

Leader-Centered Versus Follower-Centered Leadership Styles

[Leadership Advance Online](#)– Issue XI, Fall 2007

by Lena Maslennikova

In a recent conversation, I asked a leader in my organization what leadership style she was practicing. She asked me to explain what I meant, because she had not heard about leadership styles before. She has been leading departments and teams for at least ten years, yet did not know anything about leadership styles. This case is not unique. Many leaders do not have leadership training that would expose them to leadership styles.

In this article, I present some of the major leadership styles. I also explore the following questions:

- Is it important for leaders to know their leadership style?
- Is it important for followers to know their leader's style?
- What happens when your leadership style conflicts with the leadership style of the organization for which you work?

Leadership styles can be divided into two groups: leader-centered and follower-centered styles. Leaders of both groups have a vision, a mission and goals that they strive to successfully achieve by providing direction, implementing plans and motivating followers. The two groups use very different approaches, however, in achieving their goals.

Leader-Centered Styles

Leader-centered styles achieve organizational success through the self-realization and self-projection of the leader. These styles are primarily found in organizations that rely on authority, specific directions and strict deadlines for success. These organizations have top-down, hierarchical

structures. They function in the way that the leader envisions. Employees are expected to follow the leader's directions. The question "why?" is answered with, "because I said so." Examples of leader-centered styles are authoritarian, transactional and charismatic leadership.

Authoritarian Leadership

Authoritarian leadership represents absolute power of a leader over the followers (MindTools.com). Authoritarian leaders are seen as experts in the organization and, therefore, take the responsibility of identifying organizational goals and a strategic path to success. They provide the followers with clear expectations of what needs to be accomplished, when it should be done and how it should be done (Wagner, 2007). Authoritarian leaders are task-oriented. They tend to make decisions independently, seeking little or no input from their followers (Lewin, Lippit & White, 1939).

Authoritarian leadership works best in organizations that are going through significant changes, where there is little time for team decision-making and where the leader possesses the most expertise on a subject or issue (Wagner, 2007).

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leaders believe that employees are hired to do their jobs and, in return, are paid for their effort and compliance. The followers are expected to obey their leaders and follow their exact orders. This leadership style is primarily based on rewards for good work and punishment for mistakes. It does not encourage the workers to be creative or take ownership of their work. Transactional leaders state clear standards and expectations for good performance, using recognition and rewards as motivating forces for the followers (MindTools.com).

Transactional leadership is most effective when focusing on short-term projects or tasks. Transactional leaders are often compared to managers, as their primary focus is completing a task properly without any need for creativity and innovation.

Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leadership is known for the immense enthusiasm that the leader injects into the team to drive them to success. A charismatic leader embraces more communication with the followers than

authoritative and transactional leaders. It is a leader-centered style because the leader believes more in his or her own vision and abilities than in those of the followers (ChangingMinds.org). Charismatic leaders are very concerned about their image and use every means to charm their followers. Although followers are loyal to this type of leader, the entire organizational success is dependent upon the presence of the charismatic leader (MindTools.com). In addition to being likable and attracting followers, charismatic leaders inspire others to have trust, faith and to believe in them.

The charismatic style of leadership can work well during urgent organizational turnaround, as these leaders are excellent at motivating their followers to do whatever is needed.

Follower-Centered Styles

Follower-centered styles achieve organizational success through the realization, growth and development of the followers. These leadership styles are practiced in organizations that treat employees as the most valuable organizational assets, investing available resources in them. Organizations that use follower-centered styles tend to have a flat structure, where leaders and followers are treated equally. Employees have a "voice" and can greatly impact organizational decision-making. Examples of follower-centered styles include participative, servant and transformational leadership styles.

Participative Leadership

Participative leadership relies on the abilities, knowledge and feedback of the entire team. Although participative leaders make the final decisions, they involve and accept input from followers during decision-making and problem-solving processes. Input from group members with specialized knowledge and expertise creates a more complete basis for decision-making. As no leader can be an expert in all areas, participative leadership often leads to effective and accurate decisions (Wagner, 2007). Followers tend to be encouraged and motivated by this style of leadership. The commitment of the followers to the organizational success is usually increased with increased influence. Participative leadership sharpens the decision-making skills of followers, helping to develop them into future leaders (ChangingMinds.org). Participative leaders are not only driven by goal attainment, but also by follower development.

The participative leadership style works best in organizations where team building is important and quality of decisions is valued more than the speed of making them. It is best used when creativity and innovative ideas are expected from followers.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is primarily based on strong values and ideals that both leaders and followers bring into the workplace. Servant leaders care more about the success of their followers than about their own success. They look after the needs of their followers and provide an environment where the followers can reach their full potential and best performance (MindTools.com). Followers are involved in all of the operational and decision-making processes. Respect, motivation, positive attitude and serving are the main values of servant leaders. These leaders think of their followers as partners and treat them as equals. As a result, followers take ownership of organizational outcomes. Organizational success is realized when everyone is doing what they do best. When a situation requires it, a servant leader might even take on the role of follower (ChangingMinds.org).

Servant leadership is best applied in mature organizations where the needs of shareholders are valued above profit.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership builds on inspiring the followers to achieve a shared vision of the organizational future (MindTools.com). Transformational leaders put passion and energy into everything they do. They want the followers to succeed by investing time into their training, growth and development. Transformational leadership is based on selling the vision of the future to the followers (ChangingMinds.org). To achieve this, they build a trustworthy relationship with the employees. Transformational leaders lead by example through their attitudes and actions. They constantly practice integrity and commitment. Transformational leaders seek to engage and re-engage their followers with a high level of commitment to the vision. While transformational leaders seek to transform organizations, they simultaneously seek to transform the followers.

Transformational leadership is best applied in organizations that need to be transformed.

Is it Important for Leaders to Know their Leadership Style?

Is it possible for a leader to lead without knowing his or her leadership style? Absolutely. Many leaders are unaware of their own leadership style. Is it possible for leaders to improve their leadership without knowing their leadership style? I don't believe they can, as they cannot improve what they are not aware of.

When you know and understand your leadership style, you have the opportunity to improve your leadership effectiveness. It will help you recognize your strengths and weaknesses and make you more aware of the environmental threats and opportunities around you. This will provide you with a good foundation for developing strategic plans for improvement and efficiency. As Bennis and Nanus said, "Recognizing strengths and compensating for weaknesses represent the first step in achieving positive self regard" (1985, p. 55).

With the realization of the strengths and weaknesses of a practiced leadership style, comes an awareness of your abilities, values and beliefs as well as the understanding of how these are perceived by followers. The understanding of a leadership style creates a personal knowledge database that you can further develop through everyday experiences of conflict resolution, contract negotiation, hiring/firing processes, team meetings and general leadership situations. This will sharpen you and make you a wiser leader. It is not the years of involvement, but what the leader does with the experience, that makes him or her wise. Leaders who understand their styles of leadership analyze their actions and learn from their mistakes. They are very different from those who are ignorant of their styles, who do not recognize what makes them behave a certain way and therefore, never improve their leadership qualities. Knowing your leadership style makes a world of difference in leading.

A good friend of mine was a very successful leader of a creative team at an insurance company. He practiced a follower-centered leadership style and his team was one of the most productive teams in the company. As a result of his success, he was promoted to lead the biggest division of the company. He found himself in a division that was leader-centered. He failed to recognize it and as a result, did not adjust to it. Sadly, he did not succeed in this position and had to restart his career somewhere else.

Is it Important for Followers to Know the Style of their Leaders?

Have you ever been in a situation where a colleague was given a promotion above you and you couldn't understand why? The title of John Maxwell's (2006) audio lecture, "The Best Ways to Please Your Boss," might give you some insight. Delivering results in a way that your leader appreciates can greatly influence your career. Understanding your leader's leadership style, will help you to understand his or her values, preferences and communication style. Awareness of these aspects will assist you in getting noticed, recognized and considered for promotion or reward.

It is also important to know the fundamental leadership style of your organization in order to realize your potential within the organization and the team. If your own style is not consistent with the organizational leadership style, you will not be happy and successful in that environment. It is best to grasp this as soon as possible. A person with a great education, rich experience and a good set of skills may be very successful in one organization and fail in the same kind of position in a different organization. This is often because of the differences in the leadership styles of those whom he or she works for.

One of my former colleagues worked as a computer consultant and was very successful. As a result, another organization lured him away to their company by offering him a better contract. Without much thought or research, he took the new job. However, he failed to consider the leadership style of the new organization. In his previous job, he worked for a follower-centered organization where his leaders listened to him and considered his opinions. After accepting the contract, he found himself in a leader-centered organization where he was allowed to only speak when the leaders wanted him to speak and they only accepted opinions that they wanted to hear. In the end, he failed to perform to his fullest potential. After a period of time, he was asked to leave. At the time, he was not aware of the reasons for his failure. He blamed himself, lost his confidence and completely changed his field of expertise after a long stint of unemployment. Had he understood leadership styles at the time, he would not have taken the new job; or if he did, he would have approached his leaders differently or left sooner without personal trauma.

Conflict between Personal and Organizational Leadership Style

Conflict between personal leadership style and organizational leadership style occur on a regular basis. The good news is that conflict resolution is possible. Whether it is a follower-centered leader

working for a leader-centered organization, or vice versa, the very first step to resolution in style conflict is recognizing it. You cannot fix what you do not understand. Once you explore the differences in personal and organizational styles, you need to decide if it is something you can adjust to or would prefer to walk away from. You should consider that there are situations where the styles are so opposite to each other that the differences cannot be constructively resolved. For example, if an organization practices a strictly authoritarian leadership style and a team leader believes that only servant leadership will bring the organization to success, it will probably result in a conflict that will leave the leader burnt out.

Once a leader is open to adjusting her style to the organizational style, she needs to understand the strengths and weaknesses of both styles. She can then focus on turning her personal style's weaknesses into organizational strengths, while using personal strengths to cover up for organizational weaknesses.

I once analyzed a situation where there was conflict between the participative leadership style of a leader and the authoritarian style of the organization for which she worked. When she began to understand leadership styles and their influence on the workplace, she realized that it was a conflict in leadership styles that was at the root of the misunderstanding and miscommunication that she was experiencing at work. After learning more about the strengths and weaknesses of both her and the organization's styles, she mapped out a strategic path for improving her own style. She used her strengths to greater effect and simultaneously adjusted more effectively to the organization's style of leadership. One of the adjustments involved the way she collected feedback from her team for decision-making purposes. Instead of having frequent and long brainstorming meetings to gather everyone's opinions, she collected this information via e-mail. This simple change pleased her authoritarian leaders because it saved time. On the other hand, it still involved the team in the decision-making process, one of the strengths of her participative leadership style.

Conclusion

Leaders can lead without knowing their leadership styles, but they stand little chance of improving without this knowledge. If you understand your personal leadership style, you will be empowered to be more efficient and successful. Knowing your own style, as well as the style of the organization for which you work, will enable you to identify personal strengths and weaknesses as well as organizational opportunities and threats. This information will help you find the best fit for your

career and will help you to improve, grow and develop as a leader. Similarly, if followers understand the leadership styles of their leaders, they will be able to find their own niche for success.

Understanding leadership styles and their influence on your workplace, is a life tool that you cannot do without. After all, we do spend two-thirds of our lives at work!

About the Author

Lena Maslennikova is a doctoral student at Regent University's School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship. She works at Regent's Center for Teaching and Learning as an instructional designer/trainer, training Regent faculty and staff how to best utilize available technologies in online education; as well as introducing new technologies as they arrive.

E-mail: olenmas@regent.edu

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