UTILITY OF SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

TO RETAIL MANAGERS

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A Research Project

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In Partial Fulfillment

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in

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study sought to determine the perceived utility of Situational Leadership amongst retail managers in their work. A sample of 29 retail managers with training in Situational Leadership was surveyed on their general use of Situational Leadership, their usage of its specific components, and whether they experienced potential values of Situational Leadership found in the research literature. A focus group of five additional retail managers with training in Situational Leadership analyzed the results of the survey to provide qualitative comments and richer interpretation of the survey data. The study found that managers use Situational Leadership, including three of its benefits discovered in prior research, and find it useful although there is bias in the use of the styles advocated by Situational Leadership and some discrepancies between the results of this study and prior studies in regard to assessment of employee development level.

Keywords: Situational Leadership, Management, Retail, Leadership Style, Development Level

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Can a decades-old model address the challenges facing contemporary leaders in an increasingly complex world? With technology drawing an ever-growing population ever-closer together, the need for leadership and the demands placed upon leaders are both magnified in intensity. Into this at-times-chaotic environment, Situational Leadership has been offering a surprisingly simple solution for several decades, promising to give managers tools that improve employee outcomes for any team.

Background and History

Situational Leadership (SL) is one of the most popular and widely used leadership models in management and organizational training (Avery & Ryan, 2002; Papworth, Milne, & Boak, 2009; Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). It is widely praised for its intuitive appeal and common-sense approach. Despite its popularity, there is significant disagreement within the literature if it is indeed effective. More specifically, some research suggests that the model lacks necessary theoretical underpinnings (Graeff, 1997; Thompson & Vecchio, 2009), that there is insufficient evidence to support the specific desired effects of SL (Graeff, 1997; Vecchio, 1987), or that the evidence is actually to the contrary (Blank, Weitzel, & Green, 1990). Authors have long agreed that there is not enough research on this model (e.g., Northouse, 2013; Yukl, 2013). As a result, it is notable that a model with so little research support continues to be promoted and utilized by a large number of businesses and organizations.

Simply put, SL is a model that describes two factors of leadership and two factors of employee development, and then proposes matching one of a resulting four possible leadership styles to each of a resulting four possible employee development levels for

each specific job task. There have been some changes to SL in the 40 plus years since it was first introduced and there are now essentially two versions of the model. Broadly speaking, both versions categorize leadership behaviors as being comprised of consideration for employees and efforts to initiate structure, in-line with the research and theory current at the time SL emerged. Employee development level is conceptually composed of competence and commitment. From these constructs, SL states that properly matching leadership style to employee development level will yield improved results in employee satisfaction and job performance (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 2013).

Amongst the preponderance of data that does not directly support the SL model, some researchers, such as Zigarmi and Roberts (2017), Avery and Ryan (2002), and Thompson and Glasø (2015), have found that components of SL do seem to align with positive outcomes for leaders and followers subject to the model. The first component researchers have emphasized is that general flexibility in leadership style—choosing different leadership styles at different times, although not necessarily the specific styles proposed by SL—is beneficial for leaders to practice (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). A second and related component that is supported by research is the advice to customize and personalize leadership styles for each individual follower (Avery & Ryan, 2002). Taken together, these two findings suggest that leaders should change style based on the situation and not apply a one-size-fits-all approach to everyone. These ideas are conceptually easy to grasp but at odds with intuitive notions of management that there may be one best way to lead. For instance, Hersey and Blanchard (1972) themselves began their investigation into leadership styles by asking the question "what is the best leadership style?" and continue to frame explanations of SL in this way (Blanchard,

Zigarmi & Zigarmi, 2013). Furthermore, SL is in alignment with predominant trends in psychological theory and practice recommending prioritizing the uniqueness of the individual over group dynamics (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence Based Practice, 2006; The British Psychological Society, 2011). Additionally, differences in cultural values are important to take into consideration when processing the meaning of these findings for application of the SL theory globally/across cultures and this flexibility in style lends itself to cultural adjustments (Can & Aktaş, 2012). Most studies on SL have been conducted in so-called "Western" organizations where a tendency towards individualism is more prevalent. Lastly, a third significant finding amongst the research on SL is a recommendation for leaders to come to an agreement with their followers on an assessment of the followers' developmental progress, rather than relying solely on the independent assessment of one or the other (Thompson & Glasø, 2015). In the language of one of the theory's originators: "partnering for performance" (Blanchard et al., 2013) is essential. With this change in approach, managers and employees work together as partners in development and management is done *with* employees and not *to* them.

Significance of This Study

Given the need for leadership training in many different group settings and SL's popularity as a leadership model and training, looking at the research-based benefits of this model is important. As stated above, although SL has been found to be problematic in both theory and outcome, there are aspects of the model that have been found to be of value. From this mix of information, we do not yet have a clear understanding of why SL continues to be popular. The research that has not found evidence of SL's predicted outcomes has been available for decades and only continued to accrue, yet this has not

reduced the use of SL within organizations by any apparent measure. There are values researchers have found within the conceptual framework of SL but not that support the entirety of the model in any of its versions. There must be other value organizations are finding from SL beyond what researchers have studied that explain its continued implementation.

Most research on SL has focused on either testing the theoretical underpinnings of the model or–more commonly–on attempts to measure its predicted outcomes. The two primary companies that deliver SL training–Hersey's Center for Leadership Studies and the Ken Blanchard Company–advocate for the benefits and effectiveness of the model, but do not publish data on how recipients of the training feel about it. This focus has left room to study specifically what leaders value about SL in more depth. Studies have examined whether leader behavior complies with SL and whether or not it aligns with follower needs or perceptions, but there has not been significant research exploring why managers enjoy SL. Even as important new studies on SL have continued to periodically appear e.g., Thompson & Glasø (2015); Zigarmi & Roberts (2017), only one study has specifically looked into what benefits leaders have found in their experience of SL (Avery & Ryan, 2002). More specifically, Avery and Ryan's (2002) study found connections to the broad positive themes of SL mentioned above (i.e., use of different leadership styles, personalized approaches to individual employees, and partnership between managers and employees for employee development), even without specifically looking for them. Replicating and expanding this inquiry may shed further light on these connections, in particular, leaders' perceptions of what makes SL useful. A further investigation into what value managers perceive from SL, and whether there are

connections between what managers value and the SL principles supported by research, could provide a possible answer to the question of why SL continues to be used despite an overall lack of supporting research evidence.

In addition to the three most prominent threads in SL research outlined above, some smaller points from the research are also important to mention. Firstly, SL studies generally have been conducted within military, higher education, and healthcare settings, and researchers have noted the importance of further investigations into SL which look at a larger variety of work environments (Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). Second, some researchers have suggested that a possible benefit of SL is that it is simple enough to be recalled readily and applied even in hectic situations—and that its simplicity may have something to do with its wide utilization, rather than the details of the theory or its results (Avery & Ryan, 2002). Thirdly, SL research has found most support for style one of leadership which is recommended for employees with the least experience and ability (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). Lastly, studies have suggested that the number of employees supervised has been found to be a significant variable for managers' ability to apply SL, and that having too many employees to supervise can vastly reduce the ability to invest in employee development (Avery & Ryan, 2002).

Few studies have looked at the impact of SL on retail work settings, which is notable because managers in such environments tend to have less formal job training than in other sectors which suggests they may benefit from specific leadership training. Furthermore, employees in retail environments often begin with little experience or training and this makes this context a good test of SL's leadership style recommendations beginning with style one, which is recommended for employees with little experience and

consists of high task direction and low support. Lastly, in many retail environments

managers have many responsibilities and many employees to supervise, indicating this

context may be a good test of SL's applicability in such environments. This industry also

has its own significance within the modern world; both serving as a growing employer in

the new economy and also itself being an industry undergoing massive change and threat

from new technologies and competition (Corkery, 2017).

Both for the benefits of the ongoing viability of SL and for those who might benefit

from being trained in it, there is a need in the research to understand more about what

drives SL's popularity. The managers who have been trained in SL may have more to say

about what specifically they appreciate about it. There can also be a stronger connection

between the benefits found in research on SL and the experience those undergoing the

training are taking away from it.

Purpose of This Study

This purpose of this study was to gather manager perceptions of the utility of

Situational Leadership in their work.

Research Setting

Managers were asked questions to determine if they value the same aspects of SL that

researchers have found to be beneficial. The responses of the managers can be used to

uncover reasons for SL's popularity as well as to assess if SL training delivers the key

benefits revealed in the research.

The research subjects in this study were managers from retail environments who tend

to supervise a large number of employees and who have multiple reporting relationships

to other managers. Managers were asked about their experience with SL in general and also specifically around important themes found in other research. Managers were asked about flexibility in leadership style, personalization of leadership approach to each follower, and collaborating with followers on an assessment of the follower's developmental level. Managers were also asked about the intuitiveness of SL, their use of the method, their experience, and their overall perceived utility of SL.

The results of this research may illuminate whether there are other areas of value from SL beyond its predicted outcomes and theoretical problems that might explain its continued popularity. Additionally, this research project attempts to draw connections between valuable aspects of SL found in previous research studies and perceived value managers take from SL as an enhancement of the significance of these valuable aspects. Lastly, this study indicates areas for further investigation into the impact and value that SL imparts upon managers as a contribution to the possible needs and benefits for manager training in general and the possible further enhancement of management as a human activity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to gather manager perceptions of the utility of SL in their work. A thorough description of SL follows, as well as a review of the research literature published on this topic. Criticisms of SL from the literature are outlined as well as benefits that have been identified.

Description of Situational Leadership

Situational Leadership (SL) was first developed in 1969 by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard. Known then as Life Cycle Theory of Leadership, it was renamed as Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1972), and eventually split into two versions, Situational Leadership and Situational Leadership II, in 1985 (Avery & Ryan, 2002; Thompson & Glasø, 2015; Thompson & Veccio, 2009). Thompson and Vecchio (2009) have also proposed a Situational Leadership III model in conjunction with their test of the validity of the previous versions of SL, but their version has not been picked up by anyone else and in its pursuit of validity sacrifices much of the specificity and prescriptive nature of SL (Northouse, 2013).

SL emerged from a body of related research and theory on management approaches and in its long history has gone through a few notable changes. Precursors to Hersey and Blanchard's (1972) work include Reddin (1967), who defined management as having two key variables in relationship orientation and task orientation. Several authors and researchers were dealing contemporaneously with these same two variables of management that are key to SL. Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1960) discussed autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles as involving varying combinations of task and relational leadership behavior. Others have considered initiating structure and

consideration as key management behaviors (Blanchard et al., 1993; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). Korman (1966) also dealt with initiating structure and consideration as important components of leadership behavior; describing a curvilinear relationship between the two. SL can also be considered closely related and one among a body of contingency theories of management, including Fiedler's (1967) Contingency Theory and House's (1971) Path-Goal Theory, which lay out various approaches to matching a style of leadership to a specific context (e.g., if situation A exists, take action one). SL's matrix of high and low combinations of relationship and task behaviors can be considered a simpler way of organizing what Blake and Mouton (1964) arranged into their Leadership Grid, first introduced in the early 1960s.

Into this environment, Hersey and Blanchard (1972) outlined their theory of SL. In SL, leadership style is composed of a combination of initiating structure and consideration, called 'task' and 'relationship' in the first iterations of the model, and the contextual variable that determines which style would be more effective is the maturity level of the subordinate for a specific task (Silverthorne & Wang, 2001; Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). Therefore, a central principle of SL is a recommendation to match leadership style to characteristics of a subordinate's level of development. Hersey and Blanchard (1972) describe the two variables of task and relationship focus both as able to be used in either high or low degrees by managers and the combination of these creates four possible management styles. The first style (S1) is composed of high task focus and low relationship focus and is named 'Telling', the second style (S2) is composed of high both task and relationship focus and named 'Selling', the third style (S3) is high relationship and low task focus called 'Participating', and the final style (S4) is low both

task and relationship and known as 'Delegating'. Having defined four management styles, the authors also define four possible maturity levels for subordinates and ascribe a corresponding appropriate management style to each. Subordinate maturity is comprised of two variables (subordinate will and skill), also called willingness and ability. The first maturity level (M1) is construed as low skill and low will, the second (M2) as some skill and will, M3 as high skill and some will, and M4 as high skill and high will. Given these mappings of subordinate maturity levels and corresponding leadership styles for each, SL would recommend for a case where an M1 subordinate with low skill and will is working, that the best results would be achieved through a manager applying an S1 style of high task focus. As that subordinate or others progress through the stages of maturity, the manager would increase relationship focus while later reducing task focus and eventually falling back to low task and relationship focus in a delegating stance. In summary, M1 subordinates are best served by S1 style management, M2 by S2, M3 by S3, and M4 by the S4 style of delegation. Figure 1 shows a graphic depiction of these styles and their orientation to managerial task and relationship focus.

Figure 1

Situational Leadership components, variables, and their relative relationships

S
u
p
p
o
r
t
i
n
g

| Participating | Telling |

S3 | S2
S4 | S1

| Delegating | Selling |

low ← → high

Directing

willingness:	low	high	low	high
ability:	low	low	high	high
	M1	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**
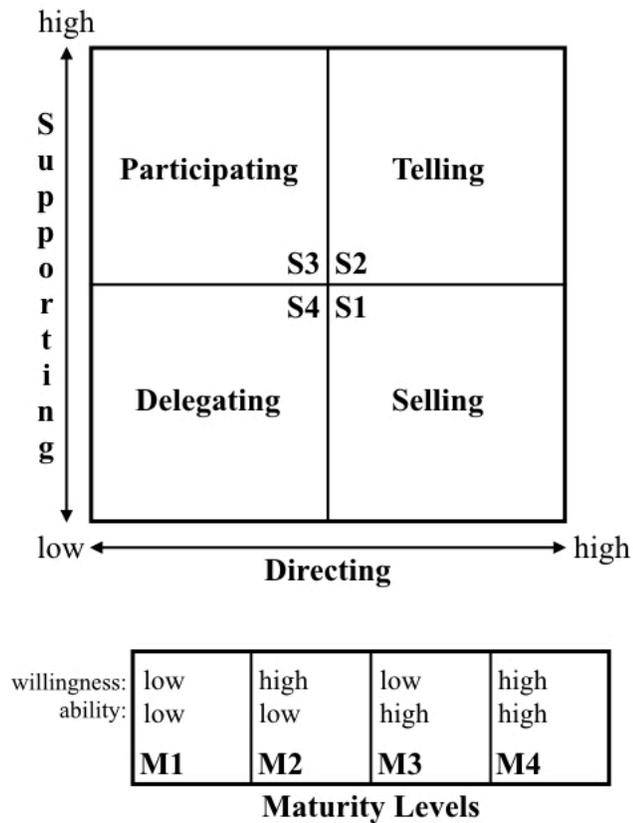
Maturity Levels

Versions of Situational Leadership

This conceptualization and mapping of leadership style to subordinate maturity level

is the essential concept of the Situational Leadership Theory as first presented by Hersey

and Blanchard (1972) and it remains at the core in subsequent revisions, despite some

changes (Graeff, 1997). The most significant change to SL came in the form of

Situational Leadership II when Blanchard split from Hersey both for development of the

model as well as in their business of selling and promoting SL training (Avery & Ryan,

2002; Graeff, 1997). Blanchard et al. (1993) describes the changes in Situational

Leadership II as having come as the result of ongoing research as well as partly in answer

to criticisms the theory had received up to that point.

The most updated version of Situational Leadership II (SLII) can be found in the work of Blanchard et al. (2015). The changes in SLII included the use of new terms as well as some underlying changes to components of the theory (Avery & Ryan, 2002; Graeff, 1997). The first terminology change in SLII is that Blanchard et al. (1993) referred to SL as a model rather than a theory. Some researchers have suggested that the main motivation for this change is to protect SLII from some of the significant criticisms it has received on theoretical grounds by removing the word theory (Graeff, 1997). Further terminology changes included renaming the leadership styles from Telling, Selling, Participating, and Delegating to Directing, Coaching, Supporting, and Delegating. Blanchard et al. (1993) notes that this was done to create more clarity by reinforcing the two leadership components of Directing and Supporting as well as to finesse some of the implications that might have unintentionally come from the previous labels, such as that only S3 allowed participating. To this end, subordinate 'Maturity' was also relabeled as 'Development Level' to remove associations of age from the concept. Similarly, the components of the now-named Development Level are relabeled as Competence and Commitment rather than Ability and Willingness (Blanchard et al., 1993). Figure 2 illustrates the changes between the two main versions of Situational Leadership.

Figure 2

SL Theory and SL II model's respective components for comparison of changes

high				high			

Situational Leadership Theory

Left diagram:

Supporting (vertical axis): high to low
- Participating (S3) / Telling (S2)
- Delegating (S4) / Selling (S1)
- Directing (horizontal axis): low ← → high

willingness:	low	high	low	high
ability:	low	low	high	high
	M1	M2	M3	M4

Maturity Levels

Right diagram:

Situational Leadership II

Supporting (vertical axis): high to low
- Supporting (S3) / Coaching (S2)
- Delegating (S4) / Directing (S1)
- Directing (horizontal axis): low ← → high

commitment:	high	low	variable	high
competence:	low	some	high	high
	D1	D2	D3	D4

Development Levels

These terminology do not impact the underlying philosophy of SL, but some changes are slightly more significant than others (Graeff, 1997). Chief amongst these changes is the adaptation of the definitions of subordinate maturity or development level. While still composed of two factors, SLII changes the 1st development or maturity level's definition from low competence or ability and low commitment or willingness to low competence but high commitment, reasoning that new employees are often eager to start and succeed at a new job or assignment (Blanchard et al., 1993). In this way, the definition of D1 is now equal to what was previously M2. The changes in subsequent development levels also contrast some with the earlier maturity level definitions, and additionally introduce another change: moving from the binary way that the first Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) defined the two components (high or low) to more of a spectrum. In SLII, D2 is

now low commitment with some competence whereas the corresponding M2 in SLT was high willingness with low ability. Commitment/willingness has been reversed from high to low and competence/ability has been changed from low to an in-between level of 'some'. This muddying of the waters continues with D3 now switching M3's high competence and low commitment (translated to SLII vocabulary) to high competence and 'variable' commitment (Blanchard et al., 1993). While Blanchard et al. (1993) lays out compelling reasoning for making these changes, the mere shift from a binary model to one with a spectrum of possibilities introduces new complexity to the theoretical underpinnings of SLII that were not present in SLT, some of which muddies the ability to validate the theory in research settings (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). It is also unclear how much of these changes were made based on merely re-thinking and how much were made with the support of data, as only some of the data is shared in the published books that advocate the model.

Terminology Confusion

In addition to the specific and intentional changes in terminology between SLT and SLII, there are many other words that are used amongst the research on SL and related concepts that are not always clearly defined. The source material from Hersey and Blanchard (1972) is clear and consistent with terminology, but follow-up research does not adhere to the standards set out by SL's creators. Business jargon, such as managers, leaders, management, and leadership are often conflated or used interchangeably in some works where elsewhere those terms have been disambiguated. Similarly, group-members, subordinates, followers, and other synonyms are used to refer to those a leader manages (or a manager leads) without a distinction necessarily being made about whether there are

any differences conceptually. Lastly, the terms 'willingness or commitment' and 'ability or competence' that Hersey and Blanchard (1972) have used in their work correspond broadly to concepts from the broader research pool of 'initiating structure and consideration' which in turn have also been referred to by yet additional terms such as 'task and relationship' (Judge et al., 2004). Throughout the forthcoming review of research, these terms will be used interchangeably unless a specific meaning is intended or was noted in the study where it was used. In that case, efforts will be made to draw attention to changing terminology from one study to the next when appropriate and clarify definition and intent when possible. See Appendix A for a list of synonyms used within the literature on Situational Leadership.

Weaknesses and Criticisms of Situational Leadership

An initial and oft-cited problem with SL is that there is not enough research on it, especially considering how popular and widely used the model is (Papworth, Milne, & Boak, 2009; Thompson & Vecchio, 2009; Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). Claims of SL's popularity range from the vague but grand; "one of the most widely known" (Papworth et al., 2009; Vecchio, 1987), to more specific and significant: "over 3 million managers trained" (Avery & Ryan, 2002, p. 244) and "used in 70% of Fortune 500 companies with 14 million trained" by The Center for Leadership Studies (2018, para. 1). SL research has been claimed to amount to over 50 dissertations, master's theses, and research papers (Blanchard et al., 1993). That said, other researchers complain that this number cannot be verified and its significance is reduced because a high proportion of these studies have not been published (Graeff, 1997).

Conceptual problems. Amongst the research that has been published, much of it can be categorized as either critical of theoretical aspects of SL or as describing how its predictions are not born out in studies. Criticisms of the theoretical aspects of SL range from curiosity on how the leadership styles were paired with the development levels to questioning of the nature of development levels (Graeff, 1997). For example, how can the change between SLT's M1 with low willingness and SLII's D1 with high commitment be explained theoretically? The pairing of leadership styles with a corresponding development style: S1 for D1, S2 for D2, etc., is a key feature of SL (Thompson & Glasø, 2015). Hersey and Blanchard (1972) go further than these one-to-one pairings, describing how after the ideal matching of leadership style and development level there are also second-best options, sometimes a third-best, and a worst pairing (Goodson, 1989). For instance, Hersey and Blanchard (1972) would say that for an employee at a D1 development level for a particular task, a S1 leadership style would be best, S2 second best, S3 third best, and S4 the worst. For a D2 employee, S2 would be best, S1 and S3 would be second best, and S4 would be worst. However, researchers have pointed out that with four leadership styles and four development levels, there is a matrix of 16 possible leadership style and development level interactions, an extent to which SL does not appear to delve satisfactorily by focusing primarily only on the recommended four matching leadership styles and development levels (Avery & Ryan, 2002).

Within the SL concept of development level, several researchers have taken issue with the components of competence and commitment, especially since SLII defined them as being more than just binary concepts. Thompson and Glasø (2015) point out some difficulties with the non-linear conceptualization of the development of competence and

commitment and ways in which it differs from other research on development.

Additionally, Papworth (2009) questions if the limitation of development to only two

components does not too severely abstract away other important factors that contribute

significantly to an employee's development level and the knowledge a leader needs to

respond effectively and accurately to that development level. In the SL model,

commitment and competence are important notions, but these researchers are asking to

know more about the relationship between the ideas. Might commitment create

competence? Could an employee develop competence without going through the project

changes in commitment that SL maps? The Ken Blanchard Companies (2017) have

attempted to answer questions about development level with a review of related research

and theory, but a full resolution has not been presented.

    Lack of predicted findings. Several researchers have taken the model of SL and

constructed studies to test if its predictions are found to be true. There is diversity in these

studies in many aspects, including populations studied, research design, and measures

and assessments used. Some of this variety contributes to the strength of the overall body

of research by showing similar findings in different contexts while in other ways the

variety creates dissonance within the research by making results incomparable.

    Papworth et al. (2009) demonstrates a common finding across many research studies

on SL by finding that results only support SL's recommendation of an S1 style of

leadership with no support for the other three styles. However, even though this study did

not find specific support for S2, S3, and S4, it did find support for the overall arc of

leadership style match to development level in that as subordinates develop, managers

reduce directive behavior. Additionally, Papworth et al. (2009) was constructed in a

peculiar way that reduces the credibility of the research results. This study examined the proportion of talking done by leader and subordinate in feedback sessions, presuming that all sessions were equally successful and reasoning that the proportion of talking by the leader versus the subordinate would be progressively less through progression of the leadership styles from S1 to S4. There are several issues with this approach. First, by starting with a presumption that all feedback sessions were equally successful, the study eliminated any possibility of judging the degree of success from each of SL's described leadership styles. Second, by relying on merely a count of words spoken, the study does not bring any qualitative evaluation of the language used to bear which may be too reductive of a measure of a conversation. Finally, the study was done on subject leaders who did not specifically have any exposure to SL training. This presumes that SL would be emergent from any successful instance of leadership which, in turn, suggests that SL is the only true and correct way to understand successful leadership relationships between leaders and team-members. No SL descriptions have made such a claim, and Blanchard at al.'s (1993) SLII model specifically changes the description of SL as a theory to a model to avoid this type of misunderstanding (and criticism). Other researchers (Avery, 2001) have designed studies for subjects who have not been trained in SL in ways that are additive to the literature. For example, this study aimed to discover latent preferences for particular leadership styles in a population.

In one of the earliest tests of SL, Vecchio (1987) found support for the S1 style of leadership and less for the other three styles. Blank et al. (1990) found support for S1 in a relatively extensive test of leadership styles along the vectors of task and relationship behavior. These and other studies while validating the S1 style recommended by SL have

brought significant doubt to the presumed values of styles 2 through 4 (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009).

Inconsistent measures. Across the body of research done on SL, there is an inconsistent use of measures. To evaluate leadership style, a Leadership Effectiveness and Adaptability Description questionnaire from Hersey and Blanchard (1972), LMX (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009), and most commonly the LBDQ-XII (The Ohio State Leadership Studies, 1962) are all used. To evaluate employee development level, the Employee Readiness Scale (Fernandez and Vecchio, 1997), Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Porter et al., 1974), and a performance rating scale from Liden and Graen (1980) are most commonly used. Several additional measures are used in individual studies, such as a job satisfaction instrument (Carlos Do Rego Furtado et al., 2011) and the content analytic approach (Papworth et al. 2009). This plethora of measures used is commendable in the wide-spread efforts it represents to find the best way to measure somewhat complex components of both leader and subordinate qualities. However, it also makes comparison of different studies difficult and possibly points to further confusion around the conceptual definition of factors within the SL models. Additionally, there are some criticisms that the measures used in SL are self-referential and thus do not establish independent data points (Northouse, 2013). Given the aforementioned limited amount of research on SL, this use of differing instruments further dilutes the pool of data.

Counterpoints to Criticisms of Situational Leadership

In discussing the history of SL through its first 25 years, Blanchard et al. (1993) acknowledges an insufficient quantity of research around the model but also suggests that many studies completed at that time had not fully understood the model. Graeff (1997),

however, lays the blame for any researcher confusion back at the feet of the authors of SL. Similarly, looking back on an uneven history of support for SL in research, Zigarmi and Roberts (2017) acknowledge a dearth of research and 'uneven support' amongst research completed for the model, but find more support among more recent studies due to innovating research design. These opinions come from those directly involved in the promotion and selling of SL training, and while their admission of uneven support does not dismiss the criticisms of SL, they are correct to point out that there are significant positive aspects that exist within the research and literature on SL as well.

An additional large discrepancy often found in the literature on SL is a generalization from a focus on a specific task, as both versions of SL advocate clearly, to a broader concept of employee development level that is not tied to a particular unit of work or job task. This may be a tempting extension of SL to broaden its possible application, but it is specifically contrary to the original source material for all versions. Research on SL should be careful to adhere to the specifics of the model or explain how and why a more general interpretation of SL's concepts is being used to avoid subjecting SL to criticism that is unfair and inappropriate.

Regarding the dearth of research that exists on SL, it is also likely that there is significantly more data that has been collected on SL that is outside the domain of published research literature and within the confines of the organizations that conduct SL training or–perhaps more significantly–within the organizations which have implemented SL training for their employees. It appears possible that this data may be considered confidential, proprietary, a competitive advantage, or otherwise too sensitive to share outside the organization that may have collected it. This could also explain why

published research has been concentrated amongst public institutions such as the military or research-oriented organizations such as hospitals and schools.

Strengths of Situational Leadership

Beyond the debate about the shortcomings of SL, there have been several specific strengths of SL articulated in research studies. Some of these benefits of SL also suffer from the general criticism that there is not enough research yet to prove these suggestions, but nonetheless many promising paths have been laid out across several studies. The three most significant points of value found within SL appear to lie in how it promotes flexibility in management style (Northouse, 2013; Silverthorne & Wang, 2001; Yukl, 2013), how it promotes a personalized relationship between a manager and each of their reports individually (Northouse, 2013), and the benefits that can come when alignment of manager and employee assessment of employee development level is achieved (Thompson & Glasø, 2015).

A powerful line of thinking within the literature on SL is that the best leadership style varies depending on the situation. While this concept appears simple on face value, it importantly contrasts to commonly held perspectives that there is an objectively best style of leadership and is also at odds with common paternal or 'Confucian' attitudes and approaches to leader/subordinate relationships that are latent in many cultural norms (Silverthorne & Wang, 2001). Research has also shown that even amongst those trained in SL, there are often preferred styles of leadership within cultural groups (Avery, 2001; Yeakey, 2002). SL's guidance to change leadership style based on circumstances is a useful contrast to these tendencies to use just one leadership style and can lead to a more diverse and positive set of outcomes (Silverthorne & Wang, 2001).

A second value that can be taken from SL is that each employee that a leader supervises would benefit from a customized and personalized management approach. Not only should a manager adapt their style to the situations they are managing, but their employees' development would benefit from a considered and personalized style of leadership that lines up with their development level (Northouse, 2013). In this way, SL can positively impact organizational results related to the long-term development of the organization's employees as well as the results from a specific and time-limited situation.

These two benefits of SL build to a third positive outcome that can be achieved if a manager and a subordinate can come to an agreement on the subordinate's development level, and a resulting type of management they would benefit from given this development level. This benefit logically follows from adapting leadership style to situations and personalizing leadership style per individual, but encounters more obstacles in real-world practice. It seems managers tend to view themselves as quite good at assessing their subordinates while these subordinates commonly do not rank the manager's abilities so highly (Avery & Ryan, 2002; Carlos Do Rego Furtado et al., 2011). Additionally, when subordinates rate themselves they do not come up with the same assessment that managers do. Avery and Ryan (2002) found that managers think assessing is not very hard and readily accepted this aspect of the SL model with little concern over any possibility of mistake. Even if leaders were able to accurately assess an employee, they might not apply the matching style SL recommends as Furtado et al. (2011) say that leaders' self-assessment of their own leadership style usage and flexibility does not agree with how their employees assess them. A solution to these problems is offered by Thompson and Glasø (2015), who introduce a 'congruence approach' where

agreement between leaders' and followers' rating of followers' development level is sought-after. Blanchard et al. (2013) describes a 'partnering for success' approach with similar intent. These efforts to encourage managers and employees to work together on assessment and a corresponding leadership style as a path for development requires additional effort but can avoid problems in disagreement and mismatched leadership styles which can be a key takeaway of a SL implementation for managers.

To summarize, there are three important benefits of SL found across research that may serve to explain some of the model's popularity as well as some of the benefits from implementing it as a training for managers. The first is to encourage more flexibility in leadership style by managers instead of any approach that suggests there is one best way to manage. The second benefit comes when a manager specifically customizes a leadership approach to an individual employee based on that individual's development level, which is an extension of flexibility in style by situation to the individual's development. The third important benefit comes from a leader and a subordinate partnering to develop a shared assessment of the subordinate's development level and the appropriate leadership style to use for developmental progress.

Additional Benefits of Situational Leadership

Avery and Ryan (2002) found that the managers surveyed could think of no better management model than SL, so SL may be a superior model in the minds of those who are trained it in or it may be the only model people know. Respondents to several surveys have pointed out that SL is the only training that they have been exposed to, and that it is simply better than nothing or acting on intuition. SL is also known to be relatively simple conceptually (Avery & Ryan, 2002) and its self-evident nature makes it easy to grasp and

consequently easy to teach. Avery and Ryan (2002) also found that this simplicity is an asset for another reason; that it can be more easily remembered and recalled in the heat of a moment when it might be applied. A model easy enough to be readily recalled could be important for managers who feel tight on time, as even some managers who like SL found that time constraints in their job were one of the largest obstacles to using it. If it is amongst the simplest and this is still a problem, no more complicated model would logically survive these type of work environments. Managers reported this stress from either having too much work or more specifically having too many employees to supervise (Avery & Ryan, 2002). Another related strength of SL is that it is prescriptive in nature, recommending what managers should do in various situations (Northouse, 2013).

Previous calls for future research have included requests for longitudinal studies to better discover the long-term outcomes of SL use, as well as statements of the need to test it in different environments (Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). The organizations have ranged from higher education, to the military, to hospitals, and beyond; but more evidence from more contexts could still provide more strength to the benefits of SL or possibly notes of differentiation on what aspects apply best in what environment.

Zigarmi and Roberts (2017) outlined benefits of new vectors for which SL might offer value. Since SL remains very popular, it is useful to know whether it is effective as many studies have sought to discover or prove. Additionally, SL's popularity may be evidence in itself of the value SL carries and more direct research into what those who receive the training feel could be a source of discovery of these additional values. Should specific values be found, they in turn could be emphasized more in future SL training

delivery. Amongst the literature, only Avery and Ryan (2002) directly aim to discover from managers who have been trained in and use SL what its value is. Their study gathers data across several industries in Australia and is additionally informed by an earlier study (Avery, 2001) conducted on the Australian manager audience at large to learn about their preferences in leadership styles. While this study is very illuminating on the value seen by SL trained managers, its sample size of 17 leaves room for more data to be collected outright as well as from different populations.

In addition to expansion to a larger sample size, Avery and Ryan's (2002) study could be a greater contribution to the literature if enhanced by specific inquiries into the values of SL found in other research. Their study was conducted as a series of interviews with managers who had received training in SL. From the conversations, Avery and Ryan (2002) learned that managers found SL to be appealing for its intuitiveness and simplicity, ease of application, and perceived usefulness to their management responsibilities. The researchers were surprised to discover the respondents reported that assessing employee development was relatively easy. They also discovered an awareness of the need for flexibility in managerial style, but a problematic avoidance of using SL's style one.

Conclusion of Literature Review

SL has enjoyed a lengthy and prestigious popularity in the workplace but has encountered significant criticisms within academic and research literature. However, this criticism has not seemed to impact the popularity of the SL models, nor does it directly address this popularity. While several studies on SL have found some benefits, only one appears to have specifically asked managers trained in SL what they like about the model

(Avery & Ryan, 2002). Little research has been done to explore if there is a connection between the positive aspects of SL and the reasons why it is enjoyable or valued by those who have been trained in it.

Criticism of SL has suggested that there are weaknesses in its theoretical foundations and research has not found supporting evidence–or has found conflicting evidence–for many of the principles of the model. Important potential benefits of SL have been found, including encouraging flexibility in management style, promoting personalized approaches to management style for each employee's development, and advocating for the creation of a mutually agreed-upon assessment of an employee's development level between that employee and her manager. However, these have not been correlated with the impact of SL training on managers. Some additional aspects of SL that appear beneficial include its simplicity, memorability, and its prescriptive nature.

Calls for further research on SL cover a vast span of possibilities, partly due to the often-mentioned lack of a significant body of research on this popular model to begin with. In addition to many suggestions for very specific studies looking into the details of SL (Blanchard et al., 1993), other broader requests include wishes for longitudinal studies and studies across more organizational contexts (Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). It also appears from a survey of the literature that there are few investigations into the ongoing popularity of SL with only Avery and Ryan (2002) directly exploring this question and possibly no published research into the connections between SL's popularity and the positive aspects of the model found across the literature.

Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this study is to gather manager perceptions of the utility of SL in their work. An important study by Avery and Ryan (2002) which surveyed managers who had been trained in SL is the only study in the literature that directly addressed manager's assessments of SL. This chapter describes the participants of the study, the procedures used in the study, and its measures. The method of data collection and data analysis are also outlined.

This study reproduces Avery and Ryan's (2002) study in a new context of retail managers and extends it with questions specifically designed to address the advantages of SL described in the literature. Restated briefly, these areas from the literature include:

- Being flexible in leadership style

- Customizing leadership style for each employee

- Coming to an agreement on employee development level between the employee and the manager

While Avery and Ryan's (2002) study was conducted via loosely structured interviews in order to gather deeper insights and rich data, this study is more structured as it is intended to answer specific questions stemming from Avery and Ryan's (2002) study and other research as discussed in Chapter 2. Retail managers who have had SL training took an online survey to gather their input. After the survey data was collected, a discussion group was formed to look for possible interpretations of the data and to provide richer data in the form of comments and insights.

Participants

Participants in this study are managers with experience in a retail setting who have undergone training in SL. Some of the participants invited have taken SL training given by the researcher and others have received training from other trainers. Data collection did not determine which trainer provided the SL training. Eligible participants indicated that they had both experience managing in a retail environment and training in SL.

Participants were recruited from the researcher's extended professional network and thus the sample is non-random. Retail companies the researcher has professional contacts with include Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Tesla, Warby Parker, and more. It should be noted that the current research was not restricted to these companies if a participant was found from another retail company. The researcher invited his professional contacts to participate and requested that they share the invitation with other qualified potential subjects whom they know so that the sample would snowball to a larger size. The researcher's professional network is mainly within the United States but also extends to Australia, Canada, China, England, Macau, Mexico, and Hong Kong. Participants were not asked what country they were from in the study. Participants were given access to a brief online summary of SL to aid in their recollection of its primary components before taking the study survey.

The survey was taken by 29 participants, although not all participants completed the entire question set. For some questions, as few as 20 people answered. The maximum number of responses to a single question was 24.

Demographic data. Basic demographic data is presented in Table 1**.**

Table 1

Survey Participant Demographic Data

Gender	Individuals	Percent
Female	6	25%
Male	18	75%
Age	**Individuals**	**Percent**
25 - 34	8	33.33%
35 - 44	12	50%
45 - 54	4	16.67%

n = 29

Experience data. Data was captured on amount of experience in management, level of education, as well as time since training in SL in Table 2.

Table 2

Survey Participant Experience Data

Year of experience	Frequency	Percentage
1-3 years	1	4.17%
3-6	9	37.50%
6-10	4	16.67%
10-15	4	16.67%
15+	6	25%
Level of education		
High school	2	8.33%
Some college	8	33.33%
Bachelor's degree	13	54.17%
Graduate school	1	4.17%
Years since training		
0-3	6	26.08%
3-6	12	52.17%
6-10	3	13.04%
10-15	2	8.68%

n = 29

Procedure

Subjects who responded to the survey invitation affirmatively were informed of the voluntary and confidential nature of the study. The study was designed to not collect identifiable information. Limited demographic information on gender, educational level, and experience was collected in the survey. Additional information on time since the most recent SL training was collected. Consent was obtained at the beginning of the survey.

Measures

The measures chosen for this study were created to reproduce Avery and Ryan's (2002) study and to address the research questions particular to this study. While Avery and Ryan's (2002) study was exploratory in nature, used intensity sampling, and conducted interviews with some quantitative questions, this study was primarily quantitative for consistency of results with an option provided for respondents to reply at more length. The original research material from Avery and Ryan (2002) could not be obtained, so this study reconstructs questions from their published work. Questions were either reproduced directly from earlier studies or derived from the findings of earlier studies and are marked as such. The full list of questions asked of each participant can be found in Appendix B. Questions 1-4 and 9-12 were answered by a Likert scale of 1-5 with 1 indicating low, infrequently, or not very and 5 indicating high, frequently, or very. Questions 6-8 were answered by multiple choice with multiple selections allowed from the following four options; 1) Style one: directing/telling, 2) Style two: coaching/selling, 3) Style three: supporting/participating, 4) Style four: delegating. The final question serving to allow for optional additional feedback to be shared.

Method

Study participants answered the questions via a Qualtrics online survey.

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data from the survey was analyzed for comparison to Avery and Ryan's (2002) study, to identify additional trends, to answer the primary research question of what the perceived utility of SL to retail managers is, and to assess the secondary

research question of whether benefits of SL found in research are perceived or

demonstrated by managers. The data is presented in chapter 4 and the comparison and

analysis is presented in chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

This project sought to fulfill the following purpose: to ascertain the perceived utility of SL by retail managers in their work. The results of the quantitative and qualitative findings from the research survey are presented in this chapter. The survey was completed by 29 respondents, although not all respondents answered each question. Results were then reviewed with a focus group composed of five retail managers who met the eligibility criteria to participate in the study but were not participants to gain a deeper understanding of their meaning.

Situational Leadership Survey Data

13 questions about SL were asked in the survey (Appendix B). Responses to each question will be presented individually. Not every participant answered every question.

Question 1 (Table 3) was intended to determine if indeed SL is perceived as easy to use as it is often described in the literature, as discussed in Chapter 2. Over 59% of respondents indicated that SL was either somewhat easy or extremely easy to start using.

Table 3

Question 1: How hard was it for you to start using Situational Leadership (SL)?

Extremely easy	1 response	4.55%
Somewhat easy	12	54.55%
Neither easy nor difficult	4	18.18%
Somewhat difficult	5	22.73%
Extremely difficult	0	0%

n = 29

Question 2 (Table 4) was intended to determine if managers use SL in their work after receiving training in it. Over 68% of respondents indicated that they used SL either most of the time or always.

Table 4

Question 2: How often do you use SL in your work?

Never	0 responses	0%
Sometimes	4	18.18%
About half the time	3	13.64%
Most of the time	12	54.54%
Always	3	13.64%

n = 29

Question 3 (Table 5) was intended to discover if SL is an intuitive theory as described in the literature and discussed in Chapter 2. Over 45% of respondents indicated that their use of SL was sometimes or more unconscious or intuitive with only approximately 9% indicating somewhat conscious and none indicating conscious/intentional.

Table 5

Question 3: If and when you use SL, would you say this use is "conscious" and intentional or "unconscious" and intuitive?

Unconscious/intuitive	5 responses	22.72%
Somewhat unconscious	5	22.72%
Sometimes unconscious and sometimes conscious	10	45.45%
Somewhat conscious	2	9.09%
Conscious/intentional	0	0%

n = 29

Question 4 (Table 6) was intended to… (This table does not have a blurb about it).

No matter what you write here, make sure that Table 6 starts at the top of the next page.

Table 6

Question 4: How flexible in style to you believe you are as a manager?

Always use one style	0 responses	0%
Mostly use one style	2	9.09%
Sometimes use multiple styles	5	22.72%
Often use multiple styles	12	54.54%
Always use multiple styles	3	13.64%

n = 29

Question 5 (Table 7) was intended to determine if managers follow SL's advocacy for using multiple styles, which was also discussed as a significant potential positive of SL in Chapter 2. Over 90% of respondents indicated that they sometimes or more often used multiple styles.

Table 7

Question 5: Do you attempt to use all four styles?

Yes	20 responses	90.90%
No	2	9.09%

n = 29

Question 6 (Table 8) was intended to discover tendencies amongst respondents to prefer one or more styles over others. Over 77% of respondents indicated that they prefer style three while the next most preferred was style two (31%).

Table 8

Question 6: Which style(s) do you prefer? (multiple selections allowed)

Style 1: Directing/telling	3 responses	13.64%
Style 2: Coaching/selling	7	31.82%
Style 3: Supporting/participating	17	77.27%
Style 4: Delegating	3	13.64%

n = 29

Question 7 (Table 9) was intended to discover which styles respondents do not prefer. 75% of respondents prefer style one the least. None of the respondents to this question selected more than one answer.

Table 9

Question 7: Which style(s) do you prefer the least? (multiple selections allowed)

Style 1: Directing/telling	15 responses	75%
Style 2: Coaching/selling	1	5%
Style 3: Supporting/participating	2	10%
Style 4: Delegating	2	10%

n = 29

Question 8 (Table 10) was intended to discover which styles respondents find more difficult to use. 40% of respondents found style one to be more difficult to use. Multiple selections were allowed. Of the 20 responses to this question, only one selected multiple styles.

Table 10

Question 8: Are there any of the styles that you find more difficult to use?

No, all styles are equally easy to use	3 responses	15%
Style 1 (Directing/telling) is more difficult to use	8	40%
Style 2 (Coaching/selling) is more difficult to use	5	25%
Style 3 (Supporting/participating) is more difficult to use	1	5%
Style 4 (Delegating) is more difficult to use	4	20%

n = 29

Question 9 (Table 11) was intended to discover the degree to which managers personalize their style for each individual who reports to them, which is a significant possible benefit to SL as discussed in Chapter 2. 65% of respondents indicated that they personalized their style most or all of the time.

Table 11

Question 9: How often do you personalize your management style for the individuals you manage?

I do not personalize my management style for specific individuals	0 responses	0%
Sometimes I personalize my style	1	5%
About half the time I personalize my style	6	30%
Most of the time I personalize my style	10	50%
I always use a personalized style for each individual	3	15%

n = 29

Question 10 (Table 12) was intended to assess perceptions of how difficult the

assessment component of SL is for managers. 55% of respondents indicated this was

either somewhat or extremely easy.

Table 12

Question 10: How difficult or easy is it to diagnose follower developmental level?

Extremely easy	3 responses	15%
Somewhat easy	8	40%
Neither easy nor difficult	4	20%
Somewhat difficult	5	25%
Extremely difficult	0	0%

n = 29

Question 11 (Table 13) was intended to discover the alignment between manager and

employee assessments of the developmental level of the employee. All respondents

indicated that these assessments were aligned half the time or usually.

Table 13

***Question 11: How often do your assessment of follower developmental level and the
self-assessment of that follower align?***

Never	0 responses	0%
Rarely	0	0%
About half the time	10	50%
Usually	10	50%
Always	0	0%

n = 29

Question 12 (Table 14) was intended to gather an overall assessment of the perceived

utility of SL as a management technique. All respondents indicated SL was either

medium or very effective.

Table 14

***Question 12: How effective do you find Situational Leadership as a technique for
managing?***

Not at all	0 responses	0%
Somewhat effective	2	10%
Medium effective	4	20%
Very effective	11	55%
Extremely effective	3	15%

n = 29

Qualitative responses

As a final question of the survey, respondents were invited to share any comments

they had in a free-form text format in response to this detailed prompt:

Please provide any additional thoughts or comments that you have regarding

Situational Leadership. Responses about your use of SL in your work are

encouraged. Any information about what circumstances you implement SL in or

any barriers to implementing SL you experience are invited, including successes

and struggles using SL, which parts of the SL model you use, when SL works or

does not work, or use of SL amongst your leadership team. If you have more to

offer on assessment of employee development, alignment of employee

development, please do so here. Lastly, any comments on how time impacts your

use of SL and what other management tools you have been exposed to or prefer to

SL are invited. Your answers will be helpful in providing color to our data and

providing rich data that can inform our analysis.

Of the 29 respondents who completed at least some of the survey and the 20 that

completed all of it, seven left responses to the final open-ended prompt. Responses varied

from the short and general such as "SL takes time and practice" to more specific and

related to a particular question asked in the survey such as comments about the difficulty

in assessing employee levels as asked in question 10. There were no clear trends or

themes amongst the open-ended responses but there were answers that added more color

to some of the quantitative data collected in the prior questions.

 Responses specific to survey questions. One respondent added some context to

questions 4, 5, and 10, which asked about switching styles, using multiple styles, and

difficulty of assessing development levels, respectively. The participant pointed out that

switching styles and assessing employees can be difficult due to the 'on-the-fly' nature of

their work environment. Another respondent added perspective to questions 4, 5, 6

(preferred style), 9 (how often do you personalize), and 10 by pointing out that they find

people have a default tendency but that they can check with others to confirm an

approach. This comment acknowledges one of the circumstances SL is suggested to

provide an alternative for–leaders using one preferred style–but suggests peer dialog

rather than SL itself as a solution. A possible causal factor for questions 6 and 7 (least

preferred styles) was raised by a respondent who described a higher success rate for style two and lower for style one and four based on the experience level of the employees they had supervised. Question 3, asking if use of SL was conscious or unconscious, was given a temporal variable by a respondent who described a shift towards unconscious use over time since SL training years ago.

General responses. One respondent tied individual effectiveness with SL to practice and time spent. Another noted the high generalizability of SL to different retail and sales environments and different employee incentive structures. Another listed contextual challenges to using SL consistently, noting that when their environment and job responsibilities changed, this interfered with effective use of SL. This participant also indicated that sometimes structured work objectives such as change management aligned better with using a sequence of styles that appeared to increase the effectiveness of SL.

Reults Conclusion

Of the 29 participants in the sample, not all participants answered every question. Between 20 and 24 respondents answered each of the 12 quantitative questions from this survey and seven provided additional qualitative color and commentary on the utility of SL in their work. Responses indicated that most managers found SL easy to use, used it often, and found it intuitive. Most managers indicated that they were flexible, attempted to use all SL styles, and they provided information on preferred and not preferred styles. Lastly, respondents provided information on customizing style to assessed developmental level of employees and most indicated that they found SL to be useful in their work.

These retail manager survey participants present a new context amongst the research on SL. Their responses were made to questions pulled from previous research as well as

to new questions formulated to assess the presence of findings about the potential benefits of SL present in the literature. Discussion of the implication of the findings from this survey and from the focus group convened to discuss the results will be presented next in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This purpose of this study was to gather manager perceptions of the utility of SL in their work. SL has been a popular management model for many decades that has faced research criticism that its theoretical foundations are weak and not all of its predictions are manifest when it is implemented. The research done in this study investigated both some possible reasons for SL's popularity and potential benefits.

This chapter first summarizes the results from the data presented in Chapter 4. Conclusions are then drawn and salient features discussed. Limitations of the study are presented. Recommendations are made to the case organizations and also to OD Practitioners. Suggestions for further research are lastly presented.

Summary of Results

Several clear findings emerged from the results of the study. Questions were grouped around use of SL, flexibility, preference in style by managers, and assessment of follower developmental level. Each of these areas produced meaningful data.

1. SL is easy to use and is frequently used by those trained in it.

Over 59% of survey respondents stated that SL was either somewhat easy or extremely easy to start using. No one said it was extremely difficult. SL is widely cited as being an easy-to-understand model and respondents to this survey confirm that. It was also discovered that over 68% of respondents report using SL either most of the time or always.

2. Managers consider themselves flexible in use of SL styles.

A core feature of SL is a recommendation to use different styles and over 68% of respondents indicated they often or always use multiple styles. None indicated always

using just one style and only 9.09% indicated mostly using only one style. Over 90% of respondents indicated that they attempt to use all 4 styles of SL.

3. Style three is the most preferred style and style one is the least preferred and most difficult to use style.

There was a clear preference amongst this study's sample for style three with over 77% choosing it as their preferred style. From the opposite perspective, the least preferred style was style one as indicated by 75%. Additionally, style one was also the style most selected as more difficult to use by respondents with 40% indicating this style. These findings correspond to results from Avery and Ryan (2002) and Avery (2000).

4. Managers personalize their style for each individual employee.

Survey respondents reported personalizing their style for each employee to a large degree. 95% of respondents reported doing so about half the time or more, with 65% reporting doing so most of the time or always. This aligns with the literature that indicated this behavior was found to be a significant potential benefit of SL.

5. Managers find it somewhat easy to diagnose the developmental level of employees.

An important part of being able to match a leadership style to an employee's development level, as SL advocates, is to be able to accurately assess this development level. In this study, 55% of respondents found assessing developmental level to be either somewhat or extremely easy. This result contrasts with Avery and Ryan's (2002) study where respondents described having more difficulty assessing the two components of competency and commitment that SL describes as combining to form development level.

6. Manager assessments of employee development level often or usually align with the self-assessment of the employee.

Another finding in the research literature on SL, most specifically by Thompson and Glasø (2015), was that alignment of manager and employee assessment of employee development level was important. All respondents in this survey indicated that their assessments aligned with their employee's self-assessments either about half the time or usually. No respondents indicated assessments aligned never or rarely although no respondents indicated that assessments aligned always.

7. Managers found SL medium or very effective as a technique for managing.

90% of respondents indicated that SL was either a medium, very, or extremely effective technique for managing. This is a strong endorsement of the utility of SL for the work of retail managers.

Conclusions from Results

The survey used in this study reproduced a study by Avery and Ryan (2002) and extended it to ask questions related to additional findings on SL from the literature. One reason to ascertain the perceptions of managers about the utility of SL is to see if it might be a component in the ongoing popularity of SL despite the criticism it has faced in the research literature. Another goal of the research was to test if benefits of SL identified in the research were present in the case population using SL.

1. SL is both liked by and useful to retail managers.

It is possibly the least surprising conclusion of this study. Many studies on SL mention that it is popular and then go on to report substantiated shortcomings of the model without revisiting why a flawed model might remain popular. Some studies

mention that there appears to be a discrepancy between the interests of the research community that has identified problems with SL and organizations which continue to use SL unphased by what has been discovered in the research. This study explicitly states what others have not asked: managers who have been trained in SL both use it in their work after the training and find it useful. Retail managers from this study, most of whom had received training in SL three or more years ago, found SL easy to use, used it in their work, and found it to be effective. This is not to say that the criticisms of SL are not important contributions, but rather to add that there is a component of value found by managers that can explain why SL is so widely used despite its shortcomings. The common claim that SL is intuitive was also supported by this study.

2. Managers believe they use the SL model fully, including the three potential benefits discussed in this study from the research literature.

Participants in this study largely indicated that they attempted to use all styles. While it is important to note that research has found that only some styles of the four described and advocated for in SL are supported as effective, it is also important to note that those who are trained in SL do attempt to use all of its styles. One of the strongest research findings on SL is the benefit of its advocacy for managers to use multiple styles. Results from this study confirm that this benefit of SL is an outcome for respondents who indicated that they are often flexible in style.

Another benefit of SL discovered in the literature was an encouragement to personalize management styles for each employee with whom a manager works. Again, results from this study indicated that a significant majority of respondents were

implementing this potential benefit of SL in the work they do with their respective employees.

A third potentially beneficial outcome of the use of SL identified in the literature was in contributing to an alignment between managers and their employees on each's assessment of the employee's development level. Half of respondents to this study's survey indicated this was the case about half the time and the other half of respondents felt it was usually the outcome.

3. Bias for and against styles is prevalent.

Despite respondents to this study's survey indicating that they tried to use all styles and frequently used many styles, they also indicated a clear preference for style three and that style one was both preferred the least and the most difficult for them. Such clear results for style three and against style one suggests that there is a strong possibility that managers may be applying their own biases in selecting which management style to use rather than basing it on the development level of the employee in question as indicated in the SL model.

These results are congruent with the findings from Avery (2000) and Avery and Ryan (2002) who found that Australian managers similarly preferred to use style three and would also put effort into avoiding use of style one through techniques such as delegating to others employee development tasks that required style one direction. Avery and Ryan (2002) expected to find in their research that SL training mitigated style preferences amongst managers but did not find that. The results from this study therefore extend Avery and Ryan's (2002) findings to a different context and likely cultural sample.

4. Manager confidence in assessment of employee developmental level may be

higher than is useful for the manager, the employee, or the effective use of SL.

Accurate assessment of employee developmental level is a key component of the SL

model given that matching a leadership style to that development level is the key

behavior in SL. Furthermore, research by Thompson and Glasø (2015) indicated that

coming to an agreement with an employee about that employee's developmental level

makes all of SL's predictions more likely to hold. This study found that most managers

found assessment of developmental level to be somewhat or extremely easy and that

alignment on developmental level with employees was common. However, Avery and

Ryan (2002) found the opposite result, that assessment was difficult. Thompson and

Glasø (2015) found that mismatch in assessment of development level was as likely as a

match in some categories and nearly as likely in others.

One possible line of reasoning to explain why this study found alignment of

assessment to be relatively easy could be the characteristics of the sample population.

Perhaps the population of retail managers experiences some unique characteristic or set

of characteristics that makes alignment easier, such as high familiarity with employee's

responsibilities or job tasks, high amount of hands-on or proximal working with

employees, close relationships and knowledge of employees, or other variables. If this

were the case, the use of a unique population would add variety and depth to the research

literature on SL rather than suggesting a problem with this study's methods or data.

The focus group that looked at the results of this study's survey was also surprised at

the results that indicated ease of assessment and high alignment of development level.

Three members of the five person focus group indicated that these results did not align

with their personal experience. One speculated that these results may have reflected more that the respondents understood the model of SL and less that they were able to gain alignment on developmental level.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study including the sample size, the instrument used, and the readiness of the respondents to participate.

1. Sample size.

The sample size of 29 is not as large as it might have been. It is possible that the trends revealed from responses by 29 people would have been different had more people responded to the survey, thus adding power to the results. Additionally, the non-random nature of using the professional network of the researcher may have introduced a bias in the responses, either from over-representing a non-representative company's employees, over-representing a point of view more common amongst the researcher's contacts than in the broader population of retail managers, or through other means. Furthermore, some demographic data not captured about the respondents makes certain data difficult to compare or analyze. For instance, it is difficult to tell if one retail company is overrepresented in the sample as employer data was not captured. Likewise, a comparison between the Australian respondents to Avery and Ryan's (2002) similar study is muddied because respondents to this survey were not asked to indicate which country they live in.

2. Selection of instrument

The choice to use a survey and the specific questions used in the survey impacted the results of this study. This study replicated and extended Avery and Ryan's (2002) study,

but that study used interviews to gather data while this study used multiple choice and Likert-scale questions in an online survey. This choice was made intentionally to gather specific answers to questions in the survey rather than the broader and deeper but perhaps less focused answers that may have resulted from interviews. However, one difficulty encountered that may have biased the results lay in formulating the Likert-scale answers available to respondents when a non-standard scale was used. Some questions, such as question 1 and 2, used standard responses to for their Likert-scales such as extremely easy, somewhat easy, neither easy nor difficult, somewhat difficult, etc. or never, sometimes, about half the time, etc. but other questions used more arbitrary possible answers constructed by the researcher. For example, question 4 offers the possible responses of "always use one style, mostly use one style, sometimes use multiple styles, often use multiple styles, always use multiple styles". It is possible that questions with non-standard Likert-scales do not offer possible answers that accurately capture the desired response a survey participant would have liked to select. The instrument used did not gather possibly relevant data, such as information on the type of SL training that the participant experienced or the participant's skill at utilizing SL. These data may have provided additional insights if the instrument included them.

Additionally, while this survey chose not to use instruments commonly used in other studies of SL such as the LBDQ-XII because they would not provide answers to the questions this study asks, this choice reduces the opportunity to compare results of this survey to other research previously conducted by not using one of the instruments used in other studies. This study also avoided using instruments criticized in the literature as self-referential (Northouse, 2013), but that does not mean that the instrument used here is not

also eligible for the same criticism. Particularly, it was noted by the focus group that the sequencing of questions may have unintentionally directed respondents to answer questions with the response that was most in line with the recommendations of SL rather than the answer most reflective of their worked experience as a manager.

3. Readiness of respondents to complete survey.

The respondents to this research survey indicated that for many it had been some years since they had participated in SL training and this may have had an impact on the results of the survey. Respondents were offered a webpage with a brief review of the basic components of SL as a reminder before they took the survey, but it is not known how many reviewed this material or if reviewing this material may have impacted answers given. Focus group members suggested that the length of time since many survey respondents had had training in SL might indicate that they were being less precise in their answers than they might have been if the training had been more recent.

4. Researcher bias

Researcher bias may also have been a compounding factor with the limitations of the instrument used. Researcher bias may have made its way into the survey through the construction of the questions asked, through the construction of the answers available to select from, or from the sequencing of the questions. The focus group members did not raise the issue of researcher bias in regard to the survey instrument, but they did raise it in regard to the non-random sample due to the use of the researcher's professional network as a path to discover eligible participants.

Recommendations

    Recommendations for retail organizations and other managers. Given the results and conclusions of this study, some recommendations for further implementation of SL can be made. Firstly, noting the positive reception and high use of SL by retail managers who have been trained in it, it is recommended that SL continue to be used amongst this population and for other managers. Research that discounts or disproves some of the predictions made by SL does not address whether people enjoy using it. Since other research finds benefits to SL and this research confirms those benefits, it is prudent to continue to give managers a training which they like, use, and that has demonstrated benefits.

    Secondly, this research further underlines a need for an evolution or addition to SL itself to specifically address bias found amongst practitioners towards use of particular styles. While not all styles have proven equal in outcome in other research studies, the presence of bias towards style three and away from style one is a factor that needs to be addressed in both the SL primary sources and in any training that delivers the SL theory and methods.

    Thirdly, results in this study about the ease of assessment and frequency of alignment of assessment that disagree with prior studies and focus group assessments suggest that more rigor be added to the process of assessment within SL and SL training. This study's results suggest that managers trained in SL may be too cavalier about assessing development level or may not be aware of the significance of this aspect of SL to the overall utility and effectiveness of the model. Making a more robust structure or providing specific methods of assessment could address these concerns around

assessment. However, the universality of SL and the specificity around development level in specific roles or tasks will present a difficult obstacle in ascribing assessment methods that are accurate or useful in all circumstances. It may be more serviceable for SL to specifically recommend that each workplace or organization that wishes to use SL for managers also be directed to develop or chose development level assessment methods that will work for the employees, roles, and tasks present in that workplace or organization.

Recommendations for organization development practitioners. Those who focus on organization development (OD) task themselves with considering the health and potential growth of an entire organization from many possible angles including individual fulfillment, group dynamics, inter-departmental relations, shared values, common mission, change, sustainability, strategy, and the alignment or misalignment of any or all of these factors. To an OD practitioner, SL can serve as an important tool given that managers are important in organizing the efforts of employees, disseminating the vision and values of the organization, and honoring the individuality of those who report to one. Results from this study suggest that SL training is valued by managers and there are several aspects of SL that are in line with the values of OD, including customizing leadership style to each employee and coming to agreement with employees about their developmental level. OD practitioners who work with an organization that already utilizes SL or who implement SL would be well served to pay particular attention to the recommendations above for style bias and developmental assessment. Undiscovered or unaddressed style bias by managers could limit the effectiveness of SL in an organization or promote certain values while demoting others that may be against the interests of an

aligned organization that OD promotes. Similarly, inability or mis-ability of accurately assessing development level or coming to agreement with employees over development level may cause organizational ineffectiveness or reduced valuing or participation in the organization by all members.

Of particular importance in addressing style bias are the results of this research and the Avery (2000) and Avery and Ryan (2002) studies which indicate managers tend to avoid style one out of personal preference for style two or three. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it leaves the needs of an employee at developmental level one unfulfilled. An employee is left to their own devices to develop their ability and confidence when their manager demonstrates these tendencies. Secondly, amongst the research on SL, style one is the most strongly supported and validated style. Therefore, the most proven and effective aspect of SL is left as the most under-implemented. For an OD practitioner, this knowledge should be deployed with efforts to specifically address the responsibilities of managers and needs of developmental level one employees to have task specific directive assistance provided.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study has extended the research on SL to a new context with the population of retail managers that have participated, and it has asked new questions to better address gaps in the research literature. There are many opportunities remaining for further research already identified in prior literature and this study introduces more.

The extension of SL to new contexts was a recommendation made by Zigarmi and Roberts (2017) that this study took up and can still be applied to countless new contexts. Similarly, recommendations by Zigarmi and Roberts (2017) to conduct longitudinal

studies of SL were not addressed by this study and remain valuable paths of investigation. Future research on SL should also be careful to adhere to SL's scope of matching manager style and developmental level per specific job task and not more generally, as discussed in the literature review.

An additional opportunity at large lies in accessing data potentially already collected by organizations that have used SL training for their employees. It is not clear what form this data may exist in, but it is likely that there are at least some correlational data-sets available within organizations that may show if SL training had impacts on performance metrics, employee satisfactions, engagement, commitment, or other variables that these organizations may measure. If this data cannot be found, a quasi-experimental design could be set up with access to an organization who is delivering SL training. More simply, follow-up surveys for employees who participate in SL training could be administered to assess the effectiveness of the training.

The data set from this study also contains additional potential paths of analysis that could provide information on the utility of SL. For instance, the survey used in this study gathered data on gender of respondents but whether the character of responses varied by gender was beyond this study's scope and was therefore not analyzed. Similarly, time since most recent SL training was collected from respondents, but it would not have served the primary research question of this study to analyze how this variable impacts use of SL. Some survey respondents seemed to suggest distance from training would improve skill in SL through practice, while others indicated this time contributed to a shift in use from conscious to unconscious. Blanchard (2013) suggests regularly revisiting the training. The utility of this recommendation could be investigated through

the data set from this survey or more through additional research. Similarly, experience in management was a variable collected in this survey but not analyzed due to lack of correspondence to the primary research purpose. For researchers who would like to know more about how SL is received and used, this could be a lucrative avenue of research to investigate if management experience impacts perceived utility of SL.

An area of curiosity within the results of this study was the bias towards style three and away from style one. While suggestions from this study include addressing this in training, it would also be a topic rich in opportunity for deeper research, particularly across cultures to determine contributing factors and cultural variances. Since style one is the most validated style within the body of research on SL, the data suggesting it is actively avoided by leaders is an important piece to understanding how to achieve the potential effectiveness of SL.

Lastly, in order to better address the curiosity of this study as to what factors influence the ongoing popularity of SL despite its criticisms in the research, a study which focuses on the decision makers within organization who chose to implement the training would be revealing. Asking these deciders what factors they are using to make the choice to implement or continue implementing SL would provide an important point of view on why and how SL has remained popular.

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Appendix A

Vocabulary and Synonyms used in SL Literature

Vocabulary and synonyms used in SL literature

consideration,	initiating structure,	leaders,	members,	maturity,	motivation,	ability,
supportive,	directive,	managers,	subordinates,	readiness,	willingness,	skill,
relationship,	task,	supervisors,	supervisees,	development,	commitment,	competence,
			employees,		confidence,	

Appendix B

Full List of Research Questions

Full List of Research Questions

1. How hard was it for you to actually start using SL? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

2. How often do you use SL in your work? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

3. If and when you use SL, would you say this use is "conscious" and intentional or "unconscious" and intuitive? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

4. How flexible in style do you believe you are as a manager? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

5. Do you attempt to use all styles? (yes or no) (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

6. What style(s) do you prefer? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

7. Which style(s) do you prefer the least? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

8. Are there any of the styles that you find more difficult to use? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

9. How often do you personalize your management style for the individuals you manage? (derived) (Thompson & Glasø, 2015; Avery & Ryan, 2002)

10. How difficult or easy is it to diagnose follower developmental level? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

11. How often do your assessment of follower developmental level and the self-assessment of that follower align? (derived) (Thompson & Glasø, 2015; Avery & Ryan, 2002)

12. How effective do you find Situational Leadership as a technique for managing? (reproduced) (Avery & Ryan, 2002)

13. Please provide any additional thoughts or comments that you have regarding

Situational Leadership.

   a. Responses about your use of SL in your work are encouraged.

   b. Any information about what circumstances you implement SL in or any

   barriers to implementing SL you experience are invited.

   c. Consider including successes and struggles using SL, which parts of the

   SL model you use, when SL works or does not work, or use of SL

   amongst your leadership team.

   d. If you have more to offer on assessment of employee development,

   alignment of employee development, please do so here.

   e. Lastly, any comments on how time impacts your use of SL and what other

   management tools you have been exposed to or prefer to SL are invited.