

## **Bringing the Emergency Room to the Classroom: Using *Grey's Anatomy* to Simplify Situational Leadership**

Jodi L. Torock  
Graduate Assistant  
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, Texas  
jtorock@aged.tamu.edu

### **Abstract**

Situational leadership has been noted as one of the most recognizable leadership concepts (Northouse, 2007). Teaching the model to a college student audience may become more of monotony than a learning experience. Using popular media technology to teach situational leadership can appeal to more learning styles than the typical lecture, and make the study of leadership more exciting. *Grey's Anatomy* (2007) is a popular drama television series that shows the directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating styles of situational leadership. Using media clips from this series, students can relate to the dramatic relationships and daily demands of the student intern characters. They also learn more about situational leadership through living in the "leadership moment" of the scenes.

### **Introduction**

Leadership education has become commonplace in traditional classrooms, workplaces, and social and professional organizations. College students sometimes receive this training through all three avenues. Leadership education can soon become an overwhelming chore, rather than an effective opportunity to learn or gain experience. However, employing new and innovative ways to study leadership can make the continuous learning process fun and interesting. Using media clips from the *Grey's Anatomy* (2007) series, leadership education can be a fun learning experience for all. The purpose of this paper is to describe situational leadership and explain how clips from *Grey's Anatomy* can help students bring leadership moments to life.

### **Leadership and Leadership Education**

College students are often the target audience for leadership education. With the acquired knowledge and skills, they take on leadership roles beyond the classroom. Students further apply this knowledge in future careers and serve as productive members of their communities.

Leadership can be complex. Northouse (2007) explains that leadership has about as many definitions as the number of people who have tried to define it. Everyone interprets leadership differently. But what is leadership? Northouse defines it as a *process* of influencing a group to achieve a common goal.

Why should college students be studying leadership? Cacioppe (1997) suggests, “There are many muddy paths that people must cross in today’s organizations and leadership needs to be clear, decisive and appropriate to the situation” (p. 335). College students use leadership in the classroom leading group discussions, in their clubs and organizations as officers, and in their current or will lead in future jobs. They influence others to consider alternate points of view, vote on a service learning activity, or offer only the best in customer service. Students learn leadership theories and models to better understand situations they are presented with now and in the future, and how to manage them effectively. Not all situations are created equally; therefore, the more leadership knowledge students have the better prepared they will be to manage each case as it presents itself.

Although leadership theory prepares students to take on leadership roles, this does not necessarily make them leaders. While knowledge of leadership theories and models does not make leaders, this knowledge can increase the understanding of leadership and why things happen the way they do (Rosser, 2007). This concept is similar to that of learning other skills. For instance, students can learn about the tango. They may learn its origin, the steps of the tango, where it is danced, and the music used for tango dancing, but unless the student practices the steps of the tango they probably will not be able to tango or at least not well. The same goes for leadership. Students may learn all of the leadership theories and models, but unless they have the opportunity to apply those concepts, leadership will merely be knowledge and not a skill.

### **Leadership Education and Popular Media**

Leadership education easily becomes monotonous, especially to the college student audience. Most often leadership education is the transfer of knowledge about leadership theories and models in the form of a lecture. Therefore, leadership educators must think outside of the box when teaching to bring the leadership moment alive in the classroom. Cummins (2007) acknowledges, “Leadership educators face an instructional challenge not unique to other disciplines – giving life to theories and realistic examples of representative models in practice” (p. 143). What better way to bring leadership learning into the classroom than through popular media?

Hofman (2002) found that movies serve as a refresher course in the teaching of leadership. Williams (2006) suggests that “because leadership educators realize principles of andragogy and experiential education work well with leadership

theories, instructors find movies are a great way to infuse leadership theory with novel teaching methodology” (p. 1).

Although movies are a great way to help students make connections, popular media, in general, may serve in that capacity. Beyond the teacher leading the students in learning or students leading other students in group discussions, leadership cannot be enacted in the classroom. Therefore, creative leadership educators must find alternative ways to bring leadership to life. Through popular media students are able to learn leadership at its best through the captured leadership moment.

Using popular media to teach does not simply involve popping a movie into the DVD player and telling students, “Take note of any leadership in this film” and calling it a day.

There is more. Clips from popular media must be viewed for a purpose: to identify a leadership theory or to drive home a leadership concept. The clip must be organized in order for the lesson to continue running smoothly. Clips need to be followed by thorough discussion so that each student is able to identify the concept presented. Callahan and Rosser (2007) note that, “By linking the theory (leadership education) and practice (leadership development) together as a process completes the education, and thus a person is more prepared to apply the knowledge and become an effective leader” (p. 271). Through the discussion, another leadership concept may be introduced that the educator may not have originally identified, so a learning opportunity for the instructor may unfold as well.

Leadership concepts may be best understood if the student is able to make a personal relationship with the topic. Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin (2007) suggest “If individuals can apply theory to (popular culture), they will be able to apply and use those theories in the everyday contexts...thus fostering theory-to-practice thinking” (p. 147). When a student is able to process the information and apply it to something familiar, like a movie or their personal life, they are more likely to remember the concept. Thus, popular media is an effective teaching tool when used appropriately.

### ***Grey’s Anatomy* and Situational Leadership: Making the Connection**

The situational leadership model is used universally by many organizations training others in leadership (Northouse, 2007). It is easy to understand and can be applied in most leadership moments. The model stresses adapting to the needs of followers.

Why should students study situational leadership? Aside from being one of the most popular leadership models, it is especially applicable to college students who are just beginning to enter positions of leadership. Leaders within organizations,

---

such as a club or class officer team, need to remain flexible in their personal leadership style. This allows them to match their styles with the learning styles of their fellow group members (Kivlighan, 1997). Leaders must be able to adapt to change in order to meet the needs and skill levels of their group. Each group is only as strong as its weakest link; therefore, all must work together to lead, understand each other, and work toward accomplishing the group's goals.

Hersey and Blanchard (1972) developed the Situational Leadership Model. It is a systematic explanation for leadership styles based upon the motivation and development of the follower. They describe four styles of leadership: directing, supporting, coaching, and delegating.

During the directing phase leaders are autocratic in nature and tell their followers everything they must do, leaving little room for creativity or imagination. At this level followers are typically new to the situation, and therefore highly motivated, but lack the experience to know what they should be doing or how they should be acting.

Supportive leaders are less directing and offer more encouragement to their followers. The followers have gained some experience in the situation, but they lack motivation because they now realize how little they truly know or understand the task at hand.

Coaching leaders allow their followers more freedom because they possess the experience necessary and are more motivated and know what is needed of them.

Delegating leaders allow their followers to proceed with the task at hand because they possess the motivation and the experience to do what is expected of them.

The Situational Leadership Model is just that, a model. It is a visual explanation of a leadership concept. Many leadership researchers (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997; Graeff, 1983, 1997; Kivlighan, 1997; Walter, Caldwell, & Marshall, 1980) have referred to situational leadership as a theory. Hersey and Blanchard (Hersey, 1984; Hersey & Blanchard, 1972; Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1985) have maintained that situational leadership is a model. However, a theory is a concept that has withstood the test of time, usually after much testing. Over the years, there have been many skeptics of the situational leadership model (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997; Graeff, 1983, 1997; Walter, Caldwell & Marshall, 1980). If situational leadership truly was a theory, and not a model, the skepticism would be limited. Therefore, situational leadership is, in fact, a model.

In their situational leadership model, Hersey and Blanchard (Hersey, 1984; Hersey & Blanchard, 1972; Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1985), stress that the leader is responsible for choosing the leadership style (directing, coaching, supporting, or delegating) specific to the individual and the task at hand. Just as each individual forms his own personality, each individual reacts and responds to

---

situations in different ways. Some individuals may need more direction than others, while others may require more encouragement and support. In addition, one individual that typically requires little direction and little encouragement may require more instruction when asked to complete a task that is unfamiliar. Therefore, leadership should be tailored to the individual and the task at hand. It should never be generalized.

The popular television series *Grey's Anatomy* (2007) provides many examples of situational leadership with its action-packed episodes, and dramatic, complicated, and often changing love stories. Each of the dynamic characters finds themselves in different situations each and every episode. Throughout the series different characters illustrate the directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating styles of leadership in casual, work, life-threatening, and high intensity situations.

*Grey's Anatomy* (2007) also features stereotypical characters that add humor to the dramatic series. Some of the characters include: Alex Karev, the smart jock; Izzy Stevens, the ditzy blonde; Cristina Yang, the smart girl; George O'Malley, the guy who cannot do anything right; Miranda Bailey, the autocratic leader with attitude that holds the group together; Derek "McDreamy" Shepherd, the brain surgeon who really just wants his girlfriend back; and, Meredith Grey, the main character who always finds herself in and out of dilemmas. With this variety of personalities, almost any student can associate with one of the characters or can relate them to friends or family.

### **How Does *Grey's* Teach Lessons in Leadership?**

Clips from *Grey's Anatomy* (2007) can be used to bring the situational leadership moment from the emergency room to the classroom so that students are able to connect their knowledge of the theory to the leadership act. Although only selected clips are mentioned in this paper, a large number of examples can easily be found. Each episode of *Grey's Anatomy* can be downloaded with limited commercials at no cost from the abc.com website.

The directive (S1) style of leadership is illustrated in almost every *Grey's Anatomy* (2007) episode. However, a great example of this high directive, low supportive style is in the first episode of season four - *A Change is Gonna Come* (2007). Cristina Yang is handed a group of bottom-of-the-food-chain interns to begin training. She quickly identifies each of the new interns by a number, not a name, and barks commands at them as to what they are and are not allowed to do – even breathe. The new interns are highly motivated and ready to learn, but they lack the medical experience that allows them to make their own decisions, especially in the emergency room. Although this example of the directive style is extreme, it is a good example that could lead to great discussion on characteristics of an effective leader.

---

In season three (*Desire*, 2007), Chief Richard Webber uses the coaching (S2) style of leadership. Meredith Grey does not complete her residency exam. She is too overwhelmed by the fact that her step-mother has just passed away on her watch in the hospital, and her father is blaming it all on Meredith. The chief requires Meredith to retake the exam. He is direct. He does not give Meredith another option. He understands she was not stable enough to complete the exam with the rest of the group, and he offers her a second chance. He knows she has the knowledge and skills necessary, but she simply lacks the motivation because of the death of her step-mother and the obnoxious actions of her father. He coaches her to move past the experience and complete her residency exam.

In the last episode of season three, *Didn't We Almost Have It All* (2007), Meredith offers a lesson on the supporting (S3) style of leadership. Cristina is getting married to Preston Burke; however, she is not sure if marriage is what she really wants. She has the skills necessary to get married, and she is motivated, but she is not completely convinced she wants to marry. She loves Burke, but she loves the operating room more. Cristina needs support and Meredith is there to provide her with the support that she needs. Meredith does not tell her what to do or what she should say in her vows, but is simply there for her. She tells Cristina what she thinks she wants to hear. Meredith is not directive, but rather highly supportive.

Chief Richard Webber is often found delegating responsibilities to others throughout Seattle Grace Hospital. He is confident that his residents have the skills and knowledge to help patients and operate when necessary; therefore, he delegates. Rarely, in any episode, does the chief ever give much instruction about how to complete a procedure or direct residents in their responsibilities. An effective example of his delegating (S4) style is demonstrated in the season three episode, *Walk on Water* (2007). The chief knows his subordinates are fully developed. When a Seattle ferry crashed and caught fire, many of the interns were sent out to the scene to help others, while the chief remained to at the hospital. They are mature individuals that possess the knowledge, skill base, experience, and personal motivation when the hospital is bombarded with patients and families after the multiple-victim massacre.

From blunt force traumas to brain tumors, no two situations in the emergency room are ever the same, and no two doctors react in the same way with each resident or new patient. While Chief Webber may use the delegating style of situational leadership in one episode, he may employ the supporting style while guiding a student resident in a future episode. Pairing clips that illustrate a character using a different leadership style in different situations will help students make the connection that the situational leadership model treats every situation differently based upon the experience and motivation of the individual.

With the abundance of drama series available on television today, how do educators select one that will serve the dual purpose of illustrating situational leadership and appealing to the audience? *Grey's Anatomy* (2007) is sure to fulfill

---

both of those needs. With constantly changing situations in and out of the emergency room, educators are sure to find many clips within each episode that illustrate the directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating leadership styles. In addition, although the *Grey's* writers, cast, and crew have won several awards including best television drama series and supporting actress, this is not the sole reason that both teen and adult audiences are attracted to the television on Thursday evenings (Awards for *Grey's Anatomy*, 2008). Between difficult relationships, struggling to pass residency exams, and dealing with not-so-ordinary family members, students often are able to sit back and watch as on-screen characters deal with the same situations they are faced with each day. Students can learn leadership lessons while they relate to *Grey's* characters.

### **That's a Wrap!**

Leading a discussion on the leadership lesson helps drive the concept home. A simple start-up question can open opportunities for in-depth conversation on leadership lessons. A simple question such as, "Can you think of an example of someone in your life that uses this style of leadership?" or "Do you use this style of leadership? When and with whom?" can lead to great leadership discussions. Students will be able to learn from not only the educators, but also the experiences of other students.

Graham, Sincoff, Baker, and Ackermann (2003) remind us, "The facilitator must be conversant with the film and workplace application" (p. 43). When everyone leaves the room after class, everyone needs to leave understanding the clip that they have viewed, and the leadership lesson gained. One way to accomplish this is to ask students, "What situational leadership style is used? What happens if the character misdiagnoses the subordinate's confidence and skill level?" For example, what happens if Erica Hahn uses a directive leadership style with Cristina Yang when all she really needs is a little guidance and a lot of support? Drive home the point that situational leadership is an individual and ever-changing model.

Theory + Example + Discussion = Learning! Learning cannot happen with strictly a classroom lecture with a brief popular media clip. Leadership educators must provide background information on the leadership concept, and potentially apply the concept to the students' lives, before a full understanding of the lesson can occur. If the students can bring it to life, they will truly understand the concept (Callahan & Rosser, 2007). Using a popular media clip can help the students make the connection between the leadership lesson and application of the concept, especially if they are unsure of how the concept applies to their personal lives.

Leadership education does not have to be another chore brought into the classroom. Make leadership learning fun again – try using *Grey's Anatomy* (2007) to bring a leadership moment to life in a lesson today.

---

---

## References

- Awards for *Grey's Anatomy* (2008). *The Internet Movie Database*. Retrieved May 30, 2008, from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0413573/awards>.
- Beers, B., Vernoff, K., Gordon, M., Horton, P., Corn, R., & Rhimes, S. (Executive Producers) (2007). *Grey's Anatomy* [television series]. New York: ABC.
- Blanchard, K., Zigarmi, P., & Zigarmi, D. (1985). *Leadership and the one minute manager: Increasing effectiveness through situational leadership*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Cacioppe, R. (1997). Leadership moment by moment! *Leadership Organization & Development Journal*, 18, 335-345.
- Callahan, J. L., & Rosser, M. H. (2007, May). Pop goes the program: Using popular culture artifacts to educate leaders. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 9(2), 269-287.
- Callahan, J. L., Whitener, J. K., & Sandlin, J. A. (2007, May). The art of creating leaders: Popular culture artifacts as pathways for development. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 9(2), 146-165.
- Cummins, R. L. (2007, May). Can modern media inform leadership education and development? *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 9(2), 143-145.
- Fernandez, C. F., & Vecchio, R. P. (1997). Situational leadership theory revisited: A test of an across-jobs perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 8, 67-84.
- Graham, T. S., Sincoff, M. Z., Baker, B., & Ackermann, J. C. (2003, Winter). Reel leadership: Hollywood takes the leadership challenge. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 2(2), 37-45.
- Graeff, C. L. (1983, April). The situational leadership theory: A critical view. *The Academy of Management Review*, 8, 285-291.
- Graeff, C. L. (1997). Evolution of situational leadership theory: A critical review. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 8, 153-170.
- Hersey, P., Blanchard, K. H. (1972). *Management of organizational behavior: Utilizing human resources* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Hersey, P. (1984). *The Situational Leader*. New York: Warner Books.
-

- Hofman, M. (2002, March). Everything I know about leadership, I learned from movies. *Inc. com*. Retrieved October 1, 2007, from <http://pf.inc.com/magazine/20000301/17290.html>
- Huber, N. S. (2002, Summer). Approaching leadership education in the new millennium. *Journal of Leadership Education, 1(1)*, 25-34.
- Kivlighan, D. L. (1997). Leader behavior and therapeutic gain: An application of situational leadership theory. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, 1(1)*, 32-38.
- Northouse, P. G. (2007). *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Rosser, M. H. (2007). Community of leadership theory. Texas A&M University, *Professional Leadership Development*. College Station, TX.
- Walter, J. E., Caldwell, S. D., & Marshall, J. (1980, May). Evidence for the validity of situational leadership theory. *Educational Leadership, 37*, 618-621.
- Williams, J. R. (2006, Fall). Pirates and power: What Captain Jack Sparrow, his friends, and his foes can teach us about power bases. *Journal of Leadership Education, 5(2)*, 60-66.

## **Biography**

Jodi L. Torock is a graduate teaching assistant in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication at Texas A&M University. Jodi received a Bachelor of Science degree in Animal Sciences at Pennsylvania State University. Growing up in Pennsylvania, she was an active 4-H member, and served as Pennsylvania State 4-H Council President in 2004. Upon graduation, Jodi plans to obtain a position within the Cooperative Extension System as a 4-H and Youth Development Educator. In this role, Jodi would like to help youth have the same great leadership and service opportunities that she experienced through the 4-H program.