



## Exploring Situational Leadership in Quick Service Restaurants

Brian Steven Perna, The University of Southern Mississippi

### Abstract

*This research explored the quick-service restaurant (QSR) context. Using the framework of situational leadership theory, 10 managers revealed Educational Leadership and Teamwork as themes from qualitative methods. These manager experiences illustrate the usefulness of situational leadership in quick-service restaurant contexts along with a platform of a valuable tool for the future benefit of leadership experiences in other organizational settings.*

**Keywords:** Situational Leadership; Managers; Organizational Communication; Interview; Quick-Service Restaurants

### Introduction

Quick-Service Restaurant (QSR), fast-food restaurants, settings may create situational leadership opportunities. The fast-food industry employees 14.4 million people, and is expected to create 1.7 million more jobs by 2026 (National Restaurant Association, 2016). With \$782.7 billion in sales annually, and over one million US restaurants, service quality is a prime concern of employee performance (Mathe & Slevitch, 2013; National Restaurant Association, 2016). At the forefront of employee performance is leadership from managers and supervisors.

Since leaders are at the forefront of creating a healthy and engaging organizational context, they are change agents in implementing leadership (Lovelace, Manz, & Alves, 2007). Leadership researchers utilized self-leadership, which entails the follower to take on more responsibility, thus being the follower being own leader (Lovelace, Manz, & Alves, 2007). By having subordinates take on more responsibility, traditional leadership demands were reduced (Lovelace, Manz, & Alves, 2007). What is problematic though is that how the leader helped followers in (QSR) situations was not explored. Likewise, hospitality researchers concluded that supervisors who undermine their highly-involved employees created a negative work climate (Mathe & Slevitch, 2013). While this research examined the context of (QSR), it lacks a qualitative approach to understanding how situations in (QSR's) related to situational leadership. Taken together, self-leadership and supervisor undermining proved to be lackluster in providing situational leadership opportunities to help their followers as well as provide effective leadership examples. To better understand the high demand context of (QSR's), the current research utilizes situational leadership to understand how managers are guiding their employees. The following section discusses situational leadership.

## **Review of Situational Leadership**

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) defined the key to situational leadership theory "as the level of maturity of their followers continues to increase in terms of accomplishing a specific task, leaders should begin to reduce their task behavior and increase relationship behavior until the individual or group reaches a moderate level of maturity" (p. 163). From a situational leadership perspective, Hersey and Blanchard (1977) stated that maturity is "the capacity to set high but attainable goals (achievement-motivation), willingness and ability to take responsibility, and education and/or experience of an individual or a group" (p. 161). Moreover, the situation includes the demands of the job, organization, and leader-follower relationship (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). Within situational leadership, the leader must determine what leadership style is appropriate based the maturity level of the follower (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). Indeed, if the situational leader has trust and confidence in the followers' maturity level, the leader can appropriately decrease close supervision because task performance and the maturity of the individual are seen as above average (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977).

Interestingly, situational leadership conveys four effective leadership styles that are framed around task behavior (one-way leader-to-follower communication of when, where, and how tasks are completed) and relationship behavior (two-way leader-and-follower communication facilitating support behaviors) (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). These four situational leadership styles are: high task/low relationship leader behavior (one-directional communication of the leader telling the follower what, how, when, and where tasks are to be completed), high task/high relationship behavior (the leader attempts a two-way communication of follower support, and sells the follower on final decisions), high relationship/low task behavior (is a shared two-way communication of facilitating decisions participated by leader and follower), and low relationship/low task behavior (the leader delegates the follower to run many aspects of the organization because of high psychological maturity) (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). Situational leadership provides leaders with four differing leader styles based on maturity clues of their followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977).

Situational leadership scholars have found that dimensions of leader behavior influence employee performance and satisfaction (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997). Likewise, Silverthorne and Wang (2001) found that leadership styles support adaptability levels in production organizations. Vecchio (1987) found that newly hired employees need task and leadership structure to mature and perform in the organization. Indeed, employee maturity and leadership styles across three organizations were found to express leader style preferences (Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002). Although situational leadership has been utilized in business and education, and has contributed to situational leadership scholarship, it is has not been applied to a (QSR) context. Situational leadership may enhance leader effectiveness in a (QSR) context. Therefore, the following research question serves as a framework for the present study:

RQ1: What situational leadership messages do managers convey to their followers in a quick-service restaurant context?

## **Methods**

10 managers were interviewed at quick-service restaurants from an IRB approved consent form and semi-structured interview guide. These managers ranged from an assistant to a general manager. The manager sample participants' ages ranged from 19 to 43 and the average

position tenure length of a manager was three years, and interviews lasted on average of 20. 267 minutes. An interview guide serves the purpose of being scripted, tightly ordered, and planned (Tracy, 2013). Interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The transcribed interviews provided 85 pages.

### *Data Analysis*

The 85 pages of transcripts were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory that utilizes open and axial coding techniques. During the open coding phase, data is broken down and concepts that emerge are labeled. The transcribed interviews were read several times to obtain data familiarity and understanding. In open coding, sentences and paragraphs were taken apart by asking "What is this?" or "What does this represent?" and then given a name to the phenomenon, which generated eight open codes. In the axial coding phase, two strong themes emerged concerning situational leadership. These themes are discussed in detail in the next section. Four participants ( $n = 4$ ) read over the participant exemplar narratives in order to ensure the researcher best highlighted the data (Hosek & Thompson, 2009).

### **Findings**

Two themes concerning (QSR) managers engaging in situations of leadership with their employees created opportunities for guidance. In instances of managers coaching their employees on appropriate practice, *Educational Leadership* was seen as an element of situational leadership. *Teamwork* comprised elements of coaching in which managers discussed stressful instances and how they communicated messages to their followers. Next, each theme is described.

#### *Educational Leadership*

This theme was characterized by the leader educating the subordinate in their role in the organization. The leader educates the subordinate by being a role model, showing understanding, and by empowering the subordinate to grow in the organization as an exceptional individual. Conversely, the leader also learns through the education of leadership by reflecting and determining what the best course of action is when leading the subordinate. An example of educational leadership was conveyed when an employee slammed the drive-thru window on a customer. The participant explained that:

the leadership message that I used was bringing up the organization's six leadership promises. One of them is called the service promise. It tells you to make sure that you greet every customer, be friendly, stay positive, stay happy, and always tell your customers thank you. So, I poured that back on her, and asked her which one of the six service promises did you use? Which promise did you demonstrate to the customer? And she was not able to tell me any one of those promises. That was my way of telling her that she should not have done that. When dealing with customers, you need to use the six service promises to every customer that we interact with.

Going over the service promises was an effective leadership message for dealing with this subordinate. Likewise, relating the organization and the manager's role to the team member helped the manager create an educational moment in the organization.

Another respondent stated that educational leadership is an opportunity:

the reason why I say opportunities. We are always human. We have strengths that we are good at, above average at, and then we have areas of our lives that we know that we need to improve on. Instead of calling those mistakes, we call them opportunities. Because there's always an opportunity to get better at something. There's always opportunity to make improvement. So, we shy away from the word mistake because people view that word has negative. If you address things as opportunities that means there is always room for improvement. That creates an environment of learning, not an environment of accountability; you did this wrong. Opportunities are a very important word.

In this instance, the leader is creating an opportunity for growth. The leadership theme in this example communicated and encouraged exceptional work performance because the leader stresses support of the subordinates and the organization to provide exceptional customer service.

### *Teamwork*

Working as a team is characterized by communicating between the leader and subordinate in a (QSR). An example of teamwork that was performed was: when they get to the stressful situation or a high paced situation where they are not keeping up, I've coached them. So if your screen fills up, listen to me. So we take the visual to where they are not stressed out, visually and put it to a hands-on. So when they're in that stressful situation we are not worried about what is on the screen, were worried about listening to the voice up front in calling back you know saying this is what the order is. This is what the special is. This is how the sandwich should be made, or if it is regular; it's just basic communication; you just jump in.

Teamwork was used to do deal with stress. When the context gets stressful, the individual effort of looking at a screen shifts to a collective teamwork effort to effectively handle the stressful situation. By working as a team and not looking at the screen, the stress of the situation was dealt with.

Another respondent stated:

so if your manager can handle the stress well, the employee can handle the stress well. When the manager is on duty, they control the entire environment. The main thing that I need to do is to have everything under control; working as a team to keep stress levels down. So we try to make sure that we keep workflow going as a team.

The leader acts as a role model to subordinates to deal with stress and convey the importance of teamwork. By being in control of the context, leaders provide the opportunity to a productive teamwork climate. If the leader is in control, the subordinate may feel as such that they can handle the stress of the environment better. In other words, the leaders set an example to the subordinates to handle the stress of the context. Even though the leader is in control of the context, it takes an effective team working together to deal with stress.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to introduce, utilize, and to learn how situational leadership was applied to a quick-service restaurant context. A series of ten interviews with managers revealed two themes: educational leadership and teamwork. Utilizing qualitative methods, that were exploratory in nature, painted a situational leadership portrait of the quick-service restaurant context. These results point to important theoretical and practical implications.

A key finding is that leaders educate their subordinates in which knowledge growth and role development are constructed. Educational leadership research is consistent with this finding in that leaders create growth through clear, explicit and ambitious goals that foster a collective professional learning community (DuFour, 2004; Leithwood, 1992). Effective leaders educate their subordinates through analyzing their surroundings to improve and challenge their subordinates' level of achievement (DuFour, 2004; Leithwood, 1992). The finding of educational leadership relates to situational leadership because the manager is using both a high task/low relationship and high relationship/low task style. The manager is using high task/low relationship when stating company policy as well as high task/high relationship to involve the employee to support company policy and to provide opportunities for the employee to mature in their role. By the manager stating what policies the employee should follow, illustrated the high task/low relationship style because the manager is stating tasks of how to address and treat the customer, and high task/high relationship because the manager is attempting two-way communication and trying to sell these policy decisions to the employee. The next narrative entails high relationship/low task because the manager is sharing the opportunity decision with followers by using the word "we" numerous times; and by using opportunity instead of mistake, may build maturity in the manager's followers.

Managers in the quick-service restaurant context utilized teamwork to control stress. Consistent to this finding, teamwork research conveyed that leaders who reciprocate shared values, helpfulness, responsibility, and a positive attitude, essentially contribute and develop a cooperative and synergistic teamwork environment (Crichton, 2005; Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001; Jones & George, 1998). Leaders that communicate teamwork through high involvement, and create a common goal have been found to motivate a job satisfaction increase from subordinates in which teamwork is highly reliable (Baker, Day, & Salas, 2006; Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001; Jones & George, 1998). Consistent with these findings, the theme of *Teamwork* illustrated primarily high relationship/high task and high relationship/low task styles. First, with high relationship/high task, the manager trained their employees on how to transition from using a screen to fill orders, using two-way communication to promote teamwork and sell the follower on communicating with the manager to control the situation of stress. Secondly, the high relationship/low task style was communicated by the manager because by the manager participating in the stressful situation and handling it, the employee should be handling the stress too. In other words, the manager is setting an example of high relationship by being right alongside the employee, not just telling the employee a task and then not being involved. Future research should seek to understand how these situational leadership styles influenced the follower to mature in their role and how effective the leader was in using these styles.

## **Conclusion**

Using situational leadership theory as a guide, the goal of this study was to show how situational leadership has implications in a (QSR). While situational leadership has been around for awhile and has been researched before, it remains a leadership theory for situation-based effectiveness (Kunnanatt, 2016). Future research should address what situations are the most effective for situational leadership needs. Situational leadership is useful for educating the leader on how to grow and to communicate to their followers in important situations. While situational leadership does primarily look at leadership styles on a situation basis, it does prove useful in understanding the communication patterns of leaders. Leaders that use and have knowledge of situational leadership may be able to empower, transform, and inspire their followers with other

leadership styles, such as transformational leadership. Succinctly, situational leadership offers a great tool and puzzle piece in guiding leaders to instill effective leadership qualities to their followers to perhaps be leaders themselves.

## Bibliography

- Baker, D. P., Day, R., & Salas, E. (2006). Teamwork as an essential component of high-reliability organizations. *Health services research, 41*(4p2), 1576-1598.
- Crichton, M. (2005). Attitudes to teamwork, leadership, and stress in oil industry drilling teams. *Safety Science, 43*, 679-696.
- DuFour, R. (2004). What is a professional learning community? *Educational Leadership*, 1-6.
- Fernandez, C. F., & Vecchio, R. P. (1997). Situational leadership theory revisited: A test of an across-jobs perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly, 8*(1), 67-84.
- Griffin, M. A., Patterson, M. G., & West, M. A. (2001). Job satisfaction and teamwork: The role of supervisor support. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 22*, 537-550.
- Hosek, A. M., & Thompson, J. (2009). Communication privacy management college instruction: Exploring the rules and boundaries that frame instructor private disclosures. *Communication Education, 58*(3), 327-349.
- Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K.H. (1977). *The Management of Organizational Behavior*. Engelwood Cliffs.
- Jones, G. R., & George, J. M. (1998). The experience and evolution of trust: Implications for cooperation and teamwork. *Academy of Management Review, 23*(3), 531-546.
- Kunnanatt, J.T. (2016). 3D leadership-strategy-linked leadership framework for managing teams. *Economics, Management, and Financial Markets, 11*(3), 30-55.
- Leithwood, K.A. (1992). The move toward transformational leadership. *Educational Leadership, 49*(5), 8-12.
- Lovelace, K.J., Manz, C.C., & Alves, J.C. (2007). Work stress and leadership development: The role of self-leadership, shared leadership, physical fitness and flow in managing demands and increasing job control. *Human Resource Management Review, 17*, 374-387.
- Mathe, K., & Slevitch, L. (2013). An exploratory examination of supervisor undermining, employee involvement climate, and the effects on customer perceptions of service quality in quick-service restaurants. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research, 37*(1), 29-50.
- McCleskey, J.A. (2014). Situational, transformational, and transactional leadership and leadership development. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly, 5*(4), 117-130.
- National Restaurant Association (2016). Statistics on restaurant employees and restaurants.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Silverthorne, C., & Wang, T.H. (2001). Situational leadership style as a predictor of success and productivity among Taiwanese business organizations. *The Journal of Psychology, 135*(4), 399-412.
- Tracy, S.J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Vecchio, R.P. (1987). Situational leadership theory: An examination of a prescriptive theory. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 72*(3), 444-451.
- Vecchio, R.P., & Boatwright, K.J. (2002). Preferences of idealized styles of supervision. *The Leadership Quarterly, 13*, 327-342.