

Developing a Range of Leadership Styles

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Leadership is often talked about as if it's some magical, mysterious quality that's the answer to all business (and social) problems. It's also often talked about as if it's possessed by just a few charismatic individuals. Rather than think about it as a magical, charismatic and rare quality, here's an approach which is down-to-earth and can make practical improvements to day-to-day performance. It does this by focusing on concrete behaviours that leaders engage in (for those interested, it's based on the work of Victor Vroom & Phil Yetton).

Let's say you have to make a decision about the direction you and your team need to go in to respond to a particular issue. You have at least five choices:

1. Make the decision yourself – just tell the group what to do.
2. Ask for information from each person individually. Don't tell them why you need it, just get the info, then make the decision yourself and inform them of what's going to happen.
3. Ask for information from each individual, but this time tell them why you need it, and involve them in discussing it with you. Then make the decision yourself.
4. Get the group together, and put the issue out for discussion. Listen to their ideas, question and probe etc. Let them make recommendations. Then make the decision yourself.
5. Turn the issue over to the group. Let them decide. You just back them up whatever their choice.

You can think of other choices (e.g. delegating to an individual – see separate article), but these five give a good range. Clearly none of these is going to be the best in all situations, and that's not the idea. Instead, the power of this comes when you consider key dimensions of the problem and pick the best choice for the circumstances.

Matching the style to the situation

To show you what I mean, here are three questions which are likely matter in all situations:

- 1) How much information do you have about the issue?
- 2) How much time have you got?
- 3) How much will it take to get commitment from the group?

Some examples of how this can work:

- If you have all the information needed, have a group that are committed, and have no time, then choose style 1.
- If you have less information and less commitment (maybe you are new to this job and group) then you need to invest more time - style 3 or 4 are going to make more sense.
- If you have to maintain confidentiality, and you need more information, you can choose option 2. You may save time, too, but at the cost fuelling rumours.
- Maybe you don't care what the outcome of the decision is as long as there is one (e.g. venue for a staff leaving do). Then choose option 5. It saves time and ensures commitment.

Further dimensions

There are other dimensions you can consider, too. For example, options 3 and 4 give you the opportunity to involve people in the decision process with you – thereby enabling you to coach people and develop their skills. On the other hand, if you have a trusted long-time report who's very committed and understands the way things work, you can save *both* of you a lot of time by using style 1.

Instead of a fruitless search for the one best way (which doesn't exist), or attempting somehow to develop magical qualities, this approach makes a difference immediately to your time use, commitment of your people and their development. You can get into this approach in much more detail by following up on Vroom and Yetton, but the basic power of this approach is now yours to use.

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