

EVOLUTION OF SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY: A CRITICAL REVIEW

Claude L. Graeff*

Evolution of the Situational Leadership Theory is reviewed in relation to conceptual developments associated with the theory and published empirical work testing the theory. Overall, its theoretical robustness and pragmatic utility are challenged because of logical and internal inconsistencies, conceptual ambiguity, incompleteness, and confusion associated with multiple versions of the model. The role of the authors' of Situational Leadership in creating confusion about the theory is detailed.

Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977; hereafter SLT) first appeared in *Training and Development Journal* as the Life Cycle of Leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). Since its inception in 1969, the model has undergone a number of cosmetic and substantive changes which Blanchard, Zigarmi, and Nelson (1993) refer to as "revisions that have since improved the model." To date, most discussions of the theoretical foundations and concepts employed in the SLT (e.g., Graeff, 1983) or empirical investigations designed to test the propositions suggested by the theory (Blank, Weitzel, & Green, 1990; Goodson, McGee, & Cashman, 1989; Vecchio, 1987) focused on pre-1985 versions of the theory. Blanchard and his colleagues (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1985; Carew, Parisi-Carew, & Blanchard, 1986; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, 1993) offer major revisions of the model in Situational Leadership II. Since it is not only a popular theory (Johansen, 1990), but one of the most widely known (Sashkin, 1982; Vecchio, 1987), most widely used (Randolph & Blackburn, 1989), or most popular leadership models employed in industry (Hersey, Angelini, & Carakushansky, 1982) over the past 25+ years, this paper reviews the evolution of the Situational Leadership Theory in relation to continuing problems that are argued to discredit its theoretical robustness and to limit its pragmatic utility. Special emphasis is placed on a critical review of the concepts and theoretical arguments associated with Situational Leadership II (hereafter SLII) as it was

* Direct all correspondence to: Claude L. Graeff, Department of Management and Quantitative Methods, Illinois State University, 329 Williams Hall, Normal, IL 61790.

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promulgated by Blanchard et al. (1985) and Carew et al. (1986). As a point of departure, the paper first summarizes the major criticisms of the original SLT, as first presented by Graeff (1981) and then discusses changes in the theory as they have appeared in the literature. Critical ongoing problems with the theory, including the absence of theoretical arguments or weak theoretical arguments for critical aspects of the model, the existence of both logical consistency and internal consistency problems in the model, and apparent conceptual ambiguity and incompleteness (especially SLII) are considered. A discussion of published studies attempting to empirically validate the theory is also included in the paper.

EARLY SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

In the 1977 presentation of SLT, Hersey and Blanchard provide the most explicit description of the theoretical foundations for the *original* version of their model. In a section of the book entitled, "Explaining Situational Leadership Theory," Hersey and Blanchard cite conclusions of Korman (1966) as a basis for their theory, and they argue that Korman suggests the possibility of a curvilinear relationship rather than a simple linear relationship between initiating structure and consideration and other variables. They state that SLT is based on a curvilinear relationship between task behavior and relationship behavior and maturity. In relation to their statement, Graeff (1981, p. 204) notes the central role of the *diagnostic curve* in the prescriptive model of SLT, and he identifies an internal consistency problem associated with the hypothesized relationship between task behavior and maturity. Graeff (1981) argues that this internal consistency problem with the theory is exacerbated by conceptual ambiguity associated with the task-relevant maturity concept as it is used in the normative model. He cites other problems including an overemphasis on ability as the performance determinant given greater importance in the theory, difficulties with the relationships-behavior variable as it is operationalized in the model, inconsistent or contradictory arguments about the relationship between participative decision making and maturity, and shortcomings regarding the progression-regression, reinforcement cycles advocated in the model.

In the next edition of their book, Hersey and Blanchard (1982, pp. 149-173) enact important changes in the presentation of their theory. One change pertains to the theoretical status and foundations of SLT; Hersey and Blanchard made the theoretical explanation for the relationships among key variables in the model *more* ambiguous. In place of the 1977 statement that SLT "is based on a curvilinear relationship between task behavior and relationship behavior and maturity" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, p. 160), they cite Korman's conclusion and posit that Situational Leadership (the word theory was deleted) "has identified such a curvilinear relationship" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 150). The second major change pertains to the problem of conceptual ambiguity associated with the concept of task-relevant maturity that was identified by Graeff (1981, p. 204). In place of a model depicting a single-continuum, global indicator of subordinate maturity, subsuming both ability and willingness on the horizontal axis (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, p. 164), they present a model with *multiple* continua (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 161) that displays *both* ability or "job maturity" and willingness or "psychological maturity" as *separate* components of maturity. As their 1982 presentation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 161) of SLT reveals, both ability and willingness are described, individually, in *linear*

fashion. Ability is argued to progress from a little, to some, to quite a bit, to a great deal through the four levels of increasing subordinate maturity, respectively. If the more ambiguous 1982 theoretical foundation of SLT, identified above, still postulates a *curvilinear* relationship between maturity and task behavior on the part of the leader, then the more explicit operational definition of maturity, involving multiple continua, leaves the internal consistency problem, identified as a *direct, inverse* relationship between maturity and task behavior (Graeff, 1981, p. 204), intact.

Worse yet, the attempt to reduce the conceptual ambiguity inherent in the unidimensional scale of maturity used in the 1977 normative model seems to have resulted in additional problems that have been described variously in the literature regarding theory, as internal consistency problems (Aldag & Brief, 1981; Miner, 1988) or logic consistency problems (Miner, 1988). The revised model (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) indicates the manner in which the two components of maturity combine at the four levels of subordinate maturity. In doing so, they create a conceptual contradiction (internal consistency problem) that is evident from a comparison of their model (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 161, Fig. 7-3) with their descriptions of how the two dimensions of maturity combine, as appropriate leadership styles, at the four levels of maturity (Hersey & Blanchard 1982:154-Table 7-1). In Figure 7-3, the willingness dimension of maturity is described in *linear* fashion, starting with “seldom” in the M-1 maturity level and progressing through “on occasion, often” and “usually” through the M-2, M-3 and M-4 levels of maturity, respectively. In Table 7-1, however, the willingness dimension is promulgated to be “unwilling” at the M-1 maturity level and move through “willing, *unwilling* and willing” at the M-2, M-3 and M-4 levels of maturity, respectively, thereby indicating a *nonlinear* scale.

Also, the 1982 model lacks theoretical or logical justification for the way the components of maturity combine in the center (M-2 and M-3) levels of maturity. And finally, the revised, 1982 version appears to be logically inconsistent when it advocates a “selling” leadership style (Hersey & Blanchard 1982, p. 152, Fig. 7-1) for an M-2 maturity level where the subordinate(s) are, according to Hersey and Blanchard (1982, p. 153), “unable but *willing* (emphasis added) to take responsibility” since they “are confident but lack skills at this time.” It could be argued that advocating *high* relationships behavior “to reinforce their willingness and enthusiasm” is an inefficient use of the leader’s time. In other words, why should the leader spend a lot of time “selling,” or persuading or convincing a person or persons “to buy into desired behaviors” who are, according to Hersey and Blanchard (1982, p. 153), “confident, enthusiastic” and “willing.”

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP II: THE SECOND GENERATION

The next changes in the Situational Leadership Theory occurred when Blanchard et al. (1985) presented the Situational Leadership II model which was later applied to groups (Carew et al., 1986). The changes, presented in their 1985 book entitled *Leadership and The One Minute Manager*, were both cosmetic and substantive in nature. The cosmetic changes involved alteration of the labels associated with virtually all of the major variables in the model. Chief among the changes was renaming of task-relevant maturity as the “development level” of the follower(s) and, in turn, the two components of maturity/development were renamed as commitment and competence in place of the original labels of willingness and ability. Another change in terms used in the model included substitution

of the path-goal leadership expressions of leader-directive-behavior and leader-supportive-behavior (House, 1971) for the expressions leader task behavior and leader relationship behavior, respectively. The “prescriptive curve” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) was relabeled the “performance curve” (Blanchard et al., 1985) or the “leadership style curve” (Carew et al., 1986). Finally, they also relabeled the four leadership styles of telling-selling-participating and delegating as directing-coaching-supporting and delegating. And while Blanchard and his coauthors offered no explanation for renaming virtually every variable in the model, Randolph and Blackburn (1989) indicate that the changes in the terms depicting categories of leader behavior (directive and supportive) and the four leadership styles (directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating) reflect the choice of expressions that are, as they say, “less evaluative.” Randolph and Blackburn (1989, p. 322) seem to be speculating that Blanchard and his associates have opted for more emotionally-neutral, descriptive terms. However, the discussion of leader directive behavior and the directing leadership style, by Blanchard et al. (1985) suggests quite the opposite. Speaking through the fictional characters of an entrepreneur and the one-minute manager, they note that “directive behavior seems to be related to autocratic leadership” (Blanchard et al., 1985, p. 31) and that “there are several situations” where an autocratic-directing style would be appropriate (Blanchard et al., 1985, p. 36). Expressions and words associated with the meaning of the word autocratic, as presented in *The Random House Collegiate Dictionary* (1975), include: “like an autocrat,” “tyrannical,” “despotic,” or “domineering.” These expressions are all considerably less than emotionally neutral in their meaning.

Another plausible explanation for the relabeling behavior of Blanchard and his associates has its origins in the “quick-fix” or “management fad” phenomenon that has been discussed by several authors (Byrne, 1986; Kilmann, 1984; McGill, 1988). In discussing the propensity of managers and executives to adopt the business fads and trends of the quick-fix mentality, it has been suggested that the quick-fix or fad authors frequently label the variables or terms in their theory or model with catchy buzzwords (Byrne, 1986) or acronymic formula(s) (McGill, 1988) that are, or they hope soon will become, popular in the nomenclature of practitioners. As noted above, chief among the cosmetic changes by Blanchard et al. (1985) was relabeling the major situational variable in the model, the maturity level of the subordinate, as the development level of the subordinate, and relabeling the components of development as the double c’s of competence and commitment instead of ability and willingness, respectively. The concepts of competence and commitment recently have been very popular in both the academic literature (Argyris, 1986; Becker, 1992; Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Martin & Bennett, 1996; Mayer & Schoorman, 1992; Sherwood, 1988) and the practitioner literature (Furnham, 1990; Reinhart, 1985; Ulrich, Brockbank, & Yeung, 1989; Walton, 1985). Several authors have cited work by Blanchard as fad or quick-fix oriented. McGill (1988, pp. 26-27) cites Hersey and Blanchard as quick-fix oriented when they changed their SLT acronym LASI—“Leader Adaptability and Style Inventory”—to LEAD—“Leader Effectiveness and Adaptability Description”—because, as he asserts, “the LASI did not suggest a dynamic model of management.” McGill (1988) also suggests that another work by Blanchard, his one-minute manager expose (Blanchard & Johnson, 1982), which Blanchard has now linked to SL, was a major fad of the 1980s. Byrne (1986) calls Blanchard “trendy” for his one-minute manager, “executive training guide” and Jackson (1986) describes “one-minute managing” as “the executive equivalent of paper-training

your dog.” Consistent with the expression “new and improved” in the vernacular of marketing, a relabeled and revised version of the theory perhaps would appear even more “improved” with new terms or expressions to describe the major concepts in the theory. Consequently, there could be some marketing benefit associated with such cosmetic changes.

From a substantive perspective, there are some conceptual changes presented in the 1985/1986 SLII. First, it should be noted that the “prescriptive curve,” central to the theory (Graeff, 1983, p. 285), has been retained as an integral part of SLII and renamed as the “performance curve” (Blanchard et al., 1985). Further, the earlier reference to Korman’s (1966) arguments about the curvilinear relationships between leader behaviors and situational variables (e.g., follower maturity/development level) as a theoretical justification or foundation for the theory, including the “performance curve” in SLII, appears to have been deleted. Consequently, the theoretical justification for the curve, argued by Graeff (1983) to be more ambiguous in the 1982 version of SLT than in the 1977 version of SLT, is seemingly nonexistent in the 1985 SLII. Instead, the rationale for changes in the model, according to Blanchard et al. (1985, p. 7) include “conversations with our colleagues at Blanchard Training and Development, Inc., our own experience, and the ideas managers have shared with us.”

The more important changes presented in SLII, according to Randolph and Blackburn (1989), involve conceptual definitions of key variables in the model. The conceptual definition of follower-development level, previously labeled follower maturity level, is argued to be a function of follower competence and commitment instead of follower ableness and willingness. Implying that the new definition of development is broader than the old definition of maturity, Blanchard et al. (1985, p. 49) say “competence is a function of knowledge and skills...gained from education, training, and/or experience,” and that competence *is not* just another word for ability. Unfortunately, this assertion might be considered logically inconsistent since it is inconsistent with common usage of the words competence and ability. In the revised *Random House College Dictionary* (1975) the synonym section of the definition of competence says “see able” and the synonym section of the definition of the word able lists competence. The SLII theorists further suggest, based on alleged common usage, that the word ability means a person’s “potential,” a concept that is usually referred to as aptitude. Nevertheless, since aptitude is usually converted to ability via education, training and/or experience (the determinants of competence in SLII), it could be argued that the new definition of competence is very similar to, or identical with, the old definition of ability. Finally, since Blanchard et al. (1985) say ability means potential (a presumed synonym with aptitude) and that ability/aptitude is converted to competence via learning (education, training and experience), the new conceptual definition of a key component of follower development—competence—appears to add as much, or more, confusion or ambiguity to the model as insight.

The second leg of the follower-development variable in SLII, commitment, is the replacement term for willingness in SLT, and it is argued to be a combination of confidence *and* motivation. Contrary to literature that presents commitment and motivation as independent concepts (c.f., Chonko, 1986; Ingram, Lee, & Skinner, 1989), or studies supporting the belief that commitment *leads* to increased motivation (c.f., Hunt, Chonko, & Wood, 1985), or literature presenting organization commitment as a multidimensional concept (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Cohen & Kirchmeyer, 1995; Becker et

al., 1996) with motivation (the willingness to exert considerable effort on the organization's behalf) as one of "three psychological factors" characterizing commitment (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974), SLII asserts that motivation *causes* commitment. However, the dichotomized conceptual definition of commitment in SLII (Blanchard et al., 1985), including confidence and motivation, implies separate conceptual status for each of the two components of commitment. It could be argued that one component of commitment in SLII, confidence, may be a determinant of the other component, motivation. Since confidence is likely to be a necessary, but perhaps not sufficient condition for motivation, and given that SLII presents commitment as a combination of confidence ("a person's self-assuredness" or "a feeling of being able to do a task well") and motivation ("a person's interest in and enthusiasm for doing a task well") it is not obvious how the new definition of commitment is substantially different from the old notion of willingness. In another presentation of SLII, Carew et al. (1986, p. 47) acknowledge that commitment *equals* motivation in SLII when they identify four development levels in SLII, "each consisting of a different combination of competence and *motivation*" (emphasis added). Accepting the argument that "willingness" (1982 SLT-maturity component) is synonymous with motivation, the use of the term commitment may actually lead to conceptual ambiguity instead of conceptual clarity. Moreover, the term commitment is usually given a more global (not-task-specific), conceptual definition in the organization commitment literature (c.f., Becker, 1992; Mayer & Schoorman, 1992) and/or job commitment literature (c.f., Chonko, 1986; Ingram et al., 1989), as opposed to its "task specific" use in SLII. Further, in making the argument that factors other than confidence or "self-assuredness" can impact motivation, Blanchard et al. (1985) provide examples that seem confusing, if not contradictory, in relation to arguments presented in SLII. In one example, Blanchard et al. (1985, p. 50) speak through fictional characters and ask, "Are there times when a person has the competence and confidence to do a job, but no interest?" Presumably, the person has the confidence, but lacks motivation. When answering themselves, they say, "Yes, sometimes people lose *motivation* when they realize it is going to be harder than they thought." Unfortunately, if confidence and motivation are independent dimensions of commitment, as their 1985 conceptual definition implies, then they probably should have said people lose confidence, as opposed to motivation, in the sentence cited above since they argue elsewhere that a reduction in confidence is the major difference between the D1 and D2 levels of development, and that the loss of confidence from D1 to D2 results from the perception of task difficulty.

In another example, these same fictional characters discuss why the commitment of the follower *decreases* from the D1 development level to the D2 development level. They say, "As people's skills grow, their *confidence* and motivation often drop" (Blanchard et al., 1985, p. 54). This sentence appears to represent a logical-consistency problem (Miner, 1988) since it could be argued that an increase in skills should not dampen a person's *confidence* or self-efficacy with respect to tasks that require those skills. And while boredom may be a factor influencing motivation, negatively, it is also plausible to argue, based on intrinsic motivation principles, that an increase in skills related to a task could lead to increased motivation to perform the task. The next sentence in their dialogue also suggests an internal consistency problem. Blanchard et al. (1985, p. 54) continue... "They begin to realize how much more they've got to learn to be able to do a really good job. With coaching, a D2's *confidence* (emphasis added) begins to go back up, as he or she gets

positive feedback on results.” The notion of how much more “they’ve got to learn” sounds very similar to the idea that “it is going to be harder than they thought,” discussed above, and since they refer to confidence in the latter situation and motivation in the former, they strongly imply that confidence and motivation are not conceptually distinct aspects of commitment. Elsewhere, another internal consistency problem in SLII is revealed in the explanation Blanchard et al. (1993) provide for the hypothesized, downward change in the commitment dimension of follower- development-level from the D2 (second lowest) to D3 (third lowest) follower development levels. According to Blanchard et al. (1993), a follower at a D2 development level is *low* on the commitment dimension while a D3 development-level follower has a *variable* level of commitment. In discussing the arguments for this transition, Blanchard et al. (1993, p. 28) say, “...subordinates can sometimes become less committed even though they have the necessary skills.” Unfortunately, a move from “low commitment” at the D2 development level to “variable commitment” at the D3 development level is an *increase*, not a decrease. Aldag and Brief (1981) and Miner (1988) probably would include their repeated lack of consistency in the category of internal consistency problems. Finally, it might be argued that they have merely substituted the term commitment in the 1985 version of SLII, even though it may contain excess conceptual meaning with potential confusion, for the term willingness or motivation in the 1982 SLT.

Another internal-consistency problem with SLII is found in the number of categories of leader behavior that it presents. In one version of SLII (Blanchard et al., 1985, p. 46), “directive” and “supportive” are two behaviors that combine to form 4 styles. Included in the category of support is “facilitating their (follower’s) involvement in problem-solving and decision-making.” A year later, when Carew et al. (1986, p. 46) apply SLII to groups, it appears they give direction, support, and decision participation *equal* conceptual status when they argue that “leadership styles differ on three dimensions: direction, support, and the amount of follower involvement in decision making.” In a sentence preceding the one identifying three categories of leader behavior, and in contradictory fashion, Carew et al. (1986, p. 46) say, “In SLII, there are two dimensions of leadership behavior—directive and supportive—that can be...” By subsuming decision involvement under the support category, they create another logical-consistency problem in SLII. If involvement in decision-making is part of support, and if involvement in decision-making (delegation style) reaches its apex/maximum at the D4 level (involvement peaked at M3 in the 1982 SLT), then it could be argued that the appropriate level of “leader support behavior” at the D4 level is *high support*, not the *low support* SLII prescribes.

The conceptual definitions of the four levels of development (D1, D2, D3, D4) in SLII (Blanchard et al., 1985) are different from the definitions of the four levels of maturity (M1, M2, M3, M4) presented in SLT (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982), and from the definitions of the four levels of readiness (R1, R2, R3, R4) presented in SL (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 1996). One possible reason for the different conceptual definitions in SLII suggests they may result from utilizing only four of nine possible combinations derived from the three values used to describe both the competence (low, some, high) and commitment (low, variable, high) of the follower(s). In contrast, both the 1982 version of SLT and the 1988 version of SL used dichotomized values to describe ableness (able, unable) and willingness (willing, unwilling) which resulted in only four maturity levels. Since there are only four combinations of leader directive behavior

D4 (1985)	D3 (1985)	d5	d4	d3	D2 (1985)	D1 (1985)	d2	d1
High Competence	High Competence	High Competence	Some Competence	Some Competence	Some Competence	Low Competence	Low Competence	Low Competence
(9)	(6)	(3)	(6)	(4)	(2)	(3)	(2)	(1)
High Commitment	Variable Commitment	Low Commitment	High Commitment	Variable Commitment	Low Commitment	High Commitment	Variable Commitment	Low Commitment
M4 (1982) R4 (1988)		M3 (1982) R3 (1988)			M2 (1982) R2 (1988)			M1 (1982) R1 (1988)
Developed Follower(s) SLII (1985)			Undeveloped Follower(s) SLII (1985)					

Key: Figure 1 is adapted (expanded) from the "four development levels" in SLII that are presented in unnumbered figures on page 50 and 56 of *Leadership and the One Minute Manager* (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1985).
 The format for presentation of values of competence in Figure 1 follows the linear mode (high, high, some, low) for presentation of values of competence in SLII (1985). Likewise, the format for presentation of values of commitment in Figure 1 follows the nonlinear mode (high, variable, low, high) for presentation of values of commitment in SLII (1985).
 With the assumption of an interval scale, and for illustrative purposes, numerical values were computed for the nominal values of low, some, high and low, variable, high in the following manner: low = 1, some or variable = 2, high = 3. Then a follower-development score was computed for each follower-development level using the commonly accepted formula (motivation/commitment X ability/competence equals performance/development level). The development-level score for each development level is exhibited in parentheses in Figure 1.
 d4, D3, D2, D1 = 4 follower-development levels presented in the 1985 SLII
 d5, d4, d3, d2, d1 = 5 potential follower levels not discussed in the 1985 SLII
 M4, M3, M2, M1 = 4 levels of follower maturity presented in the 1982 SLT
 R4, R3, R2, R1 = 4 levels of follower-readiness levels presented in the 1988 SLT/SLII

Figure 1. Situational Leadership Theory: Multiple Versions of Follower Attributes

and leader supportive behavior in the four areas under the “development curve” in the 1985 and 1986 versions of SLII, and Blanchard (1993, p. 1) has stated there are four leadership styles in SLII, some combinations of leader behaviors apparently must be appropriate for more than one level of follower development, or the SLII model is substantially incomplete. To illustrate these differences and to facilitate discussion of the conceptual definitions, Figure 1 presents nine “potential” levels of “follower-development,” including the four presented in SLII, based on the values of competence and commitment promulgated in the 1985 SLII.

In Figure 1, the D1 development level in SLII (which replaced the M1 maturity level in SLT) is defined as a follower who is highly committed, but low in competence. Blanchard et al. (1985) offer no explicit explanation for replacing/changing the M1 level definition (a follower who is both unable and unwilling); however, Randolph and Blackburn, (1989, p. 323) say the change was made because “managers have said they would not hire a D1 person for a job if the person was both unwilling and unable.” This argument becomes more tenuous in light of the repeated assertions that maturity/development/readiness in SLT/SLII is *task relevant/specific* instead of job, or person, specific. Further, since SLII presumably is not a leadership theory for new hires only, it is plausible that a follower could be promoted to a position comprised of some tasks for which s/he had no background, experience, training or aptitude and, under these circumstances, even less motivation, interest or enthusiasm. An example might be the proverbial crackerjack salesperson who fails miserably in some tasks as a sales manager; Levinson’s (1978) work on the abrasive personality characterizes such a person. It is unclear what SLII would advocate in this situation. From a developmental perspective, the model posits that all, or at least most, followers at the D1 development level experience a regressive phase in their development where their commitment is diminished because of a critical reduction in their task-specific self-esteem (Blanchard, 1993, p. 1). Benevolently accepting the SLII premise that everyone approaches all new tasks with high commitment, the assumption that everyone, or even most persons, will then suffer a loss of commitment (self-assuredness) when “they realize the task is tougher than they thought,” as support for why “commitment” changes from “high” to “low” in the conceptual definition of D2 is problematic for several reasons. For example, a person in a challenging task who has a high need to achieve or self-actualize, an internal locus of control, and the ability to make *external attributions* (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1992) for their performance difficulties, may well become more committed to the task rather than less committed. Newly hired employees, and veteran employees assigned new tasks, who are provided realistic job previews, as advocated in the literature (Luthans, 1992) may sustain their commitment to the task because they have more accurate and realistic perceptions of task difficulty and, therefore, do not become discouraged with the task. Lastly, the commitment of the follower with little competence to do a task may not drop if the leader has been providing sufficient feedback about attributions for low task performance in relation to task difficulty, or if the person uses positive imaging to avoid doubting their capabilities in their position (Garges, 1986).

The appropriate leader response to the hypothesized loss of commitment from the D1 to D2 development level, as prescribed in SLII (Blanchard et al., 1985, p. 57), includes “involvement in decision making to restore their commitment.” However, in another discussion that was advertised by Blanchard Training and Development, Inc. (1991) as

presenting SLII thinking, Hersey and Blanchard (1988, p. 177) note that “some people have difficulty understanding...how one can go from being insecure (R1) to confident (R2) and then become insecure again (R3).” As an explanation, they argue that “decisions are leader directed at the lower levels of readiness” (R1) and “the transition from leader-directed to self-directed” (follower involvement in decision making at the R3 level) “may result in apprehension or insecurity.” Unfortunately, these two explanations for the effects of follower participation in decision making contradict each other, representing another example of a lack of internal consistency in SLII. Further, if the Hersey and Blanchard (1988) argument for a negative impact of participation on commitment is correct, then commitment might be driven to a level lower than low (D2 level) in D3 (perhaps zero), in the 1985/1986 model, instead of the increase (variable commitment) advocated for D3 in the 1985/1986 SLII.

Contrasting D1 and D2, in relation to their overall levels of follower-development, respectively, illustrates another problem with SLII, the lack of theoretical justification for how the twin components of follower-development combine to determine overall development levels. Consistent with Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) assertion that the components of readiness/development combine in interactive fashion (p. 176), the equation: competence x commitment = development ($C \times C = D$) was used to generate follower-development scores for each of nine possible levels of development reflecting all combinations of three values for each development component (competence and commitment) as presented in SLII. Numerical values assigned to the three nominal values provided by Blanchard for each of the two components of development were: low = 1, some or variable = 2, and high = 3. As revealed in Figure 1, SLII argues that a D2-level follower with some competence and low commitment is at a higher level of development than a D1-level follower who has low competence and high commitment, even though the development-level score (2) for D2 is less than the score of (3) for D1. This comparison suggests that SLII, as Graeff (1983) concluded about SLT, implicitly gives causal priority to competence/ability as the more important determinant of maturity/development. The d5 level of competence and commitment in Figure 1 (generated under the assumptions in footnote 2, essentially the M3 level in the 1982 version of SLT, and not presented in the 1985/1986 version of SLII) has the same development score (3) as the D1 development level; however, it reflects a much higher level of follower development and, again, also reflects the causal priority of competence as a determinant of development in SLII. Finally, SLII offers prescriptions for combinations of leader behaviors for only four of the nine combinations in Figure 1. Left unconsidered, for example, were d4 and d5 types of follower-development which, representing moderate values of the two components of development, are likely to be highly representative of many followers in a variety of tasks.

A more recent publication of Situational Leadership thinking is contained in Hersey and Blanchard's fifth edition (1988) of their textbook. Aside from a few exceptions, the 1988 version contrasts sharply with SLII (Blanchard et al., 1985; Carew et al., 1986), and it mirrors the earlier “maturity” model (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) except that maturity is now called “readiness,” and one component of readiness, willingness, consists of the three dimensions of commitment, confidence, and motivation instead of confidence and motivation, as in 1982. Interestingly, the 1985/1986 SLII elevated commitment (comprised of confidence and motivation) to the conceptual status of a codeterminant of development/readiness. Perhaps most notable in the 1988 book is Hersey and Blanchard's disclaimer of

“Situational Leadership” as a theory. They say, “Situational Leadership is a model, *not* a theory. Concepts, procedures, actions, and outcomes are based upon tested methodologies that are practical and easy to apply (p. 170).” Viewed historically, this statement completes a four-step evolution of the theoretical arguments or foundations for Situational Leadership. From the most precise statement of a theoretical foundation in 1977, H-B moved to a more ambiguous theoretical argument in 1982 (Graeff, 1983). Then, Blanchard and his colleagues (Blanchard et al., 1985; Carew et al., 1986) modified Situational Leadership based on essentially no theoretical arguments (their own experience, conversations with colleagues, feedback from managers), and, finally, Hersey and Blanchard (1988) top it off by declaring that Situational Leadership “is a model, *not* a theory.” More recent versions of Situational Leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993; Hersey et al., 1996) are very similar to, if not identical with, the 1982 and 1988 versions of SLT/SL; consequently, the problems associated with the 1982 version (Graeff, 1983) remain in these presentations of Situational Leadership.

SLT: PUBLISHED EMPIRICAL STUDIES

There is not consensus regarding the amount of empirical work, related to SLT, that has been completed, nor agreement about the validity of the theory. Vecchio (1987, p. 446) says “investigations of the theoretical and empirical robustness of SLT have been rare,” Blank et al. (1990, p. 580) note that SLT “has received only limited attention,” and Goodson et al. (1989, p. 446) describe “a sparsity of empirical testing of SLT” that is “alarming.” On the other hand, Blanchard et al. (1993, p. 28) report that “over 50 dissertations, master theses and research papers have been written using the improved LBA and LBA II (instruments associated with SLII) since 1983, in research studies on Situation Leadership II. The vast majority of these studies, including those cited in the Blanchard et al. (1993) review, are unpublished doctoral dissertations that, according to Johansen (1990, p. 82), have “limited value.” Implying support for Johansen’s conclusion, Blanchard et al. (1993, p. 33) say, “We wish there were more research studies besides dissertations being conducted on the model.... A review of the literature identified five, published empirical studies focusing on SLT, and the five studies collectively, at best, provide very limited support for the validity of SLT. Hambleton and Gumpert (1982, p. 241) used a 20 item version (the LBA instrument) of the LEAD instrument to examine the use and validity of SLT. They conclude that their “study provides supporting evidence for the validity of the Hersey and Blanchard model,” even though “no definite causal relationship could be established, because of research design constraints.” Elsewhere, Vecchio (1987, p. 445) details several methodological problems in the Hambleton and Gumpert study. Vecchio (1987) and Norris and Vecchio (1992) obtained mixed results in their attempts to validate SLT. In the first of two studies, Vecchio (1987) found support for the theory in the “low maturity” condition, mixed support (unclear prescriptions) for the theory in the two levels of “moderate maturity,” and no support for predictions of SLT for employees with “high maturity.” The Norris and Vecchio (1992) study obtained results similar to the first Vecchio study. Two reported studies (Blank et al., 1990; Goodson et al., 1989) have failed to provide support for the validity of SLT. Blank et al. (1990) failed to find support for the theory’s assumptions regarding the relationship of leader task and relationship behaviors with indicants of leader effectiveness, and they failed to find support for the more complex

predictions of the theory. Goodson et al. (1989) tested the predictions regarding primary, second, third, and worst leadership styles for given readiness levels. No support was obtained for any of the predictions of SLT in their study. Overall, there appears to be very weak support for the validity of SLT.

DISCUSSION

A review of Situational Leadership Theory focusing on the more recent, but conflicting, versions put forth by Blanchard et al. (1985), Carew et al. (1986), Hersey and Blanchard (1988, 1993), and Hersey et al. (1996) was completed. Aside from cosmetic changes involving the frequent relabeling of key concepts in multiple versions of the approach, and some conceptual changes reflected in the SLII model (Blanchard et al., 1985; Carew et al., 1986), the major problem confronting *all* of the versions is the continued lack of a sound theoretical foundation of the hypothesized relationships among variables in the model. Perhaps in an attempt to avoid criticism that the theoretical rationale is weak (Graeff, 1983; Luthans, 1992) because of a lack of coherent, explicit rationale for the hypothesized relationships among variables in the model (Yukl, 1981), Hersey and Blanchard (1988, 1993), and Hersey et al. (1996) explicitly declare that their Situational Leadership approach *is not* a theory. Instead, they say it is “a practical model that can be used by managers, salespersons, teachers or parents.” It is difficult to accept easily their “theory disclaimer” because of (a) their description of relationships among variables in the model in relation to the definition of a theory (c.f. Kerlinger, 1986), and (b) the collective judgment of social scientists (all five published empirical studies investigating the theory refer to it as SLT).

Given the critical importance of the “prescriptive curve” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982), “development curve” (Blanchard et al., 1985; Carew et al., 1986), or “high performance curve” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988) to the application of Situational Leadership, the continued absence of a well-thought-out rationale to support its existence makes prescriptions regarding leader behavior vulnerable to a variety of criticisms including ambiguity, a lack of consistency and incompleteness. As Byrne (1986, p. 53) asserts, “Unless the proposed fad or quick-fix is *well thought out*, it/they quickly become meaningless buzzwords, hollow symbols, or mere fads.”

Consistency problems continue to plague all versions of Situational Leadership. SLII (Blanchard et al., 1985; Carew et al., 1986) exhibited several logical inconsistencies and recent versions of SL (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, 1993; Hersey et al., 1996) advocate, for example, a “selling” style for an R2 level (readiness level 2) follower who is “unable” but “willing” to do a task. As discussed earlier, every version of SL/SLII contains internal inconsistencies in the form of contradictory statements *within* each model. An example is the number of dimensions of leadership behavior cited in SLII. In the Blanchard et al. (1985) version of SLII, two dimensions of leadership behavior are identified, while three dimensions of leadership behavior are identified in the Carew et al. (1986) version of SLII. Comparisons *across* models yielded conceptual contradictions as well (e.g., the hypothesized effects of follower involvement in decision-making on follower confidence).

Ambiguity and incompleteness reflected in an absence of any theoretical explanation or justification for how the components of development combine in the important middle range levels of development in the SLII Model (including potential combinations not

identified in the SLII Model), aside from an explanation for why confidence deteriorates from D1 to D2, suggest the failure to heed the commonly accepted notion about the multiplicative fashion in which motivation (commitment or willingness) and ability (competence or ableness) combine. The SLII Model appears incomplete in that it only discusses four of the possible nine combinations of commitment and competence (development levels) that can be generated from the three values assigned to both the commitment variable and the competence variable. This exclusion of 5 mid-range development levels (combinations of competence and commitment between the R1 and R4 levels) from consideration in the model is especially problematic since, as Hersey et al. (1996, p. 319) note, "...most people in work settings usually fall into readiness levels R2 and R3" (2 of 7 mid-range combinations). Blank et al. (1990) make this same observation in their study of SLT, noting that "Hersey and Blanchard (1982) provide no guidelines on what to do with respondents in such [ambiguous] maturity group" (sic) (p. 592). Related to the ambiguity/incompleteness issue, both the SLT/SLII approaches give, implicitly, causal priority to ability as the more important determinant of performance.

Attention to ambiguity and confusion resulting from multiple versions of Situational Leadership has been noted by the authors of the theory. In a note, Blanchard et al. (1993, p. 34) lament confusing circumstances associated with "research trends on the Situational Leadership Model." They say to clearly understand the research trends on the Situation Leadership Model, the reader must recognize that changes have occurred in the model and the instrumentation used to study the model; further, they argue these changes have caused the research to be confusing and at times inconclusive. Blanchard et al. (1993, p. 34) say Blank et al. (1990) and Johansen (1990) cite studies that use the LEAD Self to make conclusions about Situational Leadership "even though the failings of the LEAD have been known for sometime." Blanchard and his colleagues argue the propensity for Blank et al. (1990), Johansen (1990), and implied others to talk about the model as if Situational Leadership and Situational Leadership II were the same is confusing and should be avoided by researchers.

Their concerns about confusion resulting from "researchers" failure to recognize changes/differences between SLT and SLII merit a response. First, Blank et al. (1990) cite only *one* study (Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982) that used a version of the LEAD instrument. As noted earlier, Hambleton and Gumpert (1982) utilized the LBA instrument, a 20-item enlarged "research version" of the LEAD instrument that Blanchard apparently thought was appropriate for the study, since Hambleton and Gumpert (1982, p. 225) acknowledge benefiting "considerably from discussions with Ken Blanchard about the scope and direction of the research study." Second, none of the other four published, empirical studies (Blank et al. 1990; Goodson et al., 1989; Norris & Vecchio, 1992; Vecchio, 1989) investigating SLT used the LEAD instrument; in fact, all four used the LBDQ12. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Blanchard et al. (1993) seem to imply that "researchers" are largely responsible for the confusion because they, intentionally or unintentionally, test the wrong theory using the LEAD instrument that, according to Blanchard et al. (1993, p. 24), "Graeff (1983) and others noted had numerous flaws." It may be incorrect for them to make this external attribution (researchers) for the confusion.

It could be argued that Blanchard and his associates (Blanchard et al., 1985; Carew et al., 1986; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, 1993; Hersey et al., 1996) must share in the responsibility for the confusion of "researchers." Blanchard et al. (1985) introduced a

revised SLT called SLII in the book *Leadership and The One Minute Manager*, and Carew et al. (1986) detailed SLII in relation to group variables in an article that appeared in *Training and Development Journal*. In the *T&DJ* article, the authors say, "The type of situational leadership we will be using in our model is called Situational Leadership II because it includes the latest thinking of the original approach's developers." Two years later, in the fifth edition of their book, *Management of Organization Behavior*, Hersey and Blanchard (1988) present changes in their Situational Leadership model in relation to its presentation in the earlier editions of their book. In reference to the version of Situational Leadership in the 1988 book, a catalog from the Blanchard Training and Development, Inc. (1991, p. 14) provides descriptive comments about the 1988 Hersey and Blanchard book. The catalog states "...This legendary book introduced the core concepts of Situational Leadership." In reference to the 1988/5th edition, the catalog continues "...The concepts of Situational Leadership II are *introduced* (emphasis added) in this best-selling book." Unfortunately, a review of the 1988 book reveals conceptual arguments and conceptual labels that are substantially different from, and even conflict with, the conceptual arguments and labels defining the Situational Leadership II model, as it was presented by Blanchard et al. (1985) and Carew et al. (1986). The 1988 version of SLT is essentially the same, with some cosmetic changes in labels, as the 1982 version of SLT, even though both the 1985/1986 (SLII) and 1988 (SLT) versions of Situational Leadership are presented as, ostensibly, the authors' latest thinking about leadership as reflected in SLII.

Graeff (1995) noted contradictory statements by Hersey and Blanchard (1993) regarding which theory of Situational Leadership is presented in the 1993 edition of their book. In Chapter 8, Hersey and Blanchard (1993, p. 184) state:

Until 1982, Hersey and Blanchard worked together to continually refine Situational Leadership. After that time, Blanchard and his colleagues at Blanchard Training and Development (BTD) began to modify the original Situational Leadership model...to support their approach (called SLII). The best description of this approach to Situational Leadership can be found in *Leadership and The One Minute Manager*.

Elsewhere, in the Preface to the 1993 book, they say "The international best seller, *The One Minute Manager*, which he co-authored with Spencer Johnson, and the follow-up books"... "and *Leadership and The One Minute Manager* with Drea and Patricia Zigarmi, were the results of these efforts. The concepts presented in *these books* are again *highlighted in this revision*" (emphasis added). Although these statements imply that SLII will be presented in the 1993 edition, Hersey and Blanchard say, in Chapter 8 (p. 184), "The Situational Leadership model used in this book will reflect the present thinking of Paul Hersey and the Center for Leadership Studies and will not include any changes to the model made by Ken Blanchard in SLII."

In the 1996 version of SLT, as presented in the 7th edition of their book, Hersey et al. (1996) delete the statement, found in the 1993 Preface, indicating that concepts presented in Blanchard's *Leadership and The One Minute Manager* book (SLII) would be "highlighted in the latest edition." Instead, Hersey et al. (1996, p. xxiv) say, "All of the continuing developments in our thinking and the varied research and consulting activities of our respective organizations are reflected in this edition." Some of the continuing developments in their thinking are revealed in an Appendix (1996, pp. 580-590) which they say (footnote, p. 580) was "prepared for submission to the *Training and Development*

Magazine for its 50th Anniversary Edition, January 1996.” Adopting an evolutionary perspective, they present *individual reflections* on differences between their respective approaches. In discussing the “development level” of (a) subordinate(s), Blanchard explains that his model (SLII) is based on Lacoursiere’s (1980) model of group development as applied to individuals (Hersey et al., 1996, pp. 586-587). A critical difference between this model (SLII) and the original 1982, 1988, and 1993 SLT model is the inversion of the first two levels of “maturity/development.” The M1 maturity-level of “unwilling and unable” subordinate(s) in the original SLT model is now the D2 development-level in the SLII model, while the D1 (unable but willing) development level in the SLII model is the M2 maturity-level in the original SLT model. Hersey, in his personal reflections (Hersey et al., 1996, p. 588) says, “I agree with Ken that most people enter a position or new task at readiness level two (not one).” If this consensus between Hersey and Blanchard reflects their “current thinking” (1996, p. 586) about the manner in which the key prescriptive variables in the model combine (D1 = willing and unable; D2 = unwilling and unable), it is very confusing to understand why their 1996 version of Situational Leadership, as presented in Chapter 8 of their book (Hersey et al., 1996, p. 200) is the same as the 1982, 1988, and 1993 versions with R1 (unable and unwilling) preceding R2 (unable but willing). Even more confusing, Hersey et al. (1996, p. 189) say, identical to the 1993 statement, “The Situational Leadership model used in this book reflects the present thinking of Paul Hersey and the Center for Leadership Studies and does not include any of the changes to the model that Blanchard and his colleagues made in SLII.” Perhaps, quoting Blanchard et al. (1993, p. 34), “researchers talk about the model as if SLT and SLII were the same,” because Hersey and Blanchard (1988; 1993) and Hersey et al. (1996) frequently present SLT as SLII.

Finally, a practitioner or student who attempts to apply the prescriptions of Situational Leadership in the work place might notice conflicting guidelines for essentially the same situation, depending on which version of the model s/he is using. For example, Randolph and Blackburn (1989) argue that the D1 level follower (low competence and high commitment) in SLII (1985; 1986) is essentially the reverse of the R2 follower (unable but willing) in SLT (1988). However, the SLII model advocates high task/directive behavior and low relationships/supportive behavior for this situation while the 1988 SLT model calls for high task/directive behavior and high relationships/supportive behavior. In terms of the use of the leader’s time, it might be argued that the former is more efficient than the latter. Because of these application problems, the multiple versions of Situational Leadership might be more useful to practitioners, and less confusing to researchers, if they were refined, and combined, into a single, theoretically sound approach.

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