



But I don't know

The Situational Leadership model has huge potential for guiding leaders in their workaday lives, says John Chamberlin.

It's a fair point. If you're a leader, or manager, trying to change your behaviour, and if you're putting yourself outside of your normal comfort zone, you're going to feel uncomfortable 'wandering' around the workplace. Stands to reason. You don't know what to do.

A year ago I wrote about management and leadership (Chamberlin, 2012), making the point that it didn't matter what you called it, what mattered was what you did, ie, how you spent your time, how you behaved. And it does, because that's all your people see.

How your people are managed (or led) affects how, in turn, they behave, which means how they treat your customers/ clients/ patients/ students. A previous CEO of Marks & Spencer (Bevan, 2002) used to say, 'If you want to know how your employees are treated, ask your customers.'

Almost 30 years ago, when he was still riding the crest of the *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982) wave, Tom Peters was doing seminars called 'A Passion for Excellence', and while advocating the 'MBWA' principle – *Managing By Wandering Around* (Peters and Austin, 1985: 6) – he said that one of the 'rebuttals' he got from managers was, "But Tom, I don't know how to wander!" His response to this, and in his trademark robust and humorous way, was:

"It's fair though, it's fair. But my rejoinder to them however

is straightforward, I say what do you do when you're in your office? You write a bunch of darned memo's that otherwise obstruct the people trying to get the real work done, so even if you're rotten at it, at least when you are out of your office you're not causing positive harm to your organisation, and that's a step up for most of us!" (Peters, 1985).

And so that's the point really, what, actually, do you do, when you step outside of the safety of that four-walled comfort zone – the cocoon that's called your office – for the first time? If that's not been your normal behaviour, then you really will be like Heinlein's (1961) *Stranger in a Strange Land*. And it's not just you who'll feel strange, your people will too. They won't understand. Quite possibly, they'll assume something bad's afoot, and you're only out there to collect the 'evidence'.

So, what if you came clean? What if you trusted your staff and actually told them that you've decided to change the way you behave at work, and that both you and they might find it strange for a while, but all you're trying to do is help them achieve whatever it is you do for your customers. But remember, it has to be genuine:

'MBWA is unlikely to be effective unless perceived by staff as part of a broader, genuine belief by management in the continuing importance of giving time to listen to, and

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how to wander...?

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understand, the feelings and problems of staff' (Mullins, 2007: 458).

Or, perhaps as Valentine Michael Smith (Heinlein, *ibid*) might have said, you're there to 'grok' the situation 'in its fullness'.

A good theory

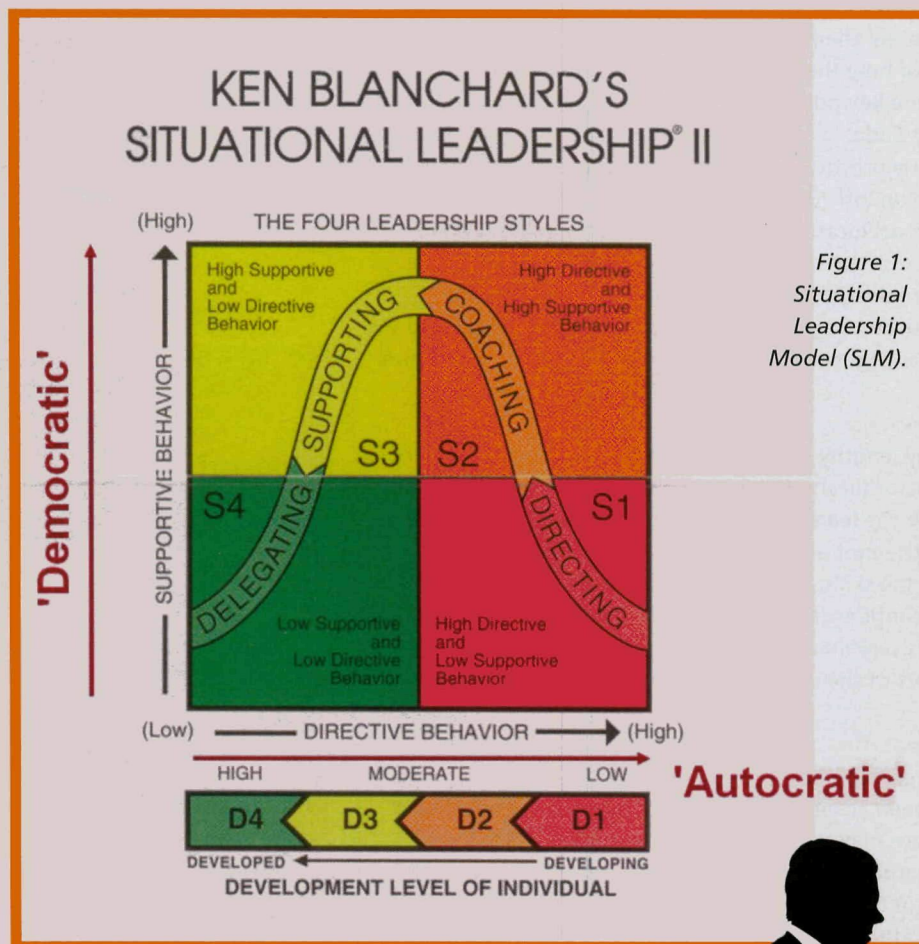
Ok, so how do you go about it? Well, one way is to base your new behaviours on a solid theoretical concept, so if it goes right you'll have a good idea why, and if it goes wrong (which it will, frequently, at least initially) you'll have something against which to diagnose what you did wrong (or didn't do right).

Kurt Lewin (1951) wasn't joking when he said, 'There is nothing so practical as a good theory', and the theory that I'd suggest you consider has been around for decades, is intuitively sound, and focuses exactly on the way you should behave in various situations.

It's called Situational Leadership (Figure 1), and is based on work by Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson back in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, 2001).

Originally developed from Blake and Mouton's (1964) 'Managerial Grid', it focuses on the situational (ie, instantaneous) needs of the worker/ subordinate/ learner/ etc and requires the 'leader' (manager, in most cases) to provide exactly and only what is required at that time, in that 'situation'.

I have added two parallel



axes to those on the graphic, because they reflect the two predominant 'styles' of leadership represented by the 'directive' and 'supportive' behaviours shown on the original. Heckmann and Huneryager (1960) believed there were four main 'styles' of management, ie, dictatorial, autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire, but whilst the model above is primarily derived and developed from Blake and Mouton's (1964) 'Managerial Grid', Blanchard (1989) stated that the two 'predominant styles' were autocratic (we

told people what to do) and democratic (we asked people what they should do), and these became those two 'directing' and 'supporting' axes of the model.

If you have never seen this model before, then I suggest you give it some serious consideration. Driving instructors are classics at applying this (even if they don't realise it); they start with the simple 'A, B, C' – accelerator, brake, clutch – and end with someone who's competent and confident enough to be left to drive by themselves.



In terms of 'styles' 1-4 (on the graphic), that goes something like this:

● Style 1: Directing

Initially they are totally directive, starting from an assumed point of 'no knowledge' on the learner's part. They talk through the pedals (A, B and C) – and even have a 'spare' set themselves! – the basics of how the car works, and the key points of the Highway Code. In many cases this early practice can take place in an 'off-road' (but still tarmac) location. This is the 'tell and show' stage, with the learner exhibiting those enthusiastic beginner characteristics (Figure 2).

● Style 2: Coaching

This is a fairly lengthy period of the instructor (in this case) working with the learner as they practise (not always successfully) the skills, whilst still lacking confidence in doing so. It is very much an 'on the pitch' part of the process.

● Style 3: Supporting

At this stage, competence has largely been achieved but confidence may still be lacking; it's more 'daren't', than 'can't' (or 'won't'). Here the manager/ leader stays nearby to offer support, but does not intervene unless required, and has pulled back almost completely on the 'Directing' part of the process. In the driving instructor example, it's at the end of this stage that the learner is put in for the test.

● Style 4: Delegating

Here the manager/leader/ coach/driving instructor (in this case) gets out of the car altogether and lets the learner drive by themselves. They are now deemed to be both competent (skills), and confident. Again, in the driving lessons example

(assuming the test is passed) the 'L' plates are taken off and the new driver ventures out on to the public roads alone; whilst possibly not yet a 'peak performer' (Figure 2), they have moved on to the 'independent learner' stage, taking charge of their own future progress.

Situational Leadership

Situational Leadership, quintessentially, is a pull system, and Arnheter and Malayeff (2005) define 'pull' as follows:

'The term pull is used to imply that nothing is made until it is needed by the downstream customer, and the application of a make-to-order (MTO) approach whenever possible.'

In a service (eg, customer-facing) environment this can have significant impacts upon the need for levels of the appropriate expertise at the customer front-line, impacting therefore on the nature of leadership at that interface, and that it also will need to be based on a 'pull' system.

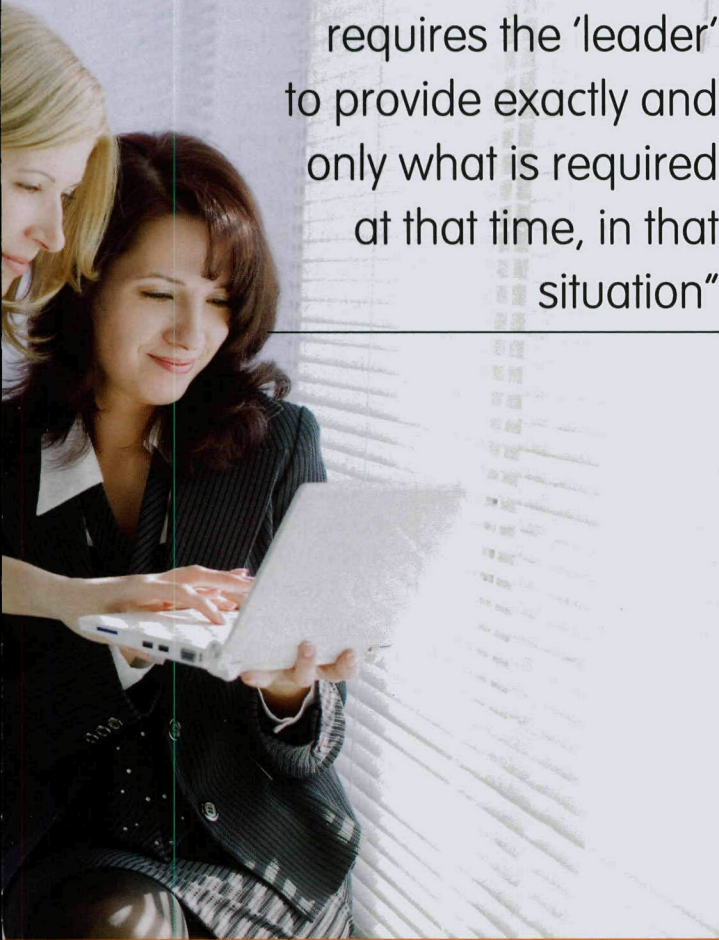
Situational Leadership (SL) therefore can – if not should – be exercised in that way; ie, the manager/leader/coach (eg, in a sporting context) provides exactly, and only, what the 'learners' require at that moment, and in that 'situation'. What this also means, therefore, is that you have to be *equally* skilled in all of those four 'styles', but as you will see opposite, they are not necessarily going to equally consume your time.

For each 'situation' you might encounter whilst 'wandering around' – you know, trying to be helpful – you will find an appropriate 'style' of behaviour based on the 'development level of the individual' (or team). By this I mean that you could, for example, be introducing a new member into an already



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“Situational Leadership requires the ‘leader’ to provide exactly and only what is required at that time, in that situation”

established (and therefore skilled and confident) team – in which case it’s the individual to whom the process is applied – or you could be introducing a whole team to a new process, eg, a communications company moving from jointing copper cables, to jointing optical fibre, when an entirely new set of skills (and confidence) is required by the whole team.

There are questionnaire sets available against which to test yourself, in terms of your own, current, predominant style (from the four choices shown), but there are some copyright issues so have a search around. Once completed, you’ll then have an indication of your own ‘development’ needs, in order to achieve an even spread of your personal competences across all four of those behavioural styles.

Going to gemba

To return to the MBWA point, however, in order to practise this, you have to be ‘in the place of transaction’ Seddon (2003), or do what Imai (1997) called, ‘going to gemba’

(gemba is the Japanese term for the workplace, the ‘factory floor’); in other words, you have to ‘Be There’, as emphasised in *Fish!* (Lundin and Christensen, 2001).

As a recent example, ex-policeman-turned-investigative journalist Mark Williams-Thomas emphasised that need to be out there and ‘on the ground’:

‘...he was a ‘doer’ while he was in the force: “Nothing beats getting out on the ground.” But that did not always win the support of his superiors’ (Gillespie, J., 2012, ‘I had to leave the force to expose him’, *The Sunday Times*, Review, 9 December, pp2/3).

Well, more fool his ‘superiors’. If you don’t – regularly and frequently – go to gemba, or get ‘out on the ground’, you’ll miss those moments, and with them your many opportunities, based on good theory, to make those helpful interventions that can make the difference in your organisation. The leadership difference.

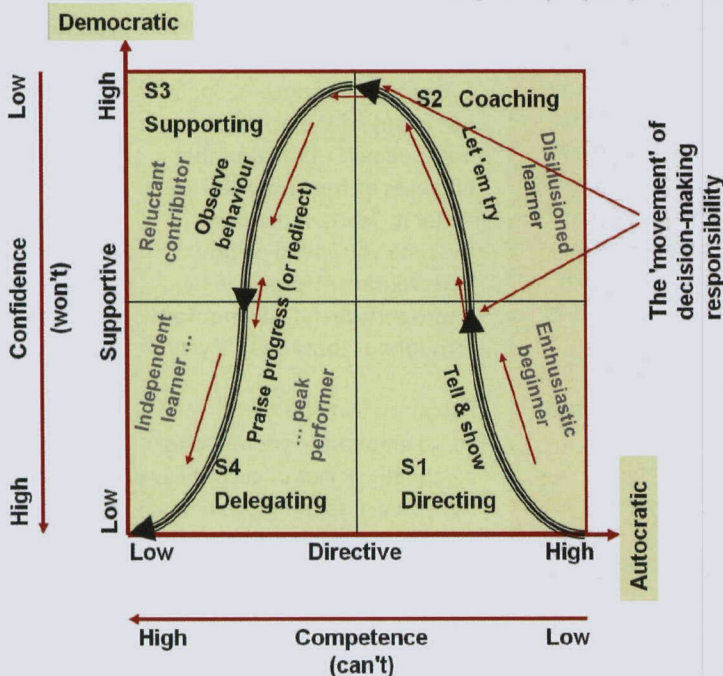
Those ‘opportunities’ have to be made; they won’t happen by themselves. There has to be a purpose to your ‘wandering around’, and one of the key aspects to that SLM (Figure 1) is that even though you need to be equally and fully skilled (that means both competent and confident) in all four ‘styles’ – one to four – you do not spend equal amounts of time in each of them. You won’t find this in the textbooks, but if you look at the model again, you’ll see that style two – coaching – is ‘high’ on both axes; ‘directing’ and ‘supporting’.

The logic, therefore, that I would propose, is that this means you have to spend more time in that segment. I say this because unless you ‘wander’; unless you go to gemba, and regularly be in

Figure 2: The SLM and behavioural descriptors.

Situational Leadership

Blanchard, K. H., Zigarmi, P. and Zigarmi, D., (1987) *Leadership and the :01ne Minute Manager*, Glasgow, Fontana/Collins (NB ‘Situational Leadership II’ diagram on p. 68); adapted, Chamberlin, 2002



‘Inverting the Management Pyramid’: Blanchard, K. H., (1989) ‘The :01ne Minute Manager – Live!’, Audio cassette seminar, Boulder (USA), CareerTrack Publications; slide 2/12, ‘The New Role of the Manager’

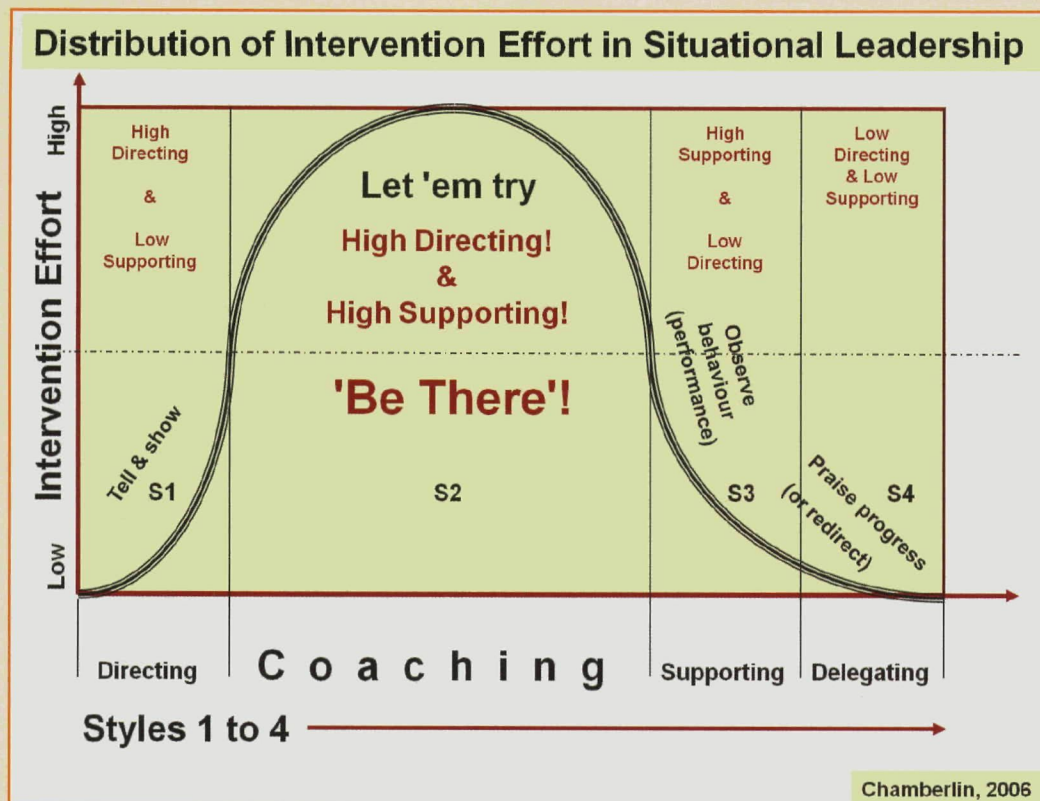


Figure 3: SLM – distribution of effort.

About the author

Until recently Dr John Chamberlin was a senior lecturer and pracademic at the Derby Business School (DBS), within the Faculty of Business, Computing & Law (BCL) at the University of Derby (UoD).

In 1996 John took early retirement from BT after 34 years in the company, the last 10 years of which he was a senior operations manager with an external workforce of up to 200 engineers and responsibility for the installation, maintenance and repair of BT's external network; copper, co-axial and optical-fibre, covering 6,000+ square miles of the East Midlands.

Within a year of leaving he had signed on for a full-time MBA at UoD, graduating in 1999 with a Distinction (only two were awarded that year), and with the only Masters' level prize for 'outstanding performance'. He subsequently joined the teaching team in the Derby Business School. In 2005 he again became a full-time student to undertake his PhD entitled, 'Reengineering Corporation Street – An Empirical Study of Business Process Reengineering (BPR) in Two Local Authorities', graduating in January 2009.

John was a founder member of 'SytoC'*, the Derby Business School's then 'Systems Thinking & Organisational Change Research Group', organised by colleague Gino Franco.

John's primary academic interests are in BPR, systems thinking, management and leadership, change management, and the public sector. He is now a freelance consultant and management writer.

www.derby.ac.uk/dbslresearch/sytoc or

JohnSea@Hotmail.co.uk

those places of transaction, you will not be in those 'situations' where you can 'coach' people to better performance, from the customers' perspectives. You have to *Be There!* Otherwise, you are totally ineffective. This does not mean 'being there' all the time, but sufficiently often that it is 'normal' for your people to see you, but not so often as to be in the way of the people getting the real work done.

The graphic above is, again, not in any of the textbooks, but I suggest – based on the two axes of the SL model itself – that it clearly shows how the time you spend on your 'intervention efforts' will be disproportionately distributed throughout those four 'styles'.

Huge potential

So, to emphasise, you need to be equally skilled in each style, but you will spend more time on one, 'coaching', than all the others. That is, if you are going to 'wander' effectively.

The SL model has now been around for more than

four decades, yet whilst I believe it has huge potential for guiding managers and leaders in their workaday lives, it remains little used, and even less understood. The irony, though, is that if you look carefully, you can see it being used around you, it's just that people don't realise that's what they are doing. If they did, then they would be underpinning their behaviour with a useful piece of that 'good theory', and understand much more clearly what it is they were doing.

Sainsbury's is a good example. As I've said previously (Chamberlin, 2010: 18), Situational Leadership...

'... only provides what the developing learner requires (in terms of 'competence' and 'confidence'), and it provides it at the time, and at the place, when and where they need it – in other words, at the 'place of transaction', or gemba. This is an extremely important point, as in a predominantly 'service' environment, there is no facility for inventory – services cannot be 'stored', they are consumed at the moment of transaction.'

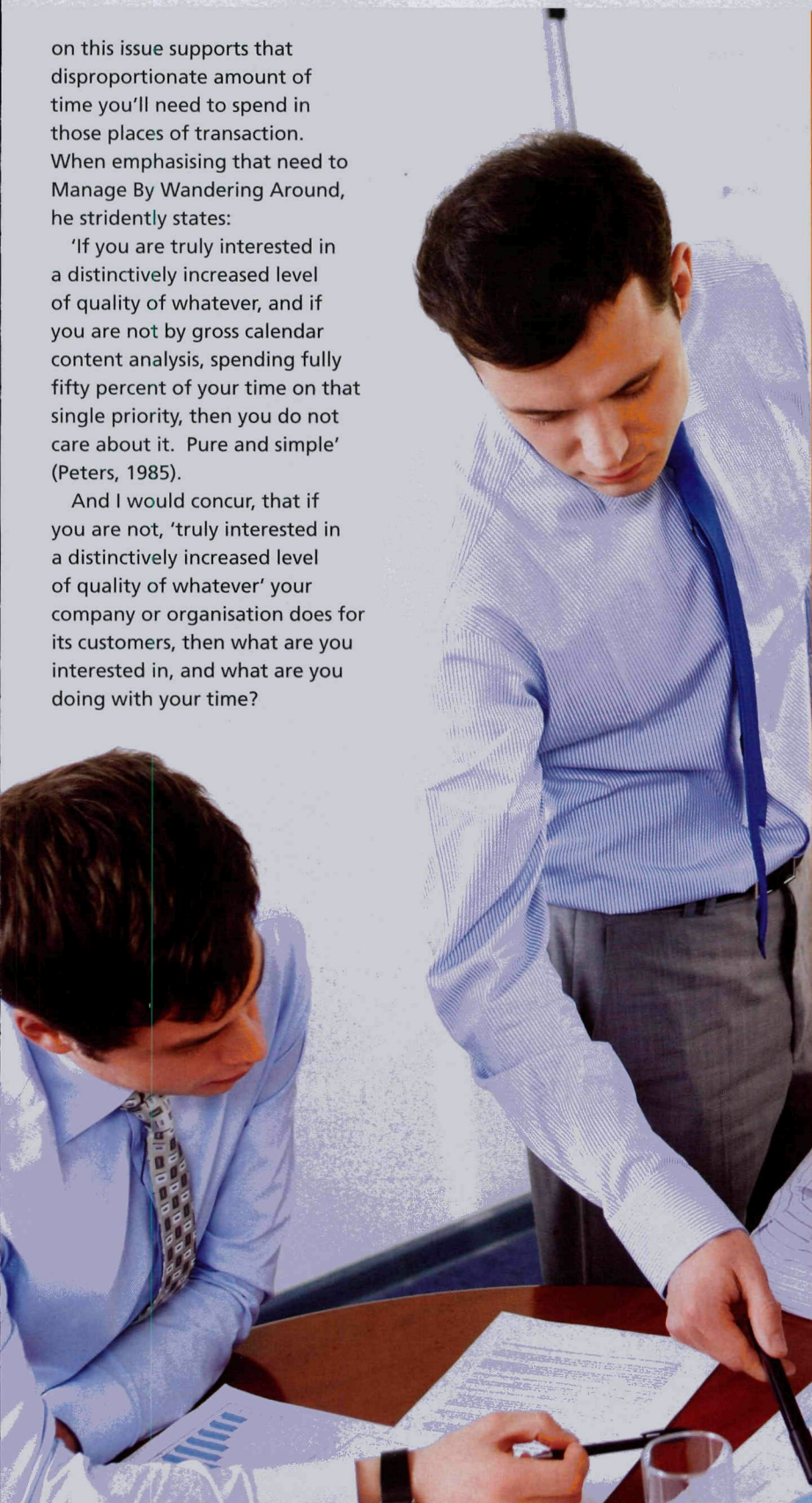
Think about when you last had a minor problem at a checkout? They don't ask you to come back tomorrow, ring the 'HelpDesk', go to another queue, or treat you as 'the problem'; the checkout person calls for assistance, and it comes, quickly, and the 'problem' is (in most cases by far) sorted whilst you are there. Normally quite courteously. And that's the point about that 'service environment'; you 'consume' the service at that moment of transaction. Sainsbury's can do this because they have people – trained and responsible (team) leaders/managers – at gemba, in the place of transaction. They are 'there', 'wandering around'.

Peters' final comment

on this issue supports that disproportionate amount of time you'll need to spend in those places of transaction. When emphasising that need to Manage By Wandering Around, he stridently states:

'If you are truly interested in a distinctively increased level of quality of whatever, and if you are not by gross calendar content analysis, spending fully fifty percent of your time on that single priority, then you do not care about it. Pure and simple' (Peters, 1985).

And I would concur, that if you are not, 'truly interested in a distinctively increased level of quality of whatever' your company or organisation does for its customers, then what are you interested in, and what are you doing with your time?



"For each situation you might encounter whilst wandering around you will find an appropriate 'style' of behaviour."

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