

The Karate Kid...and Managing Others

While watching the 2010 release of The Karate Kid recently, I had an 'aha' moment...

Fast forward 140 minutes, and I was left with the full-blown realisation that this film could teach managers a thing or two about working with their teams. Of course, the film is not real life, and your work environment will no doubt be very different. Even so, there are some smart parallels with what 'good' looks like when managing others.

In short, the film started me thinking about the Situational Leadership Model.

About Situational Leadership

Situational Leadership is a fantastically simple, workable, 'how to' for getting the best from others' performance. Personally, I think 'Leadership' is a misnomer here and if Hersey and Blanchard had asked for my advice, then the model I'd be referencing would in fact be 'Situational Management'...

Anyway...the Model describes how managers, by flexing their style, should 'give' people what they can't 'find' for themselves. Situational leadership isn't something that you do *to* people, rather it's what you do *with* people. Or in Blanchard's words;

'Everyone has a peak performance potential – you just need to know where they are coming from and meet them there'

You won't necessarily be using the same approach for the same person every time. It depends entirely on the work 'situation' that an individual finds themselves in and how confident, willing and able they are, or feel that they are, in that situation.

About The Karate Kid

It's a film about a handyman in China (Mr Han, played by Jackie Chan) who teaches a boy from Detroit (Dre Parker, played by Jaden Smith) the skills of Kung Fu to defend himself against a group of bullies. So...what has this got to do with Managers? Quite a lot, actually.

Whichever version of the film you prefer, who can forget the clear, concise instruction of 'hang it up; take it down' in the 2010 version, or the 'wax on; take it off' line of the 1984 original. It was the 2010 version of these words, repeated over and over again, that were responsible for my initial living room 'aha'.

Style 1: Structuring

In Situational Leadership terms, those initial, repetitive commands of ‘hang it up; take it down’ fit very well into the ‘Structuring’ Style.

It is a Style best used when someone has pretty high willingness/confidence to perform a task, and yet very little – if any – ability. In fact, we see the boy, Parker, displaying over-confidence and yet getting things so very wrong due to an utter lack of ability.

Structuring is about absolute task clarity, typically when someone is new to a task or a role; when there is an urgency of action and there is no time for debate; when somebody is under-performing in the task and realignment is required.

The Manager is focussed on simple statements, delivered crisply and concisely. Questions are asked not to spark discussion, but with the purpose of seeking understanding. It is about compliance. It is therefore highly appropriate that Han should choose this style: Parker has an urgent need to stand up to bullies, plus a further deadline emerges that makes time of the essence; he has a complete lack of ability when it comes to Kung Fu; his under-performance and lack of discipline in general all require refocus. Han asks no questions and most often he responds with silence, apart from the bare essentials to enable Parker to achieve the task at hand.

Style 2: Coaching

Han begins to move away from Structuring as Parker begins to respond to Han’s clear rules and discipline. He begins instead to use the 2nd Style of Coaching.

This choice is a good one. Parker’s confidence becomes a little dented as it dawns on him that Kung Fu really isn’t as easy as it first appeared. Han pulls away from one-way instruction and shows an interest in his pupil’s wavering confidence and ability. We see teacher working more closely with pupil – offering more challenge yet more support also.

In one dramatic scene, Parker wants to know how Han is able to control a cobra. Han isn’t about to give a simple, instructional response, rather he offers a more challenging response now:

Parker: *Just tell me about the cobra thing*

Han: *I have focus. Your focus needs more focus*

I think Han is in effect making Parker hold back until he is ready for a deeper learning. A learning that requires much more than simple instruction. If the cobra question had been asked in the early days of low ability/high confidence, then I can’t help thinking that Han would most likely have responded with silence...he was not yet ready for the deeper answer. Now he is getting closer to it, though there is still a long way to go. Parker is being given a clue: there is much more to Kung Fu than meets the eye.

As the film continues to unfold from 'instructor' to 'friend', there is a scene where Han appears to completely lose control and begins to repeatedly smash his car. Suddenly, the 'power' shifts towards the boy and his transition towards maturity is observed. The balancing scene that follows shows how they begin to work in tandem to share the next part of their journey together.

As Parker's ability and confidence grow, so Han's involvement decreases. We see Han quietly watching his protégé, intervening when he needs to correct the task, walking away when he is not needed.

In Situational leadership terms, the Coaching Style is valuable for when two-way conversations are required, when the involvement of the other person is important for seeking commitment to next steps. Typical conversations might include where an individual needs to be both supported and challenged to grow their ability from the 'inside'. And so Han changes gear from 'tell' to 'ask' well.

Using the Coaching style well requires good, focussed questions that are about the task as well as the person. Listening needs to be equally effective to increase understanding of how best to move an individual forward.

Style 3: Encouraging

This is the 3rd Style and is most useful when an individual needs reminding of their value as a person, not just as a task achiever. Typical conversations will include those where real motivational praise is being given. In the film, Teacher says to Pupil: 'You have taught me a very important lesson.' The Pupil replies: 'You are the best friend I ever had'. Roles have changed – the task element is decreasing to the point that pupil is helping the teacher. It is becoming more of a relationship and less about task accomplishment.

Equally, the Encouraging approach is valuable for when someone has had a setback and needs reminding of their worth – and that their ability is not in question. Not wanting to give the game away... but before a particular display of Kung Fu, we see Han giving Parker several non-verbal displays of encouragement from the side lines...enough to keep his pupil motivated and valued. The task itself really isn't in question now. He is performing at the top of his game– it's his confidence that needs to be maintained now.

Style 4: Delegating

This is where, in Situational leadership terms, a manager steps back. The biggest issue here for managers can be the 'letting go' itself. It's about 'eyes on, hands off'. Watching your team members operate with confidence and ability with very little need of you. Typically, individuals will be setting their own goals and making their own decisions.

And Han and Parker model this transition well.

The final scenes are Parker's decisions, Parker's action. He can be taught no more. Han simply does what any manager might – he watches, waits, and hopes...

This style is liberating. And of course it can be scary too. Without this style at the right time with the right person, individual growth cannot effectively happen.

Use of this style also shows the natural culmination of an individual's journey, whether in being able to meet the challenge of a group of bullies, or of another more appropriate challenge closer to home in your own organisation.