

Rock Solid Situational Leadership

December 2011 – Years later I can still see in my mind’s eye the shattered cabinets strewn like a yard-sale on a windy day atop the unforgiving concrete floor of the loading dock...

For half a year, between college and grad school, I worked for my father in a family- owned business that designed, fabricated, delivered, and installed high-end, custom-made wood products. I was part of the delivery phase of the business food chain, wheeling around southern California in a white 29-foot split-axel cab-over Ford flatbed truck delivering newly manufactured goods to countless construction sites chomping at the bit for the the day when they would morph into hotels and schools and office complexes.

One day, due to the increased workload, an additional driver had been hired and his first day on the job turned out to be quite eventful. George (not his real name—he may still be in a witness protection program J) assured us that he was on familiar turf with the trucks we were using; so when it came time to load his truck, he slipped it into reverse and backed down the incline into the loading dock.

So far, so good.

A load of 20-30 4-drawer oak filing cabinets, out-bound for a recently renovated law office in LA, was carefully poised on his flatbed. The next step was to very slowly pull the truck out of the loading dock to level ground so that the tie-down straps could be winched tightly to secure the load.

That’s when it all went south...in a hurry.

Everyone has peak performance potential — you just need to know where they are coming from and meet them there.

–Ken Blanchard

Endeavoring to slowly climb his truck up the loading dock incline, he mistakably shoved the gearshift into THIRD gear instead of FIRST gear. (You can see how this is going to turn out, huh?). The engine lugged, started rolling back down the incline, and on impulse George hit the brakes and the cabinets went flying!

Okay, so you ask, what does THAT have to do with life and leadership?

Simply this: leaders need to know the capacity of those in their charge. They must be attentive to each person’s level of competency. And having assessed that level of competency, provide a requisite level of supervision.

Ken Blanchard, author of countless leadership books, platforms a very helpful construct in *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*. His simple model calls out four leadership styles that leaders can leverage based on the competency of their direct report.

- **Style 1: Directing**—The leader provides specific instructions and closely supervises task accomplishment.
- **Style 2: Coaching**—The leader continues to direct and closely supervise task accomplishment, but also explains decisions, solicits suggestions, and supports progress.
- **Style 3: Supporting**—The leader facilitates and supports subordinates efforts toward task accomplishment and shares responsibility for decision-making with them.
- **Style 4: Delegating**—The leader turns over responsibility for decision-making and problem-solving to subordinates.

Using the language of this construct, our friend George received “delegation”. Unfortunately, what he really needed was a truckload of “direction”.

So who are the people in your posse of leadership influence? And have you rightly gauged the style of leadership that is needed for them to be successful?

Ultimately, this is a call for leaders to be **ATTENTIVE**—attentive to whom they are supervising, and equally important, the task being performed. Attentive because in one task a person may bring very limited experience and require a lot of **DIRECTING**, but in another task the same person may be quite accomplished and all that is needed is **DELEGATING**. In short, it’s “**situational leadership**”—matching your style of leadership both with the person **AND** the situation.

A leader must constantly ask the question: “What does **THIS** person need in **THIS** situation to be successful?”

Think about all the people who have sought you out with this kind of leadership care.

And then pass it on.

Lord, thank You for the privilege to serve those entrusted to my leadership care. May I steward well this privilege by offering the right style of leadership in each unique situation.