

Chapter 8

Situational Leadership for Quality Graduate Research in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Quality postgraduate supervision is key in ensuring that postgraduate programs at institutions of higher learning produce quality graduates and in turn play an appropriate role in building a knowledge economy. In essence, the role of the supervisor is to support the postgraduate student to successfully complete specific tasks in line with the research process. Supervisors adopt a variety of styles to supervise students. Adopting an exploratory research approach the chapter deliberates the supervisor-student dyad through the lens of the situational leadership model.

INTRODUCTION

Sundać and Krmpotić (2011) state that there is continuing discussion in both academia and the business sector, advancing that an ideas-driven, global knowledge economy (KE) constitutes a promising scenario for the future. In this regard, institutions of higher learning and business alike should revisit their mandates. They state that institutions of higher learning are compelled to adopt strategies that will foster innovation and creativity. According to Hughes and Kitson (2012), universities and research centers constitute strategic factors in the Knowledge Economy, as a better-skilled population is needed in order to create new knowledge and transform research outcomes into innovative products. If universities and research centers are key in a Knowledge Economy, then quality postgraduate supervision is key in ensuring that postgraduate programs at institutions of higher learning produce quality graduates and in turn play its role in the Knowledge Economy (Cloete, et al., 2013). Universities are known as knowledge producers and, the centrality of research as a key function in the triad of teaching, research and community service cannot be overemphasized (Zhao, 2001). According to Chireshe (2012), postgraduate students' research is a vital component of a university's research output.

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Several definitions of postgraduate supervision exist and the description of the postgraduate supervisor is varied. Kimani (2014) describes the postgraduate supervisor as a coach, a facilitator, or a coordinator. In essence, the role of the postgraduate supervisor is to assist the postgraduate student to successfully complete specific tasks in line with the research process. This process requires the postgraduate supervisor to provide leadership and guidance to the student, as well as to manage properly the research process (Sambrook, 2008). Supervisors also adopt a variety of styles and ways of providing supervision. Postgraduate supervisors, in general, will have preferred styles of interactions with students. Supervisors could adopt a master-apprentice role (Zeegers and Barron, 2012), offering structure to the relationship or, have a laissez-faire relationship with the student (Sambrook, 2008). The variations of supervisory styles coupled, with the number of students under supervision the variation in student developmental capacity and, the complexity of thematic areas students may research creates a challenge for both postgraduate supervisor and student. Sambrook (2008) advances that this diversity of student capacity and interest, the supervisors' areas of interest and research focus areas of both student and supervisors have the potential for mismatches in expectations between the supervisor and student. Despite this diversity, Sambrook (2008) asserts that there is consensus internationally that postgraduate supervision focusses on two key dimensions, i.e., the provision of technical and social support, which in turn, influence supervisory styles.

In this dyad of supervisor and student, it is possible that the preferred style of a supervisor does not match the capacity, expectation or preference of a student. This misalignment of student and supervisor can have various consequences. These consequences may include situations that could lead to potential conflict (i.e. personality clashes or philosophical disagreements) between the supervisor and student. This conflict episode can have multiple implications for the progress of the student in the research process. For example, the conflict could lead to a request to change supervisor, which in turn can lead to a delay in progress made by the student. There are no readymade prescriptions or perfect recipe of how supervisors and students should interact and there is thus no guarantee that the supervisor-student pairing will be a workable one. This chapter will view the Supervisor-Student dyad through the lens of the Situational Leadership Model. The Situational Leadership Model advocates that a supervisor must assess the personal development levels of students given a specific task. After such an assessment, the supervisor, in line with the prescriptions of the Situational Leadership Model, should adopt an appropriate and matching leadership/supervisor style in order to be effective. Postgraduate supervisors can apply the Situational Leadership Model in the supervisor-student dyad. This could lead to applying a more appropriate and structured supervisor style that matches the developmental level of the student.

The chapter is conceptual and exploratory in scope and has the following structure. First, it explores the elements and definition of Postgraduate Research Supervision. Second, the chapter discusses the various approaches, the roles, and responsibilities of postgraduate supervision. Third, the chapter will discuss Post Graduate Student Supervision and linking it to Student Management. Fourth, the chapter will draw parallels between Leadership and postgraduate supervision. Fifth, the chapter introduces the Situational Leadership Model and its linkage to postgraduate supervision and finally, offer suggestions for future research on the topic.

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