Situational Leadership II (SLII)

There is no single best way to lead every person in every situation. Situational Leadership II, or SLII, is a practical leadership model developed by Ken Blanchard and his colleagues. It grew out of the Situational Leadership model that Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard created in the late 1960s, and it took its new form in the mid-1980s. The main idea is simple: leaders should adapt their style to the needs of the person they are leading. SLII does this by matching four leadership styles to four development levels.

1. Direction, Support and Development Level

In SLII, every leadership style is a mix of two behaviours. Directive behaviour means telling people what to do, how and when, and then checking their work closely. Supportive behaviour means listening, encouraging, praising and involving people in decisions. How much of each a person needs depends on their development level, which combines competence, meaning knowledge and skills, with commitment, meaning motivation and confidence. Development level is always about a specific goal or task, not about the whole person, so the same employee can be an expert in one task and a beginner in another.

Example: a skilled cook may need no help in the kitchen but plenty of guidance when learning to drive.

At work: Karim, a sales team leader, has an experienced colleague who handles clients brilliantly. The same colleague is new to the reporting software, so Karim gives him clear instructions there.

2. S1 Directing for D1

The first development level, D1, describes the enthusiastic beginner, with low competence but high commitment. This person is excited to start but does not yet know how to do the task. The matching style is S1, Directing, which is high in direction and low in support. The leader sets clear goals, shows how the work is done and follows up closely. Too much freedom at this stage can leave the beginner lost and make early mistakes costly.

Example: a new driver needs step-by-step instructions, not a speech about the joy of driving.

At work: Karim welcomes Hana, a new sales assistant who is eager to start. He shows her how to prepare a price quote step by step and checks her first quotes every day.

3. S2 Coaching for D2

D2 is the disillusioned learner, who has some competence but low commitment. After the first excitement, the task turns out to be harder than expected, and motivation drops. The matching style is S2, Coaching, which is high in both direction and support. The leader keeps giving

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direction, but also explains why, asks for ideas and encourages every step of progress. Many people give up at this stage if nobody supports them.

Example: a person learning a new language often feels stuck after a few weeks, and a good teacher both corrects and encourages.

At work: after a month, Hana feels frustrated because a client rejected two of her quotes. Karim reviews the quotes with her, explains what went wrong and praises what she did well.

4. S3 Supporting for D3

D3 is the capable but cautious contributor, with moderate to high competence but variable commitment. This person knows how to do the task but may lack confidence, especially in new or difficult situations. The matching style is S3, Supporting, which is low in direction and high in support. The leader listens, asks questions and helps the person find their own solutions. Telling a capable person exactly what to do at this stage can feel like a lack of trust.

Example: a student who knows the material but panics before an exam needs encouragement more than new lessons.

At work: Hana now prepares good quotes but hesitates before an offer for a large client. Karim asks what she thinks the best offer is, listens carefully and tells her that her plan is sound.

5. S4 Delegating for D4

D4 is the self-reliant achiever, with high competence and high commitment. This person can do the task well and is motivated to do it without help. The matching style is S4, Delegating, which is low in both direction and support. The leader agrees on the goal with the person, then hands over the responsibility and the freedom to decide. Delegating is not abandoning, because the leader stays available and recognises good results.

Example: parents let their experienced grown-up son drive the family car on a long trip.

At work: a year later, Hana handles all quotes for key clients on her own. Karim agrees on the monthly targets with her, and she now trains new colleagues.

Conclusion

In summary, SLII teaches that good leaders diagnose before they lead. They look at where a person stands on a specific task, then give the right mix of direction and support. Directing suits the enthusiastic beginner, Coaching the disillusioned learner, Supporting the capable but cautious contributor, and Delegating the self-reliant achiever. As people grow, the leader's style should change with them, and it can move back when a new challenge appears. When leaders match their style to people's needs, both performance and motivation can rise.

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