Advising Jay: A Case Study Using a Situational Leadership Approach

Alan C. Lerstrom, Luther College

Through a case study, I address the position that academic advising can be viewed as a developmental process. I present my specific experiences in applying Hersey and Blanchard's model of situational leadership (1969) during academic advising sessions. The model demonstrates that effective leadership is based on the appropriate balance of a leader's task and relationship behaviors. The leader's emphasis of either the task or the relationship behavior depends on the maturity or readiness of the follower.

KEY WORDS: advising approaches, advisor role, communication, decision making, relationships, student expectations for advising

Relative Emphasis: theory, practice, research

Introduction

Whether in the form of the stories and parables that were used in early religious and moral education in the Chinese, Jewish, and Greek cultures or particular real-world examples in secular education in contemporary law, MBA, or public administration programs, case studies have had a long and rich educational tradition. Case studies challenge students and practitioners to apply theoretical concepts to practical situations, discover the complexities of human interactions, and practice diagnosing and managing problems (Braithwaite & Wood, 2000, pp. 5–8).

An effective case study tells a good story through a series of coherently organized events that sound plausible to readers. These stories present the backgrounds, goals, dreams, and choices of the characters and accounts or explanations of their motives. They also describe the manner in which the characters address critical events (Braithwaite & Wood, 2000, p. 9). Following an event in a class that I taught, I began to reflect on the relationship between effective leadership and academic advising. What I have learned applies to all of my advisees, but in this case study, I primarily relate to one advisee who will be referred to as "Jay."

Since 1988 I have taught in the Communication Studies Department at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. While teaching a unit on leadership in a small-group communication class, I began a discussion on the Hersey and Blanchard model of situational leadership (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001). Through the Hersey and Blanchard model, one essentially argues that an effective leader must match his or her leadership style with the level of maturity of the followers (for additional information see Northouse, 1997). During the discussion, I realized that Hersey and Blanchard's model could be made more real to the class by describing and comparing how students mature during their undergraduate years. I chose to describe student relationships with subordinates or followers in other settings, and explained that teachers and advisors should adapt their behaviors to evolving levels of student maturity. As I was nearing the end of the explanation, a student, who also was my advisee, raised her hand and said, "This is how you advise. I know that each new semester you will treat me as a more responsible and mature person." I had not realized that during my interactions with advisees my style changed that overtly over time. I do continue to use the comparison, and on occasion one of my advisees will jokingly ask, "So, are we now moving from selling to participating?" Because of these experiences with advisees, I decided to adapt Situational Leadership® (Center for Leadership Studies, Inc., 2007) to systematically take note of my behavior to better understand my role as an advisor.

Situational Leadership

Hersey and Blanchard first introduced the concept of situational leadership in "Life Cycle Theory of Leadership" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). In their 25-year retrospective of Situational Leadership,® Blanchard, Zigarmi, and Nelson, (1993, p. 22) noted that the theory and its name were inspired by the "changing leadership style needed by parents as a child grows from infancy through adolescence to adulthood." Because an infant requires a different parenting or leadership style than a teen or a young adult, Blanchard et al. (1993, p. 23) reasoned by analogy that different leadership styles were needed for "managing new, developing and experienced workers."

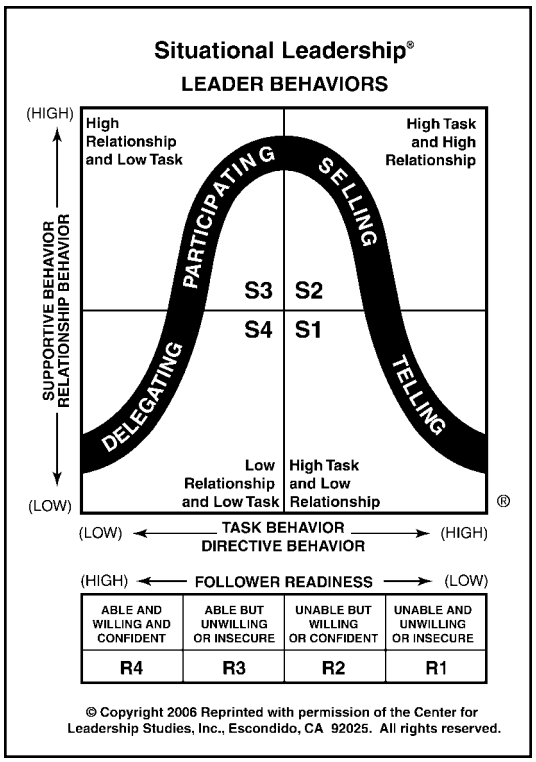
Blake and Mouton (1964), Fiedler (1967), as well as Hersey and Blanchard (1969) argued that effective leadership rests in the appropriate balance of task and relationship behaviors. Task or directive behaviors (the horizontal axis of Figure 1) are characterized as one-way communication from the leader to the follower. While the leader is not uncaring, his or her primary concern rests in helping

the follower achieve a goal. He or she provides instructions regarding how goals are to be achieved and then provides close supervision.

As subordinates or followers begin to mature in their understanding of their duties or responsibilities, the leader should increasingly emphasize relationship or supportive behaviors. These behaviors are defined as the extent to which the leader engages in two-way communication and include listening, facilitating, and supportive behaviors (Hersey et al., 2001, p. 173).

Because they were primarily concerned with leadership in the workplace, Hersey and Blanchard (1969) initially conceptualized the model in terms of task and relationship behaviors. However, in noncorporate settings, such as homes or schools, other terms may be more appropriate. They suggest that terms such as *guidance* and *support* behaviors or *directive* and *facilitating* behaviors may more accurately describe the interaction process (Hersey et al., 2001). In this paper, I substitute *task behavior* for *directive behavior* and *supportive behavior* for *relationship*. The terms *followers*, *student*, or *advisees* are used in place of *subordinate*.

Figure 1 Leader and follower behaviors



Note. © Copyright 2006. Reprinted with permission of the Center for Leadership Studies, Inc. Escondido, CA 92025. www.situational.com. All Rights Reserved.

The ever-changing styles of interaction between leaders and their maturing followers can best be understood by referring to Figure 1. The explanation is divided into two parts: a) changes in follower behavior and b) leadership behavior and the description of the interaction of the two styles (directive and supportive behaviors.)

Follower Behavior

For Hersey et al. (2001), follower behavior can best be described in terms of maturity or readiness of the followers. Readiness is not a personal characteristic but a measure of the degree to which a follower demonstrates the ability and willingness to accomplish a specific task in a given situation. Specifically, ability is the knowledge, experience, and skill that a person or group brings to a particular task or activity. The components of ability are demonstrated knowledge, or understanding of a task; skill, or the proficiency to perform a task; and experience, or the ability gained from the performance (p. 176).

In addition to the ability to perform a task, the followers must demonstrate *willingness*, which is measured as "the extent to which an individual or group has the confidence, commitment, and motivation to accomplish a specific task" (Hersey et al., 2001, p. 176). The factors that comprise willingness are more fully measured when confidence is assessed as the ability to perform a task; commitment is measured by a sense of duty to perform a task; motivation is viewed as the desire to perform a task. While willingness does describe an orientation, sometimes followers are willing to perform a task, but their lack of experience causes them to be insecure or afraid.

Even though they are different, ability and willingness form an interacting influence system, and a significant change in one area will affect the whole. The extent to which followers bring willingness into a specific situation affects the use of current abilities and the extent to which they will grow and develop confidence and ability. Similarly, the amount of knowledge, experience, and skill brought to a task will affect confidence, commitment, and motivation. Readiness levels reflect different combinations of ability and willingness that people bring to each task. A continuum of follower readiness is divided into four readiness levels (see the bottom of Figure 1), and each level represents a different combination of follower ability and will-

ingness. In readiness level 1 (R1), followers are unable and unwilling, as measured by a lack of knowledge, commitment, or confidence, to act without direction. In readiness level 2 (R2), followers are lacking in ability but are motivated and willing to make an effort. They prefer that the leader be very accessible to provide guidance. In readiness level 3 (R3), followers have the ability to perform requisite tasks, but they are insecure or apprehensive about doing so when the leader provides less structure or guidance. In readiness level 4 (R4), followers have the ability to perform job-related tasks and are committed and confident about their ability to complete them.

This adaptation of situational leadership (Hersey et al., 2001) rests in understanding that followers mature and move through the readiness levels. However, as they move from R2 to R3 they may go through a progression of being insecure, confident, and insecure again. The primary reason for the return to insecurity is the change in the leader behavior. In R1 and R2, decisions are leader-directed; that is, the leader has been providing structure or direction when addressing task issues. As the followers mature and move toward R3, their higher levels of readiness mean that they should be more self-directed or responsible for task decisions. The transition from leader-directed to self-directed decision making often leads to some apprehension or insecurity on the part of followers because of a lack of task emphasis by leaders. The strategy is intentional because effective leaders will reduce their guidance regarding ways to accomplish tasks to encourage the followers to become more self-directed and responsible.

Leader Behavior

In the Situational Leadership® (Center for Leadership Studies Inc., 2007) model (see Figure 1), task and relational behavior are unique dimensions that can be located on separate axes on a two-dimensional graph. The task dimension rests on the horizontal axis and is plotted from low to high task (i.e., directive behaviors). The relationship dimension is placed on the vertical axis and also is plotted from low to high relational or supportive behaviors.

Figure 1 also is divided into four boxes, and each box describes the appropriate balance of task and relationship behavior for each quadrant. Hersey et al. (2001) also provided descriptions of the leader behavior styles that are appropriate to each of the four quadrants.

Style 1 (S1) or *telling* is located in the lower right quadrant. It depicts a high emphasis on directive behaviors and a low emphasis on supportive behaviors. When using this style, the leader focuses on goal achievement, and the primary concern rests in helping followers who lack the knowledge or confidence to achieve a goal by describing their duties and responsibilities or by specifying "what to do, how to do it, when to do it, where to do it, and who is to do it" (Hersey et al., 2001, p. 173). While they may, indeed, care about the followers, leaders using S1 show relatively few supportive behaviors.

The second style (S2) is *selling*, and it differs from telling because of the greater emphasis on relationship. The leader provides guidance but also an

> opportunity for dialogue and clarification in order to help the person "buy in" psychologically to the leader's objective. The selling can also be described as *explaining*, *persuading*, and *clarifying*. An effective leader provides encouragement and solicits the followers' thoughts. The style is appropriate when followers are unable but willing or unable but confident. (Hersey et al., 2001, p. 184)

Using style 3 (S3) or *participating* (the upper left-hand quadrant of Figure 1), the leader places less emphasis on guidance and a greater emphasis on two-way and supportive communication, or "*collaborating*, *facilitating*, and *committing*," to provide opportunities for the follower to become more responsible in making decisions regarding the manner in which tasks are accomplished (Hersey et al., 2001, p. 185).

Through style 4 (S4) or *delegating* (the lower left-hand quadrant of Figure 1), the leader shifts the emphasis to support and directive behaviors because the followers are able to undertake a task without a great deal of supervision. Leaders operating with S4 focus on *observing* and *monitoring* with the intent of encouraging the followers to take responsibility for completing the task. The style does not suggest that the leader has withdrawn from the relationship, as active listening and two-way conversations are undertaken, but the leader is less involved in directing the followers or in providing support that is intended to build confidence.

One of the great strengths of Situational Leadership® (Center for Leadership Studies, Inc., 2007) is its emphasis on leader flexibility. As followers mature and change, leaders must discover the most appropriate means of meeting their followers' needs. Changes in peoples' behavior often occur as they move from one task to another, but changes also can occur during stages of the same task.

Effective leaders can change their style to meet the varying needs of others. Likewise, effective advisors should be able to adapt their styles to the changing needs of their advisees.

Applying a Situational Leadership Approach in Advising

Interactions among people occur in contexts that provide structure and meaning to the conversations. The preamble of the NACADA Concept of Academic Advising provides a context or a broad set of goals by stating that academic advising "should address curricular issues, rest in a pedagogical orientation, and lead to specific learning outcomes" (National Academic Advising Association, 2006).

Luther College has provided a more specific context for advising and describes the goals of advising. The *Luther College 2007-2008 Catalog* describes advising as "central to Luther's mission as a church-related liberal arts college." Good advising "compliments" and integrates the way in which "students are mentored through relationships with teachers, other faculty, staff, and other students." It further describes advising as developmental as it recognizes that "student needs change over time" with three significant stages "the transition to college, the movement toward concentration on a major, and the journey beyond Luther toward lifetime work and service" (p. 21). Crookston (1994, p. 6) supported the perspective of advising as a "developmental relationship that is based on different values and principles."

Situational Leadership® (Center for Leadership Studies, Inc., 2007) provides a model that fulfills the goals established by NACADA and the Luther college catalog. As a leadership model that is taught in classrooms and applied in training and development settings, the situational leadership approach of Blanchard et al. (1993) is a pedagogically sound method that provides a frame for discussing curricular issues and encourages advisees, as they mature, to become more involved and responsible participants in the advising process.

Advising Jay

Luther College is a Phi Beta Kappa institution with approximately 2,600 students. It is impossible to generalize Luther students. They vary as much in their readiness for college as they do in their academic and extracurricular interests. I have had advisees come to my office during the fall of their first semester with color-coded 4-year plans of study with lists of alternatives in case they cannot get into particular classes in a given semester. I also have had many advisees who arrive at advising sessions without having glanced at the schedule or given any thought to goals such as selecting a major or thinking about their life's work. Situational Leadership® (Center for Leadership Studies, Inc., 2007) provides strategies for working with the students who represent these extremes and the many students who fit in the continuum between them.

The first advising session for new students at Luther is held during the summer. A morning session with a group of five or six students begins with a general orientation and leads to students narrowing down course selections. The afternoon sessions consist of individual meetings with advises to select courses and complete the registration process. During the 2003 summer registration, I decided to focus on my directive and supportive interactions with my new advisees. Based on my previous summer advising experiences, I assumed that these advisees would primarily be focused on the task of completing registration. Many first-year students only seek direct and relatively simple answers to their questions regarding course selection because they may feel uncomfortable and unable to grasp the myriad of requirements and course options that exist in the college catalog. They also seem to have few expectations other than completing the task of course selection and registration, so they can be on their way home as quickly as possible. From a relational perspective, they have little desire to be more than polite to an advisor who by age and title may seem a little intimidating.

My first experience with Jay provides a humorous example of a student's need to register and return home as quickly as possible. When Jay walked into our one-to-one session, he began with a statement and a question. "My dad is waiting outside and wants to know how long this will take because he needs to be home by 4:00. How long will this take?" Because we had begun to discuss course options in the morning group session, I assured him that we would be able to complete the task relatively quickly. In fact we were finished with his registration in about 30 minutes, and Jay and his dad were on their way.

This interaction led me to think more about Jay and to carefully note the changes in our interactions over time. A thorough reading of Jay's advising folder showed that based on test scores, high school transcript, and list of cocurricular and extracurricular activities, he could be characterized as a student who would be very successful at Luther College. Unfortunately, he also demonstrated a characteristic that a number of Luther students, especially young

males, share: He was not particularly motivated or interested in being actively engaged in the decisions he needed to make as a college student. Jay was raised in a family and community that assumes good students will go to college. While he realized that he would have some freedom in choosing electives, he believed that others, such as his advisor, would very prescriptively tell him the courses to take and the steps he would need to complete to succeed. Rawlins and Rawlins (2005, p. 12) describe this type of advisor-advisee relationship in the following manner:

> For many students, the ideal advisor is someone who will tell them what courses they should take and what they need to do next. They may be only too happy to have an advisor who routinely E-mails them a slate of suggested courses for the coming term or semester.

While it is understandable that students may not be interested in beginning to build a relationship during a summer advising day, some students are interested in little more than task information throughout the first semester. During our fall advising session, Jay demonstrated that he felt unable and to a large extent unwilling to select courses for himself. He came to this meeting without having reviewed the course schedule for the spring, and at one point he stated that he thought it was "my job to tell him what courses to take so that he could graduate in 4 years and get a good job." Our conversations focused exclusively on course selection. Given his behavior and lack of interest in questions about his experiences on campus, I found that my manner became rather directive and task centered.

Jay did become a slightly more active participant during spring registration in that he knew he wanted to take some anthropology and psychology courses, but in spite of E-mails urging him to come to our meeting with some proposed courses, he was largely unprepared and not very actively involved in the process. His level of involvement did increase somewhat in the spring semester. I suspect that some of his friends must have started to discuss the college requirements in their informal conversations because Jay would frequently E-mail me to confirm that particular courses would fulfill specific requirements. His E-mails often would begin with the phrase "My friends say," and he would then ask a question.

The end of the spring advising session provided a time to reflect on Jay and my use of a situational leadership approach (as per Hersey et al., 2001). In many ways Jay demonstrated a very low level of readiness to be a college student. While he was intellectually able to understand the catalog and the schedule, he lacked the confidence and commitment to do so without supervision. Given his low level of readiness, I was frustrated, but felt my active direction of his course selection process was appropriate. When he would E-mail questions about fulfilling a requirement, I supported the inquiry by telling him that I was pleased that he was asking "good" questions.

In the fall of his sophomore year Jay was more willing to participate in conversations by discussing activities and thoughts about a major, but he still expected me to recommend courses and asked, "What do you think I should take?" He had begun to define areas of interest, psychology and anthropology, and had an understanding of the requirements for these majors. I was still a bit frustrated because he was unwilling to declare a major, but he was focused on courses in psychology and anthropology, and he was considering a minor in English.

Jay was changing! While he was not ready to consider a long-term plan of study, he was willing to think about possible majors and was more comfortable talking about his activities and social life. I needed to persuade him to select courses that fulfill all college requirements such as the religion/philosophy sequence.

In the spring of his sophomore year, Jay was the first person to sign up for an advising time, but when he arrived he had not looked at the available courses and his first question was "What do you think I should take?" I felt that that I needed to stop supporting his unwillingness to take responsibility in his academic decisions and I politely but firmly asked him to select another time. I told him that he needed to review the available courses and that he needed to formally declare a major before seeing me again.

A few days later our relationship began to be much more participative as Jay returned to my office having declared majors in psychology and anthropology. He was holding a list of courses that he was considering for the fall of his junior year. He also apologized for having taken so long in becoming active in selecting his courses, and he brought an application to study in Australia during the spring semester of his junior year. By coincidence, my daughter had lived in Australia and our family had spent time there. We began to talk about the differences in the cultures of the United States and Australia.

This incident was typical of the change that often occurs in the quality of interaction between advisors and advisees during the junior year. By the fall of his junior year, Jay had a thorough under-

standing of both the college-wide and departmental requirements, and he was aware of the courses he needed to complete to fulfill the requirements for graduation. At this point, I become much less directive and enjoyed relational conversations with Jay that supported his concerns about living in another culture thousands of miles from home. These conversations had a sense of equality because I could relate my experiences of living in Australia or of having led international studies programs. From the perspective of Hersey et al. (2001), Jay was able to complete all of the necessary tasks to get ready for travel overseas, but he was somewhat insecure about completing the tasks without supervision. At this point I collaborated by suggesting who he might see in the Study Abroad Office, but the process of fulfilling the tasks of getting ready to study overseas provided a great opportunity for Jay to act independently while being supported.

While he was overseas, I received a number of E-mails from Jay. Some were simply group E-mails relating his experiences, and others were more personal messages. In his private messages, he reflected some concern about course choices for his senior year and logistical concerns related to registering from overseas. We were able to collaborate and to facilitate his registration easily. For example, I reminded him that his 7:00 Tuesday night registration time on campus would be an 11:00 Wednesday morning registration in Sydney.

A situational leadership approach (Hersey et al., 2001) suggests that the senior year is a time of delegation. Jay had the ability to perform the tasks necessary for deciding how to fulfill the remaining requirements, and he was committed and confident that he had the ability to make these decisions. Early in the fall semester, he stopped by my office to discuss his time in Australia, but by fall registration, Jay simply stopped by the office to be sure that the courses he had selected would fulfill all of his remaining requirements and that he would graduate in the spring.

The advisor-advisee relation does not diminish when discussions about the curriculum are fewer than before or when the person does not need the intensive support of someone less secure, but in Jay's case our relationship did change. Because Jay was completing majors in disciplines other than communication, many of his concerns were related to writing his senior paper, applying to graduate school in industrial and organizational psychology, and the experiences he would have as a graduate student. As Jay was preparing to move to new stages in life, he was encountering some new feelings of being unable and insecure in regard to being a graduate student. Some members of the psychology faculty were working with him to address his thoughts and feelings. I was very pleased when Jay told me that he had been admitted to graduate school.

Conclusions

Situational Leadership® (Center for Leadership Studies, 2007) is not a panacea that will address all concerns about being an effective advisor. However, the model provides a useful means of understanding the developmental stages students are experiencing. Many first-year students come to college unable to decipher the myriad of requirements in a college catalog and are unable to select courses effectively; as a result, many seem to be unwilling (Hersey et al., 2001). At this point, a directive and telling style (S1) is appropriate for advisors.

As students begin to mature, they begin to develop confidence in their ability to read and interpret requirements as specified in the catalog, but they often do not see the value of some requirements or courses that may help them address deficiencies, and so the most logical approach may be to sell (S2) them on the need for particular requirements and the value in specific courses. These advising sessions can focus on the need to enroll in certain courses while at the same time build a personal relationship with the student.

As juniors, many students reflect the readiness qualities of being able but insecure (Hersey et al., 2001). While supportive and task relationships are high (see Figure 1) advisors can be less task oriented regarding courses because most juniors are well aware of the requirements that need to be fulfilled to graduate. However, these students are less certain when it comes to taking the initiative to begin the process of securing an internship through the Career Center or applying to study overseas in the Study Abroad Office, and they need to initiate these participative events by involving the experts in offices, their advisors, and themselves.

Most seniors are able and confident (Hersey et al., 2001) to fulfill the requirements to graduate, and they should be encouraged to do so. Some students still seek high levels of relationship as they search for jobs or apply for graduate school, but others begin the process of leave taking and are less involved in relations as they prepare to move on with their lives.

Understanding changes in behavior as a part of the development of student readiness can help advisors know how to adapt their leadership style to the needs of their advisees. Situational Leadership®

(Center for Leadership Studies, Inc., 2007) provides a theoretically sound and practical tool that helps advisors understand changes in the readiness levels of their students, and it suggests patterns for relating to students. These patterns can emphasize task or relational behaviors depending on the needs of the students.

References

Blanchard, K. H., Zigarmi, D., & Nelson, R B. (1993). Situational Leadership® after 25 years: A retrospective. *The Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies, 1*(1), 22–36.

Blake, R. R., & Mouton, J. S. (1964). *The New Managerial Grid*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.

Brathwaite, D. O., & Wood, J. T. (2000). *Case Studies in interpersonal communication: Processes and problems*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Center for Leadership Studies, Inc. (2007). *Situational Leaderhip*.® Escondido, CA: Author.

Crookston, B. R. (1994). A developmental view of academic advising as teaching. *NACADA Journal, 14*(2), 5–11.

Fiedler, F. E. (1967). A theory of leadership effectiveness. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. H. (1969). Life cycle theory of leadership. *Training and Development Journal, 23*(5), 26–34.

Hersey, P., Blanchard, K. H., & Johnson, D. E. (2001). *Management of organizational behavior: Leading human resources* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Luther College. (2007). *Luther College 2007-08 Catalog*. Decorah, IA: Author.

National Academic Advising Association. (2006). *NACADA concept of academic advising*. Retrieved September 25, 2007, from www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Concept-Advising.htm

Northouse, P. G. (1997). *Leadership: Practice and theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rawlins, W. K, & Rawlins, S. P. (2005). Academic advising as friendship. *NACADA Journal, 25*(2), 10–19.

Author's Note

Alan C. Lerstrom (PhD from the University of Kansas) is an associate professor in the Communication Studies Department at Luther College. E-Mail: lerstral@luther.edu.