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Mark Richardson
Cedar Mill & Bethany Community Libraries

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Stepping Up:
Applying Situational Leadership Concepts to Public Library Work With Teens

by Mark Richardson
Reference and Young
Adult Librarian,
Cedar Mill & Bethany
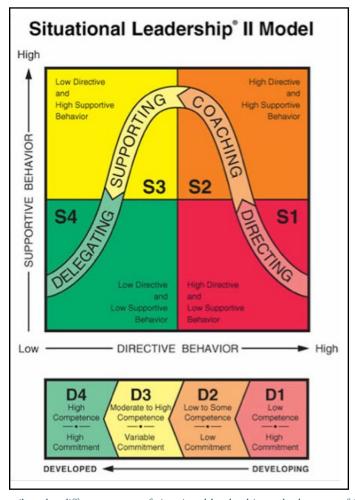*Community Libraries*
markr@wccls.org

Mark Richardson is a Reference and Young Adult Librarian at the Cedar Mill & Bethany Community Libraries in Portland. He has worked there since 2004 and been a member of OLA for most of that time. He was Chair of the Oregon Young Adult Network in 2013–2014 and served on the OLA board during that time. He has his MLS from Emporia State University. Mark enjoys walking his dog, reading, playing guitar, trivia, karaoke and playing games with family and friends.

Working with teens is fun, nerve-wracking, and never dull. After building and growing a thriving teen council at our library for nearly ten years, I've spent some time thinking about what I want teens to get out of their experience at the library. One of the big things that they need and want is to develop leadership skills. Every application for college or scholarships seems to ask how they are demonstrating leadership, so I decided several years ago that I would build in opportunities for them to develop these skills on the council. This has taken the form of them leading meetings, splitting up into smaller groups lead by a teen leader, and taking on other, more advanced responsibilities. After learning a bit more about the Situational Leadership model at the Leadership Institute of the Oregon Library Association (LIOLA) conference, I am able to see the times when council members have demonstrated or responded to leadership behaviors described in the model. This article will look at some of these instances and discuss how teaching teens about this model might strengthen their own leadership abilities.

So what is Situational Leadership? It is a model/process developed by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey 50 years ago designed to help leaders get the best work out of people based on the situation. The model changed significantly as Blanchard (2001) developed it further with Situational Leadership II. This model describes four development levels that people can be in when trying to accomplish something. These levels are defined by a person's competence and commitment on a specific task. You can have high or low competence and commitment depending on variables like how much training you have or how new the task is to you. We all go through this every day, in our work lives in particular. The goal is to get people from a developing state to a developed state where they need little direction and little support on a given task.

In response to these development levels, leaders can impact others' development by being directive, supportive or some combination of the two. Directive behaviors improve a person's competence while Supportive behaviors impact their commitment. High or low Directive and Supportive behaviors create four distinct leadership styles. These four leadership styles are called Directing, Coaching, Supporting and Delegating. (Blanchard, 2001, p.10). Most leaders are comfortable working with one or two of these leadership

Dawn Lowe-Wincentsen
Oregon Institute of Technology

Situational Leadership® II Model

This diagram describes the different stages of situational leadership and what sort of inputs a manager might give depending on which stage the workers or volunteers are in (Blanchard, 2001, p.4).

styles, very few exhibit all four. To be effective, a leader needs to use all styles and match them to the task or situation (Blanchard, 2001, p.13).

It was eye-opening to learn about these four styles and to think about our teen library council. I started our library's teen council in 2009 and it's been one of the great joys of my professional life to see so many great kids join the council as young teens and blossom into competent adults by the time they leave as seniors. The structure of the council has evolved from the beginning, as I have sought to put more power into the hands of the teens so that they could directly impact the library and how we offer services to teens. Yet encouraging them to be leaders and take more responsibility is tricky. You can tell them to be leaders, but what does that mean? Is it just telling other teens what to do? Is it planning? Is it goal-setting? Is it motivating others? All of those things? None of them?

When I look at the four leadership styles closely, I recognize using some of these styles to coach and teach the teens leadership techniques. The first style, Directing, is used whenever one trains a new person or teaches a new skill. Whenever teens are helping me with a program, I'm usually directing, particularly with someone who is new. Showing

them what to vacuum, how to clean tables, set up video game consoles, and other things is fundamental to programming. It's rewarding when they start anticipating what needs to be done and they start doing it. If the ultimate goal is to create autonomous people who have high commitment and high competence, it starts with teaching the fundamentals.

The second style is Coaching. This style is still directive, but more time is given to explaining our goals and why we have them. Input is requested and integrated into plans when possible. The teen council is frequently asked for input on planning programs and how to best market to their peers. They will plan their own programs and have to make important decisions about what happens during a program, what to buy and where to promote so that other teens will come. This is a time when the teens need a lot of support as they are often not sure what to do and interest wanes. Asking questions is important in the effort to get them thinking about what to do next. This often leads to the third leadership style, Supporting.

In the Supporting phase (which is honestly where I'm most comfortable), I am trying to get the teens to make decisions on their own without as much help from me. Blanchard (2001) states, "a leader using Style 3 listens, encourages, and facilitates self-reliant decision making and problem solving"(p.10). For example, last year, a teen running our Anime Club was encouraged to make decisions about what we would do in the meeting. She stepped up to the challenge and, week after week, decided more of the content for the club. She made prizes, came up with quizzes, found video clips to watch and developed themes for each meeting. She got more and more confident and capable with each meeting. She was rewarded with a solid core group of club members who enjoyed the knowledge she was sharing with them. It was a win-win scenario.

In the last leadership style, Delegating, people are empowered to act independently with less input from the leader. The teen leading the Anime Club is approaching this level of independence. The members of our book group have a lot of autonomy to write book reviews and decide what material we put on the teen part of our website. That being said, it is hard to imagine many scenarios where I can let the teens assume this much autonomy for a volunteer position that only meets once a month. Yet, the best teen councils approach this level of leadership from their teens. Teen councils in Salem and Tualatin plan and implement giant programs like a full fledged haunted house and a nine hole mini golf course in the library. These are pretty advanced activities.

Looking at the Situational Leadership model has helped me identify ongoing problems in how the teen council operates. It also suggests potential remedies. With 20 teen council members, I've had to break the group into smaller teams like the program group, book group and film group, and each team has its own leader. I have observed these teens engaging in directive behaviors. The problem with this is that there is usually no follow through. In order for the Directing style to be effective, there needs to be checking, monitoring, and feedback. Teens are not usually comfortable giving feedback to their peers. If the job doesn't get done, the leader will take over and do the job for their peer. This is one of the main areas that I've had to coach our teen leaders about. They have to trust that their peers are going to do the job and they have to let them do it. Developing that level of trust is hard, particularly if someone doesn't follow through. Knowing about the four leadership styles will help me put structure around these conversations that I have been having with teens for years. Coaching and delegating have a different meaning now. I've often told teen leaders that they have to delegate tasks to their teammates. Knowing that

delegation involves a high level of trust, it might be better to teach them about coaching and supporting before I start talking about delegation.

The model also values feedback at each level. That is something of which we need to do more. In the past, our groups will take a little time to discuss how things went, but usually they just move on to the next project. Our program group does the best with assessing their progress because they have projects that have immediate feedback. They plan a program, do the program, and then evaluate it. They see how many people came. They know what worked and what could be improved. Yet, there is more feedback they could gather. They can ask participants how they heard about the event or if most participants are from a particular school. They could ask participants at the end of an event what worked and what didn't. Last year we did escape rooms and an Amazing Race event. Asking the participants at the end what was fun and what was too hard would have been great feedback to get. I will encourage them to look for ways to gain this knowledge in the future.

Our book and film groups have a harder time collecting feedback about how they are doing. Our film group produces videos and photos for the library website and social media. In general, they move from project to project without evaluating how each video did. Showing them the social media statistics and encouraging them to set specific goals around viewership numbers are ways I could help them. Our book group produces numerous book reviews every year. They do a great job getting the reviews written and posted, but there is little assessment about what they want to accomplish. Do they want to get people to read these books? Read the reviews? Take some other action? This year, they intend to record a book discussion podcast. I am excited about this, but I also want them to think about what their goals are. Is it just to produce and publish a podcast? They will gain great skills doing this, but I want them to think about how it will benefit other teens, too. In looking at the Situational Leadership model, I can see that they will need to learn a lot about podcasting. They are in a high-commitment state (excited), but also low competence—the D1 or Developing level in regards to this skill. They will need some directing. Unfortunately, I may not have the skills or time to give to them. I have done some podcasts for the library in the past, so I can get them started. But I think they could benefit from some outside help as well, so I may see if there is an experienced podcaster who can give them some pointers. I will encourage them to have goals around how to get people to listen to the podcast, too.

My intention this fall is to share the Situational Leadership model with the teen leaders and possibly the larger group. I will encourage them to be more explicit about what we want to accomplish, figure out how to measure it, and do a better job with them of collecting and evaluating feedback about if they are reaching their goals. I always tell them that my number one goal for the group is for them to have fun. Adding these tools that will allow them to develop leadership skills while continuing to have fun may be the biggest challenge for the group this year. I am confident in their fun-making abilities though, so I think they are up to the task.

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