
Leadership Challenge: Move from Directing to Delegating

By John Durel

If you, as the chief executive of a nonprofit organization, are not spending at least 75% of your time on external affairs, you are impeding your organization's success. If your focus is primarily on internal capacity and operations – managing people, managing money, working on systems and procedures – then you are failing to perform a role that only the executive director can play.

Nonprofit executives must be out in the community meeting with civic and business leaders, learning about civic issues and concerns, looking for opportunities, advocating for the organization, cultivating relationships, and raising money. It is only by being out there that the leader can see her organization as others perceive it. Being aware of their concerns and ambitions will sensitize you to opportunities and challenges on the horizon. Being known, liked and respected by others will open doors.

In addition to being out and about, you must bring outside leaders in. Invite them to lunch and to see your operation. The purpose is to inform and educate them about the work of your organization, to get their thoughts and advice, to nurture relationships, and ultimately to invite them to participate financially in the important work you are doing.

Each organization will define its community based on its constituents. Whom do you serve? Who else serves this population? Who can support you? Who has knowledge or power to help you? Who sets the civic agenda? You must have a system for identifying the people most important for you to get to know and a strategy for engaging them.

Letting Go of Internal Matters

Some executives fail to spend enough time on external activities because they are more comfortable working on the inside. They choose to attend to internal matters and put off external meetings. If you are more comfortable sitting around a table with your staff than having lunch with a local business leader, then you must find a way to gain the skills and confidence to do the latter. The more you put it off, the more you hurt your organization. (See the management briefing “Your Public Presence” for more on this.)

Some executives are concerned that if they are not around, things will not be done properly. They don't trust their staff to do the right things in the right way, especially if something unexpected occurs. If you feel this way, this is a failure of leadership on your part. It is your responsibility to develop staff leaders who are able to make good decisions in the best interest of the organization.

Developing Staff Leaders

You can use the following “Situational Leadership Model” to develop the leaders on your staff. Your goal is to improve their competence so that you can delegate important decisions to them. The model is adapted from Ken Blanchard, *Leading at a Higher Level* (2006)

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In order to develop leaders you must adapt your own leadership style to their needs.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

DIRECTIVE

- Sets specific goals and objectives for the subordinate.
- Tells subordinate what to do and how to do it.
- Checks on subordinate frequently to give direction.
- Subordinate reports on progress on a predetermined schedule – daily or weekly.

This style of leadership works best with an employee who lacks the knowledge and skills needed to accomplish the task, but who is enthusiastic about learning and doing a good job. This style does not work well with employees who have the needed knowledge and skills, or who are not highly committed to the work. In these cases they will resent and resist the leader.

COACHING

- Discusses goals and objectives with the subordinate, and mutually agree to time schedule and method for doing the work.
- Helps the employee with any particular knowledge or skill that is lacking. Provides information and guidance; demonstrates how things are done.
- Checks in with the subordinate regularly to make sure things are going well and to offer help.
- Subordinate reports on progress on a predetermined schedule – weekly or biweekly.

This style works best with employees who have basic skills and knowledge and who are taking on a new challenge. It also helps with employees who have low commitment due to a lack of confidence or frustration because things are not as easy as they first seemed.

SUPPORTIVE

- Asks the subordinate to present goals, objectives, a method for completing the work, and a time schedule. After discussion they mutually agree on how to proceed.
- Subordinate asks the leader for advice and guidance when needed.
- Leader checks in with subordinate periodically to praise and offer help.
- Subordinate reports on progress on a predetermined schedule – biweekly or monthly.

This style works well with an employee who has strong skill and knowledge regarding the task at hand, and who has demonstrated confidence and commitment to the work.

DELEGATING

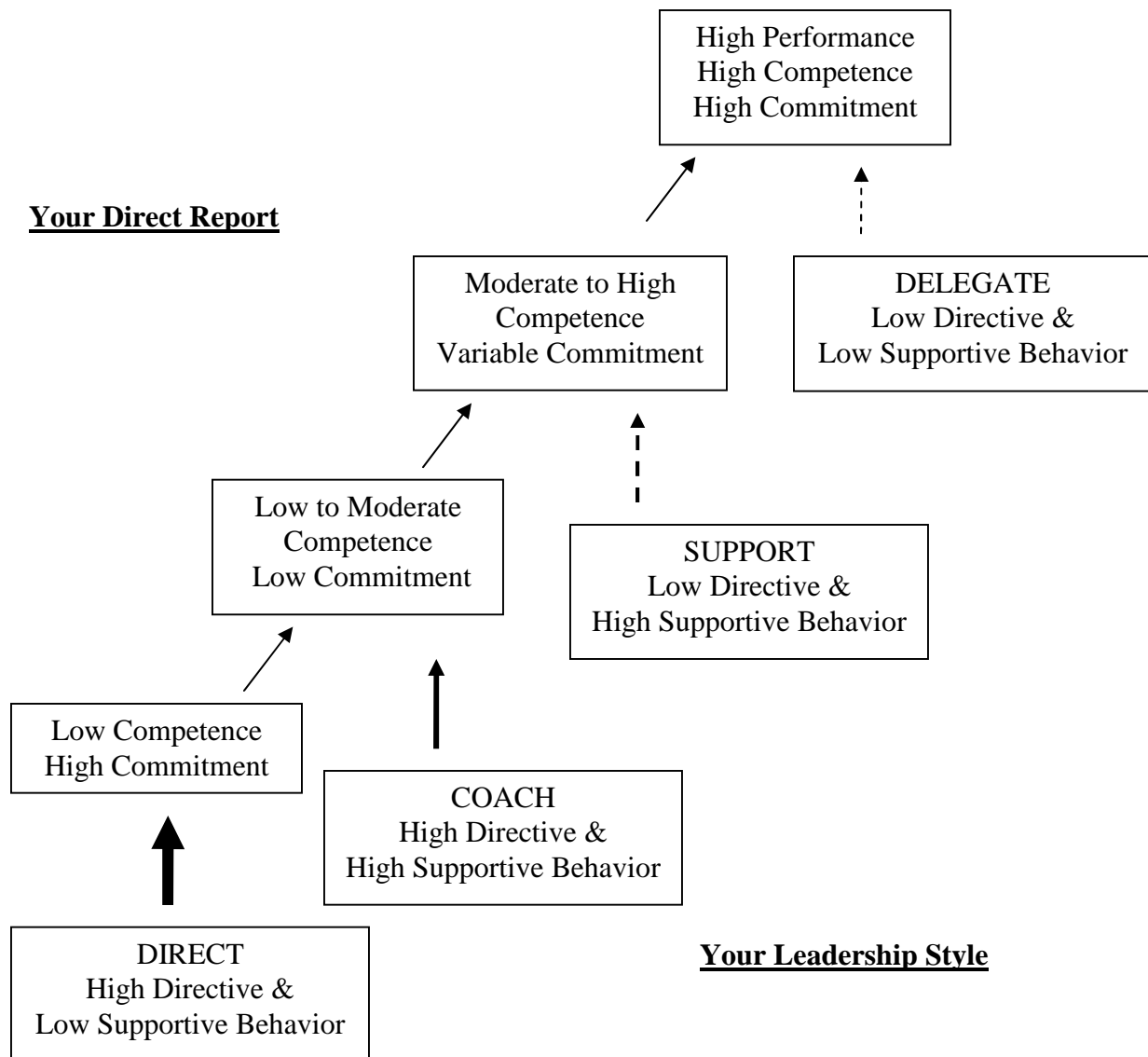
- Asks the subordinate to present goals, objectives and a time schedule; leaves it to the subordinate to decide exactly how the work will get done.
- Subordinate asks the leader for advice and guidance when needed.
- Leader checks in with subordinate occasionally to praise and offer help.
- Subordinate reports on progress on a predetermined schedule – monthly or every six weeks.

This style of leadership is essential with subordinates who have demonstrated high competence, self-confidence, an understanding of the myriad of issues facing the organization, and high commitment to the organization's success. This style is for an employee you can trust to handle unexpected events and challenges in a way that is consistent with the organization's goals and values.

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Adapting your leadership style to the needs of an individual is called “situational leadership.” The model depicted below illustrates how you can use this concept. In the model, “competence” refers to the knowledge and skill needed to achieve a result; “commitment” refers to the enthusiasm and resolve one has for the work. An individual may be more competent in some areas of responsibility than in others. Similarly, the person’s degree of commitment may vary, with greater enthusiasm for some responsibilities and less for others. As the leader, you must know where the employee is on the chart for each area of responsibility, so that you can tailor your leadership style accordingly. For example, in one area you may have to be very directive and supportive, and in another you may delegate most decisions and actions.

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Applying the Model

Your goal is to help each of your direct reports move to the point of high performance, high competence and high commitment. This will enable you to delegate most internal decisions and actions to them, thereby freeing yourself to attend to external matters.

1. Meet with your direct reports to discuss the process, stating your goal to help each of them move to a point of high performance, competence and commitment in all areas of their respective responsibilities. Help them understand the model.
2. With each direct report, come to a mutual understanding and agreement as to where he or she is for each responsibility. This can be done as follows:
 - A. Meet with the direct report to define the areas of responsibility. Be specific, but don't get overwhelmed with details. Define four or five areas of responsibility.
 - B. Independently, each of you assesses the direct report's competence and commitment for each area. Give this careful thought. To what degree does the employee possess the knowledge and skills to effectively carry out the work? To what degree is she enthusiastic about the work and resolved to achieving the results? What type of leadership should you provide? The employee asks these same questions: Do I have the knowledge and skills I need? Am I enthusiastic and committed to getting this work done? What kind of leadership support do I need?
 - C. Meet together and let her select one area of responsibility and state what he or she has written. You listen without interrupting, and then state back what you have heard, to ensure that you have understood accurately. Next you state what you have written with regards to the selected responsibility, and the employee listens and states it back. Once you both are satisfied that you understand one another, you can discuss any different perspectives you may have. Seek to clarify what you each mean regarding the employee's competency and commitment. Give examples. Ultimately the aim is to agree on the kind of leadership you will give her in this area of responsibility: directing, coaching, supporting, or delegating.

If you cannot come to agreement, you may want to choose her perspective and try it for a month. If she demonstrates more competence and commitment than you suspect she has, great. If not, fall back to a lower level in the model.
 - D. Repeat Step C for each area of responsibility, determining the appropriate leadership style for each. For some employees these discussions will go

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quickly, for others it may take quite a bit of time. This is necessary if you are going to move to a point where you can delegate to them.

- E. Once you have agreed to a leadership style for each area of responsibility for a given direct report, set up a schedule of Progress Meetings. At these meetings the two of you discuss how the employee is doing in advancing to a level of greater competence and commitment. Discuss whether the selected leadership style is working. As progress is made, decide when it is time to move to a new style.

Get Out There!

As you move to a delegating style of leadership with all of your direct reports, you will have more time to get out into the community. Don't wait until everyone is ready. That will become an excuse for you. Start now and increase the amount of time spent externally over the next six months.