

# Adaptive Leadership Model™ - designed to improve legal leadership skills

Most lawyers strive to be the best in their field, so let's challenge legal leaders to be the best leaders they can be...it's all about adaptability!

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## Optimise individual performance to optimise team performance

Many techniques and frameworks exist to support legal leaders in the management of individuals and teams. And it often surprises me how little training legal leaders receive in effective people management.

I developed the Adaptive Leadership Model™ when I was lecturing at the College of Law and included it in my book Legal Project Management, Lexis Nexis, 2012. It is the culmination of decades of leadership training, successful leadership roles, extensive reading, observation, and reflection. The core premise is that leaders best support their teams to achieve exceptional results by tailoring their own leadership style to the specific preferences of the individual team member and the specific circumstances of the work. Thus, the Adaptive Leadership Model™ was created.

*The leader needs to be adaptable rather than force team members to conform to their preferred leadership style.*

Before I developed the Adaptive Leadership Model™, my go to model was Situational Leadership® - developed in the mid 1970's by Dr Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard. This model is built around the belief that leaders need to adapt their leadership style in order to assist each individual team member to achieve their full potential in any given circumstance

## From Situational Leadership® to Adaptive Leadership™

The following model brings together many of the techniques and concepts from Situational Leadership®, emotional and social intelligence (more on this another time), as well as theories on personal motivation.

According to Blanchard, there are four main leadership styles. The same leadership styles are used in the Adaptive Leadership Model™ illustrated below -

1. **Directing**– characterised as high directive and low supporting. The Leader provides specific objectives for the task and then maps out the process in detail for how the task will be accomplished. The leader also closely supervises progress and makes corrections when required.
2. **Coaching**– characterised as both high directive and high supporting. The leader explains processes and decisions and encourages participation by the team member in the refinement of the approach. The leader considers input from the team member but makes the overall decisions about how tasks will be accomplished.

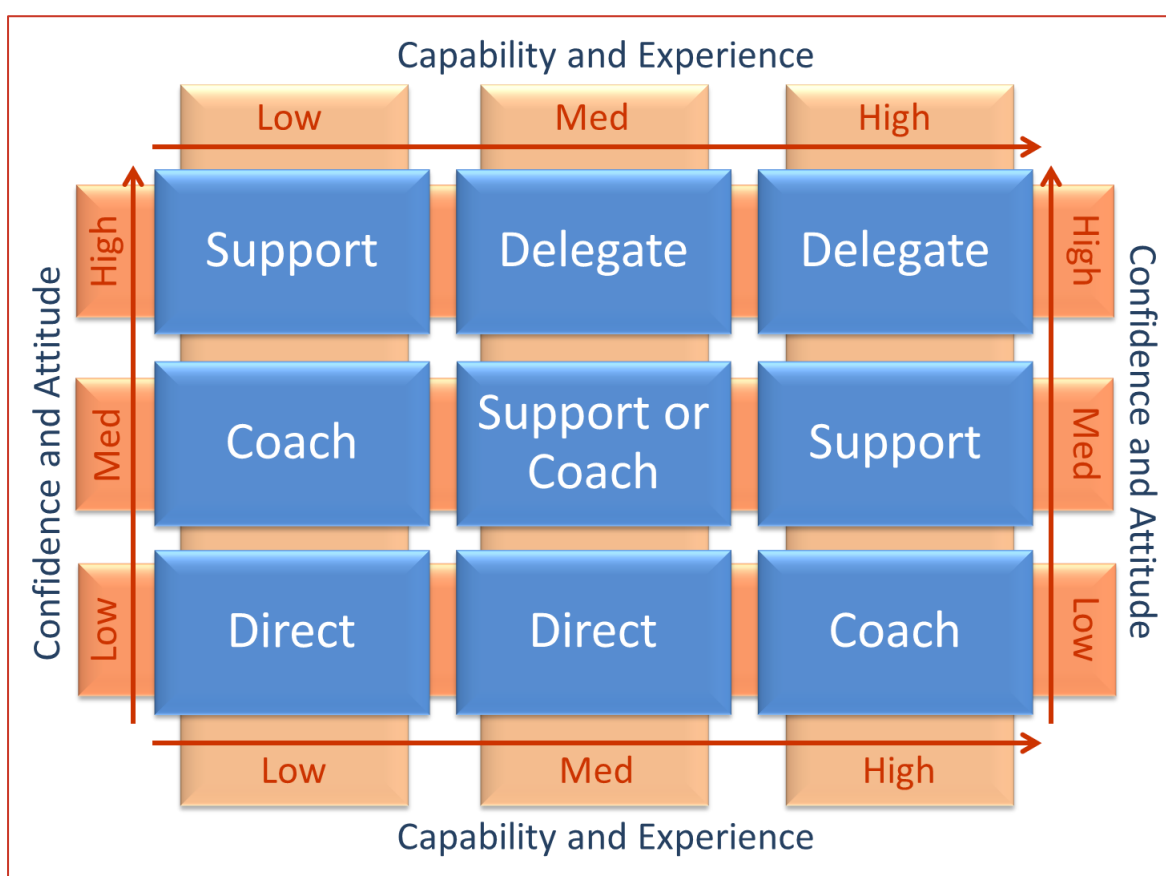
3. **Supporting** – characterised as low directive and high supporting. The leader encourages the team member through guiding discussions to develop their own approach to the task. Allowing the team member to learn through problem solving and by designing their own process.
4. **Delegating** – characterised as both low directive and low supporting. The leader provides the right resources and environment and then empowers the team member to undertake the task according to their own processes and judgement.

*In all four styles the leader – clarifies expectations and goals; observes and monitors performance; and gives feedback. (Blanchard, 2001)*

In order to achieve the optimum performance from each individual, the leader chooses the style that will best match the task and the team member or individual. This requires a conscious decision and forethought before each work assignment session with the team member and places the responsibility with the leader to apply flexible leadership rather than simply falling back into their preferred style.

Hershey and Blanchard’s original model had only four leadership styles and four situations in which to use them. The Adaptive Leadership Model for managing Individuals (below) has been expanded through observation and experience and consists of nine situations with some flexibility about the leadership style that is best suited to each situation.

### The Adaptive Leadership Model™ for Managing Individuals



This model uses the same four leadership styles from Blanchard but expands on the concept of development levels of the individual to allow for more flexibility and greater choice. This better reflects the evolving levels of sophistication in our modern workforce, and especially within highly intelligent groups such as the legal profession.

*This is particularly important when dealing with team members from different generations and to cater for leaders from different generations.*

### Selecting the optimum leadership style

In order to select the optimum leadership style when allocating tasks to a team member the leader needs to assess the individuals based on four dimensions –

1. Confidence;
2. Attitude;
3. Capability; and
4. Experience.

The following tables assist with this determination.

#### Confidence and Attitude Assessment

Confidence and Attitude Assessment			
	High	Medium	Low
<b>Confidence</b>	High confidence, always believes they can perform any activity even though they may have no experience	Medium confidence, willing to take on the activity and values the experience of others	Low confidence, may be very insecure even though they have the experience
<b>Attitude</b>	Positive attitude, very engaged and willing to take on the activity	Neutral attitude, not averse to taking on the activity, but not highly enthusiastic	Poor attitude, perhaps unwilling to take on the activity

## Capability and Experience

### Capability and Experience Assessment

	High	Medium	Low
<b>Capability</b>	Extremely capable and able to do the activity with little assistance or supervision	Has some capability and requires guidance	Has limited capability
<b>Experience</b>	Already has required expertise and experience	Has some experience and developing expertise in the activity	Little to no experience or expertise in the activity

*Different styles will need to be selected for the same team member depending on the specific task that is to be assigned.*

Leaders need to use their knowledge of the team member to assess their position on the **Confidence and Attitude** and the **Capability and Experience** scales in order to determine the optimal leadership style to use for each task. Even for experienced team members, it might be preferred to use a highly delegative style for one task and then a highly directive style for other tasks depending on their experience and attitude.

Two dimensions are given for each scale; this allows further flexibility and requires judgement on behalf of the leader to select the overall rating. For example, if a team member has extremely high capability but very little experience then the rating normally selected would be **medium**. Also, where a team member had medium confidence but a particularly low attitude rating then the overall rating recommended would be **low**.

## Reflection Activity for Legal Leaders

Having read the above descriptions of the primary leadership styles, many of you will recognise that you have one particular preference and perhaps you have been unconsciously applying that style in all people management situations.

Pause for a moment to consider the following –

1. **What is your preferred leadership style?** The one you use automatically without even thinking about it
2. **What is your secondary leadership style?** The one you use as a fall-back when your primary preference doesn't work.

Think of examples where your manager has used a style that didn't work for you in relation to a particular task and ask yourself the following questions –

1. **How did you feel and what happened** when your manager used a directive style even though you were very experienced with the particular task?
2. Have they ever thrown a task at you with no context and no instructions and left you to figure it out even though you have no experience with that particular task? **How did you feel and what happened** in terms of task performance?

## What happens when you choose the wrong leadership style?

Once I have introduced this model to workshop participants and my The Positive Lawyer® coaching clients, I am regaled with stories where people have been extremely frustrated and demotivated when leaders have chosen the incorrect style, or most likely simply reverted to their preferred style with no conscious thought.

In general, a directive style is used when an individual is highly experienced and highly confident, they will most likely execute the task well but become dis-engaged and frustrated. They will often be discouraged from using their initiative or sharing their thoughts on improvements in the future. This in turn reduces the - overall quality of the outcome: overall potential of the individual: and possibly the team.

At the other end of the spectrum are the examples where a highly delegative style has been used for an individual who is inexperienced and lacking in confidence, this normally results in a poor quality outcome, stress for the individual and frustration for the leader.

Personally, my preferred leadership style is Delegate. I learnt through experience that this style did not give me the desired outcomes when working with junior team members and now I consciously select the Direct style when required to support the individual to perform at their best.

## About the author...



This article was written by Therese Linton, Founder and Principal Consultant of The BASALT Group® encompassing The Positive Lawyer® and the Academy of Legal Leadership®. She is a global leader in the field of Legal Project Management and literally wrote the book. She also has unique expertise in Legal Portfolio Management, Legal Process Improvement, Legal Transformation and Legal Operations.

As a leading global expert in Legal Project Management, she has worked with thousands of lawyers to develop their capabilities and skills. As part of this work, she supports lawyers to improve their personal productivity; become better leaders; and create habits for success.

## Next steps...

My book on Legal Project Management can be purchased from LexisNexis and Booktopia at the following links – LexisNexis – [click here](#) and Booktopia – [click here](#). It has a whole chapter on managing teams and leadership.

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