A Sense of Style

Student leaders should be reminded that there are distinct leadership styles, each one meeting different needs.

Alan E. Nelson

Most students use the same style of leading, over and over, without considering alternatives. The primary reason is that no one has explained to them the multiple ways of leading and how certain styles fit specific situations. As developers of young leaders, it's important that we teach them that one size doesn't fit all, even though they assume their preferred way is the best.

A leader's efficacy depends on his or her ability to choose the most productive style based on the situation. One thing we teach in our young leader training curriculum is a multimethod style of empowering young leaders to make the right selection. The concept of situational leadership has been around for a while in the corporate realm, but here's an approach that will work for youth ages 10 and up, so long as the student has an above-average aptitude for leading. The four styles are Tell, Sell, Gel, and Del.

Tell

The leader "tells" team members what it is she/he wants them to do, without sig-

nificant interaction with the team such as gathering their ideas or feedback.

Strengths: Tell works well in situations where time is of the essence, the team may be less motivated or confident, and when the leader is adequately informed and competent. As long as the leader is clear, communication is direct and to the point. During emergencies or highly urgent matters, Tell is preferred, but for short-term use only.

Weaknesses: The downside of Tell is that people don't like to be bossed around. Therefore, when we use this style we run the risk of offending people on the team, who are less motivated to participate. Plus, leaders don't always select the best ideas. Most tellers use their own ideas, limiting input from others.

Sell

The leader asks a few team members for ideas, selects the one that she or he thinks is the best, and then "sells" it to the team.

Strengths: Sell increases the support from team members who get to participate more than in Tell, and improves the chances of

using the best ideas, since more than one is discussed. The approach is still relatively efficient, though a bit longer than Tell.

Weaknesses: Leaders who choose this approach but do not use others' ideas can be seen as insincere and manipulative. "You ask for our ideas, but never use them." Another weakness is that the best ideas still may not come out because of the limited time. When a majority doesn't participate, there is less buy-in from the team and weaker commitment as a result.

Gel

The leader engages the team to participate and discuss ideas, and then moves the team toward consensus. The leader helps the team "gel" toward a common strategy.

Strengths: Gel increases the likelihood that good ideas will emerge and be more thoroughly inspected. Team consensus improves. Members become owners of the process and not just renters, elevating commitment. Potential weaknesses are identified and avoided.

Weaknesses: This process takes a lot of time and can waste team effort in discussing nonproductive ideas. Too much time spent can result in lost opportunities. Another risk is that ideas can be hijacked by influential team members promoting their own agendas. Keeping Gel going in a healthy, productive manner takes good people skills.

Del

A leader may choose to "delegate," transferring authority and sharing responsibility. Ultimate responsibility still resides with the leader. Using Del to avoid leading and "dumping" responsibility should not be confused with true delegating. Expanding a leader's influence through others and developing them is the essence of Del.

Strengths: Be careful not to overuse Del in young leader development, because it can become a scapegoat to avoid difficult work in leading. Del is a more sophisticated style that empowers a young leader to develop others and share power, authority, and reward.

Weaknesses: Del can be a means of avoiding responsibility and blaming others, producing holes when accountability is lacking.

Which Style Fits Best?

Here are four brief descriptions in which a certain style of leadership is most appropriate. Read them to the students after introducing situational leading and see if they can determine what style fits best.

- You have to come up with a presentation at a school assembly next week and there is a three-day weekend. You need to create a skit to explain what your student council does to serve others.
- You're at team practice after school and one of the members gets hit hard with a baseball and has a bloody nose. The coach is not there yet.
- You're planning a schoolwide program for each class to go green. You'll be working with clubs, classroom reps, and even the adult staff in order to implement these policies.
- You're attending a summer retreat and are in charge of leading a session to plan student council-sponsored events for the coming school year.

Answers

Sell: Time is limited, but you want to create ownership and try to come up with good ideas for your presentation.

Tell: There's no time to stand around and talk about what to do. Someone needs to take charge: "Kelsie, get ice." "Jill, go call the coach!" "Who has a phone if we need to call 911?"

Del: You've got time and you're going to need a lot of other leaders to pull off this schoolwide effort.

Gel: You've got time and need to be sure that your council has consensus on what it's going to sponsor, so you can improve the chances of ongoing support.

When coaching young leaders, we've found that one of the most important training tactics is for the adult sponsor to push the "pause" button at the beginning of a new project or even a meeting. The goal of doing so is to provide self-awareness as to possible styles for leading before the team leader automatically launches into his/her preferred style. "Okay, Jesse, what are the four ways that you could lead this team today? Which one do you think would be most effective in this situation? What are the potential risks and benefits?" Obviously, you'll need to word this according to the student's age and experience, but we commonly do this for ages 10 and up, after the student has received an orientation. A good debrief time at the end might go like this: "What leadership style did Jesse use today?" "Why do you think that?" "How was the style effective?" "Would another style have work as well?" "Why do you think that?" ∎

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