Choosing Leadership Styles

Knowing which of the leadership styles works best for you is part of being a good leader. Developing a signature style with the ability to stretch into other styles as the situation warrants may help enhance your leadership effectiveness.

1. Know yourself.

Start by raising your awareness of your dominant leadership style. You can do this by asking trusted colleagues to describe the strengths of your leadership style. You can also take a leadership style assessment.

2. Understand the different styles.

Get familiar with the repertoire of leadership styles that can work best for a given situation. What new skills do you need to develop?

3. Practice makes a leader.

Be genuine with any approach you use. Moving from a dominant leadership style to a different one may be challenging at first. Practice the new behaviors until they become natural. In other words, don't use a different leadership style as a "point-and-click" approach. People can smell a fake leadership style a mile away—authenticity rules.

4. Develop your leadership agility.

Traditional leadership styles are still relevant in today's workplace, but they may need to be combined with new approaches in line with how leadership is defined for the 21st century.

Today's business environments are fraught with challenges due to the changing demographics and the employee expectations of a diverse workforce. This may call for a new breed of leader who is an amalgam of most of the leadership styles discussed here.

As the Chinese proverb goes, the wise adapt themselves to circumstances, as water molds itself to the pitcher. An agile leadership style may be the ultimate leadership style required for leading today's talent.

**Laissez-faire Leadership**

Laissez-faire, also known as delegative leadership, is the opposite of autocratic leadership. This is a type of leadership style in which leaders are hands-off and allow group members to make the decisions. Researchers have found that this is generally the leadership style that leads to the lowest productivity among group members. This often leads to decreased creativity and esprit de corps as followers feel like they are not invested in.

**Autocratic Leadership**

Also known as authoritarian leadership, autocratic leadership is the opposite of laissez-faire. The autocratic leader exercises total control over all decisions and allows very little input from employees. While this sounds like a recipe for disaster, this leadership style lends itself to situations where quick, decisive action is warranted and there is little time for debate. In the military, there are definitely times where a quick decision coming from the leader can make the difference between life and death. That said, to adopt an autocratic style 100% of the time is not advisable. Total autocratic leaders are often disliked by their employees, which stifles creativity and can lead to high turnover rates. The key here is to understand when this type of leadership style is warranted and then avoid it at all other times.

**Participative Leadership**

Also known as democratic leadership, the participative approach blends laissez-faire and autocratic leadership to find a middle ground. The participative leader actively encourages participation from employees in decision-making, but then makes the final decision for the group. The benefits here are improved employee morale as they feel valued and respected. Here, all members of the team bring many more creative ideas to the table. This leadership style, however, does not work so well in those instances when decisions must be made rapidly as the participation process can take some time to sort through.

**Transactional Leadership**

Transactional leadership incorporates rewards and punishments in exchange for employee performance. The leader and employee will agree on goals and pre-determined standards to meet those goals. In this style, the leader provides direction and oversight and then reviews the employee’s performance in meeting their goals. Employees are rewarded for meeting or exceeding the goals (i.e. with bonuses) or punished if they fail to meet their goals. This style of leadership is typically more passive and does not encourage out-of-the-box thinking.

**Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leaders create a vision for their employees and communicate it often. These leaders identify the need for change and then become that agent for change through inspiration and motivation. This leadership style will typically improve employee morale and promote inclusion within the group. The transformational leader is a role model for their employees and strives to understand their strengths and weaknesses in order to enable them to be their best. In contrast to transactional leadership that maintains the status quo, transformational leaders inspire their employees to change in order to meet the strategic goals of the organization.