

Leadership styles: a powerful model

Pierre Casse and **Paul Claudel** present a way of adjusting leadership to suit the circumstances and people involved

Before reading this article, please take this preliminary test of your personal leadership style.

From the description of a leadership situation, decide which would be the best way to handle it – not necessarily what you would do but what you believe is the most effective leadership behaviour in the circumstances.

The situation

You are a market leader and your people are coming up with a lot of ideas related to the expansion of your business. You have just redefined the vision of the team and you know that your people are committed to it. You must leave for a business trip (you will be away for one week) and you are thinking about what you should say to the team before leaving.

The options

A. Do not say anything
B. Share some of your key business ideas about the future of your business. Keep them thinking

C. Have a last meeting and check that everything is right

D. State your expectations and set up a timetable before leaving.

Before we offer a full debriefing of this test at the end of this article, we will present a description of a leadership model, including all the implications tied to the four different archetypes of leadership styles that are available to today's leaders.

Introduction to the Leadership Styles model

There are numerous leadership models around and some have, indeed, proven to be quite instructive and effective in past years. The world, however, has been changing very fast, especially in the past decade, as the emergence of information technology and globalisation has drastically transformed the expectations and behaviours of people in organisations.

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Today, most successful organisations call upon knowledge workers, ie highly-qualified people who want to make the best use of their capabilities in an environment that affords them the freedom to demonstrate their sense of initiative and responsibility. If such people are restrained from functioning at what they consider their peak level of competence, there is a good chance that they will lose momentum, as well as their motivation, and even walk away.

So in that respect, leaders ('knowledge leaders?') must understand the need for using different leadership styles effectively and appropriately.

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Leaders must also be aware that empowerment, for instance, is not always the proper style to apply (despite what some people claim), especially when the company is facing a crisis as many are today. In such circumstances, the leader needs to be prepared to step in and show the way, while getting personally involved. In other words, there is more than one proper style of leadership and what is important is to 1) be aware of them all and their various implications, and 2) learn how to apply the right style at the right moment.

The model that we are proposing describes four different types of leadership practice, all of them powerful in their own way as long as they are applied appropriately. It also provides inputs on the conditions required for a proper use of each particular style, in relation to 1) the business situation, 2) the type of team players involved, and 3) the prevailing corporate culture.

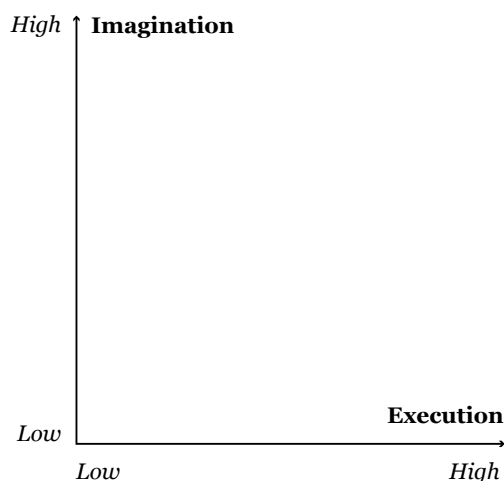
We will put a special emphasis on the 'empowerment' style, since it proves to be, when circumstances permit, the most successful way of reaching top performance and job satisfaction.

The main features of the proposed model

Two underlying leadership capabilities Our research – work done with leaders in all industries as consultants and when teaching EMBA's – has convincingly shown that there are two key abilities in relation to which current leadership behaviours can be defined:

- 1 **imagination**, or the ability to produce new ideas and to be creative in order to meet the new challenges ahead. Creativity is critical if you want to see around the corner and stay ahead of the game. The successful leaders of today are those who are proactive in changing the rules and even in re-orientating the whole business model. Imagination is also needed by leaders to reach out to others and reinvent the communication process
- 2 **execution**, or the ability for the leader to translate good ideas into deeds and results. Concepts, abstractions and talk are good as long as they lead to bottom-line delivery. This implies that the leader is able to decide on, and implement (directly, with or through others), ideas so they are materialised in a high-quality and speedy way.

Imagination and execution will thus appear as the two supporting coordinates of the model we are presenting here and the four leadership styles discussed above will be determined by the degree to which they call upon those two capabilities.



Four different leadership styles Depending on how much imagination and execution is injected by the leader into his leadership practice, the model will uncover four typical styles:

- 1 **leading by doing** This style of leadership is high on execution but low on imagination, meaning that the leader will be heavily involved in directing the team, fully in charge and telling



people what to do. On the other hand, he will not be discussing the pros and cons of the decisions he is taking, nor spending much time listening to the team members' opinions. This is the 'commando' or the sales force leader style. There are times when leaders should take over and do things themselves. They should show the way and be role models. Not only will they address key problems but they will also send a strong signal to the organisation regarding the direction to take. The motto for this style is 'do now!' and, from a topological standpoint, it can be called 'leading from the front'

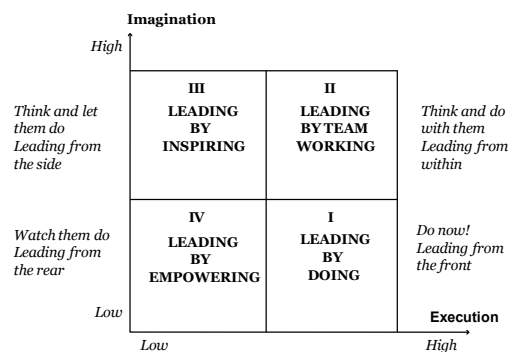
2 leading by team working Here the practice is high on execution and high on imagination. This time, the leader gets team members together to brainstorm, produce some good ideas, transform them into an action plan and then jointly implement them. This is a style that is largely favoured in many organisations and recommended by numerous academics. Although it can indeed be very effective in specific circumstances, it should, however, not be seen as a *panacea*, to be invariably preferred. For there are some shortcomings involved with team work, for instance it can be very time-consuming and its output often leans towards compromise and average solutions. This style's motto is 'think and do with them' and, topologically, it will be defined as 'leading from within'

3 leading by inspiring This third style is strong on imagination but low on execution. In this case, the leader stimulates the team members' thinking, challenging them to see things from different angles, making sure they have checked what others are coming up with and stretching their ideas. But he will not be deciding for the team nor implementing the decisions taken. The motto defining this style is 'think and let them do' and, from a topological standpoint, it can be called 'leading from the side'

4 leading by empowering At first one might be perplexed by the determination of this last style, since its coordinates are low on imagination and low on execution! However, this does not by any means signify that the leader remains passive or abdicates his responsibilities. What is happening here is that the leader now trusts people to be able to come up with their own ideas, make decisions and implement them. Therefore the leader's role remains 1) setting the vision and strategies, often together with the team members, 2) setting up the conditions (support systems) for the empowerment process to work successfully, 3) letting people go and execute as they feel appropriate, and 4) giving the proper recognition



and reward to the achievers. The motto here is 'watch them do' and, from a topological perspective, it can be called 'leading from the rear'.





Three criteria for choosing the appropriate leadership style

The challenge for leaders is to decide which style they will adopt to maximise performance and create a healthy environment.

Three indicators can be used to direct them in their choice:

- **the business situation** There is no question that, in a very fast-changing world, one cannot lose sight of the situation that the team or organisation is confronted with. By business situation, we mean how competitive are we? What is our market share? Are we clear on our business model? Do we have what it takes in terms of financing, talents, equipment, know how?

It is clear that a high-risk situation (crisis) will require very strong and active involvement by

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the leader to turn it around and keep it under control. The more serious the challenge, the more leaders must use the 'leading by doing' style. But if the situation is low-risk, it is perhaps time for the leader to give his people a chance to use their brains and implement their ideas. In other words, to empower them.

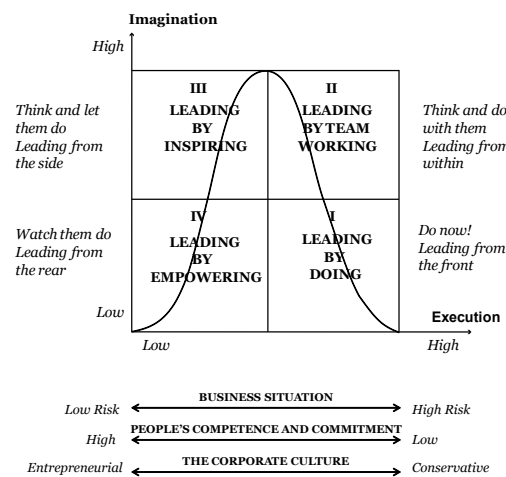
So what we have here is not a black or white choice to make, but rather a bell curve starting with high involvement by the leader when the situation is very exposed, then moving gradually towards team working as the risk diminishes, then further over to inspiring, as the team members only require mental stimulation, and ending finally with empowerment when the business is well under control and people can be given the freedom to fully take initiative and responsibility

- **the people or team members** Even if the business situation would allow for empowerment according to the *criteria* mentioned above, the leader, before going ahead and just letting team members take charge, has to ask himself: are my people prepared for it? Can I take the risk of letting them run on their own? The answer to that depends on whether the people involved are *competent* (do they understand the business, do they know our market well enough, are they well acquainted with our products, can they properly deal with our customers?) and *committed* (trust is critical. Can they be relied upon to abide by the business views of the leader, implement the agreed vision and apply the ethical rules in place?) And finally, of course, the leader will have to make sure that team members *want* to be empowered and take the corresponding risks. According to how much competence the team member demonstrates and how much the leader can trust him, different degrees of empowerment will be devolved, as shown in the graph on p50
- **the corporate culture** There is no question that the pervading culture in the organisation will influence the degree to which leaders will be inclined to extend autonomy to their team



members. The more conservative the organisation culture, the more leaders will feel pressed to stay on the right side of the model (leading by doing and leading by team working). *A contrario*, the more entrepreneurial the company environment, the more room for charismatic leadership and empowerment.

Based on the three *criteria* above, the leader is now in a position to decide what leadership style to adopt to ensure the most successful response to his business challenges. When the situation would allow, or call, for a high degree of delegation, even going possibly all the way to empowerment, we offer a few tips below that are conducive to an effective practice of that particular leadership behaviour.



Tips for ensuring a successful practice of empowerment

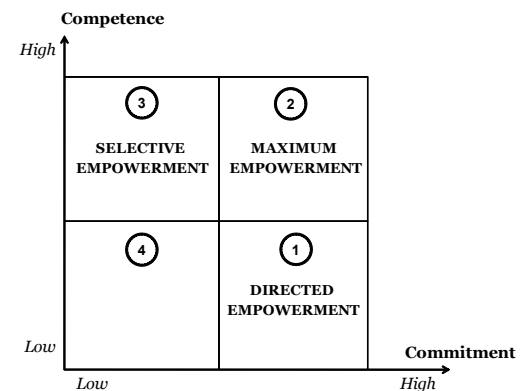
There exists a good definition of empowerment: *“Empowerment is a give and take process by which autonomy is acquired so that business objectives can be met and people’s needs satisfied.”*

Should a leader decide to go for that style of leadership, he needs to understand that empowerment itself can be applied in various

ways and to different degrees according to circumstances and, in particular, to the qualifications of the team players involved, as we have already described.

Depending on how competent the team member is and how much he can be trusted, four possible variations of empowerment are available (see the graph below):

- 1 the team player is high on commitment but low on competence** This will call for ‘directed empowerment’, which is very similar to delegation: the leader gives the team member a clearly defined and limited range of autonomy but does not allow any deviance from that assigned window
- 2 the team player is high on both commitment and competence** This the optimal situation, in which no restrictions are needed since the team player is fully qualified to take initiative and responsibility. This situation is called ‘maximum empowerment’ and all that is left for the leader to do is to challenge the team member to go for it!
- 3 the team player is high on competence but – for some reason – low on commitment** This is a situation in which the leader is not altogether comfortable that the person will follow his business lines, although that person is professionally very savvy with regard, for instance, to products and markets. The leader will now be inclined to do ‘selective empowerment’, warning the team member to stay away from, for example, a particular customer or market area
- 4 if the team member is low on commitment and low on competence**, of course no empowerment is called for, at least as long as one or the other of those two parameters has not increased in value, as it could, for instance, as a result of a development effort on the part of the leader.



Many leaders are reluctant to resort to empowerment because of the risks involved

To conclude on empowerment, it is generally accepted that, in this fast-changing global economy, this is with no doubt whatsoever the most effective way of leading.

Many leaders, however, are reluctant to resort to empowerment because of the risks involved and because you have to track various parameters such as the exposure of the business, the quality of the people and the culture of the organisation. Because of all these constraints, too many leaders prefer to abstain and do the work themselves or, at most, go for delegation.

But, although that may be the easier choice, it is not the right choice, for the following two important reasons:

- 1 many organisations are now dealing mostly with 'knowledge workers', ie highly-qualified people who want to demonstrate their excellence and contribute to the best of their significant talents. If these people are not offered the chance to fully expand, they will feel frustrated and probably seek a better fortune elsewhere
- 2 empowerment is the style of management that allows for 'internal commitment', ie giving people the opportunity to do not only what they are told to do (as in external commitment) but also contribute to the vision and bottom-line goals on their own initiative and in the way they themselves believe will be the most effective. External commitment leads to high personal job satisfaction and top performance.

Back to the initial test: complete debriefing based on the full model presented above

It should by now be clear (according to the model) that the best way to handle the situation described at the beginning of the article is option A.

Why A? Because the business situation is without question 'low risk' and evidence shows that you, as a leader, can trust team members who appear competent and committed. On top of that, you are away for only one week and always in reach, of course, given all the communication devices now available.

Empowerment will thus give you a chance to see how your people have performed in your absence, to find out about who has done what and to perhaps decide on what corrective actions may be needed, ie coaching.

All the other options prove one way or another that you do not fully trust your team members, and this could have a negative effect on their *morale* and degree of respect for, and confidence in, you



Tentative conclusion

To conclude, the active leader should always be aware that there is more than one way to lead others, and that his preferred or 'natural' style is not necessarily the best for the situation and people involved. Checking the three variables of business situation, people's competence/commitment and corporate culture is a good and safe way to decide on the best adapted leadership practice for the circumstances, which in turn should be conducive to top performance and high personal satisfaction for team members.

So, one conclusion for the active leader could be: Be aware of the three key indicators and adapt your leadership style(s) to the situation you are facing, the people who are working with you and the corporate culture to which you belong.

The major success factor is actually the leader's ability to measure the impact that his behaviour has on people and adjust it accordingly. The leadership challenge is to be flexible without appearing weak, ambiguous and unfair. Not easy, but who said leadership is easy? **TJ**

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