



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Situational leadership

Introduction

A practice supervisor who uses 'situational leadership' knows their supervisees well, and is able to adapt their leadership style to suit the different needs of each team member and situation.

This tool explains what situational leadership is, includes a visual representation of the model, and describes the four different leadership styles within it (directing, coaching, supporting and delegating).

It also invites you to think about when to use these different styles with your team, through a number of reflective questions.

What is situational leadership?

Being a leader is not always easy and leadership can be executed in different ways. Hersey and Blanchard (1977) developed the model of 'situational leadership', which links leadership styles and situations.

They indicate that a number of factors determine the style of leadership, which is influenced by the behaviour and personal characteristics of both the leader and their followers. In addition, they argue that the situation itself is also determinative and the 'leadership style' therefore depends on this, too.

With regards to situational leadership, the concept of 'maturity' relates to the level of readiness or independence of the supervisee, which depends on a number of factors.

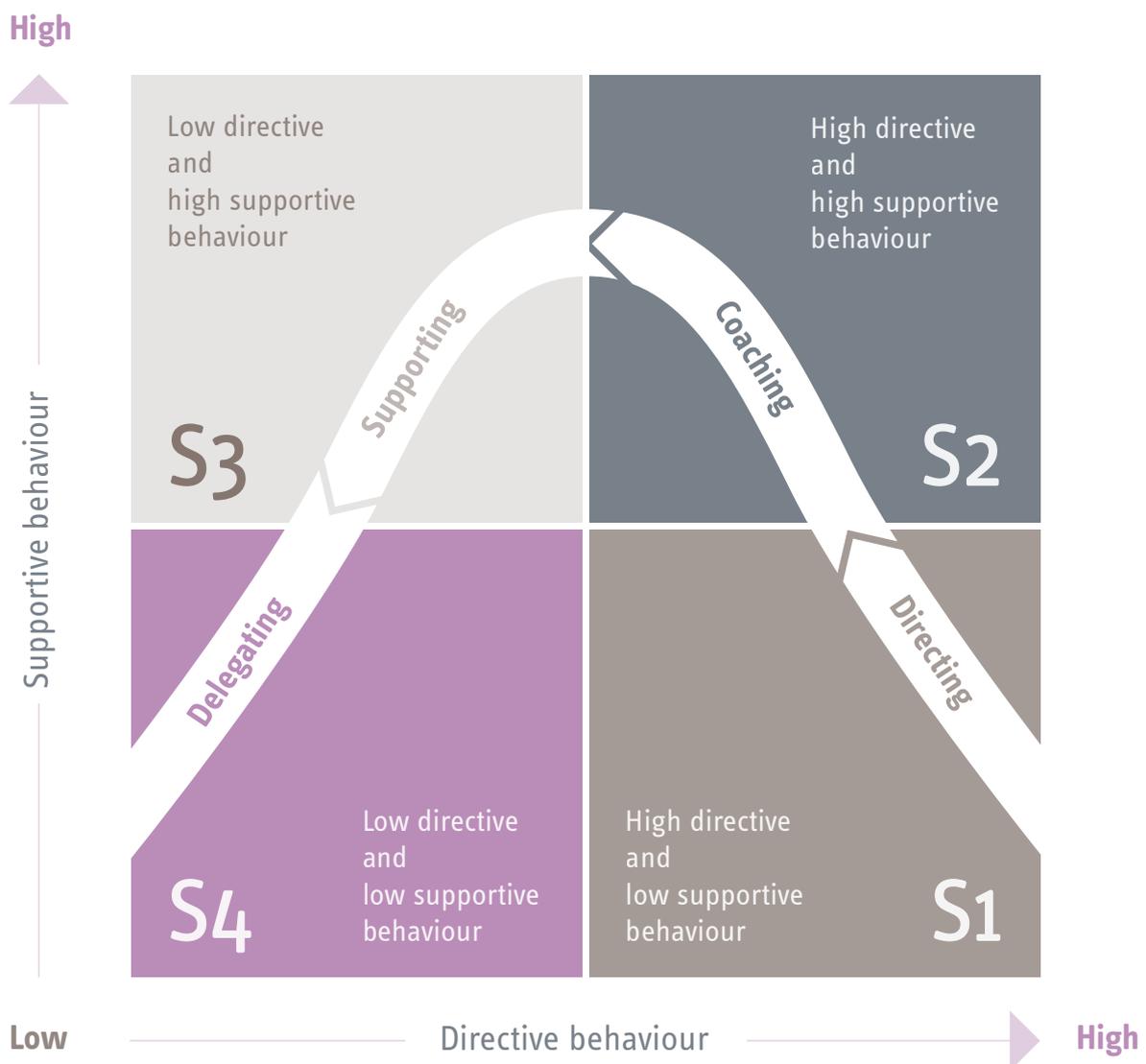
Firstly, experience is an important indicator that determines whether or not they're able to do their job independently and take (full) responsibility for it. Secondly, they have to have sufficient knowledge and skills to complete their tasks independently, as well as enough motivation to lead themselves.

For example, someone who has been in the same position for years might be skilled and experienced, but could be struggling with motivation because of a lack of career opportunities. In such a case, that person would score less highly on the 'maturity scale' than a colleague who is more motivated.

If a supervisee starts in a new position within an organisation, even if they've been with that organisation for a while, it will take some time for them to become 'mature'. The same goes for newly employed staff, student social workers, and those in their ASYE phase. After all, it takes anything from a few months up to as long as a year to be able to work (fully) autonomously in a new role.

Situational leadership model

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) based the design of their [model of situational leadership](#) (below) on a parabola (symmetrical curve) set over horizontal and vertical axis, which denote the level of support and direction needed by supervisees, according to their 'maturity'.



The level of maturity (independence of the supervisee) is indicated in the gradation of the curve from high to low. The degree of directive behaviour towards supervisees is shown on the horizontal axis and supportive behaviour is depicted on the vertical one.

Situational leadership styles

According to Hersey and Blanchard (1977), a leader will have to adapt their style to the level of maturity of the supervisee. As the maturity increases, the independence of the supervisee also increases. Consequently, four leadership styles are created within situational leadership.

These are:

Directing (telling)

- > This style suits supervisees who are still learning the job and are therefore less competent or confident. A low level of confidence, skills, knowledge and experience can feel threatening or daunting, which can lead to postponing or being resistant to tasks. This style is, therefore, also suited to leading supervisees who are less motivated.
- > Clear instruction, monitoring, reviewing and regular feedback on achievements is the most helpful style of leadership in this situation. It is also important to make the final objective clear, along with the steps that have to be taken along the way.
- > It can also be useful for a leader to have the supervisee repeat in their own words what they are supposed to do. In this way, it becomes clear whether or not the instructions have been correctly understood (this is sometimes referred to as ‘task-oriented leadership’). Certain social work practice and emergency or crisis situations may command this directive style.

Coaching (selling)

- > This style is suited to supervisees who are still learning the skills and knowledge to do the job and are really motivated to learn and develop.
- > In social work, this could relate to supporting a student or newly-qualified social worker who has the desire to work independently but still needs a high level of guidance and support.
- > It could also be useful for more experienced social workers who are new to a particular area of practice and keen to transfer their knowledge and skills, a situation that can make even the most competent staff feel 'de-skilled' and low in confidence.
- > The leader guides the supervisee by explaining why and how the leader makes decisions, and by listening and giving their undivided attention to the supervisee. This style is also called 'selling' because the leader has to 'sell' the tasks to the supervisee and convince them that they're able to do it.
- > Specific instructions are important here, as is communication at a level of equals (the leader makes the decisions but it helps if the supervisee asks questions about the purpose of the task because a partnership approach can build confidence).
- > Regular constructive and positive feedback will be helpful in building confidence and skills, too. This style can be compared to the consultative leadership style.

Supporting (participating)

- > This style is suited to supervisees who have the skills, knowledge and experience to do the task but might be low in self-confidence or overwhelmed by their workload, which can make them feel stuck or insecure. Or perhaps they made a mistake for which they blame themselves, resulting in a loss of confidence and feelings of stagnation.
- > In such cases, which can be common in social work, supervisees need little direction and guidance and a lot of support and nurture, particularly in teams where caseloads are high and resources are low, or where the wider system, nature and pace of the work has led a supervisee to become burnt out or low on resilience.
- > The supervisee needs to be encouraged to feel more confident and make decisions independently again. It is important that the leader talks to the supervisee and supports them in their work by encouraging them to take risks and by trusting their ability.
- > By having supervisees participate in the decision-making process, confidence will increase and they will be able to work autonomously. It is a good idea for the leader to give positive feedback to the supervisee, to remind them of other tasks and projects they did well in the past.
- > This type of supervisee may also benefit from some calm, face-to-face reflection or discussion about a question or an issue, to increase their confidence and make them feel their supervisor is someone they can talk to.

Delegating

- > At this level, supervisees can and want to carry out their tasks independently. They have a high level of task maturity so they need less support.
- > Supervisees are proactive about informing the leader of their progress, as well as any problems or high-risk situations they may be facing. They're motivated because of their independence so the leader doesn't have to consult with them continuously.
- > Delegating may seem easy, but it rarely is in practice, especially for inexperienced supervisors supervising more experienced staff. It's therefore a good idea for leaders to discuss the final goal with supervisees, as well as when the task has to be done and how they plan to carry it out.
- > Leaders can also plan evaluation meetings in order to monitor progress and check everything is on track. But they need to realise that delegating involves keeping some distance because the supervisee is responsible for leading the decisions.
- > Boosting confidence and letting go are the foundational techniques of delegating, but it is important to remember that experienced, independent, competent social workers still need positive feedback about their achievements.

A note on diversity

The original model of situational leadership did not include specific consideration about the influence of diversity and equality, and how this may influence perceptions about the learning and development needs of supervisees.

Given this, there is a need to be mindful of the assumptions we bring when using this model, and it is important that we are reflective about any assumptions which may include unconscious bias or stereotyped beliefs.

For example, there could be a danger of practice supervisors making unconsciously biased assumptions about the degree of maturity of different staff members, like the ‘halo effect’ in relation to someone who came with a glowing reference. Another example might be a practice supervisor assuming that because someone is ‘like them’, perhaps in relation to class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age or gender, and appears confident, they may be considered more independent than they really are.

Equally, there may be cultural or other assumptions that supervisees make about supervisors. Examples of this are that they may expect the supervisor to use more of a ‘telling’ model of supervision, based on these assumptions.

It is therefore important that practice supervisors get to know their supervisees and form a supervision relationship which aims to account for difference and sameness, and how situational leadership may apply.

Using the situational leadership model for supervision

Through situational leadership, leadership behaviour is immediately adjusted to the supervisee's behaviour and needs. It should be noted that a practice supervisor must be willing to be very flexible with respect to their supervisees, and this can take time and confidence to develop. Considering the concepts presented about the situational leadership model and the four styles (set out again below) think about the following:

- > How do you apply situational leadership in your daily practice?
- > What are your success factors for good situational leadership?
- > Within your team, who needs which style and why?
- > How do you make judgements about the 'maturity' of team members?
- > What assumptions are you making in these judgements?
- > How do you check that you're not making stereotypical assumptions about different staff members based on their gender, class, ethnicity, 'race', educational background, sexual orientation, ability / disability etc.?
- > What is your usual style?
- > What kind of leadership style do you think members of staff are expecting from you?
- > How do you know if these assumptions are accurate?
- > How do you open up conversations with supervisees about what their expectations are?
- > Which style do you feel most confident in adopting?
- > Can you think of examples of what each one looks like?
- > Which styles are more difficult for you and why?
- > What needs to happen for you to feel more confident in changing your style?
- > How long should you do this for (taking into account the need to review and adapt as required)?

Directing

For supervisees who have lower skills, knowledge and experience and low motivation. This style is about defining roles and tasks, close supervision, making decisions, and one-way communication. The decisions are made by the leader.

Coaching

For supervisees who have lower skills, knowledge and experience and high motivation. This style is about defining roles and tasks, encouraging input, and two-way communication. The decisions are made by the leader.

Supporting

For supervisees who have good knowledge, skills and experience but lower confidence or motivation. This style demands that routine decisions are passed to supervisees. The leader facilitates and is involved, but not controlling.

Delegating

For supervisees who have good knowledge, skills and experience, as well as high confidence and motivation. This style requires supervisees to decide on the level of leader involvement when it comes to making decisions and solving problems.

Other ways you can use this tool

You could explain this concept to your team and invite them to identify which style they feel may be helpful to them in which circumstances. This could be undertaken within a team meeting, away day, or individually.

You could bring this tool to your own supervision to discuss the concept with your manager and explore the range of styles that support you in different circumstances.

You could share these ideas with peers within a management meeting or action learning set, and invite them to work through the questions for practice supervisors.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

Hersey P and Blanchard K H (1977)
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Practice Supervisor Development Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@rip.org.uk
 [@researchIP](https://twitter.com/researchIP) #PSDP

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Authors: Jo Williams,
PSDP Delivery Lead
(Tavistock and Portman
NHS Foundation Trust)

Helen Shaw,
PSDP one-to-one Coaching Lead
(Tavistock and Portman
NHS Foundation Trust)

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Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756
VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,
Totnes TQ9 6EL