Situational
Leadership &
Management

Jill was walking home from work early one evening and came upon her neighbour under a street lamp.

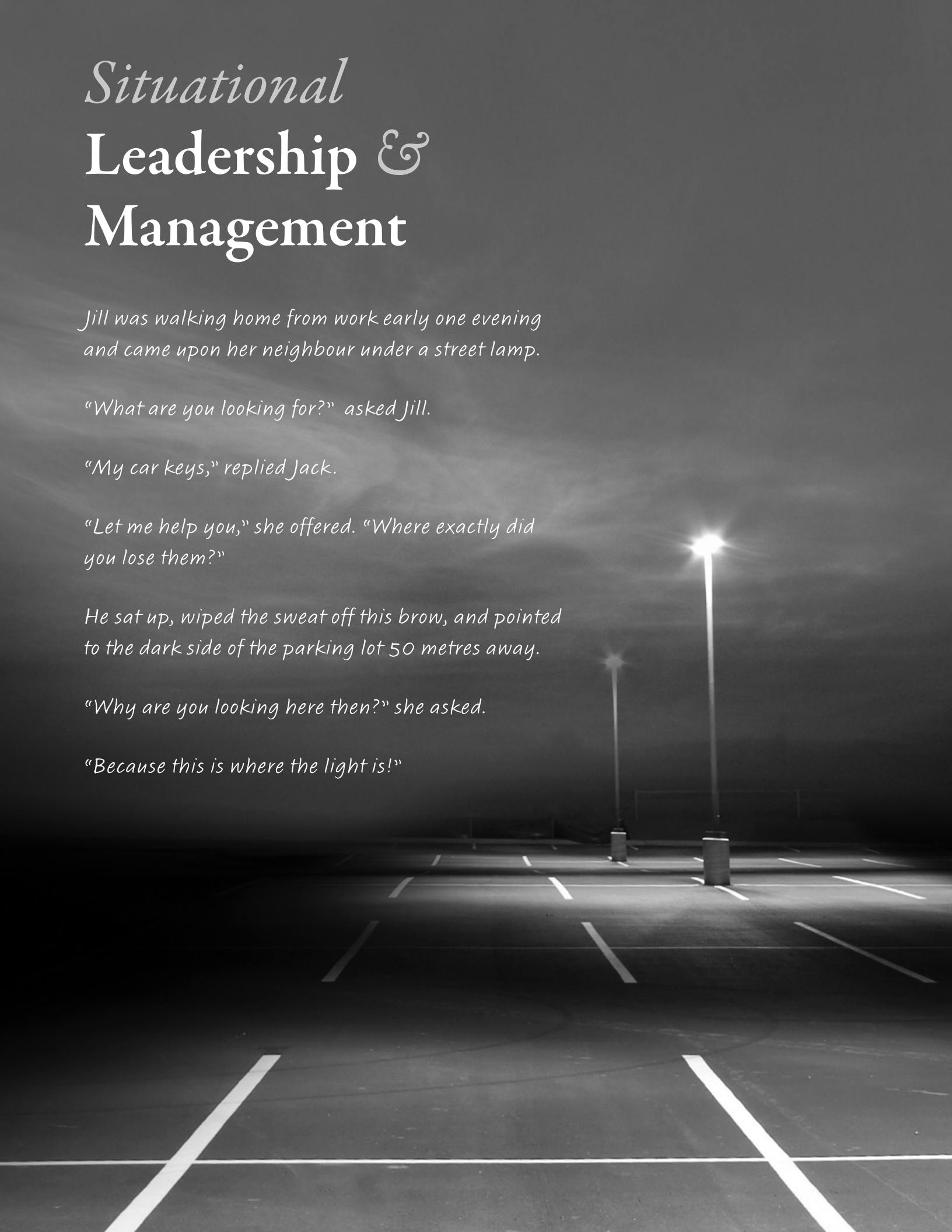"What are you looking for?" asked Jill.

"My car keys," replied Jack.

"Let me help you," she offered. "Where exactly did you lose them?"

He sat up, wiped the sweat off this brow, and pointed to the dark side of the parking lot 50 metres away.

"Why are you looking here then?" she asked.

"Because this is where the light is!"

Agreement & Certainty Matrix

Effective leaders and managers use an array of approaches to assess and respond to situations while being aware of when to use which approach.

Brenda Zimmerman has refined a framework originally developed by Ralph Stacey to assist people assess contexts or challenges along two different dimensions: **The degree of certainty & the level of agreement.**
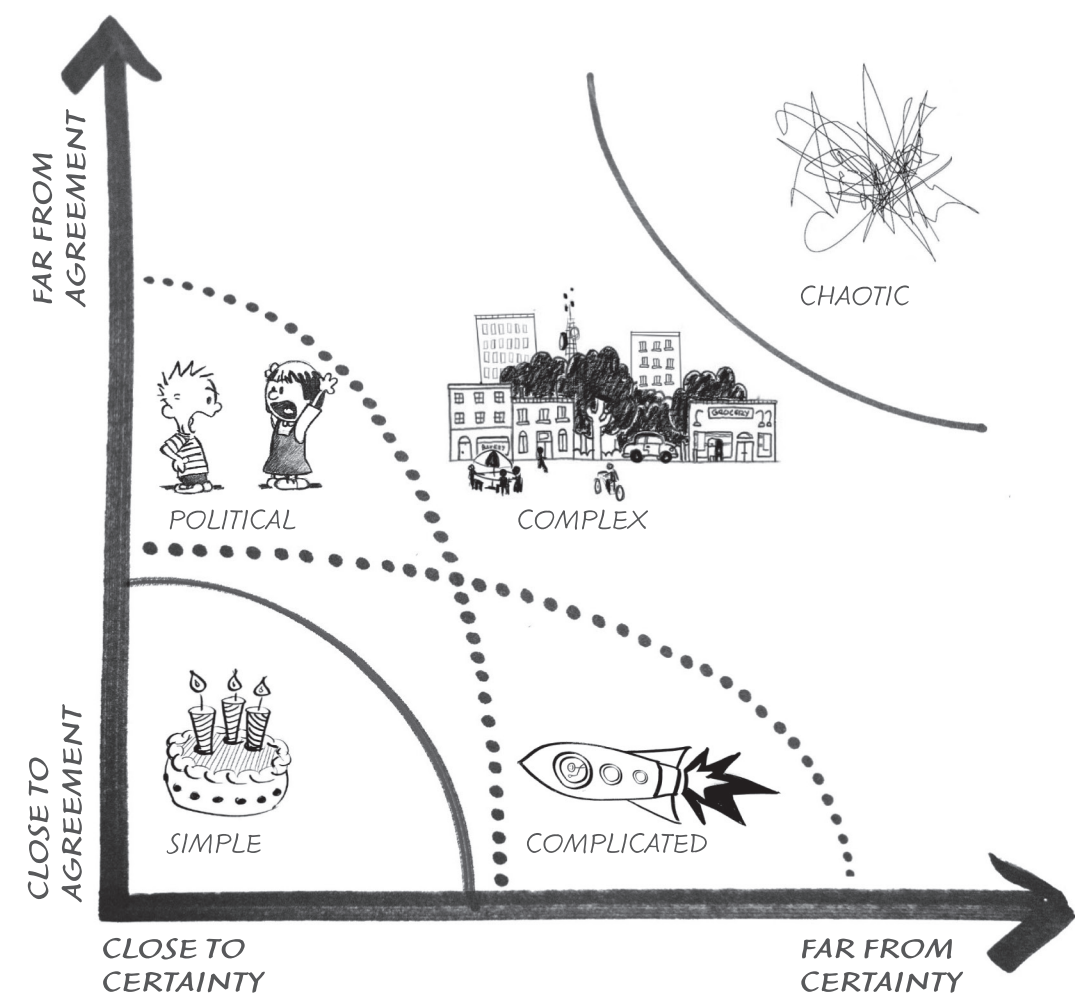
Certainty

Close to Certainty: When underlying cause and effect relationships are clear, the leverage points for change are well known, the interventions well tested, and the outcomes predictable.

Far from Certainty: When underlying cause and effect relationships and the "leverage points" for change are unknown, the interventions untested, and the outcomes unpredictable.

Agreement

Close to agreement: When the values, interests, perspectives, and positions of key stakeholders involved in an issue or decision are aligned and/or are sufficiently close to find common ground to move forward.

Far from agreement: When the values, interests, perspectives and positions of key stakeholders involved in an issue or decision are in conflict and/or are sufficiently far apart that it is difficult to find common ground to move forward.

FAR FROM AGREEMENT

CLOSE TO AGREEMENT

CLOSE TO CERTAINTY

FAR FROM CERTAINTY

CHAOTIC

POLITICAL

COMPLEX

SIMPLE

COMPLICATED

Simple 🎂

Simple contexts and issues exist when the cause-and-effect relationships are clear, the solution is straightforward, and stakeholders agree on how to frame the issue and move it forward.

Characteristics

Cause and effect relationships are clear.

The solution already exists and/or can be easily developed.

The outcomes of the intervention are relatively predictable.

Examples

Making a cake using a recipe.

Implementing inoculation against the flu.

Administrating a scholarship program.

In some cases, the issue is so straightforward that decision-makers can develop an effective solution on the spot. If not, they can often take advantage of best practice, using well-tested formulas, models, blueprints or algorithms to bring about relatively predictable outcomes.

Examples of simple issues include baking a cake using a recipe from a cookbook, inoculating school-age children with a flu vaccine, managing a payroll system, and administering a scholarship program.

When the context is simple, leaders and managers can respond in a straightforward manner: they correctly diagnose the nature of the situation, and – knowing that they have the right solution – focus on strong implementation while adhering to best practice.

What are the challenges of working within simple contexts? Ensure you have gathered all of the facts about the situation and be willing to adapt your response should the challenge and context change.

Complicated 🚀

Complicated contexts and issues exist when stakeholders are close to agreement but the cause-and-effect relationships and solutions, while discoverable, are not immediately evident.

Fixing a watch is a complicated challenge: you need to identify all the parts of the watch and figure out how they work before you can to fix it. Sending a rocket to the moon is more complicated because it involves so many overlapping challenges: it requires the orchestration of diverse sets of expertise (e.g., engineering, physics, astronomy, medicine) and involves a variety of possible solves.

Decision-makers rely on experts to resolve complicated issues: they often possess vast knowledge and experience about the cause-and-effect relationships underlying the challenges, and they know what has been tried in the past. Through creative thinking, experimentation, and debate – and with enough time and resources – they can recommend a number of effective solutions for decision-makers to consider.

Relying on traditional expertise has its drawbacks. When decision-makers and experts rely too heavily on their own expertise, they are less likely to embrace the perspectives and knowledge of others. They can also spin their wheels searching for more and more information or think themselves into a corner, a state that is often referred to as "analysis paralysis".

Characteristics

Stakeholders are close to agreement.

Cause and effect relationships are unclear but discoverable.

There are several workable answers available.

The outcomes of the intervention are relatively predictable.

Examples

Fixing a watch.

Sending a rocket to the moon.

Management information system.

Political

Political contexts exist when the cause-and-effect relationships underlying an issue are clear but stakeholders disagree on the importance of the issue, how its framed, and the desirability of different futures and path forwards.

Characteristics

Cause and effect relationships are clear.

Stakeholders are far from agreement.

The best solution is the one that all stakeholders agree on.

Examples

Deciding whether to charge user fees or allow private delivery in the health care system.

Convincing a government to increase the minimum wage

Deciding where to establish a needle exchange in a suburban neighborhood

The world is rich in political issues. Should user fees be charged or private delivery be allowed in the health care system? What is a fair minimum wage? Where should a needle exchange be located in a suburban neighborhood? Which child gets the biggest bedroom?

In political contexts, leaders and managers face several challenges. They need to create the conditions for key stakeholders to have a voice in the discussions, build and retain trust among stakeholders, and explore where and how to find common ground.

Sometimes this can be accomplished by opening up communication channels between stakeholders, helping them to realize that they are actually on the same page. At other times, it requires creating space for negotiation and dialogue, so stakeholders can discover shared values and interests and see a "win-win" path forward. In yet other instances, leaders may need to mediate deep conflicts between parties, taking care to ensure that everyone involved is able to fully participate in the search for resolution.

Ultimately, the best solution in political situations is the one that all stakeholders agree on.

Complex

Complex contexts (often called wicked or adaptive problems) exist when the cause-and-effect relationships underlying the issues are fuzzy, the solutions are imperfect and not known in advance, and stakeholders struggle to get on the same page.

Complex issues are marked by dynamic and unpredictable interactions that change suddenly and differ from context to context. Stakeholder agreement is critical in complex contexts because the solutions require sustained and orchestrated action across artificial organizational boundaries. Agreement can be difficult to obtain because stakeholders often have diverse values, perspectives, and interests.

Characteristics

Cause and effect relationships are unclear.

Stakeholders are far from agreement.

Solutions tend to be context specific, incomplete, and often time limited.

Examples

Revitalizing commerce on a downtown street.

Raising a child.

Improving the academic performance of students at a struggling school.

Leaders and manager can draw upon best practice and expertise to resolve complex issues. However, the unique and context-specific nature of these situations means that effective solutions must be developed and implemented by people with the strongest stake in the issue and customized to their unique context. The central task, therefore, is to support stakeholders experiment with responses that reveal the underlying cause and effect patterns of the challenge and point towards promising – often innovative -- answers.

Unfortunately, there are no cookie cutter solutions to complex issues. Each proposed solution will have advantages and disadvantages – including unpredictable ripple effects. Different stakeholders will prefer different solutions. Solutions that work – and are embraced – in one place may not be productive or welcome in another. Many responses will work only for a short time – as the situations evolves, it will require new ones. Over time, however, stakeholders that stick to it will uncover productive principles, rules-of-thumb, and helpful practices able to generate results.

Chaotic

Chaotic situations exist when the context is highly turbulent, cause-and-effect relationships are unclear, possible solutions are, at best, a guess, and stakeholders are disconnected and possibly at odds with each other.

Characteristics

Cause and effect relationships are unclear.

Stakeholders may be far from agreement.

Solutions have to work in the moment.

Examples

Getting emergency supplies to survivors of an earthquake.

Responding to staff turnover and financial crisis in a non-profit organization.

Addressing the violence and genocide in Rwanda.

Some examples of chaotic contexts include getting emergency medical help and clean water to survivors of an earthquake, responding to the sudden resignation of an organization's Director who leaves an empty bank account and a pending payroll, and responding to the unanticipated burst of violence and genocide experienced in Rwanda in the mid 1990s.

When faced with a chaotic situation, leaders and managers have to get up to speed on the crisis as quickly as possible. They must mobilize available stakeholders, assess the situation based on whatever information they can muster, and create clear communication channels between everyone involved.

Because a quick response is critical, decision-makers have little time to search for the right or best solution – they need to do whatever works to stabilize the situation right away. Just as a doctor in an emergency room stabilizes the person having a heart attack before helping the patient with a broken bone, leaders in chaotic situations have to address the most threatening aspects of the crisis first and develop a more considered and systematic response once the situation is under control.

If well handled, most – though not all - chaotic situations eventually evolve into less demanding situations (i.e., less complex or chaotic). They also provide opportunities for innovation. David Snowden and Mary Boone recommend that leaders dealing with crises consider setting up two parallel teams: one to respond immediately to the situation and another to develop ways to avoid the crisis in the future.

The Importance of Fit

The most important idea of the certainty-agreement lens is that leaders and managers should pay close attention to particular context in which they are working and adopt an approach to leadership and management that "fits" the situation they face.

This can be challenging. The dominant culture and training of leaders and managers tends to emphasize best practice, models, and the role of experts. In their study of the mining industry, Deloitte found that many unsolved and most pressing safety challenges fell into the complex domain, while the majority of activities focused on addressing the simple and complicated aspects of the challenge. Decision-makers need to be careful not to force a square peg into a round hole.

The stakes of situational leadership is high. Brenda Zimmerman describes how South Africa and Brazil, two countries with similar health systems, demographics, and socio-economic patterns, responded to their country's HIV epidemics. South Africa's health officials assessed the situation as complicated. They concluded that, because they only had limited resources to invest in expensive drug protocols which required high levels of expertise to implement, they had to focus primarily on prevention measures and accept a sharp, medium-term increase in infection before incident rates fell slowly over time. Brazil, on the other hand, assessed the situation as complex and engaged grassroots organizations, introduced bold public policy, and encouraged innovative medical treatments to focus on both treatment and prevention.

In 1990, Brazil's HIV infection rate was twice that of South Africa's. By 2005, Brazil's rate plummeted to 0.6% of the population while South Africa's skyrocketed to 25%.

> " Based on our research [of the mining industry] we have identified that many safety initiatives are focused on the simple and complicated domains and many of the unsolved problems are found in the complex domains "
>
> Deloitte Mining Safety: A Business Imperative

Messy Reality

The certainty-agreement matrix provides leaders and managers with a lens for viewing the underlying cause-and-effect relationships and stakeholder positions of a situation and to adopt an appropriate orientation addressing it:

Simple ⟶ *choose and follow the right recipe*

Complicated ⟶ *discover solutions by doing your homework*

Political ⟶ *create common ground*

Complex ⟶ *learn by doing*

Chaotic ⟶ *create stability and take advantage for opportunities for innovation*

Of course, reality is much messier than this. Many challenges do not fit neatly into any single zone of the matrix. For example, improving the safety of children on a busy school street may require posting speed limits and crosswalk guards to remind drivers to slow down (simple), re-calibrating traffic lights to ensure drivers don't have time to build up speed between lights (complicated), requiring parents dropping off children to do so on a side street (political), and educating children to behave more safely crossing the road (complex).

Challenges also tend to evolve over time. For example, traffic planners facing overwhelming pressure by Council and commuters to reduce traffic congestion nearby may propose measures the eventually increase the volume and speed of traffic by the school.

Situational leadership is an orientation not a formula. It requires decision-makers to correctly diagnose the kind of challenge they are trying to address, be prepared to operate across all contexts, and adapt their responses as needed over time.

Resources & Contacts

Books and Articles

Leading Boldly
Ronald Heiftetz. John Kania. Mark Kramer.
Stanford Social Innovation Review Winter 2004.

Surfacing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business
Richard T. Pascale. Mark Millememann. Linda Gioja.
Crown Business. 2001.

A Leader's Framework for Decision Making
David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone
Harvard Business Review. 2007. November.

Strategic Management and Organizational Dynamics
Ralph D. Stacey
Second Edition. 1996. Transatlantic Publications

Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed.
Frances Westley. Brenda Zimmerman. Michael Patton.
Random House. 2006.

Webpages

The Plexus Institute
www.plexusinstitute.org

Cognitive Edge
www.cognitive-edge.com

Society for Organizational Learning
www.solonline.org/PublicationsAndResources

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