



journal of biblical
perspectives
in leadership

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE BOOK OF SAMUEL

MONICA L. ISAAC

The purpose of this paper is to examine the interactions between David and other characters within the pericope of 1 Samuel 25. The study reviews the challenges David encountered and his responses and actions. The use of language within the text is analyzed through the lens of socio-rhetorical criticism to showcase how David's responses can lend guidance to the modern Christian leader when approaching different peers. The goal of this research is to link David's behaviors to the situational leadership theory (SLT) as developed by Hersey and Blanchard through an examination of the narrative voices, emotion-infused language, patterns, repetition, progression and other word structures employed. Leaders must be able to respond effectively and appropriately to the various members with whom they interact. This paper seeks to find examples of different levels of leader-follower relationships within the passage and define how modern leaders can gain insight from this passage.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an inner textual analysis to uncover the mitigating factors behind David's various behaviors and link these changes in behavior back to the situational model of leadership as defined by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969. While the model has been modified many times over the decades, this research paper utilizes the original theory as a base. David's evolving responses to each variant provide support for the idea that adaptability is vital for effective leadership. David did not employ a single style of leadership or wield a solitary power type when dealing with multiple individuals. Instead, he tailored his behavior to each situation and each person. The result was an integrative approach which "involves more than one type of leadership variable" (Yukl, 2013, p. 13). Leaders face many different levels of followers throughout their careers. This paper seeks to present Biblical evidence of the varying factors that call for flexibility in leadership. More specifically, this research seeks to answer the

question – what factors should a leader consider to adopt the leadership style that each individual follower requires?

The initial portion of the paper presents a review of pertinent literature existing on SLT. Second, the inner textual analysis of 1 Samuel 25 begins with the narrative nature of the text, continuing to examine the revelations of each character, their points of view, and the intent of each main character. Next examined are the sensory-aesthetic queues within the pericope. Third, the paper covers multiple forms of open-middle-closing texture found within the scripture, particularly analyzing the repetition, progression of text and behavior, and narratives found within the separate portions of the pericope. Finally, the paper presents an overview of how the various behaviors within the pericope link back to Hersey and Blanchard's model, and how David's behavior supports the findings of the model.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

SLT is one of the most common theories in the leadership field today, being “popular in management training programs and schoolteacher-training settings” (Thompson & Glasø, 2018). Hersey and Blanchard (1969) first introduced SLT as the life cycle theory (LCT) of leadership. LCT was developed after studies on leader behaviors were published which seemed “to suggest there [was] a ‘best’ style of leadership” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, p. 190). The LCT argued against the existence of a single superlative style of leadership, siding with the research of Fred Fielder (1972), whose contingency model argued that “leadership performance depends upon situational favorableness as well as the leader's motivational pattern” (p. 115). LCT contended that the most effective leaders modified their behaviors in response to the psychological age (or maturity level) of each follower (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, p. 190).

Hersey and Blanchard renamed the life cycle theory to the situational theory of leadership in 1977 declaring it “based on a curvilinear relationship between task behavior and relationship behavior and maturity” (as cited in Graeff, 1997). According to SLT, leaders adapt their style according to the readiness level of individual subordinates, changing styles as the follower progresses and regresses through readiness levels. This variation is based on the dyadic relationship formed with each follower (Hersey, Angelini, & Carakushansky, 1982), and allows for the possibility of mitigating factors that may affect employee readiness such as personal disaster (Yukl, 2013). Table 1 presents the combinations of follower readiness and leader style as defined by Hersey and Blanchard.

Table 1

Follower Readiness and Leader Style Combinations

Follower Level	Leader Style
Unwilling, unable, or lacking in confidence	Telling – an autocratic, directive style
Not ready, but willing to learn	Selling – coaching, mentoring style
Able, but unengaged	Participating – coaching/supportive style

Fully qualified, confident, willing and capable

Delegating – an autonomous approach, laissez-faire, more hands-off

Hersey, Blanchard, and Natemeyer (1979) later acknowledged the role of power-base in the situational model and discussed the effects of seven different types of power on the model. Further, they defined how different types of power align with different levels of follower competence. Hersey et al. theorized that adopting a leadership style that is not integrated with the correct power base may negatively impact effectiveness. Further, they argued that the actuality of the leader's power base is second to the follower's perceived notion of the leader's power base. A dominant concern of the situational leader is the ability to "increase subordinate maturity with a developmental intervention that builds the person's skills and confidence" (Yukl, 2013). Leader power as perceived by employees impacts leader ability to "induce compliance or influence followers" (Hersey et al., 1979, p.418). Since the leader focuses on the increase of the individual follower's confidence and performance level, projecting the proper type of power is crucial to both the leader and the follower.

SLT focuses on short-term behaviors and attitudes of subordinates but emphasizes that over time leader style should adapt to follower behavior as they move along the situational gamut. As an example, based on the situational model, when faced with an employee undergoing a decrease in performance the leader is expected to "reassess the maturity level and move backward through the prescriptive curve" (Hersey et al., 1979, p. 422). SLT also contends that mediating and moderating factors should be considered before adopting a style for a follower (Yukl, 2013). The effective leader considers the primary behavior of the subordinate, the mitigating circumstances that may exist, the factors going on within the organization, and their relationship with the follower before acting.

III. METHODOLOGY

According to Robbins (1996), inner texture is the interpreter's manner of examining the chosen language of the text and the author's usage and structure of the language to deliver the message. The interpreter scrutinizes the language of the text and "focuses on words as tools for communication" (Robbins, 1996, p.7). The assessor not only considers the words chosen, but how often they are used (repetition); how they are used in conjunction with other words or behaviors (progression); who is using them and why (narration); the order, context, and background in which they are used (open-middle-closing); the reasoning attributed to or implied by the chosen words (argumentation); and the emotions that the choice of wording invokes (sensory-aesthetic) (Robbins, 1996). This inner textual analysis will examine the pericope of 1 Samuel 25 using a combination of these methods.

Narrative voices

The initial narrator of this pericope is unidentified. His voice is interchanged with other voices so that the scripture moves forward through a design of "narration and attributed speech" (Robbins, 1996, p.15). David's is the first identified voice in this

pericope, beginning with a humble request to Nabal, whom the original narrator described as mean. Nabal's is the second identified voice; his response confirmed that he was foolish, selfish, and unkind: "Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?" (1 Sam 25:11, NIV). David voiced outrage at the callous reply and the narrative switches to the voice of a servant whose words further confirmed both Nabal and David's natures. The servant implored Abigail to intervene and contended that David's men were kind. Conversely, his speech ended with a declaration of Nabal's wickedness (1 Samuel 25:15-17). This alternation continued throughout the verse, switching primarily between the unknown narrator, David, and Abigail, propelling the pericope forward and solidifying the expected actions of each character.

Sensory Aesthetic Texture and Evocation of Emotion

Robbins (1996) outlined that this aspect of inner texture "resides prominently in the range of senses the text evokes or embodies" (p. 29). However, not all words conjure an image, thought, smell, or sensation of sorts (Osborne, 2006). Some words evoke an emotion (non-technical) while others do not (technical), yet even with technical words that may seemingly invoke no senses, the emotional meaning is derived from the text. Per Osborne (2006), these words may indeed have a symbolic nature, "even with technical terms the context has priority" (p. 94).

The narrative opens with 1 Samuel 25:1-3 employing four adjectives that "give particular tone and color" (Robbins, 1996, p. 30) to the discourse, setting the stage for understanding the behavior of two main characters, Nabal, the fool, and Abigail, his wife. Abigail, deemed "intelligent" and "beautiful" (the text infers that she was beautiful not only in appearance but also in spirit and character) invokes an image in sharp contrast to her husband, who was described as "surly" and "mean." These adjectives conjure emotion-fused thought, setting an expectation of how the two will behave before any action on behalf of either. The reader enters the narrative anticipating sharp, selfless actions from Abigail, and irrational, selfish actions from Nabal.

The sensory-aesthetic texture continues into the narrative to describe David through his speech and actions. 1 Samuel 25:4-13 highlights the height of Nabal's foolishness while David's greeting exuded his humility. He sent good tidings to Nabal and humbly begged for his favor in return for the protection he lent his men in the wilderness. This form of self-expressive speech on David's behalf shows only one side of David, building the case for situational behaviors exhibited within the pericope. Nabal's cruel reply to David's humble request and his feigned ignorance of David's very existence (1 Sam 25:10) evoke feelings of shock, anger, and anticipation in the reader.

The pericope continues to raise emotions in 1 Samuel 25:14-19, as a servant of Nabal reported his response to Abigail. The servant's speech evokes feelings of safety, relief, and care using narrative such as "these men were very good to us. They did not mistreat us . . . night and day they were a wall around us" (1 Sam 25:15) again setting the stage for emotion-fused thought and providing for the interpreter proof of David's moral and protective character. Abigail quickly gathered supplies and instructed her servants to move ahead to meet David and his men, without telling Nabal, concerned only for her people. These purposeful actions link back to the initial description of

Abigail - that she was intelligent and beautiful, but her quick actions convey the sense of urgency to the reader and emphasize the impending doom which she hoped to divert.

The text continues to solidify the characters of David, Nabal, and Abigail through 1 Samuel 25:20-24. David progressed with more self-expressive speech, vowing vengeance upon Nabal and his people, swearing to leave no male of Nabal's alive (1 Sam 25:22). David revealed a more aggressive, assertive side, along with a considerable amount of self-awareness and confidence in his abilities. The narrative continued to set a backdrop in a mountain ravine, in which Abigail bowed to the ground, another purposeful action which shows humility, submission, and intelligence. She proceeded to describe Nabal as a fool, followed by folly, solidifying his character through emotional speech.

Open-middle-closing textures within the narrative

The pericope features three significant narrative units, open-middle-closing. Table 2 shows the progression of the narrative from the introduction which provides the first glimpse of the main characters, making it possible for the reader to predict behaviors which summarize the moral lessons of the pericope as it strives to depict desirable and undesirable behaviors. Loyalty, faithfulness, and patience are values to be rewarded. Callousness, cruelty, wickedness, and foolishness – or the denunciation of God – are to be avoided. Within the middle texture, there is yet another open-middle-closing texture, and within this texture exists repetition and progression.

Table 2

Opening-Middle-Closing Texture and Pattern

Unit	Verses	Key Theme	Purpose
Opening	25:1-4	Introduction to the pericope, Samuel dies, driving David into the wilderness of Paran where he encounters Nabal's crew	To set the backdrop of the pericope, and introduce each new main character, providing an expectation for the behavior of each through insight into values and attributes of each.
Middle	25:5-38	Nabal and David interact indirectly, with Abigail acting as a mediating factor with direct and indirect interactions with both	Cements the reader's view of the actions and behavior of each character through self-expressive speech and purposeful actions, repetition, and progression. Escalates to a final closing act by God.
Closing	25:38-44	Death of Nabal and the faithfulness of Abigail	Highlights the benefits of loyalty, faithfulness, and patience in

Repetition and Progression within the Middle of the Pericope

Verses 25:12-19 set the background for the meeting between David and Abigail, beginning with a fervent plea for action from a servant. This opening solidified the portrayal of Abigail as intelligent and Nabal as wicked through the servant's speech and Abigail's quick response. The middle, verses 25:20-35, features some repetition and progression in several different behaviors of David's. Table 3 shows the repetition based on a theme of serving, alternating between who is serving, and who is being served – David or God. The repetitive nature of David and Abigail's exchanges accentuate David's regression and progression.

Table 3

Progression through repetition

24	your servant	my Lord	your servant	
25	my Lord	your servant	my Lord	
26	my lord	the Lord your God	the Lord	
27	your servant	my lord		
28	your servant's	the Lord your God	my lord	the
29	my lord	the Lord your God		Lord's
30	the Lord	my lord		
31	my lord	the Lord your God	my lord	your
32	the Lord	God of Israel		servant
33				
34	the Lord	God of Israel		

At the beginning of the middle section, David is angered and prepared to act against Nabal for his trespasses, when Abigail intervened. Abigail calmed David with her speech, reminding him that “the lives of your enemies he [the Lord] will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling” (1 Samuel 25:29) Through this exchange, David progressed to realization of his error, recalled his place as God's servant and calmed enough to react to Abigail with care and sensitivity. This middle texture shows David's protective nature toward his men, his confidence in the Lord, and his awareness of his abilities. It further highlighted his propensity to punish and reward when appropriate. David's movement through these levels of progression and regression leads him to realize that the ultimate power to reward and punish resides with God, and as his servant, he need not act to correct Nabal's behavior.

Argumentative texture

The actions within the text progress both logically and subjectively to provide explanations for two events. The first of these is the death of Nabal by God's hand, and second is David's marriage to Abigail. The reader enters the text with no expectation of

either event, but the arguments presented build these events so that the “reader recognizes the appropriateness of the progression only after the events have occurred” (Robbins, 1996, p. 23). The reasons given are both explicit and implicit. Nabal was proven a foolish man, mean and surly, who found peril in his folly at the hand of Lord. The story builds upon this until the final point, when God strikes Nabal down. The action is unexpected, as God does not move in the entire pericope until that point, yet the scripture builds “a willingness to accept as a natural outcome of the assertions and activities” (Robbins, 1996, p. 29) based on the previous descriptions and voices heard within the text. These voices show that the striking of Nabal is with cause and is just to those in the surrounding world. These same voices further asserted that David’s marriage to Abigail is an act of care and not a selfish act.

IV. DISCUSSION

This analysis of 1 Samuel 25 provides support for situational leadership and the importance of responding appropriately to different levels of associates. According to Hersey and Blanchard (1997), the first point of consideration based on the model “has always been to decide on the task” (p. 45). Northouse (2013) surmised that the situational leader considers two factors before acting, “the nature of the situation” (p. 95) and the behavior appropriate to that specific situation. Northouse also argued that SLT is prescriptive, “it tells you what you should and should not do” (p. 105). The leader sees each subordinate as an individual and each situation as diverse and modifies their style to meet the needs of the scenario. In 1 Samuel 25, David adopted various styles of leadership traits and behaviors, changing to meet the requirements of each different person he faced.

According to Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Dierendonck and Liden (2019) “servant leadership is a holistic leadership approach that engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual), such that they are empowered to grow into what they are capable of becoming” (para. 2). At the opening of the pericope, David adopted a combination of delegating and servant leadership as his style, recognizing his followers as self-reliant in their abilities. He chose to empower his followers “by showing trust” (Yukl, 2013, p. 348) in their abilities. Yukl named humility and altruism as traits of servant leadership, and David displayed both traits in his approach and concern for his men. David’s men, in turn, responded with loyalty and trust in his decisions. David’s followers submitted to his command willingly; further, David is described as a man after God’s heart (1 Sam 13:14). David’s men likely regarded his power base as referent, that is, a leader who is “liked and admired [causing] others to wish to be identified with him or her” (Hersey et al., 1979, p. 419).

David’s approaches to Nabal demonstrated his ability to account for movement along the situational continuum, which causes a single follower to progress and regress behavior-wise. Per Thompson and Glasø (2015) “leaders should be aware and sensitive to such changes among their followers and subsequently adapt to such continuously evolving new situations in their efforts to choose the most effective leadership style” (p. 541). David’s initial approach was to adopt a selling style of leadership, which allows the leader to use “two-way communications and explanations [to] guide the followers into desired behaviors” (Hersey et al., 1979, p. 422). Further, in his initial approach, David relied on social exchange theory as his base of power. Social

exchange theory claims that the “satisfaction of needs should not only reduce uncertainty about the trustor's intentions or behaviors but also signal the trustor's investment in a social exchange relationship leading to trust” (Aryee et al., 2013, p.237). David relied on the services and benefits he had already provided for Nabal as a form of social contract and trusted that Nabal would honor his end of the exchange. When Nabal not only refused to honor his end of the unspoken contract but haughtily denounced David's authority, David changed styles a third time.

According to Yukl (2013), follower characteristics such as values, attitudes, or behaviors are situational variables that can influence leader behavior. David knew the capabilities of his men but chose his style based on the variable of Nabal's behavior. In response to Nabal's snub, David adopted a telling style. He directed his men hastily and demanded that they ready themselves for battle (1 Sam 25:13). This tendency toward issuing directives is one of the main features of autocratic leadership. These leaders make isolated decisions allowing no time for “for the group members to discuss and think about their own ideas” (De Cremer, 2006, p. 82). Autocratic leaders are most beneficial in situations that are short on time, times of crisis, or in bureaucratic agencies such as the military or governmental organizations (Yukl, 2013). Though David understood his place as the Lord's servant, in his anger, he failed to control his emotions instead of turning to the Lord for guidance. Instead, he prepared himself and his men to modify Nabal's seeming lack of regard for his legitimate power through a display of fear-based coercive power to induce Nabal's compliance by castigation. (1 Sam 25:13; Hersey et al., 1979). In response, David's men reacted without question to David's directive.

David's encounter with Abigail presented yet another change in style. With Abigail, David adopted a participating and spiritual leadership style. Abigail displayed a perception of reward power and possibly referent power throughout their encounters. In their initial meeting, she begged David to remember her in his success and later does not hesitate to meet his call for her to join his side (1 Sam 25:31, 25:41). Per Hersey et al. (1982) the participating style involves a leader's efforts to “reduce or deemphasize the importance of their own structuring” (p.217) while showing support, communicating openly, and actively listening to follower needs. The elements of spiritual leadership include kindness, faith, altruism, and love (Yukl, 2013). Abigail's intervention sparked in David a reminder of his faith, and he responded to her with care. Abigail expressed her faith and loyalty to David and the Lord in response to his speech and returned home to Nabal and informed him of his error. This information caused Nabal's heart to fail, leaving him paralyzed until struck down by God (1 Sam 25:37-38).

Leaders should look to this pericope to glean the importance of responding appropriately to varying stimuli, such as context, background, subordinate ability, behavior, or commitment, and how the ability to adapt improves leader effectiveness. The Christian leader should approach leadership through the worldview of values such as egalitarianism, humility, love, and justice; but the leader cannot become so entranced by these morals that they allow themselves to adopt a viewpoint that each follower should receive the same level of treatment. Effective leaders “serve best by not becoming prisoners of our own doctrines” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1997, p.45). David built relationships based on the behaviors and abilities of each subordinate, sometimes modified by context, sometimes not. Leaders need to adequately assess each situation

as presented and respond individually to each. There is no one-size-fits-all method of leadership; leaders must work to develop a mastery of multiple styles for maximum success.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to present support from 1 Samuel 25 for the effectiveness of situational leadership. The study highlighted the importance of several situational leadership traits, such as patience, humility, emotional intelligence, and active listening – all traits that David exhibited in response to the different situations and people he faced. Northouse (2013) contended that situational leadership “underscores that subordinates have unique needs and deserve our help in trying to become better at doing their work” (p. 106). David’s behavior in 1 Samuel 25 is a shining example for today’s leaders of the benefits of situational leadership. The style is practical; it is easy to understand; it stresses how leaders should behave, but also how leaders should not behave (Northouse, 2013).

Further studies focusing on the views of followers is required, for example, how do subordinates view leaders who respond differently to different to stimulants? Do subordinates possess the level of objectivity and self-awareness to accept a leader that treats subordinates differently based on their capabilities, or will subordinates see this type of leader as unjust and biased? Is there a specific type of follower or mixture of follower traits that make this response more or less likely? Assessing the likely receptivity of followers would help to advance research further and expand models of situational leadership.

About the Author

Monica L. Isaac obtained her MBA from the College of William & Mary. She is a second-year Ph.D. student in Organizational Leadership at the Regent University School of Business & Leadership. Her main research interests include organizational culture, behavior, and follower accountability. Monica is currently employed with the Navy Exchange Service command as a Merchandise Accounting Analyst and resides in sunny Virginia Beach, VA with her three sons and her husband.

Monica Isaac

moniisa@mail.regent.edu

VI. REFERENCES

- Aryee, S., Walumbwa, F. O., Mondejar, R., & Chu, C. W. L. (2015). Accounting for the influence of overall justice on job performance: Integrating Self-Determination and social exchange theories. *Journal of Management Studies*, 52(2), 231-252. doi:10.1111/joms.12067

- Blanchard, K. H., & Hersey, P. (1996). Great ideas revisited. *Training & Development*, 50(1), 42.
- De Cremer, D. (2006). *Affective and motivational consequences of leader self-sacrifice: The moderating effect of autocratic leadership* doi://doi-org.ezproxy.regent.edu/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.10.005
- Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R. C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(1), 111-132. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.07.004
- Fiedler, F. E. (1972). Predicting the effects of leadership training and experience from the contingency model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 56(2), 114-119. doi:10.1037/h0032668
- Graeff, C. L. (1983). The situational leadership theory: A critical view. *The Academy of Management Review*, 8(2), 285-291. doi:10.2307/257756
- Graeff, C. L. (1997). Evolution of situational leadership theory: A critical review. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 8(2), 153-170. doi:10.1016/S1048-9843(97)90014-X
- Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. (1976). Life cycle theory of leadership. In H. Boles (Ed.), *Multidisciplinary readings in educational leadership* (pp. 188-199). New York, NY: MSS Information Corporation.
- Hersey, P., Blanchard, K. H., & Natemeyer, W. E. (1979). Situational leadership, perception, and the impact of power. *Group & Organization Management*, 4(4), 418-428. doi:10.1177/105960117900400404
- Hersey, P., Angelini, A. L., & Carakushansky, S. (1982). The impact of situational leadership and classroom structure on learning effectiveness. *Group & Organization Management*, 7(2), 216-224. doi:10.1177/105960118200700209
- Northouse, P. (2013). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (6th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Osborne, G. R. (2006). *The hermeneutical spiral* (2nd ed.). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Robbins, V. (1996). *Exploring the texture of texts: A guide to socio-rhetorical interpretation*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Thompson, G., & Glasø, L. (2015). Situational leadership theory: A test from three perspectives. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 36(5), 527-544. doi:10.1108/LODJ-10-2013-0130
- Thompson, G., & Glasø, L. (2018). Situational leadership theory: A test from a leader-follower congruence approach. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 39(5), 574-591. doi:10.1108/LODJ-01-2018-0050
- Thompson, G., & Vecchio, R. P. (2009). Situational leadership theory: A test of three versions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20(5), 837-848. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.06.014
- Vecchio, R. P. (1987). Situational leadership theory: An examination of a prescriptive theory. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 72(3), 444-451. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.72.3.444
- Yukl, G. (1989). Managerial leadership: A review of theory and research. *Journal of Management*, 15(2), 251-289. doi:10.1177/014920638901500207
- Yukl, G. (2013). *Leadership in organizations* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.