

Adjusting Leadership to the Situation

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Scenario

As a leader, I've had to rethink how I manage my team, especially when facing challenging situations. One example involved an engineer named Owen B., whose performance was noticeably low. When I took over his management, it seemed like everyone else had written him off, a mistake I almost made myself. While Owen was a nice guy, his work was consistently slow, often lacked the necessary detail, and he kept missing deadlines. At the time, I was new to management and focused primarily on completing tasks and achieving results, rather than supporting my team's growth.

Owen's substandard work consistently presented challenges. It was habitually submitted late and incomplete, and it lacked proper testing. Consequently, we frequently had to undo his changes to prevent them from compromising the overall product's integrity.

We have a struggling engineer who was one step away from a formal performance improvement plan. To address this effectively, I needed to return to basics and develop a robust strategy, one that would both support Owen and help him become a high-performing engineer. Which leadership theory would be most applicable to Owen?

Leadership Theories

Fiedler's Contingency Method

Fred Fiedler's Contingency Model of Leadership, which he developed in 1967, states that there's no single "best" way to lead (2022). Instead, a leader's effectiveness depends on matching their fixed personality or motivation to the degree of control the situation affords them. Fiedler used the Least Preferred Co-worker (LPC) scale to figure out if a leader is more focused on the task (Low LPC), meaning they feel good when they hit goals and do great in situations that are either super easy or super tough, or if they're more focused on relationships (High LPC), meaning they care most about getting along with people and shine brightest in situations that are somewhere in the middle (Daft).

To determine how "favorable" a situation is, one considers three factors: how well the leader and team get along, how straightforward the task is, and how much formal power the leader has (2022). Together, they create eight distinct control scenarios. Since Fiedler believed people don't fundamentally change their core personality, his theory suggests that organizations should adapt the job or situation to fit the leader's natural style, rather than attempting to force the leader to change (Daft).

Path-Goal Leadership Model

Path-Goal Theory, developed by Robert House in the 1970s, draws heavily from Expectancy Theory to suggest that a leader's primary job is to "clear the path" for followers to achieve their goals (Anderson). Unlike Fiedler's theory, which assumes a leader's style is fixed, Path-Goal theory argues that leaders are flexible and can and should adapt their behaviors to fit

the needs of their team and the work environment. The effective leader identifies barriers that prevent employees from succeeding and removes them, thereby increasing employees' motivation and the likelihood of receiving rewards (Daft).

To do this effectively, the theory identifies four distinct leadership behaviors: Directive (providing structure and clear expectations), Supportive (focusing on well-being and approachability), Participative (consulting with the team on decisions), and Achievement-Oriented (setting challenging goals and showing confidence in the team). The correct style depends on the "contingencies" of the situation (Daft). For example, a Directive style is best when tasks are ambiguous and complex. In contrast, a Supportive style is most effective when tasks are repetitive or stressful, as it helps mitigate boredom or frustration associated with the work (Channell).

Situational Leadership

Situational Leadership Theory (also called Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model) shifts the focus from the leader to the followers. The core premise is that there is no single best leadership style; instead, effective leaders must adapt their behavior based on the Readiness (or Maturity) of the team members they are leading. Readiness is determined by two factors: Competence (ability, knowledge, and skills) and Commitment (confidence and willingness). As followers grow and develop, the leader's style should shift from directive to supportive, and finally to delegation.

The model proposes four specific leadership styles (S1–S4) to match four levels of follower readiness (R1–R4) (Daft):

- Telling (S1): High Task/Low Relationship. Best for R1 followers (unable, insecure/unwilling). The leader provides explicit instructions and closely supervises.
- Selling (S2): High Task/High Relationship. Best for R2 followers (unable but willing/motivated). The leader still provides direction but adds support to build confidence and "sell" the goal.
- Participating (S3): Low Task/High Relationship. Best for R3 followers (able but insecure/unwilling). The leader steps back from instruction and focuses on encouraging input and decision-making.
- Delegating (S4): Low Task/Low Relationship. Best for R4 followers (able and willing/confident). The leader empowers the follower to work independently with minimal supervision.

Application to Scenario

Application: Fiedler's Contingency Method

Based on Fiedler's Contingency Theory, I first identify my natural leadership style. I was focused primarily on checking off tasks on the list and achieving results rather than on interpersonal growth, suggesting that I am a Task-Oriented (Low LPC) leader. I then assessed the situation: Leader-Member Relations are likely poor or moderate (trust is broken due to the missed deadlines and near-PIP status), Task Structure seems low (ambiguity is causing him to miss details and testing requirements), and Position Power is strong (I have the authority to initiate a PIP) (Daft).

Fiedler characterizes this specific combination (poor relations, unstructured tasks, but strong power) as a Highly Unfavorable situation. Surprisingly, Fiedler's model suggests my

natural Task-Oriented style is actually the best fit for this crisis. In sinking-ship scenarios, a team doesn't need a Relationship-Oriented leader to build consensus; it needs a directive leader to take control. Attempting to enforce a "supportive" relationship style might backfire by creating greater ambiguity for Owen.

To apply Fiedler's "Job Engineering," I should modify the environment to match my strengths rather than trying to change my personality. I should focus on increasing the Task Structure. Since Owen struggles with necessary detail and proper testing, I should break his work down into particular, bite-sized tasks with explicit Definitions of Done and rigid checklists.

Application: Path-Goal Leadership

Applying Path-Goal Theory to the Owen scenario requires me to view my leadership role not as a fixed personality (Fiedler) or a maturity judge (Hersey-Blanchard), but as a guide responsible for removing obstacles. Currently, the path between Owen's effort and a successful outcome is impeded by ambiguity; he doesn't appear to know how to meet the necessary detail or testing standards. Therefore, the most effective behavior to adopt initially is Directive Leadership (Daft).

Since Owen's work is habitually submitted late and incomplete, the theory suggests that these factors prevent him from receiving rewards and from avoiding the PIP. I need to establish specific standards, schedule precise check-ins, and explicitly define what "done" means for each ticket. By imposing this structure, I help reduce the role ambiguity that is causing his performance to lag.

However, Path-Goal Theory is flexible. I should simultaneously employ Supportive Leadership. While being directive about the tasks, I must be approachable and concerned about his well-being. This dual approach ensures that, while I am removing technical obstacles

(Directive), I'm also helping to remove psychological obstacles such as fear or frustration (Supportive), making the path to high performance attainable for him again (Daft).

Application: Situational Leadership

Applying Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership to this scenario requires diagnosing Owen's Readiness Level. Despite being a nice guy, his performance indicates he is at R1 (Low Readiness): he is Unable (lacks the skills or attention to detail to finish tasks correctly) and likely Insecure (the repeated failures and looming PIP likely destroyed his confidence) (Daft). While he may be willing in spirit, his output suggests he does not know how to succeed in this role.

Because Owen is at R1, the appropriate leadership style is S1: Telling (High Task, Low Relationship) (Daft). Unlike Fiedler, which would ask one to change the environment, this theory asks me to change my behavior to provide extreme direction. I must define the "what, how, and when" for him. Instead of asking him to build a feature, I would give him specific, small tasks with rigid instructions and check his work frequently (perhaps daily).

As Owen completes these small, supervised tasks, his competence and confidence will increase. Once he proves he can handle the basics without breaking the build, I would shift to S2: Selling (High Task, High Relationship) (Daft). I can continue the close supervision but start explaining the "why" behind the architectural decisions and offering more encouragement, gradually weaning him off the micro-management as he transitions toward independence.

AI Reflection

Google Gemini generated the following output on Jan 11, 2026:

Prompt

Given the scenarios given (attached as file) and the theories, what model and approach should I use with Owen? Please give your answer in paragraph form. Cite your sources.

AI Response

Based on the scenario and leadership theories provided, the most effective model to apply with Owen is **Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory**. This model is particularly well-suited for this situation because your goal is not just to manage the immediate crisis, but to "turn him into a high-performing engineer," which aligns with the theory's focus on adapting leadership styles to foster follower growth and maturity (Daft).

To begin, you must diagnose Owen's current "Readiness" level. The text indicates that Owen is consistently submitting "substandard work" that is late, incomplete, and lacks proper testing. Furthermore, the fact that he was "one step away from a formal performance improvement plan" suggests his confidence is likely shattered. This combination of being "Unable" (due to lack of skill or detail) and "Insecure" places him at the **R1 (Low Readiness)** level (Daft).

Consequently, you should adopt the **S1: Telling** leadership style (High Task, Low Relationship). While your natural inclination might be to support him because he is a "nice guy," the Situational Leadership model suggests that at this stage, he needs explicit direction rather than emotional support. You must define the "what, how, and when" for every task, providing "specific, small tasks with rigid

instructions" and supervising him closely, perhaps even daily (Daft). This effectively mimics the "Directive" behavior found in Path-Goal theory but frames it as a temporary developmental stage rather than a permanent fix.

As Owen begins to succeed with these smaller tasks and his competence grows, you should then transition to the **S2: Selling** style (High Task, High Relationship). At this stage, you continue the close supervision but start explaining the "why" behind decisions to build his understanding and confidence (Daft). This progression allows you to move away from the static nature of **Fiedler's Contingency Method**—which would require you to change the job environment to fit your fixed personality—and instead use a dynamic approach that develops Owen from a struggling employee into the high-performer you envision.

Human Reflection

Artificial intelligence functions as a statistical word prediction mechanism. It processes input words by converting them into tokens, which are then used to search within its neural network for the k -closest word to the semantic meaning of the provided tokens. It operates as an advanced search engine for the subsequent word. Consequently, its knowledge base is constrained by the information available to it. I omitted several human-centric factors, such as that Owen was not initially hired for his current role and had not received adequate training. In the absence of this context, the machine provided the most suitable answer. In Owen's situation, I concur that a task-intensive strategy, coupled with appropriate coaching, is the optimal course of action to resolve the current challenge.

Conclusion

Reflecting on Owen's case, it is clear that a generic management style was insufficient for addressing the specific challenges of an underperforming engineer. While my initial focus was simply on checking off tasks, applying these theoretical frameworks has highlighted the critical need for leadership flexibility. Although Fiedler's model correctly identified that my natural task-oriented focus aligns with this "unfavorable" scenario, Situational Leadership offers the most dynamic framework for my long-term development. By acknowledging that Owen is currently at an R1 readiness level, I recognize that I must provide specific, rigid instructions to build the competence he lacks rather than relying solely on emotional support. Despite the AI's failure to account for Owen's non-initial hiring for this role, I agree with the synthesis that a task-intensive strategy, coupled with appropriate coaching, is the optimal solution. Ultimately, this structured approach aims not merely to avoid a performance improvement plan; it is designed to transform Owen into a high-performing engineer.

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