

Leadership styles

Understanding how you lead

"I strongly believe that leadership is an art, not a science. I've learned that leadership can be innate or it can be learned. However, I don't believe anyone was truly born to be a great leader. Great leaders are formed over a long period of time through a series of opportunities and experiences. Without opportunities, even the greatest natural leader among us may never become known for great leadership."

-Scott H. Dearduff,
*A Cup of My Coffee:
Leadership Lessons
from the Battlefield to
the Boardroom*

What is a leadership style?

There are almost as many theories about leadership styles as there are leaders, but in a nutshell, leadership style is the way a leader provides direction and motivates others. It can be useful to know your dominant style when it comes to leading so you can understand how to relate to others more effectively.

Leadership styles are fluid and effective leaders can shift their style when needed. None of the styles outlined here are "good" or "bad" and all can be useful in specific situations. Your leadership style is made up of your personality, your experience, and your preferred way of communicating. Understanding your dominant style can help you build better relationships with others, improve business operations, and increase self-awareness of the impact of your actions.

Here are three styles identified by the Iowa Leadership Studies:

Autocratic

In this style all authority resides in the leader: they make a decision and expect it to be followed. There are times when this style can be beneficial, such as when you need to get things done quickly.

Upsides:

- Quick decisions
- Better performance because employees feel they are being watched
- Less stress because the leader is taking on all the responsibility and risk

Downsides:

- Employee frustration
- High levels of fear
- Missed opportunities from lack of flexibility
- More misunderstandings because of one-way communication flow

(Continued)

Democratic

These leaders share decision making across the team; employees are encouraged to share their opinions and they are considered. While the leader still provides the overall direction, they value the opinions of their employees and believe their perspectives to be valuable.

Upsides:

- Less likely to make bad decisions
- High employee engagement
- Enhanced team effectiveness

Downsides:

- Long time to make decisions
- Dependence on team
- Distracted from true goals

Laissez-faire or let it be

This style lets the team make all the decisions and they provide little if any guidance. This type of leader believes the strength lies in the team and it's better to stay out of their way.

Upsides:

- People take more responsibility
- Quick course adjustments
- People stick around

Downsides:

- Lack of accountability
- High stress
- Disorganization creates missed deadlines

“For those of you who really want to give critical thought to your unique leadership style and foster genuine followership, learn from what’s out there and weave it into something meaningful and authentic.”

-Stacy Feiner,
Talent Mindset

Activity ideas

- Complete SAIF’s [Leadership Styles questionnaire](#). What is your dominant style? How can you use it to be a more effective leader?
- A 23-year-old worker died after he was trapped in an unguarded machine designed to cool strips of hot rubber. The employee had been operating the cutter machine throughout the day, but in between batches he would ask if anyone else working on the line needed help.

Another employee, who operated a different machine, asked for help removing the rubber strips from the machine. The 23-year-old employee agreed and walked around to the back of the machine, while his co-worker went to the front and waited for the strips to arrive. When the worker in front didn’t see any, he called out asking where they were.

When he got no response, the co-worker walked to the back of the machine to find the 23-year-old employee’s head trapped between two metal rods.

How can each of the leadership styles be used to prevent such a tragedy? What would it look like?

- One way to look at leadership styles is to see the three types on a continuum with autocratic and laissez-faire at either end and the democratic style in the middle. Using the descriptions here, could you place your style on the continuum? Why is that a useful way to think about these styles?

Laissez-faire

Democratic

Autocratic

