Swedish Industry

- *relation between theory and practice*

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# Abstract

Many theories describe different leadership styles; there are numerous research reports and articles in the field. Recently, situational leadership has been widely reported, and the concept is the subject of this study. Situational leadership can be explained as leader adapts style of management to employees depending on the conditions and situation. Situational leadership is a flexible way to lead and is usually described in a very positive way. Tests have shown leaders who correctly apply situational leadership to their employees, performs better than leaders who do not follow this concept in an organization. For students who want to be leaders in the future, it is good to have an idea of how leadership looks like in practical work. This study gives an idea of how the Swedish industrial companies work with situational leadership. Although theories of situational leadership have existed for a long time, it is interesting to see how leaders really use leadership styles in their operations. To get an idea of how the concept works in the industry, six leaders from various companies in southern Sweden were interviewed in this study. Issues discussed are whether and how situational leadership is used, how leaders choose leadership style in different situations, and what's their experience. Do situational leadership work the same way in the industry as described in theory and literature? The knowledge of the theories that form the base of situational leadership varied in the interviewed group. The study showed leaders frequently use parts of the concept, but no one is using it fully. The leaders explained they try to listen and coach the individuals. They emphasize, it is important to know the employees and their knowledge regarding the tasks. The willingness and motivation of employees are important factors when leaders want change from steering into a supporting leadership style. To what extent these factors are managed in the organizations is not apparent from answers of the interviewees. The study shows clear differences between leadership styles in all six companies. The pattern of situational leadership concept is not clear from the answer in the interviews, but all leaders have more or less elements of situational leadership in their management style.

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# Introduction

Managers in today's complex business environment need to possess qualities such as people skills, goal setting, communication, team leadership and be a great listener to others, to mention some examples. In the past, more authoritarian organizations had leaders who decided almost everything employees would do. Nowadays, the manager should be a good educational guide for employees when they are in charge (Ahrenfelt 2014, 29).

Gröhn and Rasmusson (1995, 56) state that twenty years ago "motivation" was the main topic in management training. It was exclusively about satisfying material needs of employees. When these issues are discussed today, it has been realized in many circles it is more about satisfying social and psychological needs of the employee. Most people already have physiological needs satisfied, which comes before in the lower part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs ladder. Now a day it is important for employees to gain appreciation, identification and self-esteem at work. Modern motivational theories assume power and desire already exist in the employee and it is now a question of release and develop this energy. This is where situational leadership is a very interesting management tool.

Situational leadership means leader adapts their behavior to the employee's skills and commitments in order to give employee opportunity to continue develop for a better performance in the company.

Students of business administration have to take part of a lot of literature on leadership. Literature and general facts available online describe how important it is for a leader to adapt leadership depending on situation and competence of employees. But how does it look in today's industrial-companies; does reality match the theories? In this study, situational leadership is explained using literature, scientific articles, theories and interviews with managers in different companies in southern Sweden. The result of interviews provides some insight into how situational leadership is used and how it can work in practice. It also gives an indication of potential for improvement in capacity utilization of human resources, an important performance factor in business.

Relationship between managers and employees, as well as their relationship to the outside world, plays a crucial role in development of company as they have to be able to respond to external constant changes and demands (Ahrenfelt 2014, 119).

Another reason for the need to upgrade management style, such as introduction of situational leadership, is global marketplace requires companies to operate internationally, which requires rapid adaptation to changed conditions and high efficiency. Therefore, new forms of leadership have been important issue in the context of entrepreneurship. Social issues, diversity, human resource development and flexibility, together with knowledge of global developments are some of the issues leaders need to be able to deal with in a professional manner (Caligiuri and Tarique 2012; Rockstuhl, Seiler, Ang, Dyne, and Annen, 2011; Harteis, 2012).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how six leaders in Swedish industry believe they work according to the concept of situational leadership and to what extent their practical leadership is consistent with Hersey and Blanchard's theory of situational leadership.

## **Question**

If the interviewed leaders use situational leadership, how is it used in their business?

How have the leaders developed their working practices that create the conditions for situational leadership?

Are employees managed according to the theory of situational leadership, and if so, in what way?

How do the six leaders choose a leadership style based on Hersey and Blanchard's theory in a given situation regarding the maturity level of the employee?

## **Delimitation**

Since time is limited, and the topic has many elements that can be discussed, this study will be limited to an insight on how some leaders work in the concept of situational leadership. The study is based on semi-qualitative interviews with a small number of participants. Geographically, the interviews are conducted in southern Sweden.

# Situational leadership

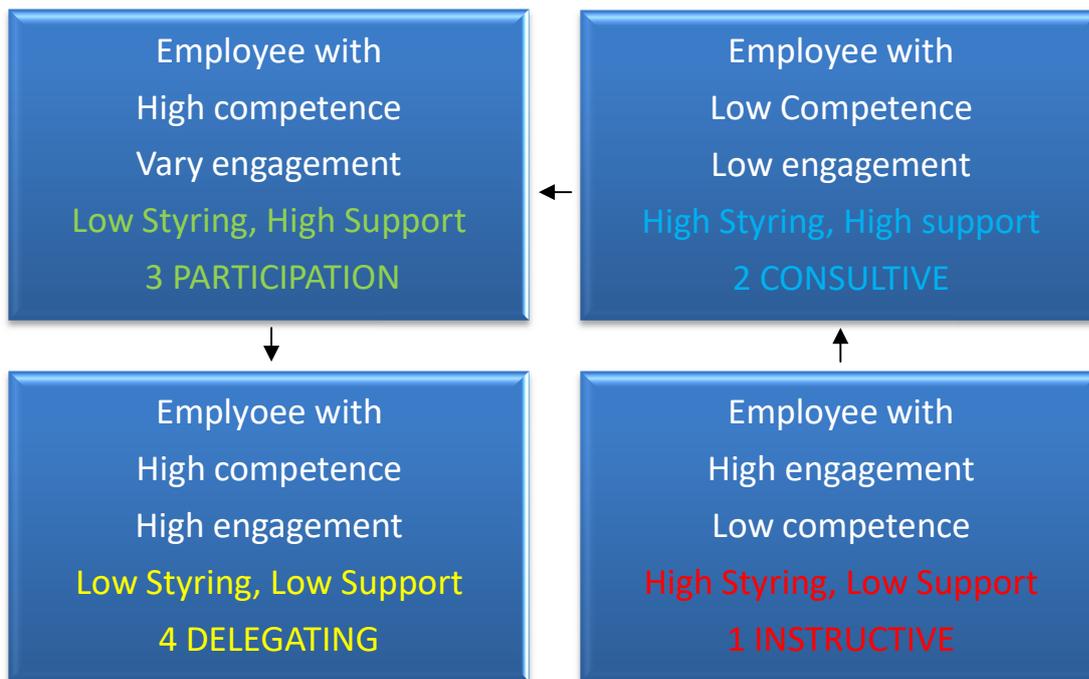
Situational leadership can look different depending on the nature of business and culture in which leadership is carried out. In this section some different descriptions of situational leadership will be given from varying sources such as articles, literature, leadership materials and websites.

## The researchers Hersey and Blanchard's view of situational leadership

According to Hersey and Blanchard, situational leadership means leader adapts behavior to the situation they are in and to employee's circumstances. The authors developed a theory of the concept in the 1960's and created a model as shown below in which the leader switches between four different leadership styles. The leader adjusts actions between supportive and directive depending on maturity of the employees.

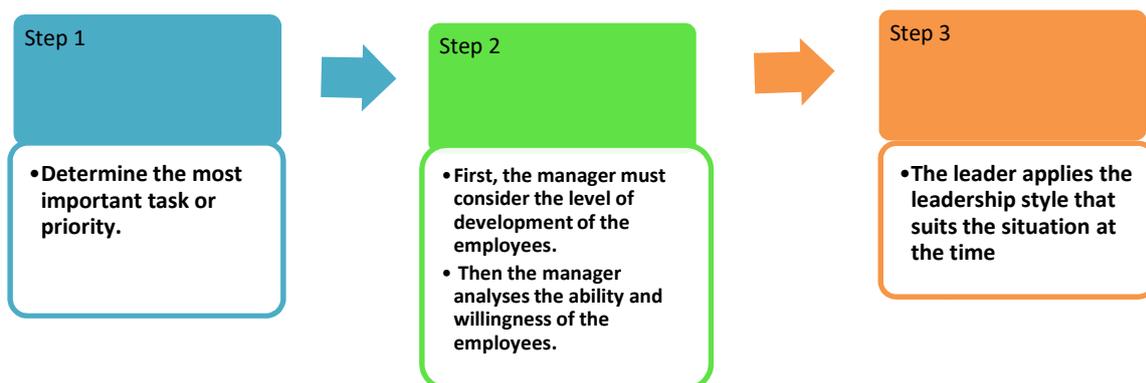
1. ***Instructional leadership style***; characterized by leader setting rules, defining clear boundaries and controlling. The leadership style is good for new employees.
2. ***Consultative leadership style***; characterized by leaders that are listening and guiding and the employee are sharing responsibility for solving the tasks. The leadership style is preferable when employees are motivated but inexperienced in the task.
3. ***Participating leadership style***; characterized by leader delegates task, decides for the employee and keep them constantly informed of how the work proceeds. The leadership style is good when working in groups, where individuals have a high level of maturity.
4. ***Delegating leadership style***; characterized when leader sets goals, planning the work, monitoring progress and showing a high degree of support. The leadership style is best suited for when employees are competent and can work independently.

The model below created by Hersey and Blanchard is to assess which leadership style to use depending on situation and level of the employees.



Model by Hersey and Blanchard (1969)

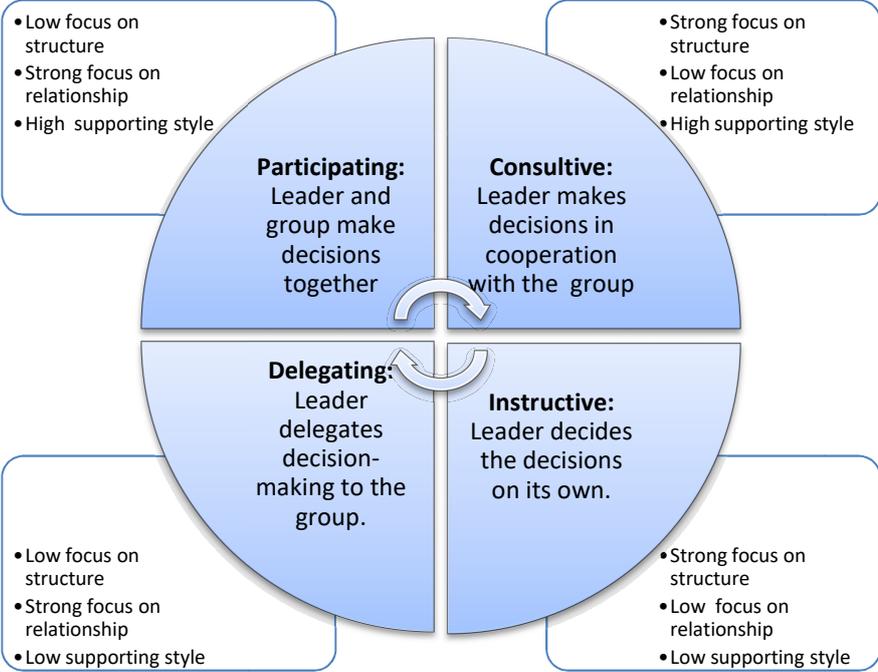
Authors Hersey and Blanchard's (1996) situational leadership model is a tool that guides leader to choose leadership style that is most effective depending on actual situation. The model is taken from authors Hersey and Blanchard's literature "Management of Organizational Behavior". The model below shows three steps to describe the process of selecting the appropriate management style taking into account the maturity of employees and the current situation (Blanchard and Hersey 1996).



<sup>1</sup> Blanchard, K., Hersey, P. 1996. *Management of Organizational Behavior*  
<http://greeks.cofc.edu/documents/The%20Situational%20Leadership%20Model.pdf>  
 (Retrieved 2016-05-20)

Authors Bruzelius and Skärvad (2010, 376-377) describe researchers have not found the best way to practice situational leadership. However, over time a number of theories of situational leadership have emerged, which emphasize demands of the situation determine the type of leadership needed. Bruzelius and Skärvad advocate Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) model of situational leadership.

Author Tonnquist (2014) writes about situational leadership in project management. Project managers need to adapt their leadership style depending on employees, situation and where in the project phase team is in. Hersey and Blanchard's theory of situational leadership, leaders choose between four different leadership styles: instructing, consultive, participating and delegating. Situational leadership can be applied to a group process model. An immature group in an attachment phase needs a lot of direction and a mature group in a togetherness phase needs neither direction nor support, the leader can delegate all tasks. Leadership styles vary of course between cultures and what country leaders in. Sweden has a more supportive leadership style. They are used to delegate and let the group participate. Swedes generally direct less than in most other countries, this perhaps is due to work culture, where Swedes do not want to stick out. They will mostly ask the groups opinion before making a decision. It can be very unusual in other countries with this type of approach. Picture below shows a model of how leaders should adapt leadership style to different maturity of project groups. (Tonnquist 2014, 281-282).



Tonnquist writes that in projects there can be many situations where it is good to have the group involved in decision-making process. However participation should not be overdone, it can be interpreted as weak leadership. When a project is launched, leader needs to do a lot of steering to make group feel comfortable with new task. At this stage it is important leader is clear and well prepared to inform and give orders to the group. In Swedish projects many participants are unaccustomed to a controlling project manager and feel a great responsibility for the tasks. The main problems encountered in a project are unclear management, poor guidelines and lack of information. As a result, employees guess what to do. A common situation for project staff is demands can sometimes perceived as higher than they actually are, and their own abilities are perceived as lower than they usually are in reality. Tonnquist further describes managers in Sweden often find it difficult to allow group to work independently. The leader finds it difficult to let go of practical tasks and becomes one in the group. The role of leader requires a certain distance from the group in order to be able to lead in a good way. For example, if leader has a mature group that is in togetherness phase, the leader's direct activities may have a negative impact on the group's commitment and motivation. Instead, leader should trust the group to solve task. In this context, leader should demonstrate importance of task and that they believe in the group's ability. When delegating, it is important to make sure information about task is properly described, because whatever happens, it is always the responsibility of the project leader. Project manager must delegate task to each member appropriately. The aim should be to provide a task with some challenge/morale and not to make task feel like a punishment. Delegation is a key task for project manager; a good balance has to be found when delegating tasks. If employees find delegated task too easy, they may lose motivation, and if employees find task too difficult, stress and panic may occur. Everyone wants to find their own pace with different increments (Tonnquist 2014, 282-284).

Author Hersey (1984) has identified three key skills required to be an effective leader in a Long-term perspective.

**1. Understanding the employee's past behavior**, knowing why employee has performed in a certain way, what motivated them, what is behind positive or negative outcome of behavior in the task.

**2. Predicting future behavior**, by anticipating how employee will behave in the future under same conditions but in the rapidly changing world.

**3. Directing, changing and controlling behavior,** understanding past behavior and predicting future behavior is still not enough. Leader must take responsibility for influencing behavior of others in carrying out tasks and achieving the same goal. These three skills can determine whether leadership will succeed or fail, be effective or ineffective. Motivating employees and being able to predict how they will act in the future provides answers to whether leadership is effective (Hersey 1984, 20).

Hersey and Blanchard (1988) conducted a study of sixty-five leaders from different industries. The leaders were asked to answer questions within three themes in a questionnaire. First part contained information on personal characteristics such as age, gender, length of employment, etc. Second theme concerned professional maturity on a rating scale. Final area dealt with leadership style where managers self-rated their leadership style on a scale of one to five, where one was not satisfied and five was exceptionally satisfied. Highly effective managers showed greater knowledge and use of situational leadership than less effective managers did. All managers in the study reported they use situational leadership at least some of the time. Results of study showed training in this area had a significant impact in the workplace. On average, employees of managers who apply the model correctly performed better than employees of managers who do not apply situational leadership. The data in this study show very positive effects of Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model, (Hersey and Blanchard 1988, 198-199).

## **Researcher Fiedler's view on situational leadership**

Situational theories see leadership as a prerequisite for effectiveness (Aarum and Abrahamsson 2005, 84). In the 1960's, many researchers were looking for the best way to lead in their studies. A way of leading that was meant to be adapted to internal and external conditions without being dependent on leader's circumstances and conditions. Situational theories are based on the fact that every situation needs a particular form of leadership. Effective leadership is a mixture of leader's behavior, personal qualities and particular situation at hand. Within these theories, researcher Fred E Fiedler's (1967) situational leadership style theory is best known. Fiedler's empirical research on situational leadership is based on different organizations, levels, functions and countries over a period of fifteen years. His theory describes a process in which leadership style should work in concern with situation

in which the leadership operates. Fiedler's research found three critical factors that determine which leadership style is most effective depending on the situation. Of the three leadership styles, Fiedler identified two main key styles. One style was *task-motivated*, where leader wants to achieve task performance and problem solving. The other style was *relationship motivated*, where leader wants human relationships and a valued position with their employees. The third leadership style is *socio-dependent style*, which is a combination of task-motivated and relationship-motivated leadership styles. Group performance is then the main way to measure effectiveness. The research Fiedler conducted was about effective leadership and his aim was to explain why leadership was the reason for effectiveness in organization. Factors that determine effectiveness of leader and organization are the leadership style, leaders influence and control over the situation. The leadership situation is divided into classes based on how leader can influence and control the situation. In other words, it is about how leader can predict and determine what employees want to do and what outcome it will have depending on choice of action. The leader's influence and control of situation can be determined by three approaches. *First is relationship between leader and employees*, the degree to which employee supports leader. The more support leader has, the easier it is for leader to delegate tasks and get them done. *Second is task structure*; how clear tasks are to employees, whether employees know the goal and whether there is a description of tasks. *Third is positional power*, to what extent leader's position gives power to reward or punish employees. In organizations such as the military, which is line-structured, power of position is high. Fiedler has a three-zone assessment of situational control: *first is strong control, second is moderate control, and third is weak control*. Combination of ***relationship-motivated leadership style and moderate situational control*** is the key to effectiveness. Combination of ***task-motivated leadership style and strong situational control*** is also a key to effectiveness. If combinations are switched, result is not as effective (Aarum and Abrahamsson 2005, 99-103).

## **Some other researchers' views on situational leadership**

Situational leadership has in general and in theory evolved leadership from being task-oriented to people-oriented. The result was leaders began to focus on relationship with employees. Description of this evolution comes originally from researchers Hersey and Blanchard (1969) who described situational leadership style as the need to emphasize and match leader's style to maturity of employees. Task-oriented leaders: define roles for employees, give specific instructions, create organizational patterns, and establish formal channels of communication. In contrast, relationship-oriented leaders in practice were caring for others, work to reduce emotional conflicts, seek harmonious relationships, and regulate equal participation. Various authors have classified situational leadership as a behavioral theory (Bass, 2008) and as a preparedness theory (Yukl, 2011). Both descriptions contain some validity. These two concepts are found in situational leadership as task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors and are interdependent. The effective leader has a mix of task- and relationship-oriented behaviors. Both task and psychological maturity of employees determine the right leadership style (McCleskey 2014, 118).

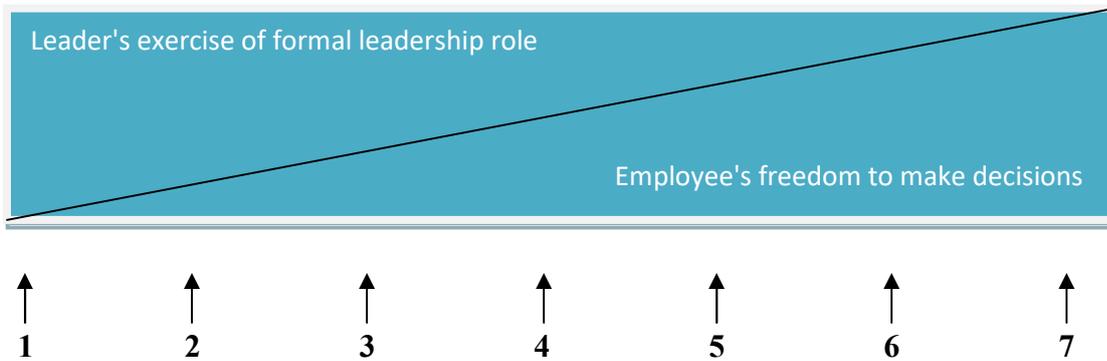
Since the 1930s, attempts have been made to find a leadership style that is both effective and conducive to employee work satisfaction. Sometime later in the development phase, a number of situational leadership models were introduced, recognizing effective leadership depended on the situation one is in. In terms of situation, it is about nature of the work, relationship between those being led, the leader (Fiedler 1967) and finally the maturity and developmental level of the group being led (Hersey and Blanchard 1982). Studies on leadership have become more numerous. From focusing only on leader to interaction between leader and employees, many of the long-standing models have contributed important insights. These models pay attention to different aspects of leadership (Lenn er Axelson and Thylefors 2005, 100-101).

In the figure below, Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958/1973) describe their manager-oriented vs. employee-oriented leadership model, which is another way of showing situational leadership. It is a matter of using the right leadership style in the model. Leader need to act on whether if he should make decision of situation or employees should within established framework. If leader needs stronger control over the situation, he can choose a more manager-oriented leadership. If leader sees maturity in employees with good skills and right motivation and attitude, leader can choose a more employee-oriented leadership. If a crisis situation arises, leader can go back to a more decision-making leadership to quickly regain control. In

this model it is important to keep in mind the choice of leadership depends on characteristics of manager and employee in terms of competence, personality and the driving force of both parties. Context is also important, such as the mission, norms, values and traditions of the organization in question.

**Manager-oriented leadership**

**Employee-oriented leadership**



**Model of Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958/1973)**

1<sup>st</sup> leader decide and communicate decisions. 2<sup>nd</sup> leader sell in his decisions. 3<sup>rd</sup> leader presents proposed decisions and invites questions. 4<sup>th</sup> leader presents preliminary proposed decisions. 5<sup>th</sup> leader presents problems, receives suggestions and then makes decisions. 6<sup>st</sup> leader defines overall framework within which employees make decision themselves. 7<sup>th</sup> leader allows employees to make decisions within the framework they have proposed (Bruzelius and Skärvad 2010, 376).

Leadership is a balance between inspiring and getting employees to achieve common goals together. A large number of leadership theories have been developed and studied over the last century, but no single leadership theory has been identified as the best approach for all situations. The fundamentals of leadership are to motivate and lead a group to achieve a common goal and this have changed over time. What has evolved in leadership in recent times is complexity and diversity within organizations and in societal values. Thomas and Bainbridge (2002) explain at both micro and macro scales of organizations, situational leadership is useful. It works for simple and difficult tasks and it is also adaptable for all levels of development. A leader needs to be honest, able to communicate clearly, have good judgment and passion. Situational leadership requires leaders to be flexible, for example, adapt to changing scenarios and conditions (Costanzo 2005).

The authors Jago and Vroom (2007) have made an analysis describing the importance of situations in leadership, where they identified three different situational variables that are relevant in leadership process.

**1. *Organizational effectiveness is often considered as an indication of its leadership.***

Organizational effectiveness is influenced by situational factors the leader cannot control. In open systems of companies for example, goal achievement is influenced by how competitors act, adoption of new legislation, new technology, interest rates and currency changes, to name just a few variables. These factors can affect organizational effectiveness and make it difficult to see what leader's effects are. These direct effects of situations have led some to conclude leadership is entirely illusory. A sensible approach to this is strength of leadership, can be measured from ability to detect which situations are crucial when leadership makes a difference (Hackman and Wageman, 2007).

**2. *Situations shape how leaders behave.***

Cronbach (1957) identified two disciplines in psychology. One discipline described behavior and anxiety effects by external events. The other discipline dealt with the measurement of individual differences. Individuals, including leaders, are influenced by their environment and by relatively stable characteristics that predispose them to certain types of behavior. Unfortunately, how the behavior of leaders is affected by the situations they face have been largely ignored. Vroom, Yetton and Jago's (Vroom, 2000; Vroom & Jago, 1988; Vroom & Yetton, 1973) research shows situations influence three times more than individual differences do. The authors explain situation matters in decision-making, and they also emphasize the importance of situational characteristics, described as consistent patterns of behavior in certain types of contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> Costanzo, T. 2005. My Situational Leadership Style  
[http://engineering.ucsb.edu/~tacy/capstone/leadership/my\\_leadership\\_style.pdf](http://engineering.ucsb.edu/~tacy/capstone/leadership/my_leadership_style.pdf)  
(Retrieved 2016-05-20)

### ***3. Situations influence the consequences of managerial behavior.***

Popular leadership literature contains clichés such as quick decisions, distributed responsibility, delegation, "trust your people", "the customer comes first" and so on. Each of these tenets is situation-free. There are no types of situations where these statements can be considered effective and where they are ineffective. It is clear that normative theories require situational choice. Actions must be tailored to fit the requirements of each situation. A management style is effective in one situation may be ineffective in another. Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) explain the possibility of developing a leadership contingency plan by identifying a large number of situational factors that should be considered by managers when deciding on a leadership style. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) took the process a step further by suggesting four different leadership styles ranging from steering to delegating and a framework to match each situation. However, their model has only one situational variable, mature follower, and they ignored other important features of context in which reciprocal influence occurs (Jago and Vroom 2007, 22-23).

### **Instructing leaders on situational leadership**

Authors Gröhn and Rasmusson explain there is no leadership style that is right for all situations and for all individuals. A manager who is quick to delegate may be wise in a particular context, but hardly so when employee lacks knowledge and feels insecure or unmotivated. Leadership style must be chosen on basis of actual circumstances. For a manager facing a group of new employees, it may be necessary to choose a management style according to each individual's abilities, motivation and autonomy if all are to succeed. People are different and have different abilities, and each person is constantly evolving, building up skills. It is this reality the leader must take into account when choosing a management style so he does not get stuck in a one-sided way of managing. The focus on employees and management style must be chosen on basis of the manager's observations. Change of management style has to be looked at once employee builds up skills. This approach to leadership is therefore called situational leadership (Gröhn and Rasmusson 1995, 45).

**Employee's level of development:** Leadership is, among other things, about interaction between people and achieving results in this interaction. In order to achieve effective leadership, there are many factors a leader has to take into account.

Exercising situational leadership involves among other things, correctly assessing the level of development of employee and adapting one's leadership style accordingly. Developmental level refers to employee's *competence* and *motivation* to perform his tasks.

- *Competence is knowledge and experience linked to solving a specific task.*
- *Motivation is employee's willingness and desire to work*

It is important to see employee's competence and motivation in context. There is a big difference between *one employee* who has a great desire to work but limited knowledge, and *the other employee* who has both a great desire to work and is competent. Here are two examples of these two employees. *The first employee:* the manager has to make careful follow-ups and checks, as there is a high risk the employee will make mistakes. If manager had acted in the same way with *the other employee*, it would most likely be perceived as interference and lack of trust, which in the long run would certainly have killed employee's interest and willingness to work (Gröhn and Rasmusson 1995, 46).

**Authors Gröhn and Rasmusson's four levels of development:** To assess an employee's level of development, manager starts from two components of competence and motivation. Putting these components together, four levels of development can be deduced:

- U1 low competence with high motivation
- U2 some competence and low motivation
- U3 increasing competence and varying motivation
- U4 high competence and high motivation

Being able to identify these four levels of development is the basis for situational leadership. It is important to remember an employee's level of development always is linked to the task at hand. The level of development therefore depends on the task. It is likely employee's level of development is high in relation to one task and low in relation to another (Gröhn and Rasmusson 1995, 46-47).

**Leader's behavior:** Behavior of a leader towards employees, i.e. the management style, can be divided into two dimensions: steering and support.

Steering is a task-oriented behavior characterized by manager: setting responsibilities, establishing goals, setting schedules, prioritizing, instructing, controlling and evaluating. Steering behavior is characterized by one-way communication. Supportive behavior is relationship related and is characterized by: listening to problems, providing support, encouraging, praising, asking for suggestions, involving, informing and explaining. Supportive behaviour is characterized by two-way communication. Management and support are two basic dimensions of Situational Leadership Model. From these we get four leadership styles. They are function of how much direction and control a leader exercises and the amount of support and encouragement that provides (Gröhn and Rasmusson 1995, 47).

**Four leadership styles:** Leader determines employee's level of development and adapts his leadership style accordingly.

*U1 low competence with high motivation of the employee*, the leader *instructs*. He has a high degree of direction and low degree of support characterized by manager setting rules. Defining clear frameworks, setting goals, controlling, planning how work will be done, when it will be done and by whom, giving detailed guidance, making decisions, closely monitoring progress of work and using mostly one-way communication.

An instructional leadership style can be effective in relation to a novice learning basic skills, at critical times when there is no room for discussion, immediate decisions have to be made, e.g. due to a tight timeframe in reorganization. When conflicts are common and leader has to step in and establish new routines or when a co-worker is eager and motivated but unsure and does not have enough knowledge about how work should be done.

*Comment:* A novice at development level 1 need a lot of instruction but not as much support, as they often are highly motivated. However, employee should not be left completely without support or back-up.

*U2 some competence and low motivation of the employee*, the manager *motivates* with a high degree of guidance and support. He has a motivational leadership style characterized by leader setting goals, planning work, monitoring progress, showing a high degree of support, praising initiative and commitment, developing two-way communication and making decisions but only after listening to employee's suggestions.

A motivational leadership style can be effective when an employee is initially unmotivated.

*Comment:* An employee at development level 2 has gained some experience but still needs a lot of direction. In addition, the "novel feeling" may have worn off; he is not so motivated anymore and needs support. Two-way communication increases the understanding that a job has to be done in a certain way. It contributes as well to greater motivation and commitment of employee, as he is then involved in the planning.

***U3 increasing competence and varying motivation of the employee***, the manager *consults* and supports to a high degree with a low degree of direction. The leadership style is characterized by manager asking how employee wants to solve tasks, making decisions together with employee, allowing them to participate and take responsibility for solving problems, listening and guiding employee to solve problems on their own. Encouraging and providing support in the work and uses two-way communication.

A consultative management style can be effective when an employee has knowledge but is unsure whether he can do the work.

*Comment:* From a motivational to a consultative management style, the instructional moments decrease in favor of personal relationship and support increases. The difference from other styles is that leader here provides encouragement and a reason for discussion, and asks for input from employee rather than giving directives and making decisions himself.

***U4 high competence and high motivation of the employee***, the leader *delegates* and has a low level of support and direction. A delegating leadership style is characterized by leader delegating tasks and decisions to employee, letting them plan and decide how the tasks will be solved, letting employee be responsible for the execution of the task, keeping a low profile overall, and being informed about the progress of work.

A delegating management style can be effective when an employee has knowledge and is willing and motivated to do a good job. Knowledge includes as well ability to plan, to meet deadlines and to cooperate (Gröhn and Rasmusson 1995, 48-50).

# Methodology

In this study, qualitative and semi-qualitative interviews were conducted using emails. Participants who were interviewed are managers in various companies in southern Sweden with extensive experience in the field. Relevant information has been searched and described in order to obtain theoretical history about situational leadership in operations. Scientific theories and models were used as tools in the study. For example, a model for situational leadership was described and used in the interview part. Analysis of the interviews did not provide a clear picture of how leadership worked in practice within the company. Therefore, a supplementary questionnaire was sent, with direct questions to leaders on how they would choose a leadership style in a given situation. At the end of the study there is a discussion section where results from interviews as well as material from previous studies and literature regarding situational leadership are discussed. The conclusion describes how reality from interviewed leaders matches literature and theories on the subject.

## Qualitative study

In qualitative methods, researcher tries to put themselves in the shoes of the person being studied, in order to understand the person's perspective. In this way, researcher tries to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. When a study is carried out in a qualitative way, researcher is convinced the perspective in question is not the only scientific perspective, otherwise another method would have been chosen. In a qualitative study, researcher gets closer to the person being studied. A qualitative research process is based on an evaluative and a factual perception of the phenomenon being studied. These two elements consist of two hermeneutic circles. One is cognitive, about understanding and from those definite questions arrives, called prior theory. The other one is normative and deals with socially based prejudices of various kinds. An example of a common prejudice that Holm and Krohn Solvang address is the belief that an unemployed person does not have a job because he is not actively seeking work. Therefore, researcher must critically examine his own beliefs, and he must not confirm his own prejudices. In summary, these two circles, which are controlling factors, work together and underlie the outcome of the process. A qualitative interview is a form of interview in which researcher has beyond minimum control of the research subjects. Researcher has a thematic framework, where survey person answers questions in which the researcher is interested in. Holm and Krohn Solvang describe that

qualitative interviews require a lot of information gathering. Interviewing can take from one to three hours. If researcher needs additional information or further explanation, it is usually ok to ask the respondent additional questions. In a qualitative interview, standardized questionnaires are not used so researcher does not have too much control over interview, but rather wants interviewee to control development of the interview. The important thing for researcher is that interview contains questions that cover purpose of interview. Respondent interviewing means the interviewee is involved in the phenomena researcher is studying. Participants in a study must be told what the study is about and participation must be voluntary. One important thing to keep in mind is the interviewee tells their own opinions and thoughts when answering interview questions (Holme and Krohn Solvang 1991, 92-108).

In this study, semi-structured interviews are conducted, which means one person is interviewed at a time. In semi structured interviews, starting point is the use of question areas instead of precise detailed questions. Larger question areas are used to guide the conversation towards a more natural conversation that gives interviewee some control over the conversation. The initial questions in this study are divided into three groups. The first group contains questions directly address situational leadership. In the other two groups questions are indirect and create a picture of how basic conditions are set up for situational leadership to work well within companies. Finally, in a supplementary survey, leaders have chosen leadership styles based on given situations from which one can infer consistency with these parts of theories for the subject. The aim is to get a reality check from interviewee's perspective in hope that they want to tell as much as possible about questions being asked. How question is asked is important. Questions should be open-ended and have follow-up questions so interviewee can better develop thoughts and opinions. Ethical aspects are important in qualitative research. Usually few people are interviewed and they share their story. Therefore, researcher must ensure respondents cannot be identified and that nothing negative will happen to respondent after the study is published. If respondent does not want certain documentation to be included in the study, researcher must respect this request (Hedin 1996, 4-6).

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<sup>3</sup> Hedin, A. 1996. A small guide to qualitative method with emphasis on interviewing. PDF.

## **Data collection**

Material for this study was collected from literature, various scientific articles, training materials and empirical interviews with six survey persons. Information on how situational leadership is described in various theories was extracted from literature, training materials and scientific articles. In interviews, the six respondents answered questions about situational leadership in their own organization. Questions in first round were divided into four areas, the way of adapting one's leadership, adapting to maturity of employees, dealing with organization's way of working with development of leadership and finally a supplementary series of questions in which interviewees chose leadership style based on given conditions. By analyzing answers, the idea was to find out how leaders adapt their leadership in practice. Before interviews were conducted, a lot of time was needed to obtain documents explaining what situational leadership is. The interview questions needed to be formulated so they could be understood consistently, as interpretation of what situational leadership is can vary between different organizations. Follow-up questions were asked when answers needed to be completed or clarified. This was done to clarify any ambiguities or misunderstandings in order to make results as realistic as possible. (Larsson 2011, 26-27).

## **Selection and Implementation**

As the study deals with situational leadership and aims to find out how the concept is used in practice through a number of examples, six leaders in the industry were interviewed. Interviewees were chosen from companies with different types of operations and sizes, as the way of working can vary, depending on these parameters. The companies' activities vary between research, manufacturing, projects and logistics, In order to quickly arrange leaders for the interviews; networking through personal contacts was used. These contacts also helped to identify managers in various positions within companies, to participate in the study.

The study used e-mail interviews in which the managers were given a summary description of situational leadership and two questionnaires which they filled in at different times. Towards the end of study, the need to clarify how leaders deal with concretely leadership situations emerged, and therefore a supplementary document was sent to the leaders with questions regarding the choice of leadership styles, which was the second questionnaire. Advantages have been taken from e-mail; participants were not locked into booked interview times. The interviewed leaders have been able to freely choose when to work on the questions. There has been a deadline for the return of interview responses and all participants answered by the

fixed date. Responses were returned as Word documents and time was saved by not having to rewrite and retype responses. It has cost less time and money not having to travel to the participants' workplaces, which are scattered across Skane region. The interviewer lives in Canada and therefore email interviews were a particularly good solution in this case. The geographical distance meant that there was not much discussion with leaders about definitions of situational leadership and interview questions, but it worked well because the task was to investigate how the interviewed leaders themselves perceive the concept and how they work according to it, as well as how their leadership fits with theories in the field.

Researchers who interview by email can more easily interview people around the world without having to take time to meet. Data from email interviews are in electronic format and require less work for editing before researchers can analyze the collected data. Getting responses back from interviewees in a timely manner can vary depending on how often people check their email, how they have time to respond, and different time zones. Response reliability may also depend on the number of participants in the study, number of questions asked, participants' motivation, and interest in responding (Meho 2006, 1285, 1288).

## **Data analysis**

The interview material has been analyzed and rewritten. At the beginning of the process, material was read through to get a summary view. Furthermore, important information was separated from responses. Details were divided into themes and named according to content. Interview material was reread a few more times when sub-themes were specified. Finally, a summary was made to get a picture of both themes and sub-themes. The data material was summarized into a detailed account of essential details aimed at the purpose of study. Next, key ideas were clarified, and leaders' perceptions were structured and analyzed. Key information in responses and underlying hypotheses were organized into a larger whole along with more essential themes and sub-themes. The content of material was divided into four theoretical categories, leaders' views on situational leadership, awareness and documentation of employees' competencies, strategy and discussion within companies on situational leadership, and leaders' choice of leadership style in a given situation. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) explain that thematisation must be based on purpose of the study. Theming should be supported by well-motivated theoretical understanding. Of an exploratory study, the aim is to find new dimensions of a phenomenon. There, thematisation can have room for interviewees' experiences of different events. This study's thematisation has had the study's purpose as its

starting point. Theme of the study has been about interviewees' experiences of situational leadership and in which contexts it is relevant. The theming has been constructed for a theoretical understanding of ethnicity. Ethnicity is generated in a rational process and relevance varies in different contexts (Hylland Eriksen, 1998). In order for interviewees to fill in content of the themes with experiences of situational leadership, the theming was open-ended. Data, analysis and report writing of collected material do not have to be seen as distinct steps in a research process, usually these go on in parallel (Creswell 2007). This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological method of analysis. In both interview situations, the thematisation of transcripts and writing of narratives, as well as in the analysis process, interviewees' experiences of work situation as a leader were interpreted (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

## **Methodological criticism**

Some of the questions in the interview could have been worded differently to avoid yes and no answers. Interviewees could have been asked to describe their answers with a few sentences for each question. It would also been useful to have more leaders to interview in the study. It would probably have made pattern of responses clearer but it would not necessarily change the results. It would as well been interesting to conduct the interviews in face-to-face meetings, so answers to the questions could be more complete. It can be noted that options for the chosen management style in section four could be clearer explained. However, leaders' responses could be interpreted based on the reasoning that followed each answer. It is likely leaders' choices might have been more consistent with each other and with the theory if the supplementary questions had been discussed, and that differences resulting from interpretations of response options would been avoided. It is all about how questions are formulated and that they are linked to purpose of the study. More articles dealing with situational leadership would possibly have been useful to better build on the theory for the study, but good articles on situational leadership were not easy to find for that part of the study.

# Results

In this part of the study, results of the interviews will be presented, and a summary is made for each paragraph.

## **Presentation of the interviewees**

Leader 1 is a Human Resources Manager/Consultant in the south-west of Skane, at a large company that provides research opportunities for European countries to develop new materials, drugs, etc. The company currently has three hundred employees.

Leader 2 is a Human Resources Manager in a medium-sized logistics company in western Skane with fifty-five employees. The company is part of a Dutch group.

Leader 3 is a Project Manager in a large company that develops and markets network equipment and software for surveillance systems. More than a thousand people works at the head office in south-west Skane and the same number are employed by the company units in the world.

Leader 4 is a Planning Manager at a large energy company with district heating and cooling as main products. They are four hundred employees, and the company is located in western Skane.

Leader 5 is a Production Manager working in a medium-sized company manufacturing process instrumentation products in south-west Skane. The company has around sixty employees.

Leader 6 is a Production Manager in a medium-sized company with sixty employees in south-western Skane. They develop and manufacture electronic and electromechanical products on a contract basis.

## **Leaders' views on situational leadership**

*How would situational leadership be described within the companies and how do the six selected leaders adapt their leadership in situations?*

Leader 1 has many employees who are engineers, scientists and lawyers. He describes the employees and leaders he works with are very much influenced by what is happening in the surroundings. They want to do what is popular at the moment, and are influenced by the highly competent individuals who report to them. Employees are very committed and motivated and Leader 1 sometimes needs to check that commitment and motivation do not get out of hand. Therefore, Leader 1 tries to stay in close contact with employees and make sure he has an insight into what they are doing to ensure everyone is moving towards the same goal. Since leader 1 is hired as a consultant in the company, he tries to delegate more and let employees decide for themselves, because they are the ones with most knowledge.

Leader 2's company is flatly organized with three levels of leaders. This means leaders in this company need to act effectively with respect concerning company values and employees. The CEO leads the management team which consists of an Administrative Assistant, HR Manager, Continuous Improvement Manager, Logistic Manager, Expedition Manager, Maintenance Manager, Support Operation Manager and a Business Controller. At the next level there are team leaders in Logistics and Expedition/Operation. Leader 2 has a hired HR consultant and colleagues in the management team with whom he can discuss leadership and actively tries to listen to employees to find coaching that can help develop employees.

Leader 3 is not aware of any specific way of working with situational leadership for project managers or team leaders in the company. He mentions it might exist for some managers, and it is personal how situational leadership is adapted. Leader 3 would call his leadership style a mix between needs-based and situational leadership. It is important to be able to take extra care of an employee who for example, is going through a difficult period in life. Leader 3 also tries to pay attention to whether people in the group have different needs for attention or need coaching for the tasks at hand, to explain the value of task and discuss motivation factors after task is completed.

Leader 4 tries to adapt his leadership to employee's circumstances and then make individual demands. Leader 4 mentions he knows his employees well and knows how they react in different situations. Therefore, he presents the task in a different way to each individual.

Leader 5 adapts the leadership based on employees' workload and deadlines, their experience and the way they spend their time determines whether leadership should be supportive or

controlling. This form of leadership they believe has brought a lot of positivity to the company.

Leader 6 explains there are employees from different cultures and countries, and they have a good mix of men and women and ages. He therefore sees a great need to adapt leadership of the company depending on individuals. The management team believes leadership is important and may bring in an external consultant to give lectures on leadership to HR managers in the company. Leader 6 keeps in close contact with team leaders every week to review needs of each individual and after adjusts leadership style between steering and delegation. Employees need development and motivation, and some employees like to change tasks while others like to stay with the same.

*"Through close contact with staff and weekly reconciliation with group leaders, we create a common picture of the unique needs of individuals and adapt management accordingly. All employees have different needs for development and motivation." Leader 6*

***Nowadays it is written leadership must be flexible and evolving, do you feel a change of this requirement?***

Leader 1 does not feel there has been any major change in leadership during his time as leader. He believes when you develop yourself as a leader, learning from bad and good experiences, it is easier to be flexible depending on the situation you find yourself in.

Leader 2 describes a noticeable change in flexible leadership. In the past, a leader only needed to focus on their own department, but today leaders need to interact with other departments which require more collaboration between leaders. Given that, many companies choose to have fewer employees, which increases requirement for skills of employees and because of that individual competences must be broaden. Therefore it is a greater demand on leaders in terms of knowing skills of employees and their personalities in order to succeed. Leader 2 has noticed nowadays they have to be able to manage other parts of the company. They must have a good overall vision and be involved in the company, even outside their own department which as well increase requirement for skills.

Leader 3 has not noticed a big change in his eight years as a project manager, but perhaps there is more talk about leadership between managers in the company than between managers

at project level. He always strives for individual and situational leadership and thinks leadership is important but does not get as much focus as the processes do. At least in his leadership role, processes are easier to define and easier to manage compared to people.

Leader 4 believes leader's knowledge of how to deal with different situations continuously needs to be developed.

Leader 5 does not see any clear changes in leadership style over the years.

Leader 6 believes leadership is constantly changing due to the rapid development. In order to remain an attractive leader, it is important to meet needs of the staff. Leader 6 points out the unions now are more vocal and push harder for staffs rights and demands for development.

*"I think when you develop your leadership, by learning from good and bad efforts; it's easier to be flexible in your actions. You know what works in different situations." Leader 1*

In conclusion, the majority of leaders believe it is important to adapt leadership style to the situation and consideration must be given to individuals the leader is responsible for. There has not been a major change in leadership style over time, but it is pointed out it always has been important to adapt and develop leadership based on different situations in order to be a good leader.

## **Knowledge and documentation of staff competencies**

### ***In what way do you know the competences of your staff?***

Leader 1 has staff interviews and other meetings with employees and an analysis of employee competencies is made.

Leader 2 meets individually staffs in the beginning of the year. These are following up four times per year. The company uses skills matrices where manager can retrieve information about employees' training, work skills as operators, maintenance technicians, logistics coordinators and supervisors, and more.

Leader 3 says managers are continuously involved and have a daily dialogue with employees and through this they form an idea of employees' skills in order to further complement their areas of expertise and opportunity to strengthen their weaker areas.

Leader 4 tries to be constantly available and communicate with employees to get an idea of what they can do.

Leader 5 describes they use regular development meetings and competences are documented in a competence matrix. Sometimes additional information is received in informal meetings and do not come up in the development meetings. These are often competences that are direct outside needs of the work.

Leader 6 documents the competences in a competence matrix and has annual development meetings and tries to have good communication with the employees in daily work.

*"By being involved and helping to distribute the daily work, you make use of the team members' areas of expertise but also giving them a chance to improve." Leader 3*

***Are employees' competences inventoried and documented and, if so, how and how often is competence documents updated?***

Leader 1 inventories and monitors staff competences and when a staff member has attended a training course, the competence becomes updated.

Leader 2 uses quality system to document internal trainings employees undertake. The documents are placed in a personal staff folder. Leader 2 thinks it is important to complement competences and believes it is important to focus on knowledge and experience.

Leader 3 does not document his employees' competences himself because he has a manager over him who takes care of both development reviews and documentation of competences. Leader provides feedback on employees to the manager. Leader 3 explains employees have individual development meetings with respective managers, which are held twice a year.

Leader 4 neither inventories nor documents employee competencies.

Leader 5 does inventor and documents employer's competencies. If employee has upgraded their skills within the company, this is documented in a personnel file. Once a year there is discussion with the employee were they review goals that are set between manager and employee at the last meeting.

Leader 6 has development meetings with employees where among other things are discussed and the competences are inventoried and documented.

*"We have a steering document in our quality system that we document all training internally which is saved in the staff folder. I think we need to complement competences instead of talking about skills, i.e. a combination of knowledge and experience." Leader 2*

In summary of this question, it can be said some of the managers are continuously involved in the work and have a daily dialogue with employees where they form an idea of employer's skills in order to further complement their areas of expertise. The majority of managers document competences of employees. Some use skills matrixes that are continuously updated when there is a change in the employee's skills. Maybe training or experience either within the company or external courses is run by the individual himself. Development meetings also review what has happened to the goal setting at the last development meeting. Some of the managers mention they try to have close daily communication with employees.

## **Strategy and discussion within companies on situational leadership**

### *How is leadership discussed in different situations within organizations?*

Leader 1 mentions leadership has always been a focus, but there is no strategy for this. He describes some good questions: what do we want to achieve, what level of ambition should we have and what style is best, when where and how?

Leader 2 company is in the process of developing a leadership profile for managers working at department and supervisor level in the company. The company will measure the leadership index every month in an employee survey to better know the relations in the company.

Leader 3 who is a project manager is not sure how leadership is discussed within the organization.

Leader 4 mentions there is an ongoing discussion between managers in the company, and sometimes they have the opportunity to have coached conversations with Human Resources.

Leader 5 explains they do not have a formal discussion in the company, but sometimes they discuss between managers in "private conversations".

Leader 6 describes what is discussed in the organization is about conflict management, and this is addressed in the context of management meetings held every month.

*"Continuing training of the management team in conflict management is ongoing, and is a standing meeting point at monthly meetings where employees/leadership is discussed."*

*Leader 6*

***Does the company have a leadership development strategy, and is skills development for leaders and staff part of the company's strategy?***

Leader 1 explains the company has thoughts and partly a strategy regarding competence development for employees.

Leader 2 discusses training for managers and safety representatives in both organizational and psychosocial work environment.

Leader 3 gives his employees the opportunity to set personal goals with their immediate manager.

Leader 4 mentions the company has a strategy for both management development and competence development for other employees in the company.

Leader 5 explains his company has a competence development strategy for employees in the company but no strategy for leadership development.

Leader 6 says the company does neither have a sufficient strategy for leadership development nor for skill development for employees.

*"At the time nothing is written down but I think everyone has some idea of a strategy for leadership development" Leader 1*

In conclusion, regarding strategy and discussion on situational leadership, almost all leaders' companies in the study have some kind of discussion on leadership in their company. Some of the companies have a strategy they follow in order to have control, for example, leadership profiles and level of ambition and a style that suits both goals and different situations that arise. In one company, the issues are discussed between managers but without a routine or structure. More than half of managers in the study do not have a strategy for leadership

development. One of the leaders describes instead of having a strategy, they have to go to seminars or forums to get inspiration from different lectures on leadership. All companies in the study have a focus on staff and leadership development. If the answers are interpreted positively, it can be said two of the six companies interviewed have an explicit strategy in this area.

## **Supplementary question:**

*What leadership style would you choose for managing employees with the following level of development?*

In response to this question, managers were asked to describe four leadership styles according to the Hersey and Blanchard model. Leadership styles were described in illogical order not to influence the managers' choices. The task was to choose the leadership style for the given competence levels of the employees. The following leadership styles they could choose are taken from Gröhn and Rasmusson (1995):

**L1: You motivate with a high degree of direction and support.**

**L2: You consult with the employee and provide support to a high degree with a low degree of direction.**

**L3: You instruct, having high degree of direction and low degree of support.**

**L4: You delegate and have low levels of support and direction.**

Which of the above leadership styles would you choose for managing employees with developmental levels as shown below. The descriptions of the alternative maturity levels of employees to be managed are from Gröhn and Rasmusson (1995):

**U1: Employees with low competence and high motivation**

**U2: Employees with high competence and high motivation**

**U3: Employees with some competence and low motivation**

**U4: Employees with increasing competence and varying motivation**

Responses from the managers are shown in the table below, and the last row of table "Theory" indicates the optimal choice according to Hersey and Blanchard:

<b>Leader</b>	<i>U1</i>	<i>U2</i>	<i>U3</i>	<i>U4</i>
<b>1</b>	L1	L4	L1	L3
<b>2</b>	L3	L4	L1	L2
<b>3</b>	L2	L4	L2	L2
<b>4</b>	L3	L4	L1	L2
<b>5</b>	L2	L4	L2	L2
<b>6</b>	L3	L4	L1	L2
<b>Theory</b>	L3	L4	L1	L2

***Motivation of leaders for the chosen management style, low-skilled and high-motivated employees (U1)***

Leader 1 says employees with high motivation are willing to learn but need both guidance and support.

Leader 2 answers because employees have low skills, they need guidance, but less support because motivation is high.

Leader 3 says an employee with low competence and high motivation may tend to want to do more than they are capable of. Which result in the employee may have done parts of the work and it is discovered later they have misunderstood the task. Leader 3 therefore believes that both a high degree of direction and support should be provided so the employee can continue to feel motivated.

Leader 4 explains if the employee does not know the task, a lot of direction is required, and because motivation is high, they will get work done.

Leader 5 finds it difficult to digitally answer the question because employees evolve along the way, i.e. initially it may be an L1 that transitions to an L2. Leader 5 believes confidence in employees with low skills allows them to grow over time.

Leader 6 did not comment on the answer.

*"If a person has a high motivation factor, he is willing to learn but needs guidance and support. Over time he will develop and be able to make the decisions himself." Leader 1*

***Motivation from leader for the chosen management style, employees with high competence and high motivation (U2)***

Leader 1 says if an employee knows the task and is motivated, it can be delegated without problems.

Leader 2 writes employee is ready to take responsibility and should also be empowered.

Leader 3 expects employee to be competent and self-sufficient that he only needs an initial briefing on what work should be done and will manage with low levels of direction and support. The manager believes there is a risk; support would signal lack of trust.

Leader 4 believes that because the employee both knows the work and has high skills, only some follow-up is needed.

Leader 5 believes that employees with high competence and motivation should be delegated tasks and given low levels of direction and support. If it become apparent that competencies are not fully up to standard. Temporary guidance and support should be provided.

Leader 6 responds that confidence should be shown in competent staff.

*"If the high competence marries well with the task, L4's are preferable as employee becomes like a self-playing piano, but if competence does not exist in the relevant area, there may be a future correction (L1's) and then revert back to L4's." Leader 5*

***Motivation from leader for the chosen management style, employees with some competence and low motivation (U3)***

Leader 1 believes if there is a problem with motivation, a high degree of management is needed above all.

Leader 2 says employees with low motivation and lack of competence need both support and guidance.

Leader 3 finds this issue difficult but chose to start by consulting with the employee to give them a chance to take responsibility which can result in higher motivation and stronger competence later on. In case this does not work, leader will move to a high level of direction and support.

Leader 4 responds that for the employee to do a good job, a high degree of direction and support is required.

Leader 5 wants to consult with the employee because responsibility tends to generate higher motivation.

Leader 6 believes low motivation and lack of competence require direction and support.

*"The person needs to be supported because motivation is too low and when competence is lacking managing in the right direction is needed." Leader 2*

***Motivation from leader for the chosen management style employees with increasing competence and varying motivation (U4)***

Leader 1 thinks if the employee has competence but motivation fails, he chooses to instruct but allows the employee to receive some support as his competence develops.

Leader 2 wants to give the employee support because motivation varies. However, not so much direction is required as competence increases.

Leader 3 replies that the employee probably has shown he is growing with the task but motivation is variable, support should be given without too much direction. Leader believes this may have a negative effect on quality, but he wants to give people the chance to fail and learn from mistakes.

Leader 4 thinks in this case it is necessary to have a finger on the pulse and wants to make sure that competence continues to increase and motivation is raised.

Leader 5 believes giving employee's responsibility tends to result in higher motivation because the results can be seen and challenged by other employees. Motivation is often influenced by personal responsibility.

Leader 6 writes that increasing competence should not be slowed down by management, but if motivation is not secure, support is needed.

*"The employee has probably shown he is growing and become more proficient at his tasks. With varying motivation it can be good to be there as support but avoid too much control. Hopefully the employee feels more motivated to be able to make right decisions. This can sometimes backfire in the quality of the work initially but I think you have to give people a chance to fail and learn from it, in the long run you get a more confident and motivated employee." Leader 3*

The summary of responses to the questions about choice of management style varied slightly between the different leaders, but their reasoning for each choice was very consistent. This may be due to different interpretations of the brief descriptions of options. In this part of the interviews, one can observe a relatively high degree of consistency between the answers and the descriptions made by Gröhn and Rasmusson on the basis of Hersey and Blanchard's theory, but there were discrepancies.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

In the analysis and discussion section, the issues will be discussed based on the responses of the interviewed leaders. Furthermore, discussion will be conducted in which the interview responses will be contrasted with theory descriptions and literature.

### **Question 1:**

*Do the managers/leaders use situational leadership in their activities, and if so, how?*

All managers try, more or less in different ways, to adapt their leadership according to knowledge and conditions of employees, individual personalities, workload and nature of the activity. Leaders mention in the interview responses that all employees are different and sometimes adaptation is needed depending on the individual they are leading and they do not see employees as a group. Leaders have different positions to deal with adaptation. Some have Human Resource consultants with whom they can discuss their leadership, others have other leaders as a sounding board, and some have no one to discuss the issues with. Leader 1

is a consultant and sees it as important to have close contact with employees to ensure everyone is moving towards the same goals, and tries to delegate because employees themselves have the knowledge to make the right decisions in their day-to-day tasks. Leader 2 listens and coaches to develop employees. Leader 3 sees in his leadership role there is a need for situational leadership and coaches to encourage employees when needed. Leader 4 knows the staff well, adapts individually and presents tasks that are appropriate for each one of them. Leaders 5 and 6 say they balance leadership styles from directive to supportive. Fiedler's (1967) view of effective leadership is a mix of leader's personal qualities and behavior, depending on the situation leader has with employees (Aarum and Abrahamsson 2005, 99-103). When the interviewed leaders in this study describe their leadership, it can be found that the summary of the descriptions is very much in line with both researcher Fiedler's view of situational leadership and theory descriptions of Hersey and Blanchard. Situational leadership as described in theories and literature is used in practice to some extent according to leaders' response to the questions. The managers' way of using situational leadership is to try to adapt their way of acting depending on the situation and the individual. They emphasize the importance of having good contact with employees. It would be interesting to find out whether employees think leaders have good contact and if they know the employees well enough to be able to further adapt their leadership to the situation. One can have many perspectives on this area and it is important to point out the purpose of the study was to ask leaders how they perceive situational leadership. Leaders 5 and 6 address importance of balance between two important concepts in situational leadership, direction and support depending on the employee's competencies that the authors Hersey and Blanchard use in their theory (Leaders 2016). In leader behavior, direction and support are fundamental elements of the model. Leadership style is chosen based on how much direction/control employees need to have, and the support and encouragement, leader needs to provide (Gröhn and Rasmusson 1995, 47). Half of the leaders use words and expressions that describe the theories of situational leadership and it seems they have done some studies in the subject. It can also be seen from the interview responses some use situational leadership, or parts of the concept, without being familiar with the theory. They try to adapt their leadership to the situation they are in. All leaders answered, they adapt their leadership style depending on the situation and the employee.

## **Question 2:**

*How have the leaders developed their working methods, which have created conditions for situational leadership?*

One important way of understanding employees' skills is regular individual development interviews, which aims on getting a grasp of their skills. The majority of managers form an understanding of employees by listening and being involved in their daily work. Managers coach employees individually depending on the situation they are in. Most managers respond, they try to get to know their employees as good as possible, and after try to coach them. Depending on the situation manager and employee are in. Other than formal developing meeting with employee, several leaders have informally discussions with employees and take note if an employee has competencies that are not documented. From that leader's document immediately information as it may be a long time until next development meeting is held. Leader's document employees' competencies in terms of knowledge and experience, but no one mentions in the interview responses anything about motivation and willingness employees have, which are important details in the theories of situational leadership. Leader 2 has development meetings four times a year, including follow-up meetings with his employees and uses the competency matrix for documentation of competence. Leader 2 is the leader who has the most meetings. Leader 4 does not do inventory or documentation of competences, but is constantly available and communicates with staff to get a good idea of the staffs. Leader 5 has informal contacts with staff outside development meetings, to find out valuable information that does not come up at the annual development meeting. It is interesting that leaders in the study are so active in inventory and documenting staff knowledge. Raising the level of competence also requires motivation, willingness and attitude which should not be forgotten in this context. It would have been interesting to find out if leaders document personalities level of motivation and other details that are work related. It is important to document complete information on overall competence, work ability and personality of employees so company does not lose valuable information if manager or employee suddenly leaves company or changes department. Effective leaders use a mix of task and relationship behaviors and are interdependent (McCleskey 2014, 118). The leaders use a mix of task and relationship behaviors, but based on their responses, none of the leaders work with these models as described below to effectively bring the right leadership style to the right situation. Hersey (1984, 20) identified three key skills for becoming a more effective

leader. These three skills involve understanding the employee's past behaviors, anticipating future behaviors, and based on directing, changing, and controlling behaviors. The author Blanchard and Hersey (1996) use a three-step model to determine leadership style. First, task is established and then employee's level of development is considered. Later employee's ability and willingness are analyzed. Finally, the management appropriate style to situation is applied. The authors Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958/1973) have described a model for development of leadership from a manager-oriented to an employee-oriented leadership. The model talks about leader seeing a development in the maturity of employees, leadership changes towards employee orientation (Bruzelius and Skärvad 2010, 376).

### **Question 3:**

*Are employees managed according to the theory of situational leadership, and if so, in what way?*

Some of the leaders explain competence as knowledge and experience, but in theories and literature as referred to in this study; willingness and motivation are important elements of situational leadership. The authors Gröhn and Rasmusson (1995) write in order to move from controlling to supportive leadership, employee must be prepared to take the next level of development and have the right work drive (willingness and motivation). When delegating, the aim should be to give employee a task that involves a certain challenge. If employee finds the responsibility of task too easy, they may lose motivation, and if it is too difficult, panic and stress may develop (Tonnquist 2014, 284). Hersey and Blanchard (1988) created a situational leadership model in which leader chooses leadership style based on assessing skills and willingness of the employees and their ability to cope with responsibility of a task (Bruzelius and Skärvad 2010, 376-377). Some leaders mention they try to get to know their employees and after individually coach them. What focus do leaders have on motivation and willingness of employees to perform the tasks? Since leaders do not touch on willingness and motivation at all in their descriptions, it can be assumed these elements are not the focus, which is a deviation from descriptions in theories and literature on situational leadership. It is an important factor to get employees to become self-reliant and when employees are mature, leaders can be there to delegate and support when needed. What is evident from the interview response is that leaders who seem to know a little more about situational leadership have been schooled by Hersey and Blanchard's theory. Although some of the other do not know so much about situational leadership, it can be seen they are still largely acting according to Hersey

and Blanchard when they answer these questions in the interview. Thinking from a logical perspective, most people in a given industry learn a style that is being used more diligently than other styles, and then an approach is passed on to the next generation of leaders. That style has then become dominant in a specific industry. Hersey and Blanchard's theory is easy to understand, easy to grasp and covers many areas of leadership. An interesting point of view on situational leadership is provided by the authors Jago and Vroom (2007) who include three situational variables in their analysis. The first organizational effectiveness is influenced by situational factors that leader cannot control and therefore it becomes difficult to measure leadership effectiveness in results. The second situation shapes how leader behaves. The leader is influenced by the environment he is surrounded by. The third situation influences consequences of leader's behavior and researchers argue for that reason it is the situation that influences these behaviors. Leader 1 says his co-workers, who are leaders as well, are influenced by highly competent people who report to them. It is important leaders know how such influence can work so they can act in time to possibly correct everyone towards the same goal. As leader 1 mention in the interview responses. Hersey and Blanchard (1988, 199) tested situational leadership on more than sixty managers and found that those who had adapted the model appropriately in their operations achieved better results than those organizations with managers who did not use the model.

#### **Question 4:**

*How do the six leaders choose leadership style based on Hersey and Blanchard's theory in a given situation regarding the employee's maturity level?*

In the case of low competence and high motivation (normally for new hires), leaders have chosen different leadership styles they reported in the results section. Some leaders have chosen leadership style that fits with the theory, while others have chosen other options. All leaders' motivations of answers are basically the same, and match quite well with description in the theory. In given situation, some leaders think they should support a lot and other thinks employees with high ambition can do wrong because competence is low. The leadership style described by the theory is that one should control more so employee does not miss anything in the task and they should be able to follow rules of the company. If employee has low competence and high motivation, leader should set rules, define clear framework and control. This leadership style is good for new employees (Leaders 2016). From responses of leaders, it appears they are not careful about clear frameworks and instructions for employees with low

skills and high motivation which is normal for new employees. If you do not manage a new employee from the beginning, you cannot expect a good work result. It is very important employee is taught the basics of work as well as procedures and rules of workplace.

Managing employees with high skills and high motivation was the only part all managers agreed on, and it is also the easiest to understand. If employee is motivated and knows their job well, it is easy for manager to feel secure and to trust work will be done in the best way possible. Gröhn and Rasmusson (1995) write that a delegating leadership style is characterized by leader that are delegating tasks and decisions to employee, letting employee plan and decide how tasks will be solved. Letting employee be responsible for execution of work, keeping a low profile overall and keeping informed about progress of work.

When asked how to choose to manage employees with certain skills and low motivation, half of managers surveyed said in order to increase motivation of employee, they can give the employee more responsibility. This is along the same lines as communicating more so that employee feels they can show what they can do. Other leaders think leadership needs to guide and support more, to get employee moving in the right direction. One of the leaders argues for his answer by saying that he sees this as a perfect situation when you want to get a good start with the employee. It is difficult to interpret if the leader means that the person in the alternative is new to the company. If so there is a risk leader has hired an unmotivated person. This is an objective observation and is important to keep in mind. Leader must be the one to help support and guide employees towards the goal. Gröhn and Rasmusson (1995) describe that a leader needs to motivate with a high degree of direction and support. They have a motivational leadership style which is characterized by leader setting goals, planning work, monitoring progress, showing a high degree of support, praising initiative and commitment, developing two-way communication and making decisions but only after listening to the employee's suggestions. A motivational leadership style can be effective when an employee is initially unmotivated.

The final question is how one would choose to manage an employee with increasing competence and varying motivation. All managers except one tell us it is important to support a lot because of varying motivation and steer less in this example, because the employee has a high competence. High competence does not necessarily mean you should lead less the employee. A competent person with unstable motivation and willingness needs to be supported, but controlled as well and possibly managed to ensure the task is carried out well.

The manager who has a deviating view thinks you need to instruct the employee with a high degree of control and it is important to support. Gröhn and Rasmusson (1995) explain the leader should consult and provide support to a high degree with a low degree of direction. The leadership style is characterized by leader asking how employee wants to solve the work task, making decisions together with the employee, allowing employee to participate and take responsibility for solving problems, listening and guiding employee to solve any problems on their own, encouraging and providing support in work and using two-way communication. A consultative management style can be effective when an employee has knowledge but is unsure whether they are up to the task.

Based on the responses, it can be seen that majority of leaders act broadly as the Situational Leadership Model describes. It is clear from the responses that not all leaders have full knowledge of how the model works and how to use it. It would have been beneficial for the companies to have a leadership strategy and a skills development program for leaders in this area. It would certainly have increased efficiency and a more stable approach to use their leadership.

# Conclusion

Leadership is not only about leading and influencing other people, but also about creating conditions for the organization to achieve its goals. Most theorists believe effectiveness can be seen as a strong indication of good leadership. There are researchers, who question this, and they are supported by Vroom and Jago (2007). They believe there are many influencing factors outside the control of leaders that affect an organization's performance more than leadership itself does. However, the purpose of this study is to explore the use of situational leadership in industry by examining how six leaders from different companies in industry perceive the concept and the extent to which their leadership aligns with the theory. After analyzing the interview responses, it can be concluded leaders use situational leadership as a leadership style to some extent. Most of leaders document competence of their employees and where they stand in relation to set goals. The study shows some leaders feel they know their employees so well that documentation is not necessary. In order to prevent information about individuals' competencies from becoming personal, it is important documentation exists and is accessible to competent people. It would have been interesting to investigate employees' perceptions of how leadership works. The leaders describe it is important to work on development of knowledge and experience. Willingness and motivation, which are other important elements for development within the concept, is missing in the answers. This indicates an area where the practice of the companies surveyed does not fully correspond to the theory of the leadership model. Manager's document employees' knowledge and skills and the documentation are updated when employees' development has taken place. Managers try to be present with their employees and listen a lot to get an idea of their abilities in order to adapt and influence the way they share tasks with each individual or groups. The unclear picture of how situational leadership works in practice became clearer after answers to the supplementary questions. Leaders do not fully work according to the theories. Due to the lack of leadership strategies in the companies and leaders lack certain skills on the subject. Otherwise, the supplementary questions did not add any new information to the topic. In the world of theory, situational leadership is a principle taken for granted, but for the leaders who work in practice with their leadership style, it seems that they draw a little from different areas and make their own leadership style to adapt the workplace to different types of employees in the company. Despite some consistency between the theory of situational leadership and how leaders manage their leadership in practice, the discrepancies are relatively large. It is clear

from the answers to the interview questions that leaders lack important knowledge in situational leadership, the model they consider themselves to use. Tests have shown employees of managers who properly apply situational leadership perform better with greater results than managers who do not use it. Given of these test result, there should be potential for improvement in the industry by focusing more on leadership style.

## **Future research**

It would have been interesting to study further in the area of situational leadership as to why Hersey and Blanchard's model is not fully used. A qualitative study of leaders in positions of responsibility would have provided deeper answers and a fuller picture of why the situation is as it is and it would have been interesting to study this with a quantitative study to get a broader view of the use of situational leadership. Why do motivation and willingness not have the same priority as knowledge and experience? It is an important question because willingness and motivation are needed to develop knowledge and skills of employees. According to Bowin (2004, 11), competence is about being able and willing (attitude, commitment, courage and responsibility) to perform a task.

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# Appendix 1:

## Interview material

### *Interview with staff manager regarding situational leadership*

My name is Ranya Ezzi and I am going to write a bachelor thesis about situational leadership from a leadership perspective. I am interested in the topic and want to learn how it works in reality. As students in universities, we get a picture of leadership through literature and various courses, but when you get out into the workplace, it doesn't always feel familiar.

The theory of Situational Leadership was developed in the 1960s by researchers Blanchard and Hersey. Their definition of situational leadership means that the leader adapts his behaviour to the situation he is in and to the employee's circumstances. The theory describes an interaction between people with the aim of achieving a result in this interaction by the leader correctly assessing the level of development of the employees and adapting their leadership style accordingly. Situational leadership may be defined differently from company to company but the essence of the concept is likely to be the same.

### *The leader:*

1. How would you describe situational leadership in your company?
2. How do you situationalise your leadership? Give examples
3. Nowadays it is written a lot that leadership must be flexible and evolving. Do you notice that this requirement has changed, and if so, how?

### *Employees:*

1. In what way do you know the skills of your employees?
2. Are they inventoried and documented?
3. If so, in what way and how often are these competency documents updated?

*Organization:*

1. Is leadership discussed in different situations within your organization, and if so, how?
2. Does the company have a strategy for leadership development?
3. Is competence development for leaders and employees part of the company's strategy?

If there are other important issues regarding situational leadership in your company that do not emerge from the answers to these questions, please make a brief statement.

# Annex 2:

## Supplementary material

Supplementary questions

Four leadership styles

1. You motivate with a high degree of direction and support.
2. You consult with the employee and provide a high degree of support with a low degree of direction.
3. You instruct, with a high degree of direction and a low degree of support.
4. You delegate and have low levels of support and direction.

Which of the above leadership styles would you choose for managing employees with the following level of development?

- Employees with low skills and high motivation  
Management style no. ....  
Please justify your answer:
- Employees with high competence and high motivation  
Management style no. ....  
Justify the answer:
- Employees with some competence and low motivation  
Management style no. ....  
Justify the answer:
- Employees with increasing competence and varying motivation  
Management style no. ....  
Justify the answer:

You haven't forgotten to justify your answers, have you?