

# THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP STYLE

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Fundamental to the management of people is an understanding of the importance of leadership. Managers must lead, and as such must accept responsibility for the activities and successes of their departments. All leaders must exercise authority, but leadership style will vary. It is generally accepted that a leader's style will affect the motivation, efficiency, and effectiveness of their employees.

The main leadership theories present two basic approaches - task-centred and employee-centred. Tannenbaum and Schmidt suggest that leadership style is a continuum, and that the appropriate style depends on the characteristics of the leader, the subordinates, and of the situation.

In a more contemporary approach, known as 'action-centred leadership', John Adair suggests that there are three basic needs that result in differing leadership styles: the needs of the task, the needs of the group, and the needs of the individual. Feidler, on the other hand, takes a more psychological approach to defining leadership.

As these approaches to leadership vary, it is interesting to explore the differences. Tannenbaum and Schmidt's continuum-based theory suggests a range of styles ranging from autocratic to democratic, although not suggesting that any one style within the continuum is right or wrong.

At one end of the continuum is the dictatorial style - the manager makes decisions and enforces them (the so-called tells approach) or, in a slightly gentler way, 'sells' their decision (the tells and sells approach).

Further along the continuum, is the autocratic style, where the manager suggests ideas and asks for comments (the tells and talks approach), or the manager presents outline ideas, seeks comments and amends the ideas accordingly (the consults approach).

The next step in the continuum is the democratic approach. Here the manager presents a problem, again seeks ideas and makes a decision (the involves approach), or allows employees to discuss the issue and make a decision (the delegates approach).

Finally, the continuum ends with the laissez-faire approach. Here the manager allows employees to act in whichever way they wish, within specified limits (the abdicates approach).

However, Tannenbaum and Schmidt's continuum is not a static model. It recognises that appropriate style depends on both the leader's personality, values and natural style, and the employees' knowledge, experience and attitude.

Furthermore, the range of situations which present themselves to a leader depend on factors such as the culture of the organisation, time pressure, the amount of authority and the amount of responsibility the leader has. This last factor is dependent - as is so often the case - upon the organisation's general environment.

A more contemporary approach is to regard leadership as comprising a number of different skills (action-centred leadership), a theory associated with the writer John Adair.

This idea recognises that leadership style is determined by three interrelated variables: the needs of the task, the needs of the group, and the needs of the individual.

The leader needs to balance the relative importance of all three, with emphasis given to identifying and acting upon the immediate priority.

'Task needs' refer to the setting of objectives for the department, planning and initiating the task, allocating responsibilities, setting and verifying performance standards, and establishing a control system.

'Group needs' require team building so that mutual support and understanding is achieved, standards established, training provided and most importantly, communication and information channels opened.

'Individual needs' recognise the development and nurturing of individual achievement, of motivation, the encouragement of creativity, delegation of authority to encourage group support, and attention to any problems or issues.

In contrast, a different, more psychological approach to leadership, described by the writer Feidler, suggests a relationship between leadership styles and departmental effectiveness and success. He distinguishes between two types of leader - those who are psychologically close and those who are psychologically distant.

Psychologically close managers prefer informal relationships, are sometimes over concerned with human relations, and favour informal rather than formal contacts. This is sometimes called 'relationship oriented'.

Psychologically distant managers prefer formal relationships. They tend to be reserved in their personal relationships even though they often have good interpersonal skills. This approach is sometimes called 'task oriented'.

It is, of course, vital to recognise that no leadership style is correct, and that style is always dependent upon the particular situation, and the nature and culture of the organisation.

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