



Adapt your management style to the situation

Which is the most effective management style? Many managers wonder about this, torn between their personal inclinations and the models they feel they should follow.

The experts underline that there is no universal answer. Observation of the great leaders and managers on the ground shows that **those who excel are not characterized by a particular style, but by their ability to adapt their style to the situation.**

Three central questions must be considered when deciding the management model to adopt with a given employee or team:

How competent are they?

People who are not well-qualified need to be managed more closely than those who know exactly what to do. That much seems obvious. However, even a very competent employee may be less so in a given domain. The ability to adapt the usual management model is thus essential to avoid disappointment. Conversely, an employee who generally needs to be managed closely may excel in a given field and appreciate being given autonomy in that particular area.

What are their aspirations?

The ability to be autonomous is not enough; people have to want it! Some aspire to be very independent, while others prefer to work in a more concerted and collective fashion. What is more, not everyone has the same desire to take on responsibility. Thus, depending on the case, a manager could decide to focus on developing this desire – or satisfying it if it already exists, or admit that it is pointless to try to empower some people. In the latter case,

When choosing a leadership style, take account of the situation, as well as your personal preferences.

he or she should instead focus on organizing the work of these employees, rather than encouraging them to take initiative. This situation can be observed even at high levels of responsibility, as the managing director of one large industrial concern recounts, *“It took me a long time to understand my production manager. I expected him to manage his work independently, but he wanted me*

to validate most of his decisions. We were both very frustrated. Finally, we found an arrangement that works very well for us. We have a weekly update where he explains what he is doing, the problems encountered, and the decisions to be made. I spend relatively little time on this and feel absolutely comfortable.”

What are the requirements of the context?

Lastly, even with a longstanding employee he or she knows well, a manager must be able to switch management methods to take account of the demands of a particular situation. An urgent high-stakes project tends to call for tighter management, for example, while a decision that requires team buy-in to be implemented requires involving people and seeking consensus, even if the usual management approach is more directive

Five main management styles correspond to distinct situations.

- 1 A **directive style** to provide structure
- 2 A **participative style** to foster development
- 3 A **consensual style** to foster cohesion
- 4 A **persuasive style** to foster engagement
- 5 A **delegating style** to foster empowerment

1st management style

A **directive style** to provide structure

Words to the wise

- The **directive style** depends heavily on the **credibility of the manager**. *Be careful to adopt this style only if you have a deep understanding of the work of team members who recognize your legitimacy.*
- The **quality of decisions** in a **directive model** essentially depends on the **manager**. *Be careful not to become isolated; be willing to challenge your own views and listen to others.*
- **Directive management** leaves little room for individual initiative and **creativity**. *Be careful not to discourage innovation, particularly in fast-moving environments.*
- The **directive style** can sap the **motivation of competent employees who desire autonomy**. *Learn to be more hands-off where they are concerned.*

The much-disparaged directive style is still very present in the business world. Directive managers define and organize the work of their subordinates. They give clear instructions, establish schedules and monitor progress. They possess a thorough understanding of the work performed by their subordinates, and take full responsibility for it.

Preferring action to discussion, the **directive style is efficient above all**, as it facilitates rapid implementation of decisions and standardized practices. This approach is consequently particularly well-suited to crisis situations or in coping with recalcitrant subordinates. When it comes to high-stakes activities or inexperienced teams, the hands-on involvement of the manager typical of this style can also be valuable in mitigating risk. This management style **is often very reassuring**, both for subordinates who either are uncomfortable with autonomy or are learning new responsibilities and for managers who wish to keep the situation under control. This is why **many managers tend to adopt it when they are under pressure**.

Directive managers are very hands-on; they give precise instructions and closely monitor their execution.

Directive management may nevertheless be experienced as stifling by experienced employees, who are given little chance to show autonomy. It also puts all of the responsibility for team performance squarely on the manager's shoulders, which is a risk in itself and detrimental to medium-term performance. Indeed, managers don't necessarily possess all of the skills their employees do, which means their

added value may easily be challenged. Moreover, as teams grow larger and the business accelerates, managers cannot possibly control

everything and may easily become burnt out. Finally, this management style is self-maintaining, and becomes difficult to change when used too systematically. Indeed, assisted in their jobs, team members don't develop the skills or motivation to become more independent, reinforcing the need for directive management!

Managers are consequently advised not to adopt the directive style by default, but only for very specific reasons, and on a temporary basis if possible.

"After bad strategic decisions, the worst thing for company survival is too much leadership."

Vincent Bolloré, quoted in Leadership, Eric-Jean Garcia, De Boeck, 2011.

A management style for each situation

• Your subordinates inexperienced and unmotivated , Or you are in a crisis situation where the priority is on immediate results.	▶	DIRECTIVE STYLE
• Your subordinates are willing to engage and have development potential , and you are more experienced than they are.	▶	PARTICIPATIVE STYLE
• Your subordinates are experienced and used to working together, Collective buy-in is a key success factor and the situation does not require fast action.	▶	CONSENSUAL STYLE
• Your subordinates are competent and success depends primarily on the effort they devote to the task.	▶	PERSUASIVE STYLE
• Your subordinates are competent and motivated and want to be recognized individually. The objectives are clear and the situation allows some margin for error.	▶	DELEGATING STYLE

2nd management style

A participative style to foster development

Many companies expect today's managers to act like coaches with their employees. This is the participative style, in which managers help employees overcome their challenges and develop their skills. These attentive managers provide subordinates with methodology, advice and valuable perspective.

This management style is perceived as encouraging and stimulating by subordinates who want to invest in **developing their skills**. Based on deep discussion, participative management is particularly well-suited to **transmitting complex, latent knowledge**. It is best

Participative managers act as coaches; they discuss the stakes and provide advice and methodology.

suited for employees who lack self-assurance and need to build confidence in their skills. In addition, this approach can help the manager challenge his or her own ideas. The participative style is consequently particularly appropriate in situations that require creativity and innovation.

This management style can nonetheless be perceived as invasive by those seeking more autonomy, and stressful for those who simply prefer to follow instructions. This approach must thus be adapted according to employee motivation and development potential.

Words to the wise

- The desire to give a helping hand can make a participative manager seem intrusive. *Take care to leave experienced subordinates some space.*
- This management style can be used only once a certain level of trust has been established between the manager and the concerned employee. *Take the time to build the relationship and reassure the employee about your motives. Otherwise, the person is unlikely to open up to you and admit his or her difficulties.*
- Participative management is very demanding. *Be attentive to how your subordinates feel, so that you can step in and be more hands-on when they run out of steam or delegate more if they feel you are too invasive.*

Standard behaviors for the various management styles

Directive	Participative	Consensual	Persuasive	Delegating
• Develops schedules, checklists, procedures • Often uses written materials • Deeply understands the work of his/her subordinates • Values efficiency	• Listens, analyzes • Provides advice and methodology • Encourages experimentation • Values personal development and engagement	• Initiates and orchestrates dialogue within the team • Organizes many meetings • Shares decision-making power • Values collaboration	• Debates ideas and a vision of the future • Explains the reasons and the consequences of his/her decisions • Emphasizes individuals • Values success	• Is more interested in the results than the means • Prefers short and focused interactions • Is not very involved operationally • Values initiative

3rd management style

A consensual style to foster cohesion

The image of a closely-knit team is often connected with consensual management. Consensual managers involve their subordinates in decisions. They ask for their opinions even outside their strict domain of expertise.

This management style can be very affirming for subordinates who enjoy teamwork and want to be involved. The time devoted to discussion **supports the emergence of team spirit** around a shared vision. When decisions are made using this approach, subordinates feel empowered and more readily inclined to engage actively in implementation.

Consensual managers are good listeners; they bring employees into decisions and take account of their opinions.

They also acquire a broader vision of their role and a better understanding of what their colleagues do, which tends to foster cooperation. This management style, based on collective thinking in which the manager does not seek to impose his or her own opinion, **allows for extremely rich discussion**. It is particularly well-adapted to complex situations requiring a deep reflection and creativity.

The consensual style nevertheless consumes a lot of time. As such, it is best to avoid using this approach in emergencies and to save it for situations whose stakes justify the investment.

Words to the wise

- The consensual style requires the engagement of all team members. *Ensure that your subordinates are sufficiently mature to be able to put their individual objectives into perspective with regards to the common good.*
- This style can be interpreted as a way for managers to shirk their responsibilities. *It is important to know when to make decisions on your own, for example, when the team becomes polarized, or when you are convinced that the established consensus is a mistake.*
- Systematically seeking consensus can lead to indecision. *If respective roles and responsibilities are not sufficiently clear, the team may be unable to take action.*

4th management style

A persuasive style to foster engagement

Words to the wise

- The persuasive style can easily appear demagogical. To remain credible and compelling and to avoid appearing anxious to convince people at all costs, it is important to explain the various aspects of the situation..
- The focus on communication may be perceived as disinterest for action. Be careful to show that you stand behind those who will concretely execute the vision.
- The desire to convince people can be a turnoff. Systematically discuss the underlying objectives and reasoning to foster buy-in.

The persuasive style is characteristic of the often-idealized charismatic leader. A speaker who can galvanize crowds is a typical example, but this style may also be used by managers who enjoy explaining their vision and motivations, discussing them and convincing others to follow their lead.

This approach can seem **exhilarating and motivating** to people who adhere to this vision and feel they are able to autonomously contribute to implementing it. The enthusiasm generated by this management style encourages people to surpass themselves to attain the described vision, especially when managers are able to adapt their message to the individual motivations of each team member. This approach is particularly

Persuasive managers communicate enthusiastically; they sell their vision and encourage people to implement it.

well-adapted to situations where employees are competent, but not sufficiently engaged. The persuasive style also fosters **initiative and creativity**. Indeed, persuasive managers lay out the general strategy, but then leave the operational details of execution up to each individual. When a compelling message is followed by discussion, people are more likely to embrace the established objectives, which is a great asset in environments requiring responsiveness.

Some employees, however, may accuse managers who adopt this style of being too formulaic and detached from operational realities. As a result, this approach should be used with caution, particularly with regard to people who crave more precise instructions.

Key words

Directive	Participative	Consensual	Persuasive	Delegating
Tasks Instructions Control Details	Advice Support Methodology Experimentation	Collaboration Listening Dialog Discussion	Convictions Charisma Rhetoric Debate	Autonomy Objectives Trust Contract

5th management style

A delegating style to foster empowerment

Words to the wise

- Delegation requires a precise framework to keep people on track. Clearly define objectives as well as the limits within which people can exercise their autonomy.
- Delegation does not relieve the manager of assuming responsibility for results. Establish effective reporting mechanisms and monitor progress to make sure people stay on course.
- Successful delegation depends on the skills and motivation of those entrusted with an assignment. Don't hesitate to offer support if necessary. Delegation doesn't mean abandoning people to their own devices! Also keep in mind that even the most autonomous subordinates still need feedback.

Anyone who becomes a manager today knows that the ability to delegate is now essential. Delegation empowers people. After negotiating objectives and available resources with them, managers then leave it up to them to carry out their assignments.

This management style **encourages people to pull together in the same direction**, by making it possible for them to give their all, while allowing managers to **focus on areas where they can add the most value**. This style is often very well-suited to situations where employees are competent, want to be involved and enjoy surmounting chal-

Delegating managers are empowering; they give people the freedom to carry out their assignments in their own way.

lenges autonomously. Moreover, the autonomy offered by the manager facilitates the emergence of original ideas and improvement suggestions. Indeed, this is the source of the theoretical attraction of delegation.

Even so, this management style may undermine motivation if it is interpreted as a sign of disinterest or a way for managers to shirk their responsibilities. As a result, this approach may be very risky if used inappropriately, for example, with unqualified employees or in highly uncertain situations, where a delegation agreement cannot be clearly defined in advance.