

# Leadership: A Simple Situational Approach

## Strategic Leadership for a practical leadership style

 By **Christy Wilson Delk**

There are probably as many ideas and opinions about leadership as there are truly great leaders, which is to say, there are a lot. Frankly, I was not the kind of owner-operator-girl-boss leader that had much time for the trendy stuff.

If you are looking for a practical leadership style, Strategic Leadership may be the one for you.

**Strategic Leadership** worked very well for me for fifteen fulfilling years of business ownership. Now, as a business professor, I continue to believe in this leadership model for those who are hands-on, engaged, or overwhelmed and find themselves wondering if what they are doing is impactful, or even leadership.

I first contemplated the constructs of Strategic Leadership during the early years of owning a franchised Kids 'R' Kids Academy. As the business grew, so did the complications and the demands. Over time, with trepidation, motivation and a few steps back, I found that this simple model works.

### Two Main Premises

- You are one person with one great big job. Being strategic and focused on how you lead is vital to your success and the success of your organization.

- One year at a time. Focus on short-term plans and opportunities. Don't ignore long-term goals and needs of the organization, but concentrate on what you need, want and must accomplish this year.

### Three Situational Categories

Few leadership articles or books talk about when to use specific leadership strategies. Knowing and recognizing when to use a strategy situationally can have a huge impact on how quickly you resolve a problem and how you move your business or department forward in a given year. The three categories are:

1. **Unplanned Leadership** – What will you do when the unexpected (and sometimes the unthinkable) happens?
2. **Responsive Leadership** – How will you respond to the opportunities (sometimes disguised as challenges) that are presented?
3. **Planned Leadership** – Have an intentional and deliberate plan for how you will lead key stakeholder groups.

The objective is to help you identify and properly lead through each of these strategic categories so that your customers, staff, superiors and community recognize you as a strong leader with whom they want to associate, do business with and refer others to.

## One - Unplanned Leadership

One of the greatest opportunities for you to display leadership is by what you do when the unexpected happens. This is your chance to step up—and one you don't want to miss, however unnerving it may be.

My leadership was tested very early in my ownership days. Here's my favorite Unplanned Leadership story.

### Who Is Driving the Bus?

It was a Friday afternoon late in the fall of 1998. I opened my Kids 'R' Kids Learning Academy franchise in August and things were going well. That is, until Alex walked in. Alex was my guy. My “go-to” employee. I recruited him several months before I opened, and he was an integral part of the operation. He drove the bus, performed maintenance duties, and was a team leader for the before and after-school program.

Alex had bad news. Really bad news. Friday was his last day. *Today* Friday, not “two weeks from now so I might have time to find his replacement” Friday. Another (non-franchised) center owner, closer to home, offered him a job he couldn't refuse, and he was to report on Monday. I never saw it coming. Panic swept through the office. Who was going to drive the bus on Monday? A driver for any early childhood program has to be screened and properly documented to meet Florida regulations. This was not a “Just hire a bus driver off the internet” type of problem.

The long story is in my book. The short story is that I learned how and was permitted to drive a 54-passenger bus over the weekend and rolled up Monday morning at 7 am with a smile on my face to cheers from the staff, children and parents.

That story became part of our organizational culture and showed clients and staff my leadership fortitude. It also showed me the power of Unplanned Leadership.

Will you be ready when a situation calls for Unplanned Leadership? Will you recognize it for what it is and seize the moment? It may come when you least expect it.

## Two - Responsive Leadership

If Unplanned Leadership is what strong Leaders do as something *happens*, Responsive Leadership is what happens in the *aftermath* of something that has happened or in response to an opportunity.

Here is one example from my personal experience that almost every manager or owner can relate to.

### Letting Good People Go

One of my favorite managers, Julie, had proven herself to be extremely hard-working, bright, and “tough enough” to manage over 50 employees when she asked about hiring her sister for a teaching position. I didn't have a formal policy to address this and said, “Sure, let's interview her” and then, “Sure, let's hire her.” The sister also proved herself to be a hard worker and was well-liked by the children and parents—*when she was there*. The problem was, she was missing a lot of work. I was aware of the reason, and while empathetic, I was running a business and excessive absenteeism was well-documented throughout the center and not permitted.

I was not the only one who had noticed. By the time I seriously discussed my concern with Julie, the staff had started rumbling about favoritism towards her sister. **Within months, morale plunged and Julie lost the respect of the staff. Loss of respect for me was next.** By the time I insisted she terminate her sister, my inner leader was shouting, “Start looking for Julie's replacement!” because of another issue that I was ready to respond to. I let Julie go and before long the ship had been righted with high morale intact.

I noticed a distinct added measure of leadership respect and loyalty from my staff, who knew I'd made the difficult decision to respond. That's the power of Responsive Leadership.

*Will you be ready to A-C-T when Responsive Leadership is needed? If you have work to do in this area, take heart; you are in the majority. Responsive Leadership is a skill-set that can be developed, and it is never too late to start.*



### Three - Planned Leadership

As much as you want to or think you can, you cannot lead everyone equally and purposefully every year and expect to see positive outcomes in every area. It's simply too big a job, and trying to do that leads to stress, burnout, and serious health or family issues.

Instead of casting a huge leadership net that likely has plenty of holes, be the type of leader your staff needs and craves, and the leader your business requires—*this* year. In other words, strategically plan your leadership.

Design an annual plan that focuses on 3 or 4 major stakeholders and be specific. For example, as my young management students learned last evening, employees and clients are key stakeholders in every enterprise. However, focusing on all employees or all clients is not specific enough for your leadership plan.

One question you might ask is who within that stakeholder group can have the highest impact on your revenue or another important company goal. The answer to that question is where you will focus your Planned Leadership resources and capital for that stakeholder group. And not just focus—you are going to Go Big. Going Big is what will make a real difference because people will notice what you do. Going Big is how strategic leaders invest and grow their leadership capital. In other words, it has to count

And it all starts with one question: *Who, specifically, are you going to lead this year?*

The first answer to that question should be *yourself*. Be sure to include your own professional goal in the annual plan.

And don't forget to make it public. That alone will raise your stock. Then A-C-T!

What was my goal this year? To write more articles of course! I'd love to hear your comments.



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