

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Coaches can adjust to players' competence and commitment level.

BY WINSOR JENKINS

In the September/October issue of *Soccer Journal*, I wrote in my article, "Soccer Metaphor Works Best," that the soccer coach provides the best description of what leadership looks like in the context of a team application in the global business world. I went on to say that the most effective soccer coach (and business leader) is one who has the ability to be totally responsive to the team through demonstrating the flexibility to change leadership styles in order to meet the team's changing needs.

In this article, I intend to expand my discussion on leadership and its relationship to coaching soccer using Ken Blanchard's *Situational Leadership II* model. My objective is to build awareness in the soccer community of a leadership model which can significantly improve coaching effectiveness and results. After all, leadership matters carry a universal application! The skills needed to be an effective leader in business, government, education, and soccer are the same.

More and more people today in this country and around the world recognize that leadership is an influence process. Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey were two of the first to promote this thinking with their introduction of the Situational Leadership model to the business world in 1972 via their highly acclaimed book, *Management of Organizational Behavior*. Blanchard continued to refine and revise the model, winding up in 1985 with *Situational Leadership II (SL II)*. Many others have recognized and promoted this leadership definition since then. I have been personally involved with the model since 1983, as a soccer coach and as a trainer in two Fortune 500 firms in the U.S. and Canada.

Leadership styles are constantly evolving. For instance, when American industry was at the center of the world's mass production economy, organizations were very hierarchical. Leadership at that time was limited primarily to the recognition and application of one, highly directive leadership style described as command and control, with one-way, top-down communication. Leadership then was the outgrowth of the church and the military. It also was understood to be associated with the leader's status...be it tradition, position, traits, personality (or charisma), or some combination thereof.

Today we see American industry continuing to change, functioning and growing globally versus domestically. Technology is serving as the change mechanism or agent, producing a broad playing field that resembles the game of soccer with its fluid and continuous tempo, empowered players, and teamwork. Here, the knowledge worker is replacing the mass production worker of the past, and multi-skilling and self-direction are the current and future realities.

As I mentioned in my earlier article, these and other organizational characteristics are all representative of a soccer team charged with operating on a real-time, continuous basis in order to perform the work needing to be done. This, too, is why the game of soccer is a more appropriate leadership metaphor for the future, why the soccer coach represents the best description of what leadership looks like in the context of a team application in the global business world, and why leadership matters in coaching soccer!

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Situational Leadership II's focus is on the development of people—individuals and teams! This is why its application to coaching soccer is so appropriate. In soccer, both individuals and the team are constantly developing their skills. Becoming a Situational Leader is a way for the soccer coach to help individual players grow and become self-reliant achievers and to ensure that the process for producing team results is working.

the people he or she wants to influence. For the soccer coach who aspires to become a Situational Leader, he or she has to be able to use one of four styles at a time: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating.

SL II's application starts with the leader diagnosing (assessing) an individual's need for direction and support, using the Development Level Continuum at the bottom of the SL II model.

Understanding that both individual and team skills and values are needed in order to compete can often present a real challenge in soccer (or in business).

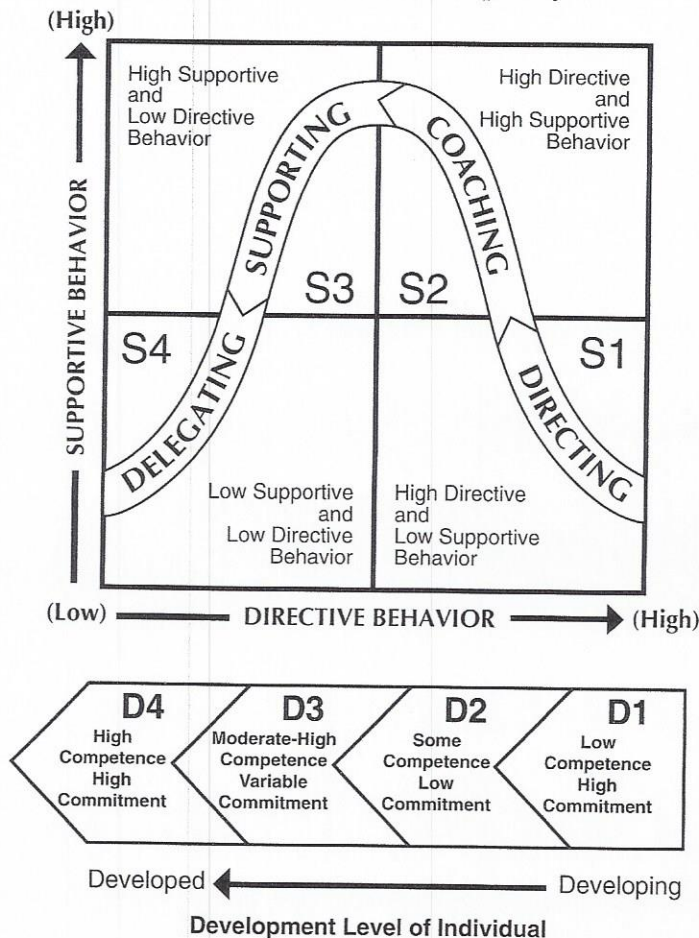
Most of us have grown up to favor individual versus team performance. Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, in their best selling book, *The Wisdom Of Teams*, present the best explanation of how individual and team skills interact on the field when they write that, “their performance focus helps teams quickly identify skill gaps and the specific development needs of team members to fill them. The shared commitment in teams encourages a healthy fear of failure as opposed to debilitating insecurity among those challenged to learn. Each team member's sense of individual accountability to the team promotes learning. Once harnessed to a common purpose and set of goals, natural individualism motivates learning within teams. And individualism drives the majority of us to find some way to make our own distinctive and individual contribution to the team.”

SL II promotes the concept that there is no one best leadership style for all situations and to be truly effective, a leader's style has to be adapted to the development level of

as a player's interest in and enthusiasm for the task. Confidence is defined as a player's self-assurance and trust in oneself to perform a task well. These two dimensions of commitment operate independently—the coach can have a player who is motivated, but not confident; or confident, but not motivated.

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP® II

The Four Leadership Styles



Blanchard Training and Development, 125 State Place, Escondido, CA 92029
(619) 489-5005 (800) 728-6000

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The Situational Leader uses the competence and commitment dimensions at a point in time for a specific task! This is an important concept to understand when applying the SL II model. Development level is not applied to an individual in a generic sense. In soccer, this means that the coach must assess what he or she is asking each individual player to accomplish on each task before applying the most effective leadership style: dribbling the ball, heading the ball, tackling, and the like. **This step represents the first skill application in the model.**

Once the diagnosis step is completed, the appropriate leadership style is selected using the top-half of the SL II model. Two dimensions to leadership style are described: Directive Behavior—telling and showing people what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and providing frequent feedback on results; and Supportive Behavior—praising, listening, encouraging and involving others in decision making. There are also four leadership styles illustrated, consisting of four different combinations of Directive and Supportive Behavior: S1, Directing; S2, Coaching; S3, Supporting; and S4, Delegating.

The model’s application calls for matching an individual’s development level with a leadership style using the numerical designation. An individual with a development level described as D1, for example, would receive a leadership style described as S1 (D2 receives S2; D3 receives S3; and D4 receives S4). **The ability to change leadership styles represents the second skill application, identified as leadership flexibility.** It represents the recognition that, “the most effective leader is one who can provide for the individual what they cannot provide for themselves,” to paraphrase Blanchard.

When I was coaching youth soccer, I applied my knowledge of Situational Leadership to both individuals and teams. I can recall when I first started with a young group of boys, including my son, how S1, Directing was the most appropriate style. Each player on the team represented a D1 on the development level continuum. Described by Blanchard as enthusiastic beginners, they were all excited about playing the game but did not have any skills. The appropriate leadership style for each player was to provide what each needed in the form of strong or high direction. On the practice field, I was constantly communicating (one-way) and showing each player how to dribble the ball, trap the ball, head the

ball, etc. I was constantly observing and providing feedback where appropriate.

Over time, as each player began to progress at different levels, I had to adjust my leadership style to each player’s D-level for the task at hand. For example, I had one player who was having trouble using his left foot to kick the ball, and he became frustrated. His right foot was his natural kicking foot, and his development level shifted to a D2 when he learned how hard it was to kick the ball with his left foot. Now, both his commitment and his competence were low. Described as a disillusioned learner, he needed a leadership style described as S2, Coaching which provided both high directive and high supportive behavior. Again, this would look the same as the S1, Directing on the directive dimension (emphasis on teaching skills). On the supportive dimension, I had to provide added encouragement through positive reinforcement and reassurance to help build his motivation to continue. Without that shift in leadership style he would, most likely, have quit the team.

In most situations, people understandably start a new task as enthusiastic beginners. In time, however, they can easily become disillusioned learners once they find out what it takes to learn the new task. This drop in commitment is often normal for any individual, and it is something you can anticipate and manage as a soccer coach (business manager, teacher, or parent). Being a Situational Leader here enables you to be proactive in helping a player transition through this difficult development stage.

Over the course of a few years I was able to move most of the players to a level described as a D4 on the model. At this level, they were highly competent and committed—for their age group. Certainly they all had more to learn, and their growth in the game would continue as they got older and gained more playing experience. Relatively speaking, however, they were each self-reliant achievers under the model’s description of a D4. My leadership style at this point was S4, Delegating. This consisted of providing low supportive behavior in the form of listening, reassuring, and praising in an appreciative or affirming way. Further, I continued to provide low directive behavior in the form of supervision in order for them to accomplish their goals.

In managing each player’s development, there were a few occasions when a player regressed from a D4 to a D3 on a

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task. Described now as a capable but cautious performer, the reasons for this shift were associated with a change in commitment, from a high to a variable level! One player, for example, did not trust his ball dribbling skill—an indication of low confidence. Another player was getting confused over what I was asking him to do when he gained possession of the ball in his own backfield—an indication of low motivation. In both cases, I had to recognize their regression and adjust my style to S3, Supporting, applying high supportive behaviors in the form of two-way communication—more listening, explaining why, asking questions, and encouraging and reassuring to help build commitment. On the directive dimension, I provided low directive behaviors as described above under the S4, Delegating style.

It is important to recognize the dynamic nature of the model. A leader can use the model in a normal manner moving from S1 to S2 to S3 to S4 in developing task-specific skills. And, as illustrated above, the model can be used in a regressive manner to address a leadership attempt where performance has slipped: S4 to S3 to S2 to S1. Regardless of application, a leader needs to shift styles sequentially. Movement in this way prevents the leader from “jumping off the track,” (illustrated as the curve through the model) and “getting derailed,” to paraphrase Blanchard once again.

When the leader does not move sequentially, it produces a negative result described as oversupervision or undersupervision! For example, if a soccer coach was working with a player whose heading skills were at the D1 level, the leadership match would be S1, Directing. But if he or she applied S3, Supporting, that would be undersupervising, providing high supportive but low directive behavior. Here, the player needs just the opposite: high directive behavior because he or she doesn't know how to head the ball, and low supportive behavior to help maintain commitment. In another example, where the coach is dealing with a goalkeeper whose development level on the task of blocking penalty kicks is D4 and applies S2, Coaching, he or she is guilty of oversupervision, providing too much directive and supportive behavior. With players at this peak performance level, the S4, Delegating style really allows them to manage their own development on that task.

According to Blanchard, the consequences of oversupervising or undersupervising are often predictable on the soccer (or business) field. Typically, oversupervised players can

become frustrated, resentful, and angry. They may even direct more energy to getting you off their back than to getting the job done! With undersupervision, a player's confidence stops developing. Without the needed direction or feedback, they fail. They can often feel set up. In time, they can become demoralized, frustrated and begin to doubt themselves. Furthermore, when you undersupervise someone, “you can also frustrate yourself because you have to step in and clean up the mess,” Blanchard points out.

It is important to recognize with each of the four leadership attempts, that some combination of both directive and supportive behaviors are always provided. There is never an application calling for no directive behavior or no supportive behavior! The term “low” on the model in no way means “none.”

To sum up, Situational Leadership II is a developmental model applicable to the needs of both individuals and teams. Its purpose is to help leaders become aware and conscious of which leadership style to use when. As such, it can be a significant resource in enabling soccer coaches to function as increasingly knowledgeable and insightful leaders, whose effectiveness in adapting diverse motivational styles to players' developing skills is critical to achieving success on the field!

(Author's note: My focus in this article has been on the first two skills in the model. Also, I have emphasized their application to individual players only.)

Winsor Jenkins, a former human resources executive for Fortune 500 firms, has played, coached, and refereed soccer at various levels. Educated at Cornell's School of Industrial & Labor Relations (BS) and the University of Idaho (MBA), Winsor currently has his own consulting practice in Portland, Oregon specializing in human resources management, leadership development, and organization development. He can be reached at (503) 620-1341.