Modeling and Modified Situational Leadership: Some Comments on Johnson

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Although I have been warmed by agreement with my arguments against "point and level systems" in group care, I have heard, with some sympathy, the lament of both novice workers and those who have been in the field for a much longer time: "Well, if I can't use points and levels, then what CAN I do?" Thus, I am delighted to see Miriam Johnson's Modified Situational Leadership (MSL) model for residential settings. This offers a rich and promising approach to creating a positive and responsive climate in group care programs.

What is described is a synthesis of four well-known conceptual schemas, or conceptual theories as Johnson refers to them: stages of group formation, leadership and followership styles as defined by situational leadership theory, and parenting approaches. These are cleverly pulled together to form a sequence of stages that follow a client's progress in care from admission to discharge.

While Johnson calls her proposal a "model," I am going to suggest that it might better be considered as an "approach" (albeit a valuable one) to child and youth care work. This is intended to point the way toward its actual use, rather than its being impeded by unanticipated issues that might prevent its being employed at all. Thus the discussion will focus on the degree to which Modified Situational Leadership, as represented in Figure 5, is a model and on how it might actually have more utility if defined as an "approach"—and certainly a more promising one than point and level systems.

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Modified Situational Leadership as a Model

MSL first of all raises questions about the nature of models and whether it indeed offers a model. In general, a model replicates or explains a portion of reality as closely as possible by proposing a theory that embraces it and then is used to understand and address similar situations. In human services, “reality” is systemic, that is, there are multiple variables in interaction with each other at various levels. Thus, two facets of models in human services are: 1) the accuracy of the source theories that yield the model and the degree to which, if combined with each other, they represent reality; and 2) the degree to which the model is dynamic, that is, can adapt to and be effectively applied to the complexity of the system to which it might be applied.

The Source Theories of Modified Situational Leadership

Let us look then at the model in terms of its components and the degree to which they represent the reality they state they do, both singularly and in combination.

Stages of Group Formation

While social group workers tell me that Tuckman's group development model is still in use despite its age of 21 years, we need to bear in mind that it was primarily used with stable groups where in general the same persons start, go through together, and terminate. As Johnson acknowledges, a limitation in applying the Modified Situational Leadership may be the fact that today residential groups may constantly be changing. Indeed, group dynamics can change significantly with the addition of even one new member or with the exit of a member. With managed care and short-term treatment, frequent child and (often for other reasons) adult turnover are the rule rather than the exception. In addition, the choice factor in group membership—the fact that residential group care clients have usually not “chosen” to be there—exerts a strong influence on group process. These factors add incongruencies that need to be considered.

Situational Leadership—Follower Development

Probably the greatest lack of fit between the reality of group care and a theory involves Hersey and Blanchard’s stages of follower development, in which the first stage is comprised of “enthusiastic beginners.” Looking at the dynamics of many children entering care, we