# The Role of Situational Leadership in the Management of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Among Durban Trucking Companies

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**Abstract**

This study's overarching goal is to dissect situational leadership as it pertains to the administration of SMEs. Examining and evaluating various situational leadership styles as they pertain to the management of SMEs is the primary goal of this study. Leader responsibilities and the development of leadership styles in the context of small and medium enterprise management have been the focus of this research. The primary goal of the research was to provide a solid empirical assessment of situational leadership's function in the administration of SMEs. We selected a subset of Durban's registered trucking enterprises to represent our community in our study. Using easy sampling methodologies and methods, a sample was collected from the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) inside the registered trucking                                                                                                         businesses.

This study's results demonstrate that situational leadership theory is useful for managing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In reality, managers and owners of SMEs will be motivated to learn how suitable behaviour styles play a role in management in many business contexts. Because of the interplay between leader sovereignty and follower skills, which often predicts subpar follower performance and attitude reactions, the research also suggested that SME owners and leaders work to improve these areas. Furthermore, the current research has given managers and owners of SMEs the resources they need to enhance and implement personal leadership.

**Keywords:** management, leadership, situational leadership, small and medium-sized enterprise **1.**

**Introduction**

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) have and continue to play a critical role in the economic growth of most countries worldwide (Lekhanya, 2016). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) make up 60% of all employment and up to 40% of the GDP in developing countries (World Bank, 2023). SMEs in South Africa account for about 34% of the country's GDP, 60% of all jobs, and 91% of all formalised businesses (Fatoki, 2019). The SME sector in South Africa is a significant driver of employment in a country with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world (GEM, 2019-2020). SME success and South Africa's sustainable economic growth are positively correlated (Van Scheers, 2016). As observed by Wiid and Diggines (2015), global economies depend on the success of SMEs to create employment, consume local resources, decrease levels of poverty, and contribute positively to national revenues.

According to the National Smal Enterprise Act 102 of 1996 of South Africa as amended in 2003, 2004 and 2019 (15 March 2019), an SME in South Africa is an enterprise with one or more of the following characteristics: Fewer than 200 employees, Annual turnover of less than R64 million, Capital assets of less than R10 million, Direct managerial involvement by owners. This study focuses on SMEs in the road freight industry in Durban.

According to Merven et al. (2019), the road freight industry in South Africa contributes 5% of the country's GDP, 2.5% of all employment, and more than 70% of land freight payload. Due to its developed infrastructure and strategic location within the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), South Africa serves as the continent's regional hub for the road freight and logistics sector (Arndt & Roberts, 2018). Numerous issues, including total cost of ownership,

demand shifting to expanding markets, the viability of existing business models, outmoded technology, inadequate management, and leadership strategies, are continuously facing the world's trucking industry (Zhang *et al.,* 2020).

Due to intense competition in the sector and narrow profit margins, owners and managers of companies in the road freight or logistics sectors must constantly innovate. The road freight industry depends on a high demand for pickups and deliveries to keep operations running smoothly (Goga et al., 2019). Reliability, customer retention, and steady demand for services are important sustainability factors for SMEs in the road freight sector. These factors are achieved by implementing effective leadership and risk management strategies that emphasise internal control measures, driver orientation, partnering with law enforcement agencies, and collaboration with industry stakeholders (Ali *et al*., 2018).

The effective management of a SME is an important component in a healthy national economy. Effective management contributes to a progressive national economy, in that it positively feeds the flux of a progressive financial system. Effective leadership in SME management is a priority consideration in the situational context of the organisation, to fulfil the organisational objectives (James & Bennett, 2020). Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership method stipulates that the leader must vary his own behavioural strategy towards each one of the subordinates according to the situation at hand and the subordinate's ability and commitment to work. This method suggests that the leader first analyses the organisation's situational needs, and then applies the most suitable leadership style, according to employee competencies and commitment in the task areas (Walls, 2019).

Theoretical paradigms on leadership range from the early trait theory to behavioural theory, and to situational approaches. The latter approach is a response to the current resurgence of charismatic leadership and its corollaries, servant leadership, transformational leadership, spiritual leadership, principled leadership, and ethical leadership (Northouse, 2016). Although literature on situational leadership is increasing, the role of situational leadership in SME management has until recently been largely ignored. However, the reality of business has engendered scholarly enquiries into the nexus between employees and SME leaders. By examining the various leadership styles used by SME leaders in the trucking freight industry and maintain the success of their enterprises, this study aims to close this knowledge gap.

This research study focuses on the role of situational leadership in the management of SMEs, specifically among a sample selected from the SME owners and managers in the trucking freight industry in Durban region of KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. The major objective of this research study is to examine and to accurately evaluate the use of different situational leadership styles in the management of SMEs. This study seeks to review leader obligations and the evolution of these leadership styles in SME management. The current research seeks to answer the following questions: How apt are SME owners and managers in compromising or implementing the situational leadership model?

The quantitative research is appropriate in situations where the variables are known, and it is possible to develop reasonable ways of measuring or controlling them. The key leadership styles and their application by SME managers is a quantifiable phenomenon, and it can be controlled. Thus, this empirical study has been systematically undertaken in such a way that the key leadership styles are described and tested in the context of the situational leadership theory. The study was conducted in Durban, the largest city in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, whose population was 3,228,003 at the time of the study. The sample was randomly selected from the population of 712 registered trucking companies in Durban. However, the sample size of this study was made of 20 truck company managers who have participate in the study. To describe the fundamental data features in this study, the researcher used descriptive statistics. Simple summaries of the sample and the measurements have been given to the researcher. Correlation, frequency, cross-tabulation, Chi-Square, and hypothesis testing are a few examples of statistical tests. They form the core of quantitative data analysis when combined with graphic analysis.

The findings of this research can indicate the appropriateness and the positive impact the leadership model can have in SME management. In addition, the present study has provided necessary tools to SME owners and managers, to guide the improvement and effectiveness of personal leadership. leaders recognise that their formal authority is not always particularly useful for organisational wellbeing. The major role of situational leadership is to move workers in the desired direction. This needs more investigation regarding personal influence, diplomacy, and skill in communicating, conflict resolution, and the incentive of motivation. Thus, post-modern leaders must be aware and predisposed to act and be able to recognise opportunities and threats and be capable of mustering organisational responses to these challenges. More than anything, they must be able to maintain the effectiveness of their leadership to achieve

organisational goals in the face of risk, ambiguity, and change. It is crucial for leaders to recognise the managerial situational context of the organisation (Walls, 2019).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Nature of Leadership

Numerous different approaches can be used to analyse leadership because of the complexity and variability of its nature. Building a framework that can be used as a method of leadership research is therefore beneficial. It has been demonstrated (Li *et al*., 2009:470) that the conceptual terms used to describe managerial leadership, such as traits or qualities approach, the group or functional approach, or action-oriented leadership, make analysis much simpler. Additionally, by categorising leadership according to behavioural categories, leadership philosophies, situational leadership, transformational leadership, and inspirational leadership.

The understanding of the word leadership varies from one country to another and has been differently defined according to cultural norms and values, and the use of power. Consequently, numerous definitions have been produced by researchers over many decades (Northouse, 2016). Leadership, at its core, is the ability to influence and guide individuals or groups towards achieving a common goal. Northouse (2016) defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. This process is dynamic, involving both the leader and the followers, and is shaped by various factors including the environment, the task at hand, and the characteristics of the people involved.

In this study, the term leadership is considered as the process in which a person provides general direction and influences group or individuals to achieve collective goals. A leader will act unswervingly to convey direction and influence on the subordinates, this includes providing information; solving conflicts; motivating subordinates; anticipating problems; developing reciprocal respect between group members; co-ordinating group activities and efforts. From this leadership definition, leaders are defined as business owners and business managers.

Different writers (Kurata *et al.*, 2022) have provided different views and definitions of the effectiveness of leadership. The major difference has been identified as a kind of result or outcome chosen from the criterion of effectiveness. These include diverse things such as group performance, survival, achievement of organisational goals, capacity to alleviate crises in the group, group preparedness as well as subordinate commitment to group, and subordinate satisfaction with the leader. The psychological well-being is important, as well as the leader's status for group maintenance and group members development (Kurata *et al.*, 2022).

There are various theories and models that have been proposed to explain the concept of leadership. Some of the most prominent include trait theory, behavioural theory and contingency theory. Trait Theory posits that leaders possess certain inherent traits that make them effective. These traits, such as charisma, intelligence, and confidence, are believed to be innate and unchangeable (Luria *et al*., 2019; Verawatia & Hartonob, 2020). Behavioural theory, contrary to trait theory, behavioural theory emphasizes the actions and behaviours of leaders rather than their inherent traits. This theory suggests that effective leadership is a result of learned behaviours (Haukur & Helgi, 2019; Verawatia & Hartonob, 2020). Contingency theory suggests that the effectiveness of a leadership style is contingent upon the situation. No single leadership style is best in all situations; instead, the situation dictates the most appropriate leadership approach (Haukur & Helgi, 2019; Verawatia & Hartonob, 2020).

### 2.2 South African View of Leadership

Good management of businesses is crucial by an effective and responsible leadership that is consisted of ethical values of accountability, responsibility, transparency, and fairness (Robinson, Sun & Arrigoni, 2020). The Constitution of South Africa has provided the Bill of Rights to bring about significant change of society's moral perception of business. To create a structure that follows profit and neglects human rights is legally prohibited in South Africa. Businesses are socially bound with both rights and responsibilities, for instance, the Bill of Rights which provides them with the framework of their legal operating system and goes further than just financial considerations. According to the South African Bill of Rights, businesses must be driven by foundational principles and values of freedom and equality, and dignity when interacting with any stakeholder. In particular, the Bill of Rights provides important direction to companies for supporting their strategies and operations (Maduna, 2001).

South African leaders are facing diverse challenges within the organisations; however, the most common challenge is that many South African corporations are over-managed and under-led (Deloitte, 2020). Therefore, owners and managers of SMEs are challenged to apply a strong combined leadership and management styles and use ones to stabilise the others. While management is dealing with complexity, leadership is dealing with change. It is then increasingly important to consider changes for the effective business competition and endurance (Gradinarova, 2021).

This process of democratisation of the workplace has been sustained by a combination of decentralisation of power and authority, flattening of hierarchy, disclosing of existing channels of communication and recreation of new ones. Thus, the leader's focal point will be no longer oriented on power but on achievement. These notions require an important participation of both leader and subordinates and continuous consultation (Gradinarova, 2021). The research conducted by John-Eke and Eke (2020) which examined the management practises of African managers in Southern African nations, found that African leaders consistently pursue personal power and benefits rather than giving organisational goals the higher priority they deserve. Usually, their positions are seen in the organisations as personal fiefdoms. African leaders are strongly focused on supremacy resulting in luck of organisational commitment of African employees. Therefore, many employees handle organisational properties with irresponsibility and indifference.

John-Eke and Eke (2020) further stated that post-independence leadership styles in African public and private organisations have persisted in being autocratic, dictatorial, and ineffective. While other societies promote and participate in employee empowerment and support free thinking and creativity that ensure organisational nimbleness, African workers still have to be inspected instead of expected, which means being directly supervised rather than motivated. Nevertheless, with the process of democratisation in South Africa, a Westernised approach, and possibly African approaches of leadership have been adopted. Organisations are looking forward to involving more people in their decision-making process. In fact, elements of participative management subsist beneficially to a South African approach of management (John-Eke and Eke (2020)).

*2.3 Contingency Theories of Leader Effectiveness*

Originally elaborated in the 1960s, researchers have currently developed models in which they have tried to conceptualise and describe existing relation that a leader has with a situation. These theories are identified as an effective leadership contingency approach. These models are grouped in two categories. The leadership effectiveness contingency model and the cognition of theory resource that is focused on the internal state and traits of the leader, and normative decision-making model, for instance, the path goal theory and the situational leadership theory that is focused on the leader's perceived behaviours (Jawoosh *et al*., 2021). In the case of this present study, consideration has been taken to leadership effectiveness contingency theories. These theories classify leaders into two categories, the job-oriented leader and the relationship-oriented leader. However, the contingency theories determine whether the leader performs effectively in higher, medium, or lower situational control (Bryman; Grint & Collinson, 2011).

More specifically, in the contingency model, it is predicted that leaders with extra relationship-oriented qualities have supplementary, effective, and moderate control of the situation and leaders with extra task-oriented qualities have supplementary and effective control in high and low situational control. Based on these leader qualities and situational control, a leader is considered matched and predicted to perform effectively, or alternatively unmatched and predicted to perform less effectively. In leadership effectiveness, contingency models have been initially identified as group performance. In response to criticisms regarding the model's lack of inclusion of other indices of effectiveness, it has been found that the model could also predict team satisfaction (Bryman; Grint & Collinson, 2011).

The situational approach concentrates on the situational implication in the leadership study. People with differing personalities and backgrounds have emerged as effective leaders in diverse managerial situations. Despite the situational approach limitations, situational factors are considered in leadership characteristics. Contemporary approaches of leadership study stipulate that contingency theories focus on the relations between the factors that are involved in leadership behavioural prototype and leadership situations. Contingency theories of effective leadership are based on the beliefs that there is more than one appropriate leadership styles that can be aligned to different situations (Bryman; Grint & Collinson, 2011). The main contingency models of effective leadership comprise Fiedler model, Leader-participation model, Path-goal theory, Leader-Member Exchange theory, Situational Leadership theory.

*2.4 Situational Leadership Theory of Paul Blanchard and Kenneth Hersey*

In diverse level of organisational management, effective leadership is regarded as a key factor of the success. Effective leadership and effective leadership styles may even play a more important role in SME management given its managerial environment. The SME's work environment is close-knit, so the importance of leadership and leadership styles should be greater (Dyczkowska & Dyczkowski, 2018). Hersey and Blanchard's situational theory has been originally developed in 1969 from the research done at Ohio State that has used similar terminology to instigate configuration about behavioural, task, relationship, and consideration. This model has been widely applied even in the business environment (Hersey; Blanchard & Natemeye, 1979).

2.4.1 Original Version of Situational Leadership Theory of Hersey and Blanchard

Hersey and Blanchard have found their Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) on the earlier research studies of leader behaviour. They identified four behavioural leaderships: telling, selling, participating, and delegating, which are evaluated by the LEAD (leadership, effectiveness, and adaptability, description) instrument (Silverthorne & Wang, 2001). The theory envisages that the degree to which these behaviours are effective is obviously depending on the subordinate task maturity and subordinate psychological development. Subordinate task maturity is evaluated by using such factors as ability, education, and experience, while subordinate psychological development is evaluated by using such factors as self-esteem, willingness, and motivation (Thompson, 2003).

It is further proposed that effective leadership style has been defined as a behavioural prototype of attitudes, philosophy, feelings, belief, and assumptions concerning leadership that influence the subordinate's behaviour (Sinaga; Bah & Rahanra, 2023). Therefore, situational leadership theory of Hersey and Blanchard states that many appropriate effective leadership styles exist, and that the leader can use to influence subordinates' behaviours. The leader has to act according to the situation in view, in order to implement a required task and behavioural relationship. This leader's role is based on follower competence and commitment. Alternatively, because of varying follower readiness, leader's task and behavioural relationship should change as well to fit into the determined level. Consequently, the leader effectiveness on follower task performance and satisfaction will be clarified (Sinaga; Bah & Rahanra, 2023).

Hersey has determined four major situational leadership styles, which are telling (higher task and low relationship), selling (higher task and higher relationship), participating (lower task and higher relationship), and delegating (lower task and lower relationship). The conceptual basis of these situations stands on the fact that the more follower's developmental level increases, the more leader's effective behaviour engages less instruction and less supportive relationship (Papworth *et al.*, 2009). Nevertheless, leader effectiveness is optimised by corresponding leader's behaviour with follower's readiness. Therefore, subordinate's levels, represented by R1, R2, R3 and R4 would match better to leader's style represented by S1 – 4. As follower develops, the SLT suggests that he moves from the lower level of readiness to higher level, and the corresponded effective leader's style vary respectively (Papworth *et al.,* 2009)
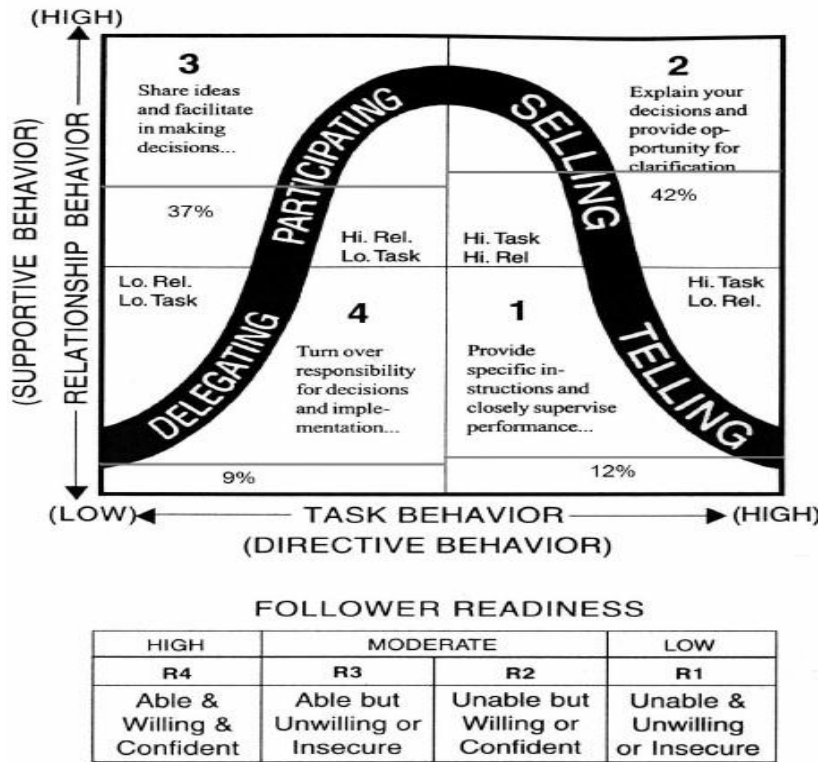
Figure 1. Hersey and Blanchard model of Situational leadership original version

2.4.2 Revision of Situational Leadership Theory

Historically, Situational leadership theory has gone through several changes since its inception in 1969, which changes referred to as revision that have then improved the model. Eventually, in 1985, Hersey and his colleagues have developed the new version of situational leadership theory (Al-Khamaiseh *et al.*, 2020). It has been noticed some changes such as the maturity levels of followers has been relabelled as developmental levels and both factors of maturity and developmental have been relabelled as commitment and competence instead of initial designation of willingness and ability (Sinaga; Bah & Rahanra, 2023). An additional exciting difference has been made in appellation of four situations or styles. In fact, telling, selling, participating, and delegating have been relabelled directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Likewise, both behaviours that have been initially known as task behaviour and relationship behaviour have been now identified as directive and supportive behaviours (Sinaga; Bah & Rahanra, 2023).

Even though the changes in these styles have been produced to improve the theory, Mirčetić and Vukotić (2020) argued that Hersey and Blanchard have obviously produced only the theoretical description for the relationship between key components in the more ambiguous model. Critiquing the theory, Mirčetić and Vukotić (2020) further suggested that the authors of SLT have offered no clear reasons for relabelling the components in the model. The new appellation describing categories of leader behaviours such as directing and supportive, also the four situations such as directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating have deliberated a non-significant choice of expressions. Mirčetić and Vukotić (2020) hypothesised that Hersey and his colleagues have adopted for an emotional and disinterested terminology.
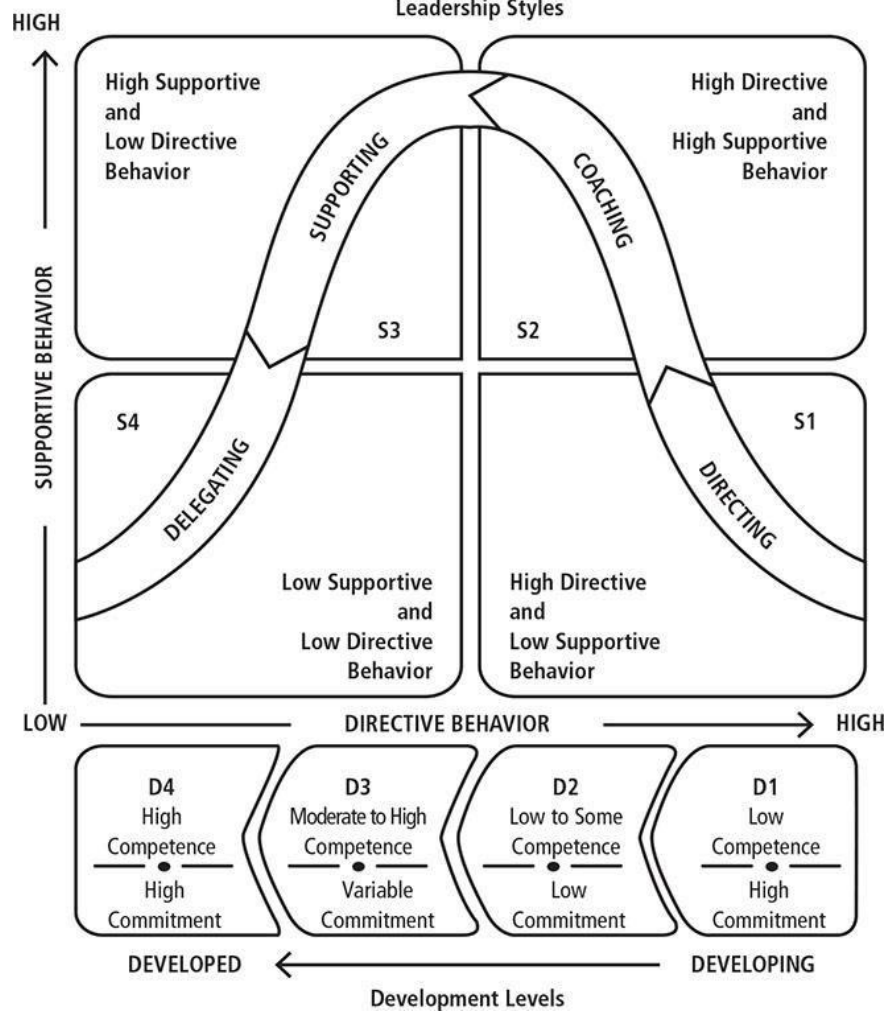
Figure 2. Hersey & Blanchard revised model of Situational Leadership II revised version

It is further suggested by Al-Khamaiseh *et al*. (2009) that three measurements describe Hersey and Blanchard's SLT. Both measurements are related to leader's styles that are (R) relationship behaviours and (T) task behaviours.

All these measurements are drowning on to generate four categorical situations (S1 – 4):

- Guiding or telling or directing identified by lower relationship and higher task.
- Explaining, selling, or persuading, identified by higher relationship and higher task.
- Encouraging, participating or problem-solving includes higher relationship and lower task.
- Observing, delegating, or monitoring, that is lower relationship and lower task.

2.4.2.1 Telling or Directing

Telling or Guiding or Directing is a contextual managerial situation in which a follower lacks ability and lacks commitment or competence. According to Hersey (2009), Telling determines a situational leadership style that is high in task and low in relationship and has to be exercised to the leader-follower interactions where the follower is in need for help, as it is the case of new workers within the organisation needing direction and special attention from the leader. The follower at this level has very limited or no knowledge of the task requirements therefore is depending on a high direction of the leader to assist in learning the organisational structures; and the follower displays the lowest maturity level.

Furthermore, Blanchard (2008:19) suggested that Directing is situational leadership style that is the High-directive and low-supportive leader's behaviour. In this style, the roles of subordinates are defined by the leader who tells them what, how, when, and where to do diverse tasks. The leader will instigate problem–solving and decision-making, he will announce solutions and decisions to be taken in consideration and will supervise implementation. In addition, the leader assigns timelines, and closely supervises subordinates when they are inexperienced or incompetent to complete the task, even when committed. Poor results request leader to be focused on the development of his group members' performance, trust and motivation. Improvement of this style request that leader should be more specific towards what each team member's task is, and towards the standard of what a "good job" looks like.

Telling style matches with lower follower's readiness. The given direction in this style determines the subordinate role when he is unable and unwilling to take own responsibilities. In this stage any uncertainty regarding the task that must be achieved is excluded (Al-Khamaiseh *et al.*, 2020).

2.4.2.2 Selling or Coaching

Selling, also called explaining, persuading or coaching. Selling is a situational leadership style in which the followers lack ability but are encouraged or convinced. It is suggested by Hersey (2009) that Selling displays an effective leadership style that is high in task and high in relationship and is applied to those subordinates who are getting use of their task requirements and are in deep communication with the leader, profiting abilities yet needing special assistance for developing personal competencies. In addition, Blanchard (2008) suggested that Coaching is a style that describes higher directive and high supportive behaviour; the leader is still providing direction but hearing the subordinate reactions, opinions and propositions, as well. He augments the dual-way communication but also upholds pre-eminence of decision-making. Coaching fits the best for "low-to-moderate" developmental level; followers who have abilities but lacking commitment to take responsibilities, they profit of directive and supportive leader's behaviours.

Thus, because subordinates lack competence, coaching style fits the best, nevertheless, the leader will provide supportive behaviour to build trust and enthusiasm of the subordinate. Coaching is the most effective style. Coach is the leader who both direct and support their followers. While keeping responsibility for decision-making with the leader, this style builds trust and encouragement in followers' attitudes. The improvement of this style requests that the leader should operate with competent followers to fulfil organisational goal and monitor performance (Al-Khamaiseh *et al.*, 2020). Selling style fits the best for "low-to-moderate" subordinates' developmental level. This style offers both directive and supportive behaviour to incapable but committed subordinates; it includes joining directive relationship with clarification and reinforcement or instructions in view to sustain enthusiasm (Al-Khamaiseh *et al.*, 2020).

2.4.2.3 Participating or Supporting

Participating, supporting, encouraging, or problem-solving is a situational leadership style where subordinates have competence but are not commitment to utilise it through. Hersey (2009) has suggested that participating displays an effective leadership style that is described as low in job achievement and high in confidence. It has been applicable to the subordinates who have cultivated into becoming technically competent, knowing the outcomes required of them, hence, still needing the special leader's coaching instructions to confirm whether the processes and task fulfilment are on the expected paths. Alternatively, Blanchard (2008) has suggested that Supporting is High-supportive and low-directive situational leadership behaviour. In this style, leader's function is to offer acknowledgement and to actively pay attention and encourage problem-solving and decision-making. As capability rises, most subordinates' question whether they can execute the job on themselves; here a supporting style is best recommended. Subordinates necessitate being head and motivated. Supporting is appropriate for "moderate-to-high" development level. These subordinates are capable but have unstable willingness toward the job achievement. In this style, the leader has to apply dual-way communication and starting to listen to subordinates' views in order to motivate them to use their competences. Leader facilitates, listens and transfers the pre-eminence of daily "decision-making" and "problem-solving" to group members. Leader provides support and motivation to subordinates when they lack trust or motivation for a given job (Al-Khamaiseh *et al.*, 2020).

The improvement of this style suggests that the leader should ask more questions, admire performance, or encourage his group members to resolve their personal problems. Participating style fits the best for "moderate-to-higher" subordinates' developmental level. Capable but uncommitted subordinates' profit of leader's supportive leadership

behaviour in order to augment their confidence, by allowing them to participate in decision-making. Participating style improves the aspiration to achieve the task (Al-Khamaiseh *et al*., 2020).

2.4.2.4 Delegating or Delegating

Delegating, observing or monitoring is a situational leadership style where subordinates are able and committed to achieve the determined task.Hersey (2009) suggested that Delegating displays an effective leadership style that is low in job achievement and low in confidence, reflecting the case wherein subordinates are fully matured. Alternatively, the subordinates are fully developed, equipped, and able to achieve the task. In this style, followers require, and often desire only minimal input from the leader to be an effective follower; and the subordinates reflect the highest level of maturity. Moreover, Blanchard (2008) has suggested that delegating style is described as Low-supportive and low-directive situational behaviour. In this situation, a leader allows subordinates greater independence, since they have the skills, willingness and trust to complete the task. Subordinates at this stage are capable and confident to perform the organisational goals. Consequently, a "low-profile" delegating behaviour in which the leader provides less direction and support is probably to be best and effective situational style.

Although leader might still determine the problem, he delegates the accountability for executing plans to experienced subordinates. They are allowed to "run the show" and participate on how, when, and where jobs are to be achieved. In this situation the role of the leader will be to empower mature and confident group members to run their personal performance collaboratively set objectives and then assign day-to-day decision-making to mature group members. The improvement of this style request that the leader should ask his group members to tell him what resources they need to excel and then protect these resources (Al-Khamaiseh *et al*., 2020). Delegating leadership style best fits for higher developmental level subordinates; suggesting that the leader provides less directive and supportive behaviour, it permits capable and committed subordinates to be accountable for what it needed to be done (Al-Khamaiseh *et al*., 2020).

*2.5 Situation Leadership Theory in SME Management*

For SMEs, especially in the trucking industry of Durban, situational leadership is invaluable. The industry is characterized by rapid changes, unpredictable challenges, and a diverse workforce. Leaders in this sector must be adaptable, switching between leadership styles based on the task at hand and the team they are leading (Robinson, Sun & Arrigoni, 2020). The trucking industry in Durban, like many sectors in South Africa, is shaped by both global business practices and local cultural nuances. Situational leadership, with its emphasis on adaptability and flexibility, is crucial for navigating the unique challenges and opportunities of this sector. By understanding the broader concepts of leadership and integrating the South African perspective, leaders in Durban's trucking SMEs can drive their companies towards sustainable growth and success (Wu & Peng, 2022).

The Situational Leadership Theory's role in SME management is paramount. Its emphasis on flexibility, employee development, delegation, motivation, decision-making, and crisis management aligns remarkably well with the multifaceted challenges faced by SME leaders. By embracing this approach, SME managers can navigate the intricate landscape of small and medium-sized enterprises with finesse, enabling sustainable growth, employee empowerment, and overall organizational success. As SMEs continue to be drivers of modernisation and economic progress, the application of Situational Leadership Theory stands as a beacon guiding their journey towards prosperity (Soomro, Memon & Shah, 2021; Naushad, 2021).

## 3. Research Methodology

Numerous situational leadership philosophies and contingency theories have been highlighted in the literature review. Leaders in SME management can use these management philosophies to enhance the efficiency of management in the trucking industry. As a result, many of the issues and challenges mentioned in the literature review will undoubtedly be resolved. It is crucial to conduct empirical research on the interactions between leaders and followers using SME management as the framework, and to actively seek to comprehend the wants and needs of followers. The validity test of the Hersey and Blanchard SLT serves as the foundation for this research study. This test will forecast follower performance and attitude responses based on the SLT factor that leader behaviour interacts with.

The goal of this study was to add to the body of knowledge about the understanding and application of situational leadership theory and its potential effects on the management of SMEs in the Durban trucking industry. This study used an e-mailed questionnaire to collect primary data in addition to reviewing secondary data sources. The research

design for this study was quantitative. Since the positivist approach in human behavioural research must be restricted to what can be observed and measured objectively and independently of individual feelings and opinions (Patil, 2020). This study used a quantitative research design. Descriptive, analytical, causal, and evaluative questions have been used in the survey questionnaire to conduct a quantitative causal research study on the function of situational leadership in SME management (Andrić & Milašinović, 2021).

Hypotheses for the present research study have been formulated below:

Table 1. Hypotheses

| | Null Hypothesis | | Alternative Hypothesis |
|---|---|---|---|
| $H1_0$ | SLT is not understood in SME management | $H1_a$ | SLT is understood in SME management |
| $H2_0$ | SLT is not applied in SME management | $H2_a$ | SLT is applied in SME management |

The current study's target population is made up of business owners and managers of SMEs in the trucking industry in the Durban region of the KwaZulu-Natal Province, with a total of 589 companies (Dun & Bradstreet, 2023). A convenient sampling technique has been used to extract the sample from the Durban trucking companies and 20 companies have participated in this research study. An arbitrary sample of five SMEs has been selected from outside the sample frame to test the validity of the questionnaire and find out whether the questionnaire has functioned as expected. These results from this test have not been included in the group. With a self-completion questionnaire, respondents answered questions by completing the questionnaire themselves. As a method, the self-completion questionnaire can come in several forms. Probably the most prominent of these forms is the mail questionnaire, whereby, as its name implies, a questionnaire is emailed to the respondent. The self-administering questionnaires were used instead of face-to-face interviews due to time constraints. Self-administering questionnaires has allowed respondents to answer questions at leisure. It is also the preferred method for collecting data from a large universum which is also geographically dispersed.

For this research, the questionnaire has allowed the respondent to provide the primary data, in the simplest and most accurate manner possible. The questionnaire was designed specifically to try to reduce interpretation errors by ensuring that most of the questions have used a nominal system, in a bid to further reduce errors through misinterpretation during the completion of the questionnaire by the respondents. The questionnaire has been divided into two sections: Section A sought to determine demographic information on the business owners, such as gender, qualification, experience and number of years and employees of the business. These demographics give greater insight into the respondents. Section B tried to discover the perceptions of business owners regarding situational leadership and the application of situational leadership styles by the business owners and managers. It also sought to determine the impact of situational leadership in small business management. The researcher has examined the research problem and objectives considering the primary data collected. To analyse the coded responses from the structured questionnaires, the researcher used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. The raw data generated by the questionnaires was analysed to determine its meaning. These data have been analysed and interpreted to inform the findings, recommendations, and future research directions. The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. As appropriate, data has been presented in the form of tables, graphs, diagrams, and percentages. As a result, the researcher was able to generalise and draw conclusions.

## 4. Findings

The statistical analysis is broken up into two sections, descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics for the demographics are illustrated below in graphic form. The percentages reflected in the graphs below are percentages of those that answered the question and exclude the missing values.

*4.1 Demographic and Characteristics of Business*

4.1.1 Gender

Figure 3 below illustrates that 60% of the sample was male and 40% female. The higher number of female business leaders is encouraging as it suggests that women are gaining confidence in pursuing entrepreneurship.
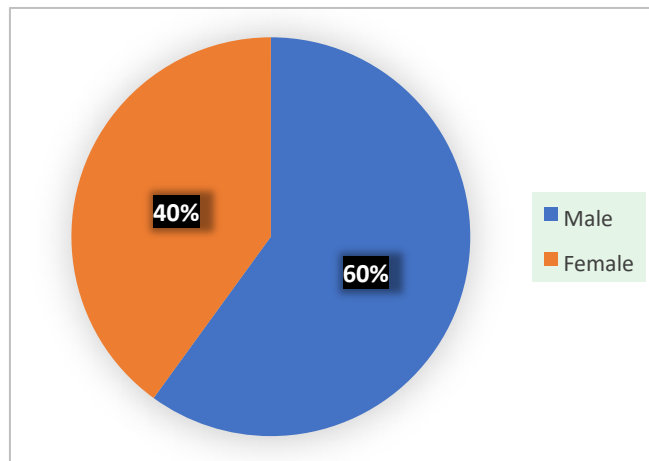


Figure 3. Gender

4.1.2 Highest Level of Education

As shown in Figure 4 below, most of the respondents were postgraduates (45%) followed by those with bachelor's degree (25%), then with bachelor's degree (20%) and Matric certificate (10%). This suggests that the level of education has an impact on the understanding and application of SLT in the management of SMEs in trucking industry.
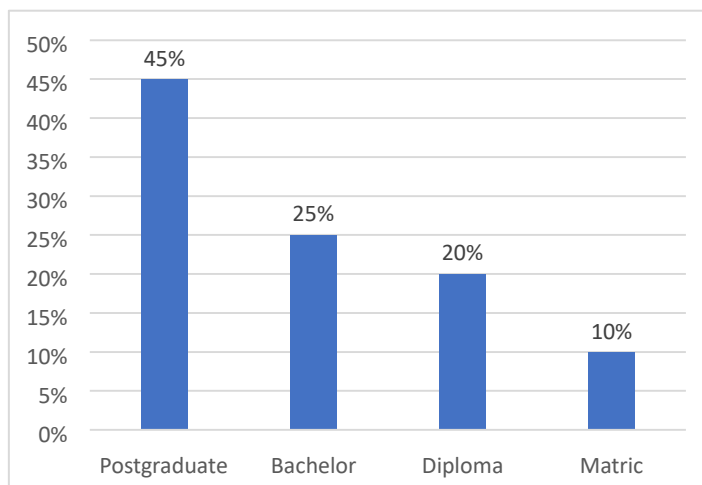


Figure 4. Level of Qualification

4.1.3 Position Occupied in the Business

This question analysed the role played in the current organisation, as this could assist in assessing whether owners differ in their leadership approach from managers. Figure 5 indicates that 90% of respondents were owners in their organisations, and 10% were managers.
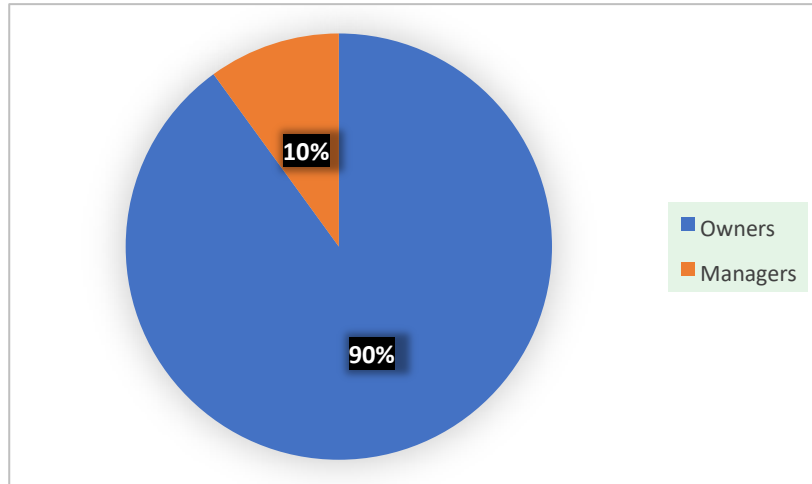
Figure 5. Position occupied in business

4.1.4 Duration in Leadership Position

Figure 6 shows that 20% of respondents have been in their current roles for 5 years or less, and 80% of respondents have held their posts for more than 5 years, a milestone in the SME lifecycle.
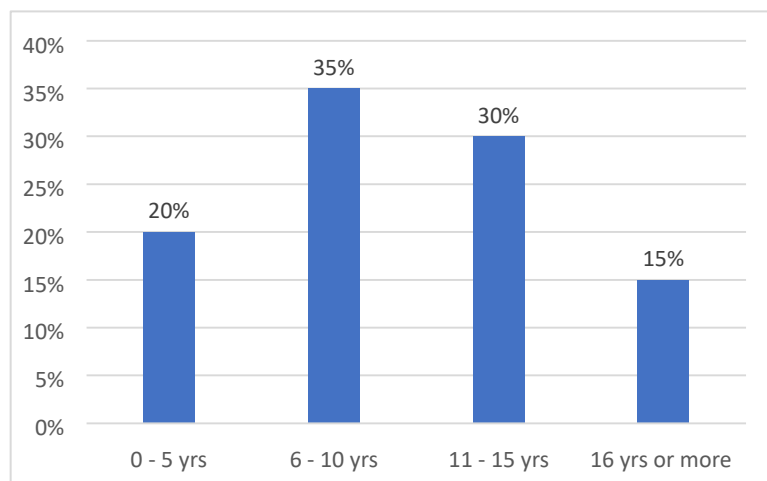


Figure 6. Duration in Leadership Position

4.1.5 Number of Direct Subordinates

According to Figure 7, 75% of respondents have 5 or less subordinates under their direct leadership, 10% had 6 to 10, 10% had 11 to 15 and 5% had 16 or more.
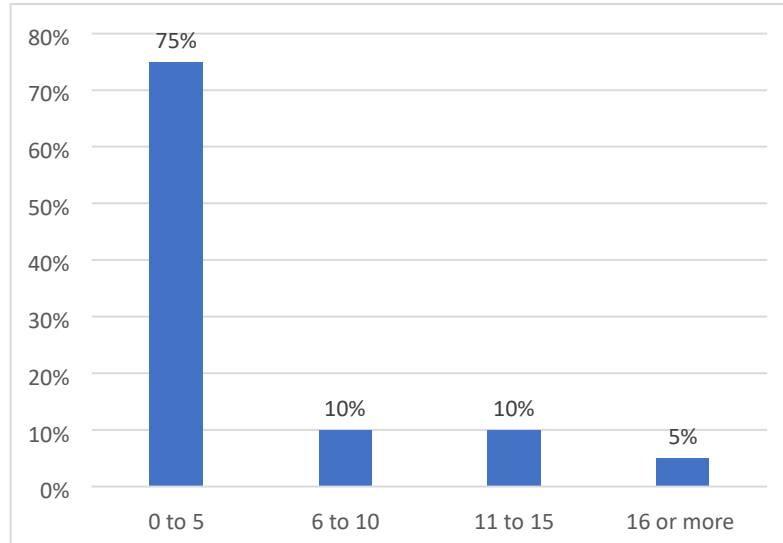
Figure 7. Number of direct Subordinates

*4.2 Understanding and Application of SLT in SME Management*

4.2.1 Reliability Analysis

If a measuring instrument has internal reliability, it would help maintain stability, so the instrument can be used at different times or under differing conditions. The Cronbach Alpha is calculated to ensure internal reliability (Patil, 2020). The Cronbach Alpha is calculated for the questions using the same scales. This coefficient is based on the average correlation of standardised items within a test. Alternatively, it is based on the average covariance among the items that are not standardised. The Cronbach Alpha is ranged from 0 to 1 (Acharyya & Bhattacharya, 2020).

Cronbach Alpha has also been calculated to assess the level of consistency of the results, as part of the reliability test. As well, it has been calculated to analyse how similar results could have been obtained if the sample size was increased. A value of at least 0.7 is a very good value that leads to conclude that the same results can be obtained if the researcher conducts the survey with a larger sample of respondents (Walker, 2011:28). The Cronbach Alpha has been calculated for the questions that had the same scales in each section, that is, understanding of situational leadership, Section B Question 1 to 3 (B1 to B3) and application of situational leadership styles, Section B Question 4 to 7 (B4 to B7). The results are illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's Alphaa | | No of Items |
|---|---|---|
| QB4 to B7 | 0.784 | 4 |
| QB1 to B7 | 0.754 | 7 |

a. The value is positive due to a positive average covariance among items.

Alpha should be at least 0.70 for the reliability to be regarded as satisfactory (Burns & Bush, 2012). The Alpha values of all the measuring instruments have indicated a satisfactory level of internal consistency.

4.2.2 Hypotheses

Two hypotheses have been used in this research study. These assist in validating the quality of this study. The present research is based on two main hypotheses which are tested further. The first hypothesis relates to whether owners and

managers of SMEs have enough understood of situational leadership theory and the second hypothesis relates to whether SME owners and managers have applied situational leadership theory in their managerial strategies.

**Hypothesis one (H1):**

**H10**: Null Hypothesis: SLT is not understood in SME management.

**H1a**: Alternative Hypothesis: SLT is understood in SME management.

Table 3. Cross Tabulation: Evaluating Understanding and application of SLT

| | | % within Evaluating understanding | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | Situational leadership | | Total |
| | | Not applied | Applied | |
| Evaluating understanding | No understanding | | 100.00% | 100.00% |
| | Little Understanding | | 100.00% | 100.00% |
| | Average understanding | 50.00% | 50.00% | 100.00% |
| | Perfect understanding | 100.00% | | 100.00% |
| Total | | 60.00% | 40.00% | 100.00% |

Table 4. Chi-Square: Evaluating Understanding and application of SLT

| Chi-Square Tests | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. | (2-sided) |
| Pearson Chi-Square | 17.917a | 3 | | 0 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 24.148 | 3 | | 0 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 16.303 | 1 | | 0 |
| No of Valid Cases | 20 | | | |

a. 7 cells (87.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .40.

Tables 3 and 4 have shown that Pearson's chi-square is larger than 0.05 which is interpreted as a rejection of the null hypothesis (H10). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (H1a) is accepted indicating that the Situational Leadership Model is understood in SME management.

(i) **Hypothesis Two: Tested using Spearman's rank correlation H20**: Second

Null Hypothesis        SLT is not applied in the SME management. **H2a** Second

Alternative Hypothesis    SLT is applied in the SME management.

Table 5. Correlation between Understanding and application of SLT

| Correlations | | Situational leadership | Evaluating understanding |
|---|---|---|---|
| Situational leadership | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -0.926** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | 0 |
| | N | 20 | 20 |
| Evaluating understanding | Pearson Correlation | -0.926** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0 | |
| | N | 20 | 20 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The relationship was negative and significant at 95% confidence level hence the null hypothesis is accepted. This concludes that Situational leadership model is not applied in SME management.

4.2.3 Test of Hypotheses

The hypothesis test that has been carried out was Cross-tabulation and the Chi-Square test. The reason for using these tests was to test for independence of association between variables. The researcher carried out these tests to determine whether the demographic data (Question 1 to Question 5) prevent the understanding and application of situational leadership styles in the SME management.

The summary of results is shown in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Case Processing Summary

| | Cases | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Valid | | Missing | | Total | |
| | N | Percent | N | Percent | N | Percent |
| 1. Gender: * | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |
| 2. Highest level of qualification completed: * | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |
| 3. Please indicate the field of study for example Agriculture, Business Management, Human Resources Management: ** | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |
| 4. Did you have any practical experience in business management prior to owning your business?: * | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |
| 5 If yes, please indicate in one of the boxes your past experience in the business management field:* | 11 | 55.00% | 9 | 45.00% | 20 | 100.00% |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6. What position do you occupy in the current organisation? * | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |
| 7. How long have you occupied that position? * | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |
| 8. Age of Business: ** | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |
| 9. How many employees do you have in the organisation? * | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |
| 10. How many subordinates do you have under your direct leadership? ** | 20 | 100.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 20 | 100.00% |

*Evaluating understanding  **Situational leadership

Table 6 shows the summary of the respondents' responses to Questions 1 to 10. It has been noticed that only Question 5 has missing cases, that means 45% (9) of respondents did not answer the question. This has been taken in consideration for the rest of the following analysis. For Questions 1 to 4 and 6 to 10, all the respondents have answered the questions.

**5. Discussion**

The findings showed that the majority of respondents were vastly male and widely recognised as SME managers and owners. The Cronbach Alpha has been used in reliability testing to ensure internal reliability. This shows that consistency was valid, that the instrument can be used in different situations or at different times, and that using a larger sample size would not have resulted in different results.

It was recognised that the understanding of situational leadership styles by business owners was better than that of managers; however, the application of situational leadership styles among business managers was very poor. Thus, it was concluded that business owners have a good understanding of situational leadership styles, but they do not apply them in their managerial behavioural strategies.

**6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

*6.1 Summary of Key Findings*

The overall purpose of this study has been to examine and to critically evaluate the use of different situational leadership styles in the management of SMEs. This study sought to review leader obligations and the evolution of these leadership styles in SME management. The study findings of the situational leadership theory depicted that the sample population was divided into two, that is, some of the respondents had a perfect understanding of situational leadership theory but do not apply it in their behavioural managerial strategies, and another group of respondents had less understanding of situational leadership theory, but they partially apply situational leadership theory in their behavioural management strategies. Thus, there was no clear outcome although the total application of situational leadership styles mean was high, indicating a relatively high ability of application of situational leadership styles, when considering the sample as a whole. In the study it was shown that the majority of the respondents had a good understanding of situational leadership styles as many of them reported that they can strategically behave according to the current situation.

*6.2 Recommendations*

The first step to solving issues which are mentioned in the present study is the consciousness and knowledge of the problems and constraints that are influencing the effectiveness of small business management. The second step is attentiveness to the possible future problems facing small business owners. In fact, it will enable leaders to act proactively and be forewarned in their decision making. There is a great risk in starting a business, but there is also the possibility of success, if the problems are anticipated, properly understood and addressed in anticipation.

6.2.1 Leadership Training

One of the challenges facing South African SMEs has been identified as poor management. It has also been reviewed that the main reason of SME failure in South Africa is reduced practical leadership. Therefore, the real challenge would be to strengthen the bond between leadership and management and use the one to balance the order (Soomro, Memon & Shah, 2021; Naushad, 2021). Because of the political stigma from the apartheid regime in South Africa, autocracy is viewed as an ineffective leadership style. Leadership training would be of high importance in a sense that it will help leaders to be attentive to the dominant leadership styles that they apply. As leaders, SME owners and managers will be aware of the impact of the leadership styles they display on their subordinates. The present study among South African SME owners and managers has shown that there is a need for self-awareness of leadership styles. It is therefore suggested that if a leader is aware of his dominant leadership style and the impact of this style on his subordinates, autocratic leadership practice could be considerably reduced. Although obviously South African SMEs need change, the change process seems to be slow. It is then recommended that training programmes should highlight these issues.

A further recommendation is that SMEs in South Africa should also engage in leadership training programmes such as a leadership coaching program. These kinds of programmes should include situational leadership training as well as many other behavioural leadership strategies. These one-to-one programmes are set according to the individual's own schedule, speed and time scale. This entails working with an experienced coach who has a high level of understanding business and commerce operating system. Largely, this leadership coaching could prove to be significantly advantageous to South African SME management.

6.2.2 Implementation of Situational Leadership Styles

Implementing situational leadership techniques is essential for improving SME management. The main agents of change in their organisations are the leaders. They are essential to the interaction with their followers as they work towards achieving their economic objectives. The supportive behaviour and directive behaviour dimensions of leadership styles are discussed in situational leadership theory. Four categories of situations - directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating - are created using these. According to the situational leadership theory described above, it is advised that SME owners or managers change their behavioural strategies towards each of their subordinates, depending on the circumstances and on their capacity and commitment to work.

*6.3 Limitations*

Albeit that this research findings have added value to the understanding of the role of situational leadership styles in SME management among trucking companies, limitations to this study are acknowledged. The limitations of the study include the following.

The sample used for the present study was the SMEs who are operating in the trucking industry in Durban. This population is not representative of all SMEs in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, or South Africa. Consequently, the primary research findings from this study cannot be accurately extrapolated for the general SME population of South Africa.

The low response rate has been noted in the present study. Many respondents did not return the questionnaires and as result, the expected sample size was not reached. This further makes the findings such that they cannot be extrapolated for other business populations.

*6.4 Conclusion*

The SME sector is well known for the fact that it can contribute to a healthy national economy and offers potential for employment creation. The effective management of a SME is an important component in growth rate and success of businesses in the sector. Effective leadership in SME management is a priority consideration in the situational context of a organisation, in order to fulfil the organisational objectives.

The Hersey and Blanchard situational leadership theory stipulates that the leader must vary own behavioural strategies towards each one of the subordinates according to the situation at hand, and the subordinate's ability and commitment to work. This method suggests the leader first analyses the organisation's situational needs, and then applies the most appropriate leadership style, dependent on employee competencies and commitment in the task areas.

The study has intended to provide an empirical evaluation of the role played by situational leadership in SME management. The research dissertation has analysed different situational leadership styles, their understanding and application in SME management among PCB members. These styles were analysed and aligned with demographic

variables. While leaders apply different situational leadership styles depending on the situation at hand, there have been factors that were influencing the understanding and application of situational leadership models. Questionnaires were used to collect demographic data and evaluate the use of different situational leadership styles displayed by leaders. At this stage, the objectives of this research study were fulfilled.

The findings of this research have shown the appropriateness and the positive impact the situational leadership model could have in SME management. In addition, the present study has suggested necessary recommendations to SME owners and managers, to guide the improvement and effectiveness of personal leadership. Research findings and recommendations will firstly inspire SME owners and managers to understand their managerial role in the contextual business situation to ameliorate negative leader autonomy and follower experiences, as these often interact in predicting poor follower performance and attitudinal responses. Secondly, these findings will contribute to the SMME sector and provide essential tools to South African SME leaders to improve their situational leadership skills and productivity.

Consequently, the acquisition of relevant vocational, technical, and business skills is generally regarded as one of the critical factors for success in SMEs. In addition, literacy and entrepreneurial awareness are seen as particularly important in enabling South African SMEs to advance from survivalist activities to larger and better earning enterprises.

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