


# Situational leadership styles and trust development in supervisory relationships

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**Orientation:** Trust is a critical element in supervisory relationships, influencing subordinates' willingness to follow leadership directives. Leadership style shapes trust perceptions in these relationships.

**Research purpose:** This study examined the alignment between situational leadership (SL) styles or stages (directing, coaching, supporting, delegating) and four supervisory relationship trust (SURT) characteristics or stages (compliance, fairness, good faith, benevolence).

**Motivation for the study:** While research has explored leadership styles and trust, the relationship between SL and specific SURT facilitators remains underexplored, particularly in South African supervisory contexts.

**Research approach/design and method:** A quantitative, exploratory design was used. Convenience sampling yielded 26 SL workshop attendees who participated in structured interviews. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Spearman's rank-order tests assessed differences and relationships.

**Main findings:** Statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) in trust perceptions across SL stages were found. Compliance and fairness (transactional trust) were generally higher in early stages (directing, coaching), while good faith and benevolence (relational trust) were more evident in later stages (supporting, delegating). Given the small sample ( $n = 26$ ), these findings should be regarded as promising, but tentative.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Results suggest SURT may develop in four stages aligned with SL progression. Leaders could adapt their style to emphasise the trust-building behaviours most relevant to each stage.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study adds to leadership–trust literature by providing promising initial empirical evidence of a link between SL stages with trust-building behaviours.

**Keywords:** supervision; relations; trust; compliance; fairness; good faith; benevolence; situational leadership.

## Introduction

### Background

Trust is a crucial requirement in human relationships. In employment relations, trust plays a significant role in fostering positive interactions between employers and employees. Modern organisational leaders need to be adaptable in guiding, supporting and developing their followers, and need to adapt flexible leadership styles that foster and sustain adaptable trust-based organisational cultures, such as the situational leadership (SL) approach that was developed by Hersey and Blanchard in the 1970s. Situational leadership theory has been updated since then and is still widely implemented in modern organisations (Centre for Leadership Studies [CLS], 2017; Hersey & Blanchard, 2013; Kapotwe & Bamata, 2023).

Trust influences a subordinate's willingness to follow a leader's direction and guidance. Many authors agree that transactional leaders tend to maintain trust by emphasising compliance, while transformational leaders tend to foster trust through communication, motivation and recognition of effort. Research has confirmed that authentic leadership, which emphasises self-awareness, transparency and ethical behaviour, is positively related to trust in supervisory relationships (Kleynhans et al., 2021; Northouse, 2016; Soderberg & Romney, 2022). Although numerous leadership theories have been proposed in literature and tested in a wide variety of organisations, the SL theory of Hersey and Blanchard appears to have stood the test of time.

## Research problem

Literature strongly suggests that situational leaders who adapt their leadership styles based on the readiness of their followers are more likely to foster higher levels of trust in supervisory relationships. The relationships between leadership styles and trust in supervisory relationships have been studied before, but few studies have specifically examined the relationship between SL styles and stages of trust development in supervisory relationships, and none were found in the South African context. At this juncture, the proposed alignments between SL styles and supervisory relationship trust (SURT) stages are based on preliminary conceptual reasoning and therefore require stronger empirical investigation and validation (Ehlers, 2021; CLS, 2017; Hersey & Blanchard, 2013; Northouse, 2016).

The development of trust in supervisory relationships is a gradual process that requires consistent effort from leaders and followers. Recent research resulted in a plausible theory that employment, organisational or SURT develops in four distinctive sequential stages, namely: compliance, fairness, good faith and benevolence. This employment relations trust theory suggests that higher levels of trust and benevolence will become more prominent in mature employment relationships. Further research into the relationship between trust development and other organisational variables was recommended (Ehlers, 2021). This article will treat employment relations trust and SURT as equivalent constructs, using the terms interchangeably.

Table 1 identifies four development stages in SL and employment relations trust theories. At face value, there appear to be some relationships between SURT and SL stages. For example, the telling style seems to emphasise compliance and the supporting style seems to display good faith. These initial observations strongly suggest that there may be significant relationships between one or more of the four stages of SL and SURT theories. Further investigation may therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of the development of, and dynamic interplay between leadership behaviour and trust in supervisory relationships.

**TABLE 1:** Stages in situational leadership and supervisory relationship trust development.

Stage	Situational leadership	Supervisory relationship trust
First	S1 Directing (Telling) (Inexperienced and dependent follower)	Compliance
Second	S2 Coaching (Selling) (Experienced but dependent follower)	Fairness
Third	S3 Supporting (Participating) (Experienced and less dependent follower)	Good faith
Fourth	S4 Delegating (Experienced and independent follower)	Benevolence

Source: Ehlers, L.I. (2021). Is benevolence the pinnacle of an employment relations trust hierarchy?. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 19(0), a1655. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v19i0.1655>; Centre for Leadership Studies (CLS). (2017). *Situational leadership: Relevant then, relevant now*. The Centre for Leadership Studies & Training Industry, Inc. Retrieved from [https://www.situational.com/content/uploads/2017/10/FINAL\\_CLS\\_History\\_CaseStudy\\_Digital.pdf](https://www.situational.com/content/uploads/2017/10/FINAL_CLS_History_CaseStudy_Digital.pdf); Northouse, P.G. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Sage

## Research objectives

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the relationships between the stages in the development of SURT and the developmental stages in SL theory. Two research objectives pursued were:

‘To test whether perceived levels of SURT facilitators differ significantly across SL stages.’

‘To determine the strength and direction of associations between SURT stages and SL stages.’

## Overview

The remainder of this article contains a literature review, a discussion of the quantitative research methodology that was adopted in this study and a discussion of findings. An overview of limitations and recommendations of the study is followed by specific conclusions and recommendations, and some concluding remarks.

## Literature review

### Situational leadership theory

The original SL Theory, developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in the early 1970s, introduced the idea that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon a leader's ability to adapt their style to the readiness level of their followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 2013). Novruzov (2024) believes that SL is a balanced leadership approach that could enhance affective and normative commitment as well as performance. Aslam et al. (2022) believed that the follower-centric approach that is proposed in SL styles allows leaders to respond flexibly to unprecedented challenges, thereby maintaining work motivation and job satisfaction.

In the first SL model, Hersey and Blanchard identified four leadership styles: Telling (S1), Selling (S2), Participating (S3) and Delegating (S4), each suited to different stages that relate to follower readiness levels. Follower readiness is determined by competence (ability) and commitment (willingness) to perform a specific task. The telling and selling styles were recommended for followers with lower levels of readiness who required high direction and supervision. The participating and delegating styles were recommended for highly competent followers with high readiness, allowing them to work autonomously (CLS, 2017; Hersey & Blanchard, 2013; Northouse, 2016).

The Situational Leadership II (SLII) model retains all the principles of the original SL model but introduces more precision in matching leadership styles to follower readiness. The SLII emphasises the dynamic and adaptive nature of leadership, asserting that effective leaders must continually assess and respond to the development levels of their followers, which are based on their competence (ability) and commitment (willingness) to perform a task (CLS, 2017; Northouse, 2016). The SLII model facilitates objective

assessment of task requirements and developmental stages of followers, and selection of an appropriate leadership style that fosters task accomplishment as well as follower growth. This approach can result in numerous positive organisational behaviours and outcomes (CLS, 2017; Northouse, 2016; Novruzov, 2024; Kapotwe & Bamata, 2023).

Situational Leadership II identifies four primary leadership styles, namely: Directing (S1), Coaching (S2), Supporting (S3) and Delegating (S4). Each of these styles is tailored to address follower needs in four stages, which relate to follower readiness levels. Directing (S1) is appropriate for followers with low readiness (R1), who require clear instructions and close supervision. Coaching (S2) is used when followers are willing but still lack competence (R2), providing both direction and support. Supporting (S3) is best suited for followers with moderate readiness (R3), who can perform tasks but may need encouragement and facilitation. Delegating (S4) is used for highly competent and motivated followers (R4), who can take full responsibility for tasks with minimal oversight. Situational Leadership II highlights the importance of leaders adjusting their styles as followers develop, ensuring leadership remains effective and responsive to the evolving needs of the team (CLS, 2017; Hersey & Blanchard, 2013).

Effective implementation of the SLII model requires leaders to continuously assess and adjust their approach based on the evolving needs of their followers and organisational context. The following general guidelines for effective implementation of SLII in modern supervisory relationships were recommended by numerous authors: Assess follower readiness, diagnose readiness accurately, adapt leadership style, provide clear direction and goals, offer support and encouragement, empower decision-making, maintain open communication, monitor progress and performance, promote development, build trust and respect, be flexible and adaptive and evaluate effectiveness (CLS, 2017; Hersey & Blanchard, 2013). Table 2 illustrates the relationship between leadership styles and readiness levels.

**TABLE 2:** Situational leadership theory.

Stage	Leadership styles	Follower readiness levels
1	Directing (S1): Characterised by high task focus and low relationship focus, this style is appropriate.	R1 (Low Readiness): Followers are mostly inexperienced or incompetent and dependent or unwilling to perform a task.
2	Coaching (S2): This style combines a high task focus with a high relationship focus.	R2 (Moderate Readiness): Followers are more experienced or competent but lack the confidence to perform a task independently.
3	Supporting (S3): Leaders reduce task direction and increase relationship support, fostering autonomy and encouraging development.	R3 (High Readiness): Followers are very experienced and competent but may be insecure or hesitant to perform their duties completely independently.
4	Delegating (S4): Leaders using this style provide minimal task and relationship guidance.	R4 (Very High Readiness): Followers are highly experienced and highly competent, in addition to being very eager and willing to work independently.

Source: Centre for Leadership Studies (CLS). (2017). *Situational leadership: Relevant then, relevant now*. The Centre for Leadership Studies & Training Industry, Inc. Retrieved from [https://www.situational.com/content/uploads/2017/10/FINAL\\_CLS\\_History\\_CaseStudy\\_Digital.pdf](https://www.situational.com/content/uploads/2017/10/FINAL_CLS_History_CaseStudy_Digital.pdf); Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K.H. (2013). *Management of organisational behaviour: Utilising human resources* (10th ed.). Pearson Education

Despite its enduring use, SL theory has been criticised for a lack of empirical validation (Mirčetić & Vukotic, 2020), limited cross-cultural testing and potential oversimplification of leader–follower dynamics. These limitations necessitate careful contextual application and further research.

## Supervisory relations trust theory

Trust is a fundamental component of human relationships. Trust generally refers to the willingness of any entity (vulnerable trustor – e.g. an employee or subordinate) to rely on another entity (powerful trustee – e.g. an employer or supervisor) to behave in an agreed-upon or expected manner (Maximo et al., 2019; Nienaber et al., 2015; Starnes et al., 2016). Trust is not a static phenomenon. It evolves through certain development stages that encapsulate many interrelated trust expectations, perceptions and behaviours. Higher levels of trust are related to positive perceptions of conviction, devotion, tolerance and support in supervisory relationship exchanges (Ehlers, 2021; Nienaber et al., 2015; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021).

Research findings confirmed that delegation of tasks, autonomous work and support for employee development increased trust in supervisory relationships, which resulted in subordinates demonstrating higher levels of commitment, discretionary effort, honesty and loyalty towards leaders. Such behaviours are typically displayed by authentic leaders (Kleynhans et al., 2021; Nienaber et al., 2015; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021).

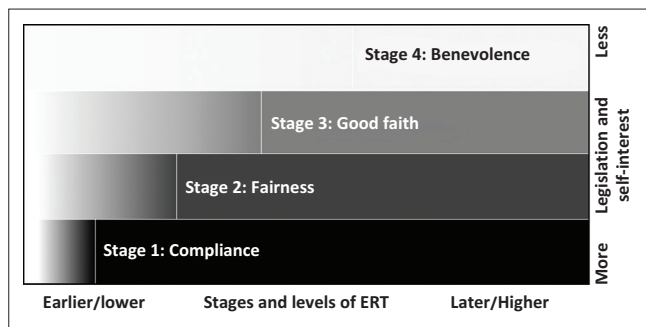
Employment relations trust, and assumingly SURT can be simply defined as the belief that a powerful party will act in the best interest of a vulnerable party in a supervisory relationship exchange, by complying with formal regulations, acting fairly, acting in good faith and even acting benevolently when circumstances in supervisory relationships require such behaviours (Ehlers, 2021; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021). Table 3 provides a summary of the developmental stages of SURT, primary facilitators of SURT and the key elements of each facilitator.

Research findings strongly suggest that employment relations trust, and assumedly SURT, will typically develop in a relatively predictable sequence in most employment or supervisory relationships. However, unexpected random displays of fairness, good faith and benevolence may occur in any of the developmental stages (Ehlers, 2021; Fawcett et al. 2017; Mbuma, 2019; Nienaber et al., 2015; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021). This sequence is illustrated in Figure 1.

**TABLE 3:** Stages and facilitators of supervisory relationship trust.

Stage	Stages	Facilitators
1	Compliance	Constitution, legislation, contracts, policies, procedures
2	Fairness	Awareness, objectivity, equity, consistency, reciprocity
3	Good faith	Interest, sincerity, respect, constructivity, consideration
4	Benevolence	Kindness, charity, goodwill, unselfishness, sacrifice

Source: Ehlers, L.I. (2021). Is benevolence the pinnacle of an employment relations trust hierarchy?. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 19(0), a1655. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v19i0.1655>



Source: Ehlers, L.I. (2021). Is benevolence the pinnacle of an employment relations trust hierarchy?. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 19(0), a1655. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v19i0.1655>  
ERT, employee relations trust.

**FIGURE 1:** Sequential development of supervisory relationship trust.

Compliance is the first stage in SURT development and refers to awareness and adherence to all formal relationship laws, rules and regulations. Previous research findings confirmed that the fulfilment of legal and contractual obligations is the cornerstone of transaction-based trust in employee relations (Mbuma, 2019; Savolainen & Ikonen, 2016). Fairness builds upon the transactional foundation of compliance. Positive perceptions of fairness result from experiences of impartiality, equity, consistency and reciprocity in relationship exchanges. Such experiences are not necessarily required in laws or employment contracts (Ehlers, 2021; DiMatteo et al. 2011; Fawcett et al. 2017; Nienaber et al., 2015; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021).

Good faith behaviour will become more evident when higher levels of trust have been established through emphasis on compliance and fairness. Positive perceptions of good faith result from displays of interest, sincerity, respect, constructivity and consideration. Such relationship-based behaviours are not typically required in or enforced by formal regulations (Ehlers, 2021; Nienaber et al., 2015; Savolainen & Ikonen, 2016; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021). Benevolence is a refined, advanced and elusive stage of employment relations trust, and becomes evident when kindness, charity, goodwill, unselfishness or sacrifice is on display in a supervisory or employment relationship. Such shared value-based behaviours will only be displayed when higher levels of compliance, fairness and good faith are perceived in a relationship (Ehlers, 2021). This assumption aligns with beliefs that organisations and individuals can achieve deeper, moral forms of reciprocity in mature trust relationships that developed over time (Fawcett et al. 2017; Mbuma, 2019; Nienaber et al., 2015; Savolainen & Ikonen, 2016; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021).

### Leadership style and relationship trust

Supervisory relationship trust perceptions depend on subordinate perceptions of the ability (skills, competencies, means), benevolence (willingness to create benefits for subordinate) and integrity (predictability and reliability) of their supervisors. A subordinate will not typically anticipate exploitation by a superior when SURT levels are perceived to be high and vice versa (Nienaber et al., 2015; Wilson &

Cunliffe, 2021). Subordinate expectations, experiences and outcomes of previous trust exchanges result in revised positive or negative perceptions of supervisor trustworthiness. Revised perceptions influence a subordinate's willingness to trust a supervisor in future relationship exchanges. (Fawcett et al. 2017; Starnes et al., 2016; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021). Trust can be disrupted when leaders or employees fail to meet general expectations of ability, integrity, benevolence, support, rationality, normality and regulated conduct. Such disruptions typically lead to reassessments of psychological safety and trust in a relationship. Such assessments may result in the recovery or deterioration of trust and authenticity perceptions in an employment relationship (Kleynhans et al., 2021; Maximo et al., 2019; Nienaber et al., 2015; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021).

Subordinates of trustworthy supervisors will be less likely to distrust or anticipate exploitation and subsequently more willing to increase their trust in their supervisors and vice versa (Starnes et al., 2016; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021). Previous studies confirmed that interrelated subordinate perceptions of the levels of trust, compliance, fairness and good faith in supervisory relationships are strongly related to their perceptions of the quality and levels of trust in such relationships. Many studies confirmed significant positive relationships between SURT and a variety of positive leadership behaviours (Ehlers, 2021; Dietz & Hartog, 2015; Fawcett et al. 2017; Kleynhans et al., 2021; Krot & Lewicka, 2012; Maximo et al., 2019; Nienaber et al., 2015; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2021).

It is worth noting that South African work relationships are uniquely shaped by diversity and historical inequalities, which may influence how trust is developed and maintained. Evidence from South Africa's health sector shows that workplace, interpersonal and institutional trust are tightly interlinked and depend on supportive supervision, clear communication and strong organisational support (Watkins et al., 2021). Culturally rooted leadership approaches such as Ubuntu have been associated with stronger employee engagement and cohesion, implying a pathway for fostering trust in diverse teams (Chetty, 2024). Recent South African research on hybrid teams further identifies leader competencies, such as emotional intelligence and accountability, which create psychological safety, a critical precursor to trust formation in heterogeneous workforces (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). The influence of diversity on the relationship between SURT and SL stages falls beyond the scope of this study.

## Research methodology

### Research design

A focused literature review on Social Role Theory (SRT) and SL informed the study's theoretical foundation, research problem and methodology. Data were collected through structured interviews and statistically analysed in accordance with guidelines provided by Creswell (2014), Cozby and Bates (2015), Leavy (2017), Quinlan et al. (2019) and Stockemer (2019).

## Research instrument

A structured interview was developed in accordance with guidelines in Creswell (2017), Cozby and Bates (2015), Leavy (2017) and Quinlan et al. (2019). The structured interview included 6 biographical items relating to age, gender, years of employment and supervision experience, as well as 16 questions related to the perceived importance of compliance, fairness, good faith and benevolence in each of the SL stages. These 16 questions were linked to a typical 5-point Likert-type scale that was chosen to enhance clarity and reduce respondent fatigue. The scale included five responses, namely: unimportant, less important, somewhat important, important and very important.

Three volunteers with above-average knowledge of SL theory participated in preliminary structured interviews. They expressed positive sentiments and feedback after completing the interview, but recommended that a fact sheet with related definitions be provided to interviewees and that the interviewees be allowed to ask unlimited clarifying questions from the interviewer during the data collection process. These recommendations were heeded and implemented in all interviews. The interviewer took great care to explain options to interviewees without suggesting responses, to prevent interviewer bias. All problematic items or areas were identified on the respective survey sheets and considered in the analysis process.

All questionnaire items were directly related to previously validated items in theoretical models of Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) and employment relations trust (ERT) to ensure construct validity (Ehlers, 2021; CLS, 2017; Hersey & Blanchard, 2013). A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 ( $n = 26$ ) confirmed that the questionnaire was marginal but adequately reliable and consistent for the purposes of this study. Future studies could aim to develop instruments that are more consistent and reliable (Salkind, 2014).

## Sampling and data collection

A convenience sampling approach was adopted in this study. In all, 26 out of 60 attendees of a series of 3-day workshops in SL volunteered to participate in the structured interview process. All interviews were conducted by the course facilitator within 7 days after completion of the respective workshops in 2022. Even though this sampling approach ensured that all respondents were adequately informed on SL theory, a post-hoc power analysis indicated limited statistical power to detect small effect sizes. However, the relatively small sample size of 26 met the minimum requirements for implementing basic inferential statistical analysis procedures that were required for purposes of this explanatory research study (Creswell, 2014; Salkind, 2014). There were 13 males and 13 females in the sample. The age of respondents ranged between 23 and 68 years, with an average age of 40.38. Respondents had an average of 18.23 years of work experience and an average of 8.96 years of supervision experience.

## Data analysis

Data were captured and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 22). A variety of descriptive statistical procedures (means, standard deviation, tables, charts) were implemented to investigate characteristics of the dataset and identify potentially significant patterns. A combination of inferential statistical procedures was employed to test the validity of the four theoretical propositions. A repeated-measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) examined mean differences in trust constructs across the four stages, and post-hoc Tukey tests examined specific between-stage variations. Effect sizes ( $\eta^2$ ) were calculated to determine the magnitude of observed differences. A Spearman's rank-order test was conducted to investigate the statistical significance of correlations.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Gordon Institute of Business Science Ethics Committee. Before participation, all subjects received comprehensive information about the voluntary nature of their involvement, guarantees of confidentiality and data protection, the scientific purpose of the study and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all volunteers before their participation commenced. This consent included explicit acknowledgement of the study's ethical parameters and participants' rights to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

## Results

### Supervisory relationship trust in different situational leadership stages

Table 4 contains descriptive statistical analysis results that will be discussed in the following sections.

#### Directing stage (Stage 1)

The perceived high level of compliance ( $\bar{x} = 3.65$ ; 1) confirms that authority is typically used to establish behaviour foundations and boundaries in this stage. However, the moderately high level of fairness ( $\bar{x} = 2.85$ ; 2) suggests that authority is not abused in this stage. Lower levels of benevolence ( $\bar{x} = 1.04$ ; 4) and good faith ( $\bar{x} = 1.85$ ; 3) further suggest that literal compliance with rules is emphasised in this stage. This appears to align with the high-task, low-support approach, where leaders establish trust by providing clear instructions with little emotional or relational engagement.

**TABLE 4:** Levels of supervisory relationship trust by stage ( $n = 26$ ).

Style	Compliance		Fairness		Good faith		Benevolence	
	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank
Directing	3.65	1	2.85	2	1.85	3	1.04	4
Coaching	3.32	1	3.23	2	2.38	3	1.23	4
Supporting	3.23	3	3.65	1	3.54	2	1.96	4
Delegating	2.89	4	3.54	1	3.38	3	3.50	2

Note: X dash refers to means in this table.

### Coaching stage (Stage 2)

The perceived high levels of compliance ( $\bar{x} = 3.32$ ; 1) and fairness ( $\bar{x} = 3.23$ ; 2) suggest that supervisors enforce rules in a neutral, consistent, equitable and reciprocal manner in this stage. However, lower levels of benevolence ( $\bar{x} = 1.23$ ; 4) and good faith ( $\bar{x} = 2.38$ ; 3) suggest that trust remains transactional in this stage. This approach appears to be a combination of task direction and growing support, where leaders expand trust by building rapport while prioritising structure and accountability.

### Supporting stage (Stage 3)

The perceived levels of fairness ( $\bar{x} = 3.65$ ; 1) and good faith ( $\bar{x} = 3.54$ ; 2) seem to peak in this stage. Compliance levels remain high ( $\bar{x} = 3.23$ ; 1), but trust moves from a transactional to a relational base in this stage. Benevolence levels ( $\bar{x} = 1.96$ ; 4) steadily increase. Care and empathy seem to be secondary to compliance, fairness and reliability. This appears to align with SL's low-task, high-support style, where leaders foster deeper trust by empowering followers through collaboration and open communication.

### Delegating stage (Stage 4)

Trust appears to mature into a care-based, ethical bond between leaders and followers in this stage. The perceived levels of benevolence ( $\bar{x} = 3.50$ ; 2), fairness ( $\bar{x} = 3.54$ ; 1) and good faith ( $\bar{x} = 3.38$ ; 3) are very high in this stage, while compliance ( $\bar{x} = 2.89$ ; 4) drops to a relatively lower level. This suggests that followers internalised shared relationship values and no longer require strict oversight. These assumptions appear to align with SL's low-task, low-support style, where trust becomes self-sustaining through mutual respect and genuine concern for well-being.

## Theoretical implications

Descriptive data analysis results strongly suggest that SRT progresses through four distinct phases that align with SL theory's developmental stages. Data strongly suggests that transactional trust components (compliance and fairness) dominate the initial directing and coaching stages, while

relational trust elements (good faith and benevolence) become prominent in the later supporting and delegating stages.

Relational trust behaviours can be expected to surpass transactional trust behaviours at the start of the supporting stage (Stage 3). High levels of fairness, good faith and benevolence converge in the delegating stage, strongly suggesting that higher levels of SRT can be achieved through mutual respect and shared values rather than strict rule enforcement.

## Transformation of supervisory relationship trust

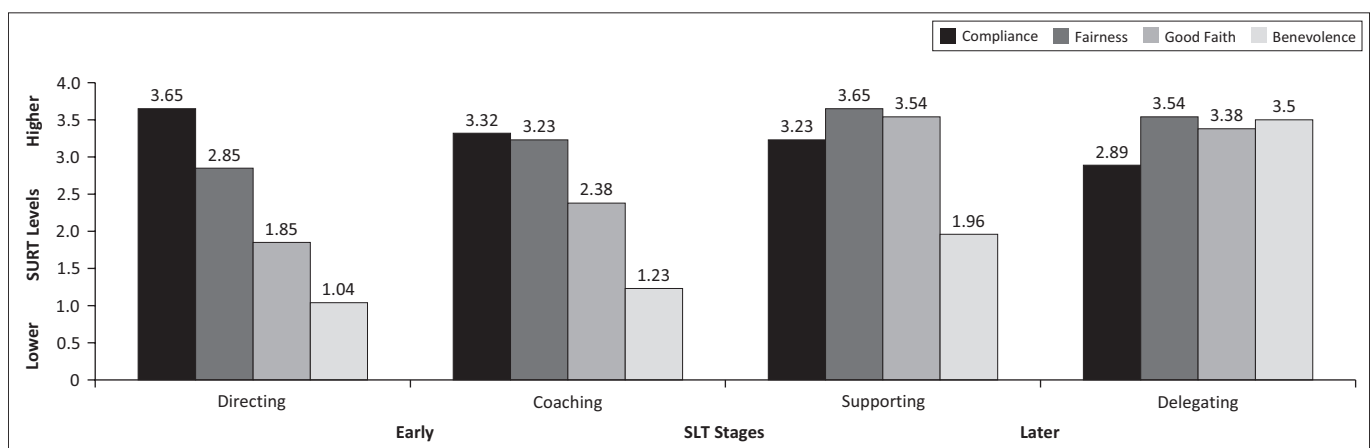
Figure 2 illustrates the perceived levels of compliance, fairness, good faith and benevolence in the different stages of SL.

### Compliance

Compliance levels were perceived as very high in Stage 1 and were perceived to gradually decrease across Stages 2, 3 and 4. Analysis of variance results confirmed statistically significant differences between stages ( $F[3,100] = 3.33$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). A small effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.08$ ) indicates that only 8% of compliance score variance was attributable to the SL stage. While the leadership stage has some influence on compliance scores, most of the differences in compliance are because of other factors. A Spearman's rank-order test ( $p = -0.26$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) confirmed that these decreasing compliance scores were significantly different from Stage 1 scores in Stages 2, 3 and 4. The lowest compliance score ( $x = 2.89$ ) was relatively high, which indicates that compliance levels were perceived to be relatively high in all SL stages.

### Fairness

Fairness levels were perceived as moderately high in Stage 1 and became increasingly higher in later stages. Analysis of variance results indicated statistical significance ( $F [3,100] = 5.80$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), with a medium effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.14$ ) showing 14% of fairness score variation is SL



SURT, supervisory relationship trust; SLT, situational leadership theory.

FIGURE 2: Supervisory relationship trust levels in different SLT stages.

stage dependent. Results suggest that the leadership stage has a clear and meaningful impact, explaining 14% of the differences in fairness scores. Gradual changes occurred in Stages 2, 3 and 4. Statistically significant results from a Spearman's rank-order test ( $p = -0.33, p = 0.001$ ) suggest that fairness levels increase steadily in these successive SL stages.

### Good faith

Good faith levels were perceived as lower in stages 1 and 2 and perceived to increase to higher levels in later stages. Analysis of variance results are significant ( $F [3,100] = 21.70, p < 0.001$ ). A large effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.36$ ) suggested that 36% of score variation is attributable to the SL stage. These results suggest that the leadership stage strongly influenced good faith scores, explaining 36% of the variation, with the biggest changes in Stages 3 and 4. Intense changes were perceived to occur in Stages 3 and 4. The strong positive correlation ( $p = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ) suggests that good faith may become more emphasised as leadership styles evolve towards delegation and trust-based approaches.

### Benevolence

Benevolence levels were perceived to be very low in stages 1 and 2 and low in stage 3, and very high in Stage 4. Analysis of variance results were statistically significant ( $F [3,100] = 28.75, p < 0.001$ ). A very large effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.44$ ) suggested that 44% of benevolence variation could be explained by stage. Results suggest that leadership stage explained 44% of benevolence variation, with the most marked change in Stage 4. Intense change may typically occur in stage 4. The strong correlation of all variables ( $p = 0.56, p < 0.001$ ) suggests that very high levels of fairness, good faith and benevolence could typically converge in the delegating stage of SL.

### Theoretical implications

Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated deviations from normality for all variables ( $p < 0.001$ ), but Levene's Test confirmed homogeneity of variances across stages for compliance ( $p = 0.969$ ), fairness ( $p = 0.997$ ), good faith ( $p = 0.984$ ) and benevolence ( $p = 0.947$ ). Given the equal group sizes, ANOVA was deemed appropriate despite the normality violations. Results of the inferential statistical analyses confirm that transactional-based behaviour (compliance) gradually decreased, whereas relational-based behaviours (fairness, good faith, benevolence) progressively increased across the four stages of SL theory. All ANOVA ( $p \leq 0.02$ ) and Spearman rank ( $p \leq 0.02$ ) test results were statistically significant, indicating that these patterns are unlikely to be a result of chance. The magnitude of effects varied across outcomes: compliance was only modestly influenced by SL stage ( $\eta^2 = 0.08$ ), fairness demonstrated a medium effect ( $\eta^2 = 0.14$ ), while overall performance scores ( $\eta^2 = 0.36$ ) and benevolence ( $\eta^2 = 0.44$ ) were strongly stage dependent. Notably, the most pronounced increases in good faith and

benevolence occurred in the later stages, particularly Stages 3 and 4, underscoring the intensification of relational-oriented behaviours as leadership style evolved. These findings suggest that as leaders transition through the stages, relational trust-building behaviours become increasingly prominent.

### Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights, the following limitations should be acknowledged and specifically addressed in future studies relating to these phenomena:

#### Sample

The study analysed data from a relatively small sample ( $n = 26$ ) of SL workshop attendees. The sample size is inadequate for widely generalisable statistical inference but allowed for limited exploration of initial assumptions. Larger samples should be considered to enhance the reliability and generalisability of the theoretical assumptions of this study.

#### Diversity

Participants came from similar backgrounds. Future research should include more diverse industries and cultures to broaden applicability. Data from larger and more diverse samples from different industries or cultural settings should be investigated to test generalisability assumptions.

#### Timespan

The reliance on data collected from a cross-sectional research design restricted the ability to make strong inferences about causality and trust development over time. Longitudinal research designs should be considered in future studies.

#### Bias

Perceptions of trust development were measured at a single point in time. Further longitudinal studies may yield more conclusive findings. Workshop attendance may have influenced trust-related perceptions of respondents. Investigations of perceptions of a more diverse sample could enhance the validity and reliability of future studies.

#### Focus

The study focused on the development of four dimensions of supervisory and employment relations trust. Future studies should also consider the development of emerging trust themes such as distrust dynamics, psychological safety and vulnerability.

#### Method

A large sample quantitative approach could provide more reliable insights. Qualitative studies can also assist researchers to identify and analyse more subtle facilitators of trust and distrust in supervisory relationships.

## Recommendations

Given the exploratory nature of this study and its methodological constraints, the following tentative recommendations should nonetheless be noted. However, it should be noted that none of the findings contradict the widely held assumptions in the literature that are related to these tentative recommendations.

**Alignment:** Leaders should align their leadership style with the developmental level of their followers. This involves adjusting behaviours to match the needs of each SL stage to nurture trust through appropriate emphasis on compliance, fairness, good faith and benevolence.

**Transition:** Strong emphasis should be placed on transactional trust elements (compliance and fairness) in the early leadership stages (directing and coaching). As followers progress to more autonomous stages (supporting and delegating), leaders should place more emphasis on good faith and benevolence.

**Transparency:** Open communication and consistent, constructive feedback are critical facilitators of trust in supervisory relationships. Leaders should demonstrate empathy to strengthen trust and support followers' growth.

**Integration:** Organisations should consider the integration of SL and trust-building strategies into leadership training initiatives to improve SRT, performance and job satisfaction levels.

**Policies:** Human Resource policies should incorporate regular assessments of trust within supervisory relationships to identify potential issues and enable timely interventions.

**Ethics:** Deliberate promotion of ethical behaviours among leaders (transparency, fairness, benevolence) can cultivate and sustain high trust in work culture.

## Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between SL stages and SRT. Two specific objectives were pursued. These are discussed as follows.

### Objective one: Supervisory relationship trust facilitators in situational leadership stages

Descriptive statistical findings suggested that the characteristics of SRT are different in the four SL stages, and that SRT facilitators appear in a relatively predictable pattern, as suggested in Figure 1 (Ehlers, 2021). The following specific observations were made:

- Compliance levels were perceived as highest in the directing stage. Fairness was perceived as moderately high, and good faith and benevolence levels were perceived as low.

- Compliance and fairness levels were perceived as high in the coaching stage. Good faith and benevolence levels were perceived as low.
- Compliance, fairness and good faith levels were perceived as high in the coaching stage. Benevolence levels were perceived as moderate.
- Compliance, fairness, good faith and benevolence levels were perceived as high in the delegating stage.

### Objective two: Alignment between supervisory relationship trust and situational leadership development

It should be noted that the small sample size prevented generalisable inferential statistical findings. However, results from the limited inferential statistical analysis confirmed that, as far as this small sample of respondents goes, there are statistically significant differences in the perceived levels of compliance, fairness, good faith and benevolence across the various stages of SL. Findings from this study and supporting literature appear to support the assumptions that SRT develops in four distinct stages that are closely aligned with the four stages of SL. Findings also suggest that compliance and fairness are transactional-based-trust facilitators, and good faith and benevolence are relational-based-trust facilitators. The following plausible, but not generalisable, theoretical assumptions arose from this study:

- Compliance levels are typically very high in stage 1 and gradually decrease to a high level in stage 4.
- Fairness levels are typically high in stage 1 and gradually increase to very high levels in stages 2, 3 and 4.
- Good faith levels are typically low in stages 1 and 2 and sharply increase to high in stages 3 and 4.
- Benevolence is usually low in stages 1, 2 and 3 and sharply increases to very high in Stage 4.

### Concluding remarks

While these patterns are encouraging, replication with larger and more diverse samples is necessary before definitive practical frameworks or theoretical propositions can be advanced. Nonetheless, the present findings provide plausible evidence that SRT develops predictably and systematically across the four stages of SL theory. This staged evolution suggests that leaders can strategically emphasise specific SRT facilitators at different points in the leadership process. By doing so, leaders and their organisations may foster stronger interpersonal relationships, enhance team cohesion and achieve higher levels of performance, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. These benefits are particularly relevant in dynamic and diverse workplace contexts, where trust serves as a foundational driver of sustainable success. Further investigation into these dynamics could deepen theoretical understanding and inform leadership development programmes that are both contextually relevant and empirically grounded. Table 5 provides a consolidated summary and a proposed action framework designed to guide future research and the practical application of SRT facilitation strategies across the four SL stages.

**TABLE 5:** Framework for further research.

Situational leadership stage	Stage	SURT facilitator emphasis
Directing S1 and R1 (Low Readiness)	1	Compliance, fairness
Coaching S2 and R2 (Moderate Readiness)	2	Compliance, fairness
Supporting S3 and R3 (High Readiness)	3	Compliance, fairness, good faith
Delegating S4 and R4 (Very High Readiness)	4	Compliance, fairness, good faith, benevolence

SURT, supervisory relationship trust.

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The author declares that there are no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

## Author's contribution

L.I.E. is the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, L.I.E., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

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