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Style matters

Would you follow yourself?

Question:

“In your Feb. 4 column in *BizTimes Milwaukee*, you wrote about the need for leaders to have balance between technical and interpersonal skills. Could you extend your discussion, specifically by talking about the concept of leadership style?”

Answer:

Leadership is, of course, one of the most fertile areas in the business and management literature. There are literally thousands of books out there on this topic.

Is there one best way to lead? Just what does it mean to lead, anyway?

This is where the concept of leadership style comes in. Just as we all have differently shaped feet and toes, we also have different ways of leading and influencing. Leadership style represents your characteristic approach to leading others. Your style is born of your personality, values, personal and professional experiences, mentors, role models, and education/training (or lack thereof).

No style is perfect. No style fits all occasions. While it's likely you have one primary approach to leading, it's also likely that you can flex into other modes as events and situations demand.

Below is an overview of some common leadership styles. See if you can see yourself (or others) in the descriptions.

» **Commander**

Believes strongly in authority and chain of command. May or may not choose to collaborate with peers or staff. Comfortable making decisions without input from others, since “the buck stops here.” Can be a strong defender of employees when they are under attack from customers, corporate, or budget-cutters within. Usu-

ally good under pressure, strong on accountability, and may be blunt and/or terse when giving information or feedback to staff members.

» **Caregiver**

Sees employees as dependents in need of support, education and discipline. May share decision-making authority with employees as a means of teaching them, but usually keeps a strong hand

in the process. May take a sincere interest in the personal as well as professional well being of staff members. Is likely to offer nurturing one-on-one advice. May be better at talking than listening and, as a result, may need to grow his/her listening skills.

» **Team captain**

Strong believer in team building. Sees himself/herself as the person who helps people grow as individuals, but especially as members of a team. Encourages employees to work in

partnership with one another. Praises individual performance but is likely to frame the praise in reference to its benefit to all. Likes to create plans and have a strong hand in the assignment of duties to employees. Listens to subordinates, especially department heads.

» **Coach**

Like the team captain, the coach wants employees to grow a strong team, but takes a stronger one-on-one approach with staff. Knows the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of each staff member.

“Strong leaders have more than professional knowledge. They also have personal knowledge. They know themselves.”

Treats them as individuals. Devotes significant time to talking with staff. May be known as a good listener. Does not offer immediate answers to questions or solutions to problems, but asks questions as a way to help employees discover them.

» **Expert**

Believes fervently that his/her top value as a manager is rooted in the superior craft skills and knowledge he/she previously demonstrated as a staff member. Is often reluctant to let go

of performing that craftwork when promoted. May have time management problems because of this self-assigned workload. May disappoint employees who hope for coaching from the expert, rather than repeated demonstrations of his/her great work for them to emulate.

» **Buddy**

Believes employees and leaders can and should be friends. Wants to be respected and liked. Doesn't like hierarchical distinctions. May enjoy socializing with employees, have easy-going work relationships and promote informality in the workplace. May earn strong loyalty from those employees who feel a bond with the buddy, but at the same time, may be seen by other staffers as unprofessional and prone to playing favorites.

» **Remote controller**

Believes his/her most important work is done in his/her office, often with the

door closed. May communicate easily and well with his/her own supervisors or department heads, whom the remote controller uses as conduits and liaisons to front-line employees. May prefer to communicate with direct reports by memo and e-mail rather than face-to-face. This may be a function of the remote controller's personality (i.e., introverted), sense of priorities, or both.

So, did you see yourself in one, several, or all of these styles? Which is your primary style? Secondary? Did you see characteristics of yourself in some of the leadership types?

While you might have a particular vision of your leadership style, remember that your direct reports might see things differently. It takes courage, but you might want to gather a few staff members together, share the list of leadership styles, and solicit their feedback. This can be an important step in clarifying whether your perception of your leadership style is

aligned with that of those who follow you.

Based on the feedback you receive, you have the capacity to adapt or alter your style to become a more effective leader. Identify some steps you can take immediately. Identify some changes that might require a long-term approach. Identify resources upon which you can draw and people inside (and outside) of your organization you can enlist for support.

Ultimately, remember that strong leaders have more than professional knowledge. They also have personal knowledge. They know themselves. On an ongoing basis, they look inward to examine their strengths and weaknesses and they solicit input on how they can grow and develop.

For, as John Wooden, the legendary UCLA men's basketball noted, "It's what you learn after you 'know it all' that matters the most." ■

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