

Reinhard Schmitt

THE AUTO NO MOUS LEA DER SHIP STYLE

As a good leader, you have no doubt explored a range of leadership approaches, theories and styles.

And, of course, you have reflected on what all this means for how you conduct yourself within the context of your organization.



REINHARD SCHMITT

For Reinhard Schmitt, THE recurring theme underpinning greater momentum and vitality in organizations is when leaders adopt the attitude of “let decisions be taken where they are needed in day-to-day operations.” In his opinion, the continual pursuit of this principle is what distinguishes companies that are serious about agility from those that are merely playing agile theater. In his work as a consultant, he is continually fascinated by the energy that employees generate when they are given responsibility to shape their own purposeful working environments ... and how quickly this energy dissipates when leaders do not manage to let go and intervene in these environments, whether requested to or not.

THE LEADERSHIP STYLES MODEL

Depending on the business environment in which you have worked and who you have received input from, you will draw a distinction between the authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire leadership style. This theory of leadership assumes that success is ultimately the direct result of certain innate personality traits, such as charisma, courage, assertiveness, intelligence and the associated behaviors.

However, the scientific community has long since reached a consensus that there is no proven correlation between personality traits and leadership success. Furthermore, this concept draws on rationale going all the way back to Kurt Lewin, one of the founders of modern social theory – that is, a model that originated in the 1940s.

THE AUTO NO MOUS LEA DER SHIP STYLE

WRONG BUT STILL USEFUL

Despite all the criticism, one clear benefit still remains: The situational leadership model provides clear and concise assumptions in an otherwise nebulous landscape. It establishes a common language and terminology that enable both leader and led to shape the leadership process.

It is particularly important for leaders new to the role to believe that leadership is a manageable task, thus enabling them to build confidence and courage.

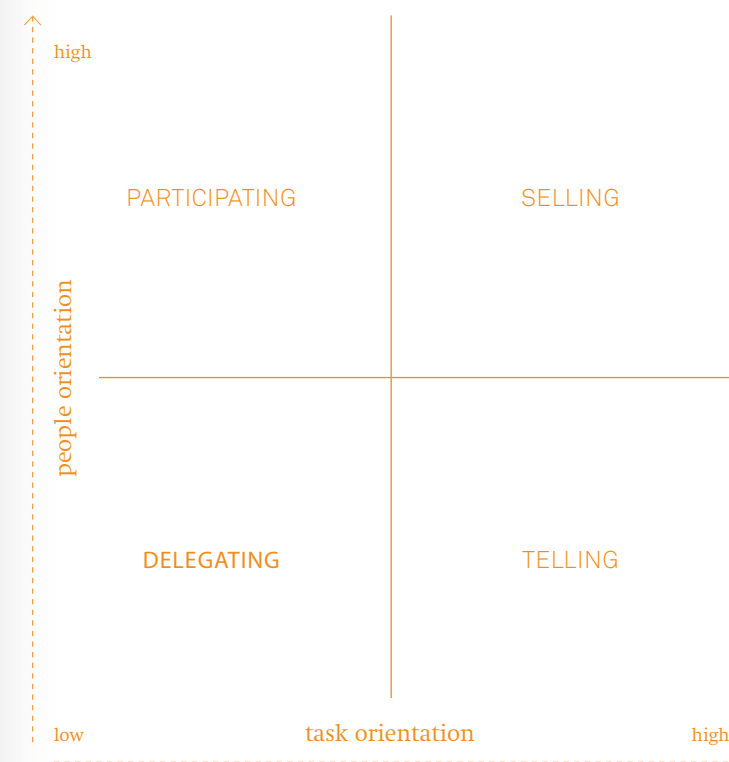
And, so, the situational leadership model is just like the vast majority of tools designed to help us deal with complex (social) situations: they are as wrong as they are useful.

THE SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP MODEL

Perhaps, when asked about the ideal leadership behavior, you think of a diagram with four squares that contains the terms “telling,” “selling,” “participating,” and “delegating.” In this case, you are most likely thinking of Hersey and Blanchard’s model of situational leadership. This model, which is still one of the most widely used frameworks in leadership training today, now looks back on a history spanning almost 50 years.

The situational leadership model does indeed constitute a significant advance in understanding compared to the leadership styles model, for it clearly shows that leadership is only effective if it focuses on situation-specific conditions, that is, the relevant task structure and the relationship between leader and led.

Despite the popularity of the model, one should be aware that it was anything but unique at the time of its development and therefore is imbued with a healthy dose of eclecticism. On top of this, it is not a theory in the true sense of the word: at best, Hersey and Blanchard applied a retrospective coat of theoretical paint to empirical studies drawing on different benchmarks. Further, the situational leadership approach has been accused – in our opinion with some justification – of overly trivializing the leadership challenge.



THE AUTO NO MOUS LEA DER SHIP STYLE

I wanted to be sure that no good idea had been left untried, that everyone could have the opportunity to experiment.

AUTONOMY	STYLE	
Employee/Team ↑ Manager	letting go	allowing
		framing
		delegating
	participatory	advising
		coordinating
		inquiring
	directing	explaining
		instructing

DESCRIPTION
Employee/team takes own decision and provides transparency towards the manager.
Employee/team takes own decision within rules defined jointly with the manager.
Employee/team takes own decision within a specific work assignment and regularly reports to the manager.
Employee/team is required to consult the manager and then takes own decision
Manager and employee/team take decision jointly (procedure to be clarified: majority, consensus, consent, approval/opposition, ...).
Manager consults employee/team and then decides him/herself.
Manager decides him/herself and provides background information on the decision to the employee/team.
Manager takes decision him/herself without giving reasons.

NO
PARA
DOX

Then you most certainly delegated a lot?

No, not really – I allowed

AN EXTENDED PERSPECTIVE

In times of agility and New Work, however, the limits of Hersey and Blanchard’s leadership styles have been reached, because the degree of autonomy desired is in many contexts significantly higher than that allowed for by the model.

A clear example of this was demonstrated during a Learning Journey when the director of a public educational institution we visited said: “I wanted to be sure that no good idea had been left untried, that everyone could have the opportunity to experiment.” Then someone asked: “Then you most certainly delegated a lot?” After a moment of reflection, he replied: “No, not really – I allowed.” This statement clearly illustrates how decision-making autonomy can be extended beyond the “delegating” leadership style.

“Greater autonomy” is the recurring theme of all organizations serious about New Work and agility. Autonomy is essential if decisions are to be made where they are needed in day-to-day operations and not where allowed for in the organizational chart or job description. Organizations that succeed in implementing the guiding principle of autonomy gain significant momentum and are able to leverage the decision-making intelligence of the many rather than only the few.

That is why we at Process One gave some thought to what the situational leadership model should look like if it is to provide practical orientation for the demands facing leadership today. Ultimately, we have replaced the axis of “task and employee orientation” with “autonomy” as a key parameter in our situational leadership model. The four leadership styles from the Hersey and Blanchard model can be easily mapped along the key developmental aspect of autonomy. This makes it immediately clear that not everything that is supposedly old is now useless and unfit for purpose.

I wanted to be sure that no good idea had been left untried, that everyone could have the opportunity to experiment.

Then you most certainly delegated a lot?

No, not really – I allowed

BEYOND DELEGATION

The autonomy axis in our model also opens up an entirely new dimension beyond the “delegating” leadership style. After all, delegation still requires targets and objectives to be communicated by the manager – or to be derived from strategies, strategic initiatives, or projects and then broken down in to “chunks.” This word alone makes it unmistakably clear how much effort and energy such an undertaking requires.

However, if we strive for an environment in which targets and objectives are not solely passed down through the hierarchies, but can also increasingly develop and be implemented at the market/customer “coalface,” we need to go beyond mere delegation.

And, of course, many leaders have long since understood that classic leadership processes and instruments are largely not conducive to realizing a company’s innovative potential. We know that we must create room for maneuver, allow for emergence, and make a “down payment” on trust.

PUTTING AUTONOMY INTO PRACTICE

Most importantly, however, our extended model shows how to translate the appeal to allow for greater autonomy in organizations into action. For, even if you as a manager are prepared to cede more autonomy, you still have to reach agreement with your employees on how and in which cases this is to be achieved.

If you are now wondering how to put words into deeds, we would like to give you the following tried-and-trusted tip. First, conduct a “decision inventory” by listing the decisions that need to be made on a regular basis in your organizational unit.

Then think about the decisions for which you would like to increase your team’s level of autonomy. If the level of autonomy you are aiming for is significantly higher than the one currently practiced, we recommend you proceed with caution in order to avoid excessive demands being placed on both sides: acceptance of more responsibility on the part of the employee or team, self-disciplined relinquishment of responsibility on your part (the generally more difficult part of the two).

NO
PARA
DOX

I wanted to be sure that no good idea had been left untried, that everyone could have the opportunity to experiment.

Then you most certainly delegated a lot?

No, not really – I allowed

If your team has reached a certain level of maturity, discuss with them how to define the decision-making or leadership style to be applied in future to each decision. Or use Decision Poker cards* for this step: Each employee receives a set of cards containing the leadership styles and places their preferred leadership style (and hence their desired level of autonomy and responsibility) in the middle. This usually results in them quickly reaching a common understanding of the various degrees of freedom and responsibility.

Our model “ends” with the “allowing” leadership style. Employees and teams that are led using this style are self-organizing. They take all necessary decisions and are responsible for implementing those decisions. Nevertheless, you remain – outwardly – responsible for results as a leader and can rescind this style should it transpire that it doesn’t make any sense. However, there is a risk associated with this: Teams and employees who have become used to taking responsibility for their own work mostly react negatively to the withdrawal of autonomy.

In connection with Decision Poker, however, the model also shows that they do not first need to have gone through a major transformation in the direction of New Work; rather, they can start immediately. It only takes the courage to begin and the courage to grant autonomy “from the bottom up” and to demand it “from the top down.”

THE AUTONOMOUS LEADERSHIP STYLE NO PARADOX

Once a quarter, we publish a report on topics relating to the world of business, the economy, and society that we find of relevance to our work as consultants. These are topics which are ideal for exploring contexts that are both complex and not easy to grasp and, therefore, in our experience, need to be addressed in greater depth. Ultimately, the way in which we address the topics says a lot about how we see ourselves: as curious, unbiased consultants who are committed to making an impact.

* You can order Decision Poker cards from us.

To find out more, please visit
our website

www.process-one.de

You can also read more insights
into current themes of leadership
and management at

www.leadership-development.de

Process One Consulting GmbH
Marienstraße 22
36039 Fulda

Tel: +49 661 291 8211
info@process-one.de
www.process-one.de