

Time and changing social conditions have lessened the extent of autocratic leadership over the years; yet autocratic leadership patterns prevail in many organizations. Gone are the days when the average worker was uneducated and completely dependent on orders from above. Autocratic leadership was the rule when the average worker was illiterate, or at best, semilliterate, but even today many outmoded organizational assumptions prevail and autocratic and bureaucratic leadership hold forth when they should have given way to more consultative and participative styles.

We must briefly examine some of the assumptions on which so-called modern organizations are based, limiting this discussion to the extent necessary to allow continued exploration of leadership.

SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE

Douglas McGregor, in his landmark work "The Human Side of Enterprise," wrote of two opposing approaches to management: Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X in its pure state is autocratic leadership. Pure Theory Y is participative leadership. Each of these management theories is based on a number of assumptions, only the first of which, relating to management in general, is common to both. That common assumption, valid in any case, is that management remains responsible for organizing the elements of all productive activity, bringing together the money, people, equipment, and supplies needed to accomplish the organization's goals. Beyond this assumption, however, the two theories proceed in opposite directions. Theory X assumes the following:

- People must be actively managed. They must be directed and motivated, and their actions must be controlled and their behavior modified to fit the needs of the organization. Without this active intervention by management, people would be passive and even resistant to organizational needs. Therefore, people must be persuaded, controlled, rewarded, or punished as necessary to accomplish the aims of the organization.
- The average person is by nature indolent, working as little as possible. The average person lacks ambition, shuns responsibility, and in general prefers to be led.
- The average person is inherently self-centered, resistant to change, and indifferent to the needs of the organization.

Theory Y, on the other hand, is predicated on the following assumptions:

- People are not naturally passive or resistant to organizational needs. If they appear to have become so, this condition is the result of experience in organizations.
- Motivation, development potential, willingness to assume responsibility, and readiness to work toward organizational goals are present in most people. It is management's responsibility to make it possible for people to recognize and develop these characteristics for themselves.
- The essential task of management is to arrange organizational conditions and methods of operation so people can best achieve their own goals by directing their efforts toward the goals of the organization.

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STYLE AND CIRCUMSTANCES

If you are an autocratic leader, you are operating under Theory X assumptions. You choose to make all the decisions and hand them down as orders and instructions. If you are a participative leader, you are generally ascribing to Theory Y assumptions and encourage your employees to participate in joint decisions.

You have a choice of leadership styles available to you ranging from extremely closed to fully open. The trick is to know which style to apply and when to apply it. You may have some "Theory X people" in your department; they will likely be a minority—those few who actually prefer to be led and have their thinking done for them. However, you may also have a number of "Theory Y people" who are self-motivated and capable of significant self-direction. This is especially likely in departments employing large numbers of professionals, such as nursing service. Although the same "rules" (meaning personnel policies) apply uniformly to all employees, you will deal differently with individuals in other ways. Some you will consult and invite their participation; others you will simply direct.

Avoid making assumptions about people. Know your employees and try to understand each one as both a producer and a person. By working with people over a period of time, and especially by working at the business of getting to know them, you can learn a great deal about individual likes and dislikes and capabilities. Learn about your people as individuals and when necessary lead accordingly. If you are convinced that a certain employee genuinely prefers orders and instructions and this attitude is not inconsistent with job requirements, then use orders and instructions. Although many employees of health-care organizations seem to prefer participative leadership, not everyone will desire this same consideration. Maintain sufficient flexibility to accommodate the employee who wants or requires authoritarian supervision. It is fully as unfair to expect people to become what they do not want to be as it is to allow a rigid structure to stifle those other employees who feel they have something more to contribute.

There is no single style of leadership that is appropriate to all people and situations at all times. Now, however, there is more reason than ever before to believe that consultative and participative leadership is most appropriate to modern organizations and today's educated workers.

A final word about style: Some supervisors and managers put much effort into telling employees what style of management they practice. For instance, it is not uncommon for a manager who is new to the organization to make statements like, "I practice employee empowerment," "My door is always open," "I want your input," or "I believe in total quality management." There are hazards in presenting one's self in this manner. First, in the words of a wise, anonymous observer, "It's Management 101—using the buzzwords, saying what you think you should be saying." Second, and a far greater hazard, is the risk of being trapped by employee perception.

It takes only one or two perceived contradictions of your self-described style to create dissonance. As soon as you are seen unilaterally (although even necessarily) making a decision or as soon as someone finds you unavailable although you have said the door is always open, you have created a conflict

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between your words and your actions. It is probably best to say as little as necessary about your own management style and let your actions convey your style. In other words, instead of telling them what you are, let your actions show them.

OUTMODED VIEWS

In addition to harboring erroneous assumptions about people, many managers cling to outmoded notions of how a manager should behave. They see, with all good intentions, the leader as being a "boss"—the essential giver of orders: "I'm the boss. I'm paid to make decisions and I'm responsible for the results of those decisions, so I will make those decisions." In brief, some managers see participative leadership as "passing the buck" or "spreading the blame" and in general view participative leadership as a shirking of responsibilities.

However, participative leadership is anything but abrogation of responsibility. Although you can parcel out some of your management authority and spread it among a number of employees, you remain responsible for the decisions and actions of your employees. In remaining responsible for the decisions of the group, the true participative leader is displaying considerably more courage than the autocrat who simply decides and gives orders. To trust your employees with a share of your authority while you retain full responsibility is a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness.

Another outmoded view of leadership is reflected in the belief that the leader should always know best, that employees look to the leader to "tell them how to do it." The true function of the leader is to help the employees find the best way to do it themselves. The leader does not take up a position at the rear of the pack and shove. Neither does the leader move in front of the crew and urge them to follow. Rather, the leader is somewhere in the pack—a facilitator, a remover of obstacles, and in general a catalytic agent that causes the entire group to move forward in the proper direction. The true leader is not the master of a department but rather its busiest, most responsible servant.

LEADERSHIP'S PRIMARY CHARACTERISTIC

Many attempts have been made to create detailed listings of qualities that characterize leaders. It is done all the time; lists are generated that include standard noble but intangible characteristics such as honesty, integrity, and initiative, and slightly more measurable criteria such as academic qualifications. However, there is not a characteristic to be named that we cannot find completely lacking in some supposedly successful leaders. In short, you cannot make a list, even a brief list, and truly say that a leader must have these characteristics.

Is there anything that always truly defines a leader? A leader is certainly not defined by organizational appointment or by the simple conferring of a management title. A title may describe a position but not a person; a great many so-called leadership positions are occupied by people who are anything but leaders in the true sense of the word.

The single factor that defines a true leader is *the acceptance* by the followers. This means acceptance of the individual as a leader, not