Conversations with Paul Hersey

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INTRODUCTION

My interview with Paul Hersey took place over a period of time during the beautiful Southeastern Ohio autumn. It was all opportunity. Paul had returned to Ohio University to serve as a distinguished visiting professor at an institution where his academic career had begun some years previously. I knew that he was coming to OU, but I had never met the man. Of course, his leadership model had been part of my textbooks and courses for years. Then one day at the start of fall quarter, a new face appeared in my office door. Tanned, mustached, and with an air of confidence, there was no mistaking its identity. "You must be Paul Hersey," I said. "Hi," came the reply as a strong hand reached out to shake mine. "Dewey Johnson told me you were a good guy," said Paul, "I wanted to say hello."

And say hello he did. That first meeting led to many sessions in which I had the opportunity to ask questions relating to Paul's leadership ideas, their origins, and their global applications. Just as important, though, our conversations allowed me to travel with him through a career of international professional recognition, consulting assignments with the premier corporations of our day, and the accomplishments of true entrepreneurship. Finally, I enjoyed his ideas about teaching and learning, ideas conveyed to me with the same excitement his students must have felt when he entered his first class at Ohio University and announced the topic for the day leadership!

What follows is a question and answer selection from my interview with Paul about his leadership ideas.

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL HERSEY

Schermerhorn	In order to get started Paul, what is your preferred summary description of Situational Leadership theory?
Hersey	First of all, I would not call Situational Leadership® a theory. I would consider it a model. The difference is that a theory is something that you construct to analyze or understand a given event, whereas a model is something that you can take out and replicate and use in a variety of different settings. An example is the manufacturing model developed by Henry Ford in his mass production facility. Perhaps early on, up through the time when I wrote an article entitled "Life Cycle Theory of Leadership," Situational Leadership® was more of a construct. But now it is something practical and applicable, and it is being used all over the world.
Schermerhorn	Let me make sure that I understand your distinction between a theory and a model. You do not call Situational Leadership® a theory, because a theory is targeted toward understanding; you prefer to call it a model, because a model is targeted toward use or application. Is that correct?
Hersey	Yes. I view a model as applications oriented, and that is precisely what Situational Leadership® is all about. Now, getting back to your original question I would summarize the model this way. Situational Leadership® is about being effective as a leader. This involves matching your leader behaviors (those behaviors you use when attempting to influence someone else) with the needs of the individual or group that you are working with. It is adapting the combination of directive behaviors and supportive behaviors appropriately to the readiness of others to perform specific tasks or functions.
Schermerhorn	Let us assume that there are fifty leadership trainers and management educators at various locations around the world who are at this moment talking with audiences about Situational Leadership®. Do you worry at all that they are describing the model?
Hersey	Absolutely! This is a major concern and it is something that we have worked hard to deal with. At the Center for Leadership Studies we select very carefully those people who represent us around the world. Anyone who becomes "certified" as a Situational Leadership® trainer comes to us to be trained. We work closely with them to clearly establish expertise in the model. Then, if they work in different countries, they are

responsible for translations into languages other than English

Schermerhorn Let's discuss the history of management thinking for a moment. I have always been partial to the work of Douglas McGregor (1960). But whenever I speak about his views in my classes today, students invariably ask: "How can a book from the early 1960s be that important today?" The students seem so focused on the present that they have difficulty relating to anything historical. Are we so far advanced now that the thinking of Douglas McGregor and other historical leadership and management scholars is out of date?

Hersey Absolutely not. In fact, if I look back on the people who made an impact on my life I value having had the opportunity to learn from those like Douglas McGregor, Carl Rogers, and others. I can't remember who said it, but I've always valued the expression: "We can see so much further from the shoulders of giants."

Schermerhorn That's a beautiful statement. One of the things I worry about with our business education today is that we don't want to recognize the giants of the past anymore. In fact, the new giant is available right here on my desk it's the Internet. The growing tendency of our students is to look only toward it for the information and ideas they need. As wonderful as the Internet is as a resource, the tendency of students to increasingly rely on it in for most of their information scares me.

Hersey The balance must be kept between high tech and high touch. I think that we are losing the balance. The technological revolution of communications is important; it's the difference between surviving in business today and not. But you can't balance very long on a stool with one or two legs. We need all of these balances to keep things on an even scale.

The model is presently translated into eighteen or nineteen languages. Obviously I don't understand them all. But I do work with the people who are doing the translations, and I try to keep that as uncontaminated as possible. Of course that doesn't mean that all translations are perfect, but it keeps them reasonably accurate. Judging by the acceptance, which Situational Leadership� has achieved around the world, we are pretty delighted with what's going on.

Even so, there are many other people teaching the model that haven't

been trained by us. In these cases I don't really know how accurate their descriptions are. My gut feeling is that the basic concept will get across, that is the need for leaders to select influencing behaviors that are appropriate to their situations. Even though the model may not be explained in as complete

or exact a way that I would like, the fact that the basic notion behind the model is being communicated is an accomplishment. It is probably better than allowing everyone to think about leadership in normative terms.

Schermerhorn   What do you mean in this reference to "normative" in leadership thinking?

Hersey   If you go back to the 1960s leadership thinking was concentrated on finding some magic solution to the problem of creating effective leaders. An example is the "grid" notion developed by Blake and Mouton (1979). It is an excellent model as long as you understand what it is and what is isn't. The grid identifies concerns for production and concerns for people, but these are about values and attitudes. We all hope that every manager in our organization is highly concerned about end results production, and highly concerned about developing the human resource people. There's no question about that. The problem that some of the grid folk's fell into, however, was drawing behavioral conclusions from a model based on attitudes. Situational Leadership® extends this approach into a behavioral dimension. Given preferred values and attitudes, the leader's question becomes: "how do I behave?"

Schermerhorn   In Situational Leadership®, "diagnosis " is an essential part of the skill that you are trying to teach. Is that correct?

Hersey   Yes. Situational Leadership® gives us a way as managers or as leaders to be just as professional as those who practice medicine or law. It also says that we cannot be professional by just writing prescriptions. A prescription without diagnosis is malpractice. What Situational Leadership® teaches is that you need to do your diagnosis first and then act on it to provide those things that can make a difference.

Schermerhorn   When you get into Situational diagnosis I begin to think about the contingency leadership theories of Fred Fiedler (Fiedler, Chemers and Mahar 1978) and Robert House (1971). In what ways is your thinking similar to those from this school of thought?

Hersey	The big difference between Fiedler and me is that I believe we can help people learn to change their behaviors so they don't have to be replaced as leaders. I believe that leaders can learn to positively impact different kinds of situations. I believe that through training, people can become more effective leaders in a variety of situations.
	Again, what we attempted to do in the middle or late 1960s was to provide a simple model, something that people can carry around with them. People have asked me many times: Why four styles, why four levels of readiness? Why not 5, why not 8, why not 81, like the Managerial Grid?" My response is that for a model to have any value it has to be used and for it to be used it has to be simple.
	My dad worked for Bell Labs and held the original patents on the dial system for telephones. When people were first given telephone numbers they made all kind of mistakes. Most numbers were five or six digits, some seven. What researchers eventually found was that as long as you kept the numbers in sets of four or less, the mistakes went way down. People can handle in their minds sets of ones, twos, threes, and fours. When you get beyond that you get lots of mistakes in the dialing system.
	So that's where the "four" came from in Situational Leadership®. It seemed to be the best number for people to remember. We didn't want the model to get too complicated. We wanted it to be remembered and used.
Schermerhorn	I have always believed that the most senior faculty should teach the introductory courses. The current system often reverses that with seniority generally comes assignment to upper level courses. One of my favorite courses is introductory management. I enjoy teaching it and, to tell you the truth, that's where I believe I should be at least for a good part of the time. What do you think?
Hersey	I think you should be there. That's where our best people should be. But we tend to have the same problem in industry. If you look at the way organizations were traditionally set up, they were layered pyramids. The higher you advanced the fewer people you supervised directly; the smaller your span of control.
Schermerhorn	So many of our models and theories in management and organizational behavior today are terribly complex. They often seem more designed to communicate with scholars than practitioners. I don't get that sense in your model. It seems to have been designed for the manager or leader

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as end user right from the beginning. Am I correct?

Hersey   I think so. My concern has always been to offer something that can make a difference in the real world. Some time ago I was on a panel where someone remarked that too many academic publications were a lot to do about nothing. I don't know if that's totally correct. But, if something doesn't make a difference in the real world, if you can't go out and apply it, if it isn't going to help someone manage more effectively, what is it really worth? I think that my career has been built around caring for the practitioner. Part of this is of course due to the fact that before I became a professor I had ten years of business experience.

Schermerhorn   I would like to push a little bit further on the research issue. What about the scholarly literature that has developed around the Situational Leadership® model? Are you satisfied with it? Has the model been adequately treated by researchers?

Hersey   I'm not sure that I really have an answer to that. I doubt that you can really pick up a textbook in management that doesn't reference it. There are those people who publish simply because of pressure to publish and who enjoy trying to tear down anything that is out there. We are giving people an opportunity to think about the Situational Leadership® concept, and to try and find out if it can work for them. That's more what I am concerned about.

Schermerhorn   Does Situational Leadership® have its origins in your industrial experience?

Hersey   Yes, let's talk about that. I spent ten years in a variety of different types of business settings. The last position I had been in a huge technical laboratory. The company had a unique problem. They had seven thousand of the brightest scientists and engineers in the country, perhaps in the world. Most came in with graduate degrees in engineering, physics, or mathematics. They had tremendous technical skills.

But when it came time to become a manger in this company, basically you got promoted based on your technical skills. So the company would often lose a super researcher and gain a very mediocre to poor manager. This was actually Peter's Principle working getting promoted to your level of incompetence. We weren't using then what I call today the anti Peter Principle vaccine: training and development prior to being promoted, the opportunity to try the job on a part-time basis before you

get promoted to it fulltime.

This was an important issue because traditionally, when unsuccessful as managers, they were sent back into technical jobs. They had then lost confidence in themselves and their peer group no longer looked up to them as "winners." This was all caused by their unsuccessful experience in management.

So we had people who were no longer productive in the technical role, where they formerly excelled. We didn't want such failures and so we tried to put together a program to help people make a successful transition from technical to supervisory work. We began following the lead of Carl Rogers. We used nondirective interviewing to isolate various skills that were essential to managerial work. These included people skills like questioning, active listening responses, mirroring, encouraging all things that we associate with Carl Rogers work, and all hands-on things that would be useful in goal setting, performance evaluation, and problem solving.

We built an excellent training program where people tried these skills and role-played and internalized them. They didn't just learn the skills in terms of concepts or knowledge; they began to practice and use them before going into their work. As a trainer I would then go into goal setting, problem solving, and performance evaluation sessions to observe their behavior. As a non-participant observer I had no role other than to be a fly on the wall. And you would be surprised what you learn if you push back and aren't directly in view.

I quickly learned that when people, and now I'll use the terminology of the model, were above average in readiness, the people skills worked beautifully for their managers. They had a positive impact. But when the interchange was between a manager and followers with performance problems, the skills derived from Rogers' work didn't work well at all. We began to see that these high relationship behaviors work only in certain situations. That was basically the beginning of Situational Leadership®.

Schermerhorn   Is it fair to say that in the beginning you had not anticipated that the relationship skills would be Situational in their impact?

Hersey   Absolutely. It was my informal hypothesis that these skills are excellent skills and that I could help these people to be better managers just by training them to use these skills that is, to be a good listener, facilitate participation, talk things over during problem solving. But I noticed that really low performers needed some guidance and direction. Their supervisors could be supportive in small successful approximations as

they grew in performance readiness and accomplishment over time.

Schermerhorn	Have you told this story on the origins of Situational Leadership® before?
Hersey	Only orally. In fact one of the first formal times was at an American Society for Training and Development conference. It was the last session of the last day, and I expected nobody to be there. But the audience piled in. One of the questions I got was how did it all really start? Where did it come from?
Schermerhorn	What I like about your "founding story" is that it describes a model that comes from a clear work reality. In the words of Closer and Strauss (1967), we might call it well "grounded."
Hersey	As I mentioned earlier, I think that all of us in the field in late 1950s and through the middle 1960s were looking for the golden fleece. We were looking for that magic solution or set of principles that would be useful in any management situation. Yet I think that most of us who were trained as behavioral scientists should have known better. A "principle" according to Webster is "a universal truth." When you are talking about human behavior you are simply talking probabilities you are looking for things that can help. To use a baseball metaphor, you can't give me the way to hit a home run every time at bat, but you can help me to increase my batting average. That's what we are doing for people with the Situational Leadership® model.
Schermerhorn	I don't know if this is a question or a comment. When you were working to train the scientists and engineers in relationship skills, you ended up seeing something different. From that you eventually created a model of leadership. What interests me greatly is that you were describing something that you had directly and personally observed in the workplace. I contrast this with those of us who build models from what others have written, and from the results of analyzing data taken from paper and pencil measurements. I guess what I want to ask is: Could you or would you have arrived at the same conclusion if you hadn't been there yourself and seen it with your very eyes?
Hersey	I may not have. We are getting better at these things. But it takes work. In fact, we had an interesting problem with this training program it did a lot of good. When you are in an organization that is of such a high quality, most of the workers skew into the high readiness areas,

otherwise they wouldn't be hired. So with the people skills program we had only about 10 to 20 percent failures. Many people wouldn't even have noticed them; instead they focused their attention on the successes. I did notice the failures, and from that came my sensitivity to the situational aspects of leadership

Schermerhorn   The tendency and potential risk in such training, you are saying, is to just look for successes and after you find them say "there they are, so lets go do it again." Is that correct?

Hersey   Yes. In this case that would have meant simply doing more, a lot more, training in relationship skills for supervisors. If I hadn't been in the role of observer, if I hadn't been able to go back and interview both the leader and the follower afterwards and get into some of their feelings, I may not have observed the unsuccessful side of the training and its outcomes. It just didn't happen a high percentage of the times. We were seeing a lot of successes. It was only little-by-little after I had done more observations and interviews that I recognized "Hey, this is not for everybody."

Schermerhorn   What happened next?

Hersey   I left the business world and got into the academic world in the early 1960s. Then my contact was not just with one large and successful company. My consulting work grew around a variety of companies of large, small and medium size. They weren't just hiring me to make good things better, but because they had problems that they wanted a consultant to work on. That's when I began to see real differences. I was working with companies that weren't able to get the very best people and that didn't have high performance at every turn. Then I began to see the "Ah ha's" of a lot of folks who may have been capable and ready when hired, but were now turned off, upset, and no longer performing. It wasn't that they didn't have the ability, but they weren't using it.

Remember that is an important slippage, or difference between present or actual performance accomplishments and your performance potential. It is the amount of ability that you are using that counts, not how much you have.

Schermerhorn   Paul, we're about to the end of our interview. Let me ask just one final question in this context. You have described a journey from industry to academia and consulting, with the Situational Leadership® model forming in your mind at each juncture. Was the model fully set at this

early stage in your academic career, or has it continued to develop further as time passed and your experiences have grown?

Hersey   Yes and no. It wasn't formally worked out in those early years. It was clearly forming, and I knew that I had to make distinctions and train managers to provide different behaviors. It was a model in the rough stages. By the middle 1960s, the time when I joined the faculty at Ohio University, we were calling it the Life Cycle Theory of Leadership. Then it was a theory in my mind and I still had some questions about it. Could we take it overseas? Could we use it? It was far less sophisticated than now as the Situational Leadership® Model. By the early 1970s this model was pretty well set, although it has been refined continuously ever since.

Note

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