

Leadership

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1 Ideas about leadership

Ideas about leadership have taken many directions. Interest in leadership among social scientists arose in part from the demands of management and the early studies focused on leadership as a *trait*. Three types of leader — the autocratic, the democratic and the *laissez-faire* — were identified and their different effects on people and groups were documented.

Other studies concentrated on the *qualities/characteristics* of leaders, a number of which — like being a first child or height — cannot be acquired; you either have them or you don't.

With the development of human relations approaches to management in the 1940s and 1950s, and perhaps as a reaction to the Hitler's choice of the title *Der Führer* (or The Leader), the focus shifted from styles of leadership to styles of organisation and decision-making. As many as eight different styles of decision-making were identified on a continuum from autocratic to *laissez-faire*.

Likert (1987), for example, identified four types of organisation on a spectrum from exploitative to participative:

- exploitative — authoritative
- benevolent — authoritative
- consultative
- participative

But the spectrum approach simply intensified the argument as to whether there was one 'right' way — at one end of the spectrum — when some organisations which were at the other end of the spectrum also appeared to be successful.

Blake and Mouton (1964) sought to overcome the debates as to whether successful managers were successful because they paid attention to the task or to the people by developing the Managerial Grid in which two dimensions — concern for output and concern for people — form the axes for the grid and allow almost infinite permutations of these two aspects of management (Figure 1).

Most managers, they argue, adopt a particular combination of the two dimensions as their preferred style but may, when they are prevented from using their preferred style, shift their position to a new combination, or fall-back style, with more or less concern for output or people than is typical of them. While accepting the great variety of possible combinations, Blake & Mouton pick out five general areas of the grid for specific description, though most people do not exhibit the 'pure' form suggested by the following descriptions:

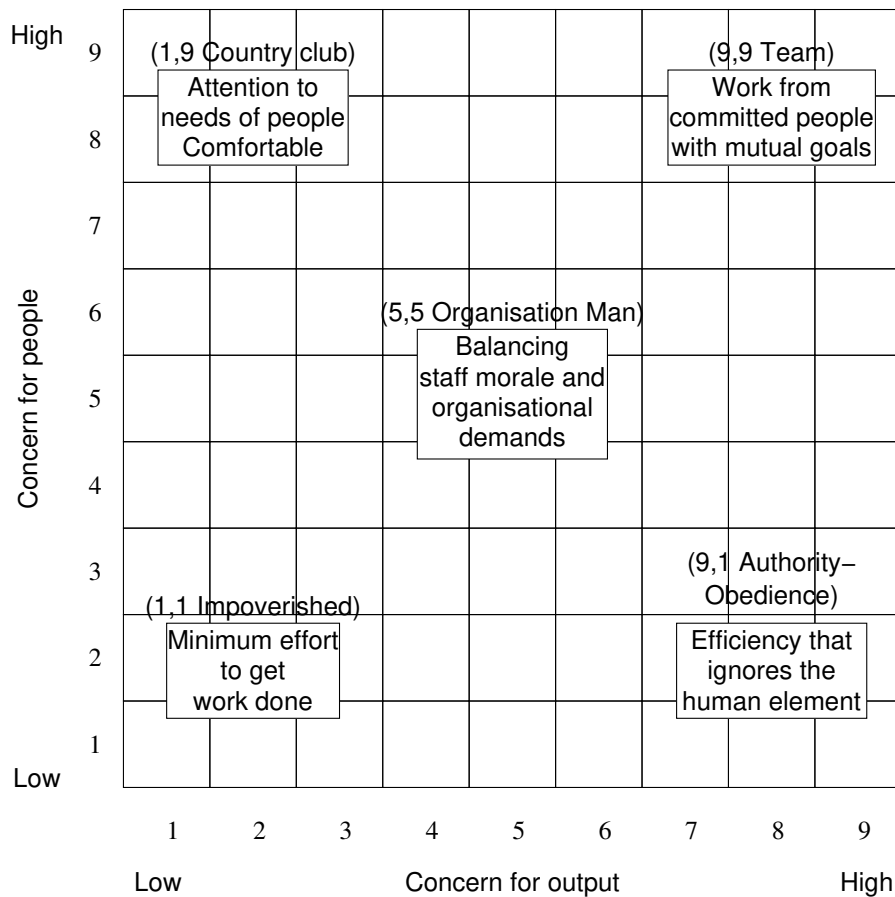


Figure 1: The Managerial Grid

- 1,1 'The organisation provides me with a job. I do enough to keep it.'
- 1,9 'I am a colleague to the staff and will work to ensure they like me.'
- 5,5 'I avoid controversy or taking sides by following the organisation's policies.'
- 9,1 'I expect staff to carry out what I think they ought to do.'
- 9,9 'I consult with staff members on mutual goals and mutual problem solving so they understand their role and responsibilities.'

Contingency theorists, however, argue that, far from there being one successful style of management, different styles are more effective in different situations and the good leader will adapt their style to suit the situation (or contingency). While contingency theory is reassuring in that no style of leadership is regarded as 'wrong' — only its use in certain situations is 'ineffective' — its arguments are rather circular; if you were an effective leader, you must have been using a range of styles.

Finally in this section, the words attributed by Adair (1988, p. 106) to the 6th century B.C. Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, but which are found in other versions, are interesting, not least because people who have worked for various types of leaders say that that is exactly what they felt at the time:

A leader is best
When people barely know that he exists.
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him,
Worst when they despise him.
'Fail to honour people,
They fail to honour you.'
But of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will all say, 'We did this ourselves'.

2 Successful leaders

In the 1990s Collins (2001) researched nearly 1,500 US companies to find which ones had been consistently successful over fifteen years; he only found eleven. Moreover, he found that there was nothing to mark these companies out apart from their focus on what to do, rather than what *not* to do; however, when he looked at their chief executives, he found that their leaders:

- were self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy;
- got the right people in place;
- confronted brutal facts and never lost faith;
- recognised that you can only be great if you are best in the world at your business.

Their organisations had also become great through a 'flywheel transformation,' changing very slowly and then gradually accelerating the changes.

As people they were modest and self-effacing, worked to make company great — their desire to see the company great was more important than their personal wealth, accepted responsibility for failures and mostly came from inside the company.

In relation to getting the right people in place, Collins comments:

the purpose of bureaucracy is to compensate for incompetence and lack of discipline
— a problem that largely goes away if you have the right people in the first place
(p. 121).

These organisations avoided bureaucracy and hierarchy, gave people freedom (and responsibility) within a framework and insisted on having disciplined people, not on imposing discipline.

3 The leadership team

These leaders all worked with a small team because leadership requires a range of skills. No-one is ever good at everything. A leadership team may lack the range of skills it needs because people do not recognise the range of skills which people can bring to a team. For example, there has been increasing recognition that men and women bring different skills and different attitudes to leadership. Men, for example, tend to prefer 'logical' solutions to problems whereas women tend to prefer solutions that cause the least hurt to people (Gilligan, 1993). While some men have used this argument to restrict what women can do in management, it is now clear that women can be as effective as men in leadership positions, and may indeed be slightly

more effective because women tend to use more democratic and transformational styles but the differences are small (Burke and Mattis, 2005).

Because men and women tend to see ‘solutions’ in different ways, there are plenty of opportunities for members of a leadership team to fail to communicate satisfactorily. Tannen (1992) has provided an excellent survey of the many ways in which men and women, while often using the same words, have very different assumptions about the meanings of those words. One conclusion from Tannen’s work is that any team, other than a single sex team, is likely to have to work hard at understanding the assumptions of all members of the team.

Tannen’s work also has implications for the ways a leadership team communicates with the rest of the team members. If the leadership team is all male or all female and the team members are of the opposite sex or a mixed sex team, the opportunities for misunderstanding are rife. It is all too easy then for the leadership team to be blamed for the failures of communication between them and team members in the organisation.

Though I have concentrated on gender differences in this section, there is at present no reason to discount other differences such as culture or ethnic background from having similar impacts on leadership teams.

4 Some other (possibly) useful ideas

Drucker (1989) argues that the job of a manager is to serve employees — an idea prefigured in Jesus’ statement that ‘whoever wants to become great among you must be your slave’ (Mt 20:27).

Drucker also speaks of ‘The fallacy of the one-man chief executive (1989, p. 164),’ the idea that the success of a company depended entirely on one person, normally the founder. Take Soichiro Honda and Takeo Fujisawa; Soichiro wasn’t a terribly good engineer but Takeo was a brilliant accountant who saw that Soichiro’s people skills could be turned to good use in the company. So while Takeo managed the company, spending more money on research than car companies far bigger than Honda had ever done, Soichiro was the front of house man. Honda would award prizes of all-expenses paid trips to Japan, tours round the factory and a meeting with Soichiro Honda to the families of dealers who did particularly well. The daughter of one of these dealers told me how, when she was introduced to Soichiro, he spoke to her, a mere teenager, as if she were the most important person in the room. This sort of interpersonal skill is one of the greatest motivators you can find and it is not surprising that Honda were so successful when their dealers were getting the sort of motivation which no other company was offering at the time. Soichiro and Takeo were a winning combination because they each recognised the strengths which the other brought to the company.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that people normally develop through four main stages in the ways in which they think about the world; at the second level, they understand group relationships and are able lead groups but only at the third level do they understand the relationships their group has with other groups sufficiently well to be able to lead the group in making and sustaining the relationships the group needs to have with other groups in order to get what they want to do done. I found in teaching adults that few adults under 40 really understood the relationships which their group needed to have with other groups to achieve what they wanted or needed to achieve.

In a study originally published in 1961 Burns and Stalker (1994) found that the staff of good managers frequently overestimated how good their managers were — after all, it is good to

be able to say, ‘I work for a great manager,’ when so many people report poor management. While a manager in that situation may not be able to disabuse their staff of this fantasy — the staff will probably put it down to ‘false modesty’ and their estimation of the manager will go up — it is important that the manager does not start to believe their staff’s exaggerated estimation of themselves, however gratifying it may be.

Finally, while Collins found that the most successful managers did not have a public persona, where a leader is forced to have a public persona, as Winston Churchill did during World War II and Volodymyr Zelenskyy is doing during the Ukrainian conflict, their communication skills come to the fore in ‘confronting brutal facts and never losing faith.’

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A Another version of the Chinese saying

‘As for the best leaders, people do not notice their existence.
The next best, the people honour and praise.
The next the people fear and the next the people hate.
When the best leaders’ work is done,
the people say “We did it ourselves”’