

## **Situational leadership for developing group culture.**

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*Professionals working with groups of young people often experience the following challenge: "How do we develop the motivation and cohesion of this group to allow us to work on the key objectives we are here for?" This paper begins by exploring the process of group development and then goes on to map out a conceptual framework for leadership of these groups. It suggests that professionals must be prepared to adopt a range of leadership styles and that the match between these leadership styles and the groups needs at any given time is a crucial factor in this group development. The paper then goes on to explore potential issues in adopting a situational leadership style including congruence with each professional's values and 'natural' style, and the dilemmas that result from having to develop a 'new' style to match the developing needs of the group.*

*The group of twenty five 16 year old students sit quietly as the teacher instructs, "As we look forward to the next 5 days together here on the island, I would like you to think about what guidelines we should put in place to guide us in how we operate as a group. I would like you to write your ideas here on this poster and I will come back in twenty minutes to see how you have got on." Twenty minutes later the teacher and other staff return to find the task completed but with 'guidelines' such as; "We will stay up all night", "we can swear as much as we like...", "we can smoke...", "we can do whatever we want..." and all the students have signed their names to the 'contract'.*

Professionals in settings such as social work, mental health, outdoor education, therapy, teaching etc often work with groups of young people and the dynamics in these groups can vary widely. Sooner or later we can be faced with a group where we begin to despair at their attitudes and actions and wonder if it is possible to work with them. Sometimes this can be like watching a herd of stampeding cattle and we wonder if it is wise to be standing in front of them! As in the anecdote above these groups often leave us wondering if the leadership style we adopted with them was really what they needed or did we miss the mark somehow?

On the other hand, perhaps we have also experienced leading a group where over time they transform into a close knit, supportive and enthusiastic team making significant changes in their lives. It can leave us wondering, "What creates such a group?", "Does this happen randomly or can we actively catalyse this process?" and "How can I move this difficult group in that direction?"

Programmes are generally designed around a range of educational, therapeutic or developmental objectives, perhaps depending on the setting (ie: achievement, behavioural change etc). Functional or cohesive group culture is seldom one of these overt outcomes as the outcomes generally focus on the needs of the individuals in the programmes rather than the group as a whole. However, professionals running programmes like this would be likely to agree that a functional or cohesive group culture is an essential pre requisite for all these other outcomes. Is there a 'secret recipe' for developing a healthy group culture?

## Development of Group Culture

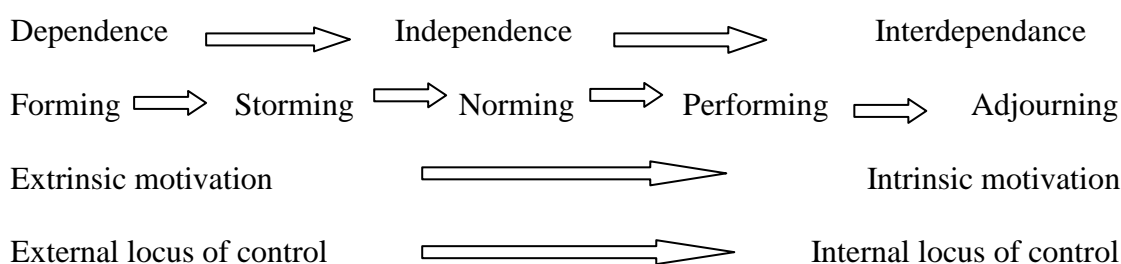
Conceptual frameworks relating to individual and group development often involve a process of moving from less functional group culture to a more functional culture. (see Table 1). Numerous researchers have tried to order, number and name the stages such as the well known model by Tuckman and Jensen (1997); Forming, Storming, Norming Performing, Adjourning. Not every group experiences all of these stages and the stages are not necessarily in this order but we do notice that groups often change dramatically over the period we are working with them.

Eric Schusser (2005), an experienced teacher at Dunstan High School in Alexandra recognises Stephen Covey's developmental stages of Dependence, Independence and Interdependence. He describes how his classes transition through these stages over time as he works with them;

*"My students are highly at risk when they enter the programme. Most students are **dependent** on me to guide them down the bumpy road.....". "In the second and third term a change starts to occur.....our relationship deepens and they experience a class feeling that they like and want more of...a feeling of respect, dignity and trust. In this setting **independence** grows, skills grow and students are challenged on their selfishness....". "In the third and forth term magic occurs, challenges to behaviour are met with consideration rather than cursing, acceptance and apologies rather than violence. People are feeling more empowered and **interdependent**. They help each other and some of this is transferring into other areas of life. " (Schusser, 2005, p107-108)*

It is interesting to consider other conceptual frameworks which may also mirror this process such as a progression from 'extrinsic motivation' (where an individual is motivated by rewards and consequences provided by someone else) moving towards 'intrinsic motivation' (where an individual is motivated for their own achievement). Likewise another related concept is 'external locus of control' (where an individual believes that all the decisions in their lives are made by others) through to 'internal locus of control' (where an individual feels that they can make their own decisions).

**TABLE 1: Group Development Continuum**



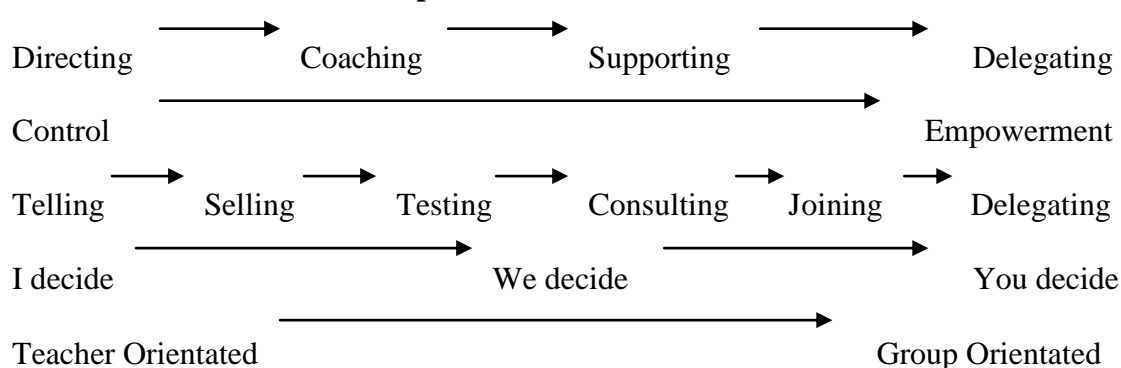
As professionals working with young people it is interesting to consider the following; 'Do we see our role in education, development or therapy fitting with a group development continuum, ie: developing groups of young people who begin to take responsibility for their own lives, develop maturity, and become self determining?' As a teacher the author can recall 13 year old students arriving at the secondary school looking and feeling a bit lost and being really dependant on external guidance. However as these same students matured though the years at school they became more and more interdependent and finally once they began considering leaving school they had to become largely independent. Most would agree, this process is integral to our work with young people.

## Situational Leadership Models

Leadership has been described as ways we express our influence and there is a plethora of leadership models and theories. (Leithwood, Jantzi, Steinbach, 1991). A group of these leadership models are portrayed using a sliding scale model with styles varying based on how much authority is exercised by the leader and how free group members are to contribute to decision making.

Hersey and Blanchard (1963) created a model called Situational Leadership in the late 1960's that allowed leaders to analyse the needs of the situation they are dealing with, and then adopt the most appropriate leadership style. Their 4 point scale is as follows; Directing, Coaching, Supporting, Delegating and each stage is characterised by the level of direction and support given by the leader to the person or group being lead.

Simpson and Gillis (1997) describe a leadership model which moves from 'Control' to 'Empowerment' which is used in Project Group Adventure's therapeutic programmes in Atlanta Georgia. This model is a 10 step process, where '1' is total external control of the group, with the staff initially imposing and enforcing all rules, with the power dynamic shifting towards more and more group control or empowerment, till at '10' where the group is completely self governing. The author has spent several months working in this programme in the past and was impressed to see groups of challenging young people taking a high degree of responsibility for themselves and each other in the programme.

**Table 2 Situational Leadership Models**

Tannenbaum & Schmidt (1973) have a similar scale with the six categories of; Telling, Selling, Testing, Consulting, Joining and Delegating. Heron (1989) describes the dynamics involved in educational decision making and highlights the possibility of leaders adopting a range of decision making roles. These involve Hierarchy – I decide, Cooperation – we decide, and Autonomy – you decide.

This continuum of control to empowerment has also been recognized by many writers in Education. Lewis (1996) describes a range of approaches to classroom leadership, two of these being ‘teacher orientated’ and ‘group orientated’. In the teacher orientated model, the teacher assumes the right to decide the rules for appropriate behaviour, and also uses recognitions and punishments to ensure these expectations are met. The group orientated model involves power sharing between the teacher and the class, where both rules and consequences are determined by classroom meetings and although the methods of monitoring this may look similar to the teacher orientated approach, the goal is no longer simply the students conforming to the teachers demands;

*“In the teacher orientated approach, the use of ‘choice’ for students to do as they are told or be punished is largely a fake choice. However in the group orientated approach the choice is genuine, and practitioners using this approach believe that only through genuinely free choice can students come to set limits on their own behaviour” (Lewis, 1996, p2)*

Alton-Lee (2003) in the *Best Evidence Synthesis* describes numerous research outcomes which indicate sustained higher achievement where students were empowered to take charge of their learning. Wilson-Hill (2006,) describes how; “a transformative and facilitative teacher style to promote students participation can be developed and nurtured, making a gradual change from a more transmissive model of teaching.”

### **Correlation between leadership style and group development stage.**

What role do we have at each stage with a group and what options does this give us as leaders? It seems that what is required on the left side of the continuum is a leader who is directive, sets boundaries and parameters which are not negotiable or that young people have any input into. On the contrary, what is required on the right side of the continuum is a leader who has become much less directive, where their role is now facilitation of the decisions that are being made by the group.

Hersey & Blanchard (1982) describe how the particular leadership style chosen (S1-S4) is based on the developmental level of the individual being lead. They designed four categories (D1-D4), each of which are a blend of the follows ‘competence’ and ‘commitment’. In their model each developmental stage has an appropriate leadership style; ie: S1 to D1 etc. Priest and Gass also describe a correlation between leadership style and group development stage;

*In the past, leaders have often relied on repeating past occurrences and the ‘magic’ of groups to reach their intended goals. By understanding group development, however, you*

*can choose activities, leadership styles, and effective strategies that are appropriate for the needs of the group in a particular stage. When you accomplish this your program will “flow”, or have a sense of natural timing that allows participants to get the most out of their experiences. (Priest & Gass, 1997, p. 70)*

This implies that if we choose to adopt a group development model as in Figure 1 above then we must also adopt a contingency or situational leadership model where our style and role varies as the group develops. In reality it is seldom that leaders will give total responsibility to a group, however from the young persons perspective even a small amount of choice can feel a lot different than no choice at all which is often their experience.

A practical way in which this model can play itself out is in the aspect of group rules, contracts or guidelines which state the acceptable ways of interacting in any particular group. A leader using this model needs to use a flexible method of setting contracts. This may mean that initially expectations are set totally by the leader, ie; “These are my expectations of everyone in this group: mutual respect and one person talks at a time.” However, within a few sessions or weeks, the leader could then facilitate a discussion with the group along the lines of “How do you think our group guidelines are going?, What should we change?” following the progression of the “I decide, we decide, you decide” model. This model not only relates to who sets the guidelines, but also who is responsible for implementing and enforcing the guidelines. The opening anecdote in this article illustrates what happened when the author relinquished too much control of the group too soon resulting in chaos. It also put the author in the position of having to take back control and effectively mandate new group guidelines which was not well received by the group. The lesson in this experience was to be more conservative with the process of handing over responsibility to a group in the early stages of work with them.

How does this model impact our initial leadership starting point with a group? Not all groups start on the less cohesive side of the continuum, some may already have a strong degree of interdependence and maturity in place so a leader may not always begin their leadership style on the directive side either. Some factors that influence the group’s development and can act as indicators of their current development needs may be; the age of students, the size of group, how well the leader knows the group, the setting and type of activity, prior experience and competence of the group.

### **‘Natural’ leadership style**

Another key determinant of what leadership style we use with a group is our personal preference as leaders, or what could be called, ‘natural’ style. Priest & Gass (1997) describe how a leaders orientation to approaching leadership issues is a result of their own emphasis on the two dimensions of ‘task’ and ‘relationship’. Task focus is related to the level of concern the leader has with getting the task done, whereas Relationship focus is the concern the leader has with maintaining positive group interactions. Task focussed leaders are most comfortable at the left end of the situational leadership continuum which Relationship focussed leaders are more comfortable on the right.

However when leadership style is correlated with group development level it is clear that the leadership style chosen in given situation must be determined more by the groups needs rather than the leaders preference. This inevitably puts leaders in the perhaps challenging position of having to allow for flexibility in their leadership style and chose at times to operate in a style which is not ‘natural’ for them and which may feel uncomfortable.

For some leaders, the directive side of the continuum is most familiar, where they are quite comfortable giving strong direction and guidance to their groups. However this role may soon become redundant as the group develops because it leaves very little room for the group to take responsibility and ownership. On the other hand, other leader are very comfortable in the facilitator role, in fact they may have an ideal in their head of how a group should interact and are greatly surprised when the group doesn’t seem to meet these expectations. In these cases they may find themselves not giving clear guidance and firm boundaries and as a result the group loses cohesion and control. In this case a situational leadership model can be extremely insightful in that it can allow a leader to be more comfortable in taking a more directive role at

the start of a groups development, not because its necessary how they would like to be as a leader, but because they can see that the boundaries are a means to an end, that in effect a period of control can lead to empowerment.

Similar themes emerge from the writing of Celia Lashley, an author who has undertaken extensive research in boys schools in New Zealand, prior to which she managed several jails for Correction Services. She describes how the year 9 boy (13 year old) needs to know where his boundaries are, that they need to be brightly coloured and firm because he is going to hurl himself into it on a regular basis over the next few years and he must be able to bounce off without hurting himself. She goes on to explain that there needs to be the beginnings of real consequences for him pressing against this boundary using the metaphor of an electric fence;

*“.....as he walks the boundary for the first time, he'll touch it to check out how it feels, how real it is and as part of his learning he needs to feel the light tingle in his fingers. It's this that tells him that the boundary is real, that the people in his life are watching, that they do care and are genuine in their desire to keep him safe....(Lashley, 2005, p 78)*

This metaphor continues in a similar way for the Year 10 boy, in fact perhaps increasing the levels of direction, overt reinforcement of boundaries, swift implementation of consequences and making sure there's a limit to the amount of debate about breaking the rules. However this escalation of the consequences reverses as the young person continues to mature;

*... "in Year 12 the electric current can be safely switched off as the maturation process is now fully under way. "In year 13....there is a point where the boundary needs to be removed all together and replaced by a white picket fence with a number of large clearly marked exit gates. This is the area that appears to present the greatest challenge to boys schools. It's a relatively new experience to consider the complete removal of the boundary which used to be in place so long and which teachers have grown used to. I could detect some trepidation at the suggestion that Year 13 boys need to be given a strong sense of the control they have over their own destiny" (Lashley, 2005, p 92- 93)*

This hesitancy in leaders to relinquish control of their groups emerges in other literature too. Results from Lewis's research with teachers (discussed earlier) showed that the group orientated approach is most supported by teachers with the teacher orientated approach a close second. However, what was very interesting is that when Lewis analysed the data based on the year level that was taught, there was a tendency for teachers to desire an increase in retention of power when teaching older age groups;

*"Clearly there would seem to be a gap between what teachers would ideally like to utilize in schools and that which is practicable" (Lewis, 1996, p3)*

*"With regard to policy, the research findings highlight the need to develop a discipline policy that progressively provides more decision making for students as the ages and relevant skills of the students increases" (Lewis, 1996, p4)*

This increase in control with age may be related to external measures such as the need to push students to succeed in gaining qualifications. Perhaps another reason for the hesitancy of some leaders to devolve control and responsibility to the group is also partly due to concerns regarding risk management and the need to maintain safety parameters.

This task of selecting and implementing an appropriate leadership style is complex and challenging and there are many factors to consider. Priest & Gass (1997) have formulated a Conditional Outdoor Leadership Theory Model where leadership style is not purely determined by group needs but selected based on a mixture of the following 5 factors; environmental dangers, individual competence, group unity, leader proficiency and decision consequences. This also implies that the situational leadership scale is not uni directional, always moving towards increased group responsibility, but that the leader may need to regain 'control' in some situations. Broadwell (1994) highlights this issue and proposes an adaption of Situational

Leadership called Bi-Polar leadership where leadership style is linked not only to groups development stage but also to external measures such as forces acting on group as well as from within.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the link between the process of group development and leadership style. The model of situational leadership being described here requires the leader to be tuned into the needs of the group and adapt their style and role to suit the current group needs. It also requires the leader to continually be looking for opportunities to induct the group into taking responsibility for some of the choices in the programme, to share some of their power. It has also suggested that leaders are likely to have a preferred style and that challenges exist when the leadership style required to match the developmental stage is different to this 'natural' style. However unless these challenges are met, it is possible and even likely that the leader can in fact impede the development of a group and the individuals within it.

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