

LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

Management Styles - Which Works Best?

By Leyla Hussein • 3 December 2018



A manager once came to me at the end of her rope. She had one person on the team coasting badly, so she tightened the rules for everyone, and within a fortnight the rest of her good people were quietly furious at being policed for someone else's failing. She had reached for one style and applied it to a whole team, and it had backfired on both ends. That is the trap in management, and it is worth understanding before you fall into it.

Working in a management role is a genuinely tough job. You have to [look after your team](#) and keep them happy, while keeping the people above you happy too. That squeeze makes handling your own people complicated. How do you manage them so the company [actually hits its goals](#)? Do you just explain why something matters and hope that motivates them? Or do you set strict rules and discipline? Knowing which approach brings the best out of people is hard, and there is usually a lot of trial and error before you find what works.

What is out there

There are several recognised management styles, each with its own strengths and its own flaws.

Autocratic. The manager tells the employee what to do, with consequences if it is not done properly. It tends to motivate through fear, and it is not universal. Some people respond badly, either becoming so upset that their productivity collapses, or actively pushing back because they do not respect authority handed down that way.

Democratic. Here the manager brings employees into the decision, motivating through collaboration and inviting people to put their opinions forward. The manager still makes the final call and carries the responsibility for it, and ultimately does what they think is best. It is motivating, because people's views clearly matter and their work feels valued. The downside shows when someone has poured real time and belief into an idea that then does not get chosen, which can be deflating.

Laissez-faire. The manager points at the outcome they want and then largely steps back, leaving the team to work out how to get there. It is a very hands-off approach, and it can be brilliant for people who are eager to prove themselves and climb. The ones who thrive on it are self-motivated and love the freedom to invent better ways of working. But people who need structure can flounder without it, and, without meaning to, create a disruptive atmosphere.

And these are not fixed. Your whole team might run beautifully on laissez-faire except for one person who is slacking, in which case a more autocratic approach for that individual makes sense. Or half your team might respond well to autocratic direction while the other half feel crushed by it.

So which one

For a manager, picking a single style and applying it to everyone simply does not transfer. It is not that easy. You have to understand [the atmosphere and culture](#) you already have, and what your particular people respond to. As a rough rule: young or new-to-work staff, or unpredictable individuals, tend to need a more autocratic approach. A mature workforce that understands the value of the work will usually suit a more democratic one. And the self-motivated, determined, thorough people respond best to laissez-faire. But do not stop at adapting to your workforce. Adapt to yourself, too. There is no sense running an autocratic line if you cannot be consistent with it. Work within what you can genuinely sustain, and apply that to your people.

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