

## ***Advances in Project Management Series<sup>1</sup>***

# **Developing Leadership Agility: Different Projects, Different Approaches**

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Every project manager knows that each project is essentially unique. The mix of different people, different objectives, different agendas, different circumstances and different unfolding events leads to a different dynamic that project managers ignore at their peril. One trick ponies never do well – only the agile flourish. To be successful, project managers need to be *flexible*, that is, they need to have a broad repertoire of potential behaviors and problem-solving approaches that they can tap into. But preferably they should also be *adaptive*, in other words, have the ability to learn new behaviors and problem-solving approaches if the current set is not sufficient. At the same time, this flexibility and adaptability should be coupled with *responsiveness* to the situational demands, meaning that they should quickly and accurately sense what the circumstances require and adjust their behavior accordingly. Only where project managers master flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness will they be truly agile and ready to deal with the unpredictable nature of project work.

For leaders in a project setting the need for agility is even higher. Not only is each project unique and shifting over time, but the people involved in projects have become increasingly more diverse. Not only does the workforce come from a wider variety of cultural backgrounds, but there is also a richer mix of genders, affiliations, lifestyles and career paths, each requiring leaders to adjust their behavior to be able to strike the right chord and win hearts and minds in the most effective way. With so many different situations and different people, all demanding a different approach, to be successful leaders must exhibit leadership agility – *have the capacity to flexibly switch between leadership styles, and adaptively master new ones, in rapid response to the specific needs of the people and the situation they want to influence.*

Yet, the fundamental question is which leadership styles exist that leaders could potentially make use of, what the advantages and disadvantages are of each, and under which conditions one would be preferable over the others. As this is a huge question, this article will limit itself to mapping twenty important leadership styles, grouped into ten pairs of opposite styles (see figure 1 for an overview). For the reader the question is whether you master all twenty and can easily

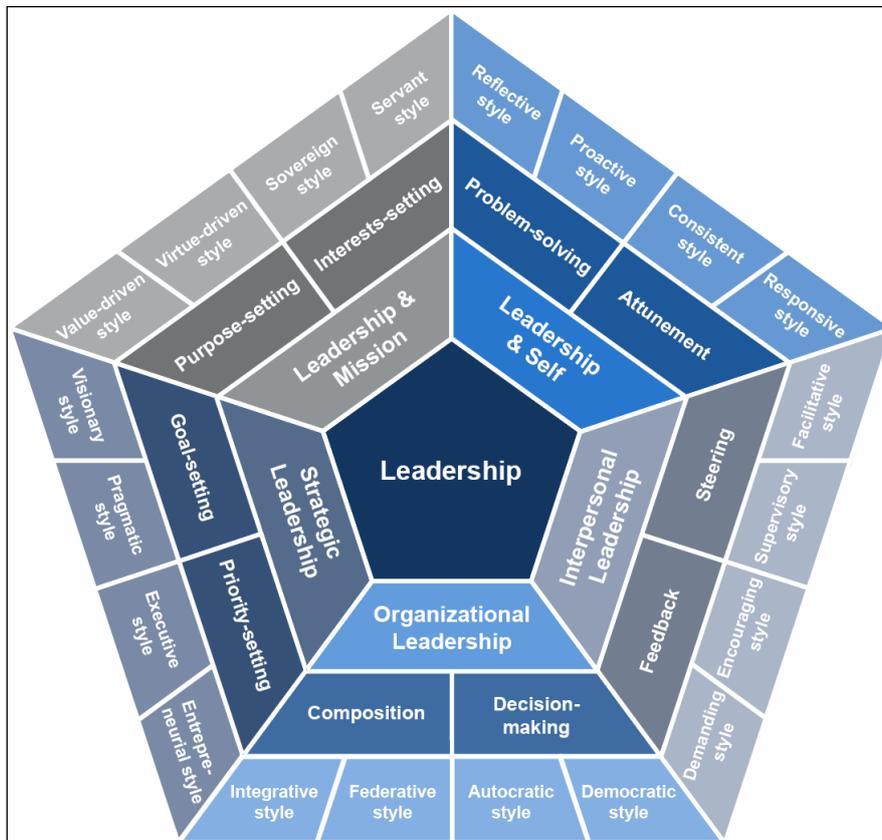
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switch between them depending on the needs of the circumstances. That would make you highly agile. The more likely reality is that you will be better at some than at others, leading to the question of whether there are some leadership styles that you need to improve to become more agile. Generally, people tend to exhibit a preference for one side of a pair (we call this their ‘default style’), making the other side of the pair the style requiring further development. If you would like to determine your own default styles, table 1 provides a ‘quick and dirty’ assessment tool.

These ten dimensions are not the only ways in which leadership styles can differ, but they do represent the most important balancing acts faced by leaders in their drive to effectively influence people around them. The ten can be divided into five clusters, depending on the leadership domain involved. The first two dimensions fall into the domain of *interpersonal leadership*, which deals with how leaders interact with other individuals to achieve certain results. The second pair is concerned with *organizational leadership*, focusing on the ways in which leaders can get individuals to work together as a strong team. The third set of dimensions is concerned with *strategic leadership*, dealing with the question of which role a leader plays in the formulation and implementation of strategy. The fourth pair falls into the category of *leadership & mission*, which deals with the type of purpose that leaders emphasize to mobilize people to follow. And finally the fifth pair of dimensions revolves around the way in which a person deals with being a leader and behaves towards leadership challenges - *leadership and self*.

**Figure 1: The Leadership Rose: Leadership Domains, Tasks and Styles**



## Interpersonal Leadership

Two questions are key when it comes to steering the behavior of individuals: *what* should leaders try to influence and *how* they should try to influence it. The issue of ‘what to influence’ is referred to as *interpersonal steering* and is concerned with determining the topics the leader wants to focus on to trigger the desired behavior of the individual. The issue of ‘how to influence’ is referred to as *interpersonal feedback* and is concerned with the way the leader should stimulate the individual to actually move in the intended direction.

### **Interpersonal Steering: The Paradox of Activities and Conditions**

To be successful, leaders need to get people to perform. They need to steer the behavior of each individual, to enlarge the chance that the work actually gets done as intended. They need to have a lever of control – some way of ensuring that people carry out activities in an effective way<sup>i</sup>. The most straightforward way of doing this is to tell each person which activities to complete and then to check whether these tasks are accomplished as instructed. This is direct control, whereby discussions between the leader and the follower generally have two agenda items: outlining the activities that will be delegated and evaluating the progress on each of the activities identified. The great advantage of this hands-on approach is that the leader knows exactly what is going on and can take corrective action quickly if necessary.

**Table 1: The Leadership Style Profiler**

<b>Supervisory Leadership Style</b> I take hands on control of key tasks to ensure that people carry out the work correctly.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Facilitative Leadership Style</b> I delegate key tasks to the right people and ensure that they are well-equipped to carry out the work independently.
<b>Demanding Leadership Style</b> I challenge people to do better, by emphasizing the room for improvement.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Encouraging Leadership Style</b> I show confidence in people, by emphasizing their ability to do a good job .
<b>Integrative Leadership Style</b> I build teams of like-minded people, creating a shared sense of identity and uniform ways of working.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Federative Leadership Style</b> I build teams of people with a diversity of attitudes and views, giving them room to think and act differently.
<b>Autocratic Leadership Style</b> I take the responsibility for making decisions and ensuring speed and clarity.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Democratic Leadership Style</b> I take the responsibility for making sure decisions are taken jointly and ensuring quality and commitment.
<b>Visionary Leadership Style</b> I set strategic goals that are very ambitious and broad, challenging people to find ways of achieving them.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Pragmatic Leadership Style</b> I set strategic goals that are realistic and specific, guiding people’s progress in achieving them.
<b>Executive Leadership Style</b> I focus people on managing the current activities as efficiently and effectively	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Entrepreneurial Leadership Style</b> I focus people on renewing the organization, taking the risk to seek

as possible.		out new opportunities.
<b>Value-driven Leadership Style</b> I explain to people that our mission is to do well by making money for our shareholders and ourselves.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Virtue-driven Leadership Style</b> I explain to people that our mission is to do good by making a contribution to the well-being of our stakeholders .
<b>Sovereign Leadership Style</b> I strive to fulfill my own objectives, mobilizing others to help me where possible.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Servant Leadership Style</b> I strive to fulfill the group's objectives, offering others my help where possible.
<b>Reflective Leadership Style</b> I think before I act, reflecting on leadership issues and options before moving into action.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Proactive Leadership Style</b> I think while I act, reflecting on leadership issues and managing responses along the way.
<b>Consistent Leadership Style</b> I approach each leadership situation in the same way, remaining predictable and authentic.	1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6	<b>Responsive Leadership Style</b> I flexibly adjust my approach to each leadership situation, depending on the specific circumstances.

However, leaders can also trust that team members have the capacity to determine the necessary activities themselves. Leaders can delegate the activity definition, not only the activity execution. By giving individuals a clear mandate and the responsibility to reach the intended results in the way they believe works best, leaders can empower people to take initiative and ownership. This does not mean that the leader relinquishes control. The influence of the leader on the follower is not direct, by telling the individual what to do, but indirect, by shaping the conditions that enable followers to “do it themselves”. The lever of control is not activity-oriented supervision, but condition-oriented facilitation, creating the optimal circumstances to trigger the intended behavior. Typical enabling conditions include having the right training, information, resources, decision-making authority and incentives.

In balancing between activities and conditions as the primary lever of control, leaders who prefer to influence on the basis of activities have a *supervisory leadership style*. These leaders tend to be personally involved in the nitty-gritty of day-to-day operations and very hands on, defining tasks and providing their team members with ideas, advice and feedback. Leaders more inclined to indirect control by creating the optimal organizational conditions have a *facilitative leadership style*. These leaders focus on creating the right conditions, getting the right people and then getting out of the way. They believe that the most effective way to bring out the best in people is to trust their competence and their willingness to perform.

***Interpersonal Feedback: The Paradox of Challenge and Appreciation***

Besides the issue of what to influence, leaders are faced with the question of how to influence. They must determine the tone of voice and posture they want to take to trigger people to move in the desired direction. Looking at the way that sports coaches give feedback to their athletes is very illustrative for how business leaders can approach this issue. Some coaches believe that the best way to spur an individual to an exceptional accomplishment is by continuously highlighting the upside potential and refusing to accept that the current performance is the best possible.

These coaches challenge their charges to rise above themselves and to see that they are capable of operating at a higher level. Therefore, these coaches feel that their feedback needs to be critical, demanding and sometimes even confrontational, constantly pushing their athletes to close the gap between their current and optimal performance.

Other coaches, however, do not emphasize the performance gap, as they find this stance too negative. Instead of instilling the urge to live up to their potential, they focus on instilling confidence in their athletes. They want their sportspeople to believe in themselves and to have the inner strength to go out and excel. Therefore, these coaches show appreciation for the talents and hard work that their athletes put in. They are understanding, encouraging and sometimes even overly complimentary, constantly expressing their belief in the ability of their athletes to give a top performance.

As business leaders try to find the best way to motivate their followers, they too must find the right stance, somewhere between being challenging and being appreciative. Where leaders lean over towards the side of challenge, they have a *demanding leadership style*. These leaders are constructively dissatisfied with the current level of performance and set higher standards to challenge followers to do better. Leaders more inclined towards the appreciation side of the balance have an *encouraging leadership style*. These leaders are positive towards their followers, expressing confidence in the capabilities and willingness of each individual to do a good job.

## **Organizational Leadership**

Organizational leadership is about the leader's role in building and maintaining an effective team of people. The organizational unit that the leader focuses on can be small (e.g. a department) or large (e.g. a corporation), formal (e.g. a unit) or informal (e.g. a community), and inside the company (e.g. a cross-functional team) or across the company's boundaries (e.g. an alliance).

Two issues are key when it comes to the leader's work of getting people organized: determining how to pull together the best possible team (*organizational composition*) and establishing how they should make choices (*organizational decision-making*).

### ***Organizational Composition: The Paradox of Unity and Diversity***

Whether it is a taskforce, a department, a business unit or an entire corporation, putting together the best possible group of people for the job, and getting them to work concertedly as a team, is a key leadership task. Leaders need to take individuals and forge them into units that are more than the sum of the parts. This means influencing people to give up part of their autonomy and individual identity, to become integral part of a larger whole. Building a highly effective team involves more than only selecting the most knowledgeable and skilled individuals, and getting them to work side-by-side. As every sports coach knows, 'all-star teams' often get beat by squads that work together as well-oiled machines.

Achieving the right organizational composition starts with striving towards a shared goal – no unit without unity of mission. But to really pull together as a team, people need to also embrace common values, share a common worldview, speak a common language, adhere to common

rules and work according to common practices. The more the team members are on the same wave length, the easier it will be to communicate, cooperate and commit within the group. And the more tightly-knit the culture, the stronger will be the feeling of belonging and the sense of shared destiny. Collins and Porras even propagate pursuing ‘cult-like cultures’ as a way of getting organizations that are ‘built to last’<sup>ii</sup>.

Yet, besides unity, leaders will also want to have enough diversity of ideas, experiences and practices on board to fuel discussion and renewal. There is no innovation without diversity. IBM found out the hard way that having a ‘big blue’ monoculture led to group think and complacency in responding to changes in the outside world. It took an outside-CEO, Lou Gerstner, and a shake-up of the entire top management team to bring in the requisite variety of views, values and visions to restore IBM’s ability to renew itself<sup>iii</sup>.

In balancing unity and diversity, leaders that lean over to the side of unity can be said to have an *integrative leadership style*. These leaders tend to recruit a group of like-minded people and quickly align them into a tightly-knit team with a strong sense of shared identity. Leaders that lean over to the side of diversity have a *federative leadership style*. These leaders select people that are not only of different backgrounds, but also have different worldviews. They allow for a more loosely-knit culture, in which there is more autonomy and debate, but necessarily also more misunderstandings and conflicts.

### **Organizational Decision-Making: The Paradox of Direction and Participation**

Leading also entails getting decisions made. Without decisions, organizations keep on marching on a pre-set path, or succumb to paralysis, becoming incapable of doing anything at all. Yet, while leaders need to ensure that decisions are taken, the question is whether they always need to make the choices themselves. Instead of making top-down decisions and commanding the way forward, they can also mobilize bottom-up participation in the decision-making process<sup>iv</sup>.

The advantage of a top-down approach is speed, consistency and clarity. When leaders call the shots, they can be fast, avoiding extensive consultation, deliberation and procrastination; they can be consistent, avoiding unaligned decisions and compromises; and they can be clear, limiting the ‘wobble room’ for people to do their own thing. Moreover, by setting the direction of the organization themselves, leaders explicitly take responsibility for the choices and the consequences. This too creates clarity, about who is the boss and who can be held accountable. Many followers appreciate this clear differentiation of roles, often also because they trust the judgment of the leader more than they trust their own opinion or the views of the group.

Yet, getting others to participate in decision-making can be highly beneficial in a number of ways. First, broader participation can improve the quality of decision-making. Leaders are not all-knowing and their judgment is not infallible, and therefore it is often indispensable to get the input from people with another expertise or with different experiences. Moreover, to look at an issue from various angles, to generate new ideas, to critically evaluate opportunities and to understand the implementation consequences, all works better if a variety of people are involved in the process. A second advantage of broader participation is that people generally feel more commitment to decisions to which they have contributed than to decisions that land on their desk. Employees can feel more appreciated and therefore more motivated, leading to more support for implementing the decision taken. This in turn can lead to faster implementation, even if the decision-making itself took a bit longer. And thirdly, by participating in decision-

making, people understand the background of the choices made, learn about the assumptions and trade-offs, grow as individuals and become more flexible if a decision needs to be revised or changed.

As leaders balance between being directive and inviting participation, they often exhibit a natural tendency to feel more comfortable leaning over to one side or the other. Where they gravitate towards making decisions themselves, they can be said to have an *autocratic leadership style*. These leaders tend to prefer clear lines of authority and accountability, and take upon themselves the responsibility of making the tough choices, expecting others to respect and execute the decisions made. Where leaders are more inclined towards encouraging participation, they are said to have a *democratic leadership style*. These leaders tend to harness the power of the team, getting people to contribute to the emergence of a decision by bringing in their expertise, ideas and goodwill.

## **Strategic Leadership**

Strategic leadership deals with the role of leaders in the process of formulating and implementing strategy<sup>v</sup>. As leadership is about getting people to move in a certain direction, setting the strategic course of action is a crucial aspect of a leader's role. Leaders need to be intimately involved in the process of making strategic choices and mobilizing people to realize the intended strategy.

Guiding the strategy process presents leaders with many challenges, but two stand out in particular. Firstly, leaders need to determine what type of strategic aims need to be given to direct others. Leaders must choose how ambitious and specific the strategic goals they want to set should be. This task is referred to as *strategic goal-setting*. Secondly, leaders need to determine what type of strategic focus they should give others to ensure organizational continuity. Leaders must decide what kind of priorities need to be set to safeguard the sustainability of the organization – this is the task of *strategic priority-setting*.

### ***Strategic Goal-Setting: The Paradox of Idealism and Realism***

The task of strategic goal-setting is all about the classic leadership question: “Where are we going?”. To get people to move in a certain direction, they will want to know to where it is they are headed. But in setting a goal, the leader needs to consider that objectives can serve two different psychological needs of followers. On the one hand, most people want to have something to aspire to. Strategic goals are about ambitions – what would we like to become? We set strategic goals to challenge ourselves to rise above what we currently are capable of doing, to reach a higher level. As such, strategic goals are ideals, creating a stretch to become better or even the best. They can light a fire that mobilizes the entire organization to work hard over an extended period of time to achieve the shared dream.

On the other hand, many people also want to have certainty. They would like to know, with as much clarity and assurance as possible, where the organization is headed and that these objectives are feasible. Even more tangibly, they would like to know what is expected of them personally and they need to feel confident that they will be capable of meeting these expectations. As such, strategic goals that are perceived as realistic can create a sense of security and organizational stability. They can help to establish a shared conviction that the organization

is capable of dealing with the challenges at hand and is in control of its future. This confidence can mobilize the entire organization to work hard to reach the strategic goals as planned.

Yet, strategic goals that are ambitious and stretching will not score high on security and stability, and vice versa. Bullish objectives that stimulate people to rise above themselves, don't fit well with the desire to have the assurance of specific and attainable aims. We refer to this tension between inspirational and feasible strategic goals as the *paradox of idealism and realism*.

As it seems impossible to be fully idealistic and realistic at the same time, in practice leaders tend to lean over to one side or the other, resulting in different leadership styles. Those that emphasize idealism have a *visionary leadership style*, as they outline an inspirational and challenging long term vision, far beyond the organization's current capabilities. Having set such a BOLD goal – broad, optimistic, long-term and daring – such leaders tend to encourage people to find innovative ways of making it happen. Leaders emphasizing realism over idealism have a *pragmatic leadership style*, as they communicate to others exactly what they want. They tend to set SMART goals – specific, measurable, acceptable, realistic and time-bound – focusing on the period for which they can plan.

### ***Strategic Priority-Setting: The Paradox of Exploitation and Exploration***

Putting it crudely, the task of strategic priority-setting is about whether the leader should be conserving the organization or undermining it. The question is whether it should be the priority of the leader to maintain the status quo, creating stability and reaping as much value as possible from the current organization, or whether the leader should challenge the status quo, accepting the short term turmoil, but sowing potential future value, to be harvested at a later moment.

In the long run, all firms need to renew themselves, as their markets change and their products become commoditized. They need to search for new opportunities, serve new clients and provide new offerings. The required innovation can even call the existing business model into question. This strategic exploration, just as in the oil industry, is essential to keep the pipeline of new business opportunities filled – sometimes running just to stand still.

Yet, strategic exploration can be difficult and disconcerting. Innovation is a financially costly process, that is complex to manage and with results that are tricky to predict. At the same time, to be able to innovate means challenging the established way of doing things in the firm, upsetting existing practice and potentially creating cannibalistic products that could destroy the current business. Involving people in exploration means taking their attention away from current customers and current activities, on a potential wild goose chase of finding something new. The required experimentation can create unrest, inefficiency and lower customer satisfaction. This while the same attention and money could be invested in optimizing the current business, making incremental improvements to existing processes. This exploitation of the present business is more predictable and manageable, while giving results in the short run.

Organizations might need a bit of both exploitation and exploration, but to a large extent the two are at odds with one another<sup>vi</sup>. The money and attention can only be invested once, requiring leaders to set priorities. Moreover, it is difficult for leaders to send two messages at the same time (“let's shake things up” and “let's focus on fine-tuning”) without getting stuck in the middle and not being successful at either. Therefore, this tension truly is the *paradox of exploitation and exploration*.

Leaders who emphasize the importance of exploitation over exploration have an *executive leadership style*, as they focus on getting results. They concentrate on the efficient and effective functioning of the organization by using, maintaining and extending the organization's existing capabilities, infrastructure and client base. Leaders that give more priority to exploration have an *entrepreneurial leadership style*, as they see themselves as the driver of the entrepreneurial process within the organization. As intrapreneurs ("inside entrepreneurs"), they concentrate on constantly rejuvenating the organization by getting people to challenge the existing business model and search for pioneering ideas and approaches.

## **Leadership & Mission**

Knowing how to lead is important, but knowing why to lead is essential. If leadership is a choice, why do you want to choose this role? What is your mission? Which fundamental drivers will sustain you during the long hours of hard work, give you the strength to deal with uncertainty, bolster your courage to take on opponents and fortify your resolve to overcome setbacks? What will give meaning to your work and make it all worthwhile? Knowing your purpose as leader can make you stronger as a person, but also more capable of using your sense of mission to mobilize others.

Leaders can have many reasons why they want to lead, but there are two key questions that always come to the foreground; what does the leader ultimately want to achieve (*values-setting*) and whose interests does the leader want to serve (*interests-setting*)?

### **Values-Setting: The Paradox of Wealth & Health**

People's core values are what they find fundamentally important. When deciding what to do and where to go, people's core values drive their choices. They provide the basic criteria for determining which options should be more highly regarded than the others. They constitute the gauge against which the goodness of a decision can be measured.

In the context of business, one of the core values needs to be the creation of economic value. Business leaders need to be focused on creating wealth, otherwise the life span of their firm will be extremely short. Without profit, they will not be able to invest and without an economically viable business model they won't be able to pay the bills. Therefore, leaders need to be driven by the desire to create economic value-added, by satisfying customer needs better than rival firms and by running an efficient organization. They need to direct their people towards both market effectiveness and organizational efficiency, getting them to embrace the importance of winning the competitive game and making money.

Besides the "money" side of organizational life, leaders also need to pay attention to the "meaning" side<sup>vii</sup>. Firms are more than only economic machines; they are social environments in which people spend a large part of their waking lives. Many people don't feel fulfilled by only creating wealth, they want to strive towards a higher goal. They don't only want to do well (*welfare*), they want to do good (*well-being*). Some place a high value on their personal health and development, physically, emotionally and socially, while others want to contribute to the well-being of particular groups, society or the environment. Leaders, too, need to consider what

will make them feel sound of body and mind. Which aspects of personal, social and environmental health should they value most?

The popular phrase “people, planet, profit” suggests that it is possible to strive for wealth and health at the same time, but in practice there is a tension between the two that is not easily resolved, necessitating leaders to lean over to one side or the other. Moreover, many leaders just don’t award equal importance to both wealth and health. Leaders who place more emphasis on wealth have a *value-driven leadership style*. They are in the business game to create material prosperity for clients, employees and/or themselves, focusing on achieving a strong competitive position and a sustainable level of profitability. Leaders gravitating more to the health-side of the balance have a *virtue-driven leadership style*. To them, money is a means, not an end. They need to run an economically-viable business to survive, but the true purpose is to achieve a higher virtue – achieving personal development, contributing to science, alleviating regional unemployment, curing the ill or saving the rainforest, to name just a few examples.

### **Interests-Setting: The Paradox of Self-actualization & Service**

Leaders also need to determine in whose interest they want to lead. *Qui bono?* Who should benefit from the act of leading, the leader or the followers? To some extent the leader needs to benefit, otherwise there would be no motivation to become a leader. Leaders need to understand their own needs and make sure that these needs are fulfilled. As Maslow already pointed out decades ago, these needs can range from a desire for money and power, to a craving for recognition and acceptance, to a longing for personal development and the achievement of a dream. With a wink to Maslow, we can label the fulfillment of any set of personal needs by a leader as self-actualization – the leader becomes what she/he wants to become.

Besides serving their own interests, leaders also need to serve the interests of the followers, otherwise there would be no motivation to follow. Different followers can have widely differing needs, varying from a sense of security and monetary gain, to acknowledgement, support, respect, advice, approval, challenge and meaning. Followers can also have their own dreams and personal development ambitions. To a certain extent the leader will need to be of service to the followers to be able to get people to move in a certain direction.

Yet, in balancing between self-actualization and service, leaders often exhibit a tendency to favour one side over the other. Leaders emphasizing their own interests over those of the followers have a *sovereign leadership style*. They have become leaders because of their strong desire to fulfill their own dreams and they attempt to recruit people who are willing to help. They are the masters of their own destiny, who find followers willing to support them in their endeavour. Leaders emphasizing service over self-actualization have a *servant leadership style*<sup>viii</sup>. They have become leaders because of their strong desire to help others and to work towards the success of the team.

### **Leadership & Self**

The previous eight dimensions have all dealt with the ways in which leaders try to influence others. But leaders also have a big impact by who they are. It is not only how they try to lead that sways others, but also what type of person they are and how they normally behave. How leaders listen, talk, sit, walk, look and gesture are all registered by potential followers. How they seem to think, how they show emotions, how they engage in conversation, how they react to

stress and whether they actually practice what they preach; it is all picked up. Even characteristics such as personality, age, appearance, education, organizational position, social standing, nationality and beliefs can be significant. The identity of leaders, in all its aspects, is an integral part of the influence they have.

More precisely, it is the perception of the leader's identity in the eyes of potential followers that is of importance. It is the image that leaders have that wins the confidence of others. Therefore, leaders need to be concerned with both who they are and how others view them. Leaders can work on their self, improving their skills, changing their outlook, living the behavior they expect from others and adjusting themselves to situational needs. But leaders also need to work on their "personal branding", positioning themselves towards stakeholders, deciding which characteristics to emphasize and what to reveal of themselves.

There are many style differences due to the specific identity/image of leaders. One could even argue that all leaders have their own unique style. Yet, there are two key dimensions along which the basic behavior of leaders strongly shapes how they are perceived by the potential followers around them. These two issues are how leaders approach leadership issues (*leadership problem-solving*) and how they adjust to their leadership environment (*leadership attunement*).

### **Leadership Problem-Solving: The Paradox of Thought and Action**

When confronted with any type of leadership issue, leaders need to think and act. Whether the challenge is in the market or in the organization, and whether it is an opportunity or a threat, leaders need to reflect on the situation and take initiatives to deal with it.

Of course, thinking about leadership challenges is very valuable. Taking the time to thoroughly reflect on the situation can provide useful insights into the issues behind the issue. Taking a step back to carefully put things into perspective and to gain an overview of what's going on can help the leader to avoid jumping to conclusions. Proper analysis and some good mulling over can give the leader a range of possible options and a well-reasoned view on the advantages and risks of the various alternatives. Similarly, acting on leadership challenges is crucial. Taking the initiative to get things moving is the only way to achieve a result. Seizing the bull by the horns and mobilizing people to help make things happen is how outcomes are realized.

Yet, in balancing thinking and acting, leaders don't always place equal emphasis on both. Nor do they always prefer to do thinking and acting in the same order. Leaders with a preference to think thoroughly before they act have a *reflective leadership style*. Instead of shooting from the hip, they take a disciplined response to external challenges, first letting the situation sink in, before formulating a response and then moving to action. Leaders favouring action over thought have a *proactive leadership style*. It is not that they don't think, but they don't wait to finish the thinking before they act. To them, thinking and acting go hand in hand, as most leadership issues can only be resolved by taking them on and figuring out how to proceed along the way. Instead of researching issues to death, proactive leaders believe in getting things moving, trusting that solutions will present themselves as the situation unfolds. Just do it, and apologize if you were wrong.

### **Leadership Attunement: The Paradox of Authenticity and Adjustment**

As leadership requires followership, it has become widely accepted that leaders need to adjust themselves to the requirements of followers<sup>ix</sup>. Such "situational leadership" demands that

leaders understand the capabilities of their followers and the nature of the followers' work, so that these leaders can optimally attune their approach to the given situation. Yet, many other factors can come into play, requiring leaders to adjust. Followers can have different psychological needs, cultural backgrounds, interests, ambitions, cognitive abilities, prejudices and personal histories. Teams can have different compositions, personal relationships, unwritten rules and joint experiences. Not to mention the differences between functional areas, companies, industries and countries that can have an impact. Without the ability to adjust one's "self" to the outside world, leaders would hardly be able to function.

At the same time, the need to be authentic is also widely accepted<sup>x</sup>. To not be seen as a fake, merely "playing" a leadership role, one needs to "be" a leader, as close as possible to one's true self. Potential followers will quickly sniff out whether someone is bona fide in actions and intent, or just mouthing the words taught in a leadership course. Moreover, being genuine is easier to keep up in the long run and allows leaders to build on their core strengths, instead of attempting to do something for which they have no talents.

With the need for authenticity and adjustment so widely accepted, it is surprising to note how few people have acknowledged the tension between them. The two truly form a paradox, in which we would like to have both, while they seem the conflicting opposites of each other. Leaders favoring authenticity over adjustment have a *consistent leadership style*. Coming from the inside, the way they lead is highly consistent wherever they are and whoever they lead. Their character, beliefs, values and strengths shape their approach, more or less irrespective of the circumstances they are in. To them "it doesn't all depend", but rather "what you see is what you get". Leaders favoring adaptation over authenticity have a *responsive leadership style*. Being highly sensitive to the needs and expectation of those around them, they tailor their approach to each specific situation they are in. To them it makes no sense to get everyone to "read your manual", while you can provide a user-friendly interface. For the responsive leader it is not only a matter of effectiveness to adjust to the specific circumstances, but also a matter of respect – who do you think you are as a leader making everyone adapt to you?

## **Leadership and Learnership**

This is good point at which to go back to the leadership style profiler in table 1 and to check whether your first quick and dirty profile accurately portrays your current leadership styles. Where you feel that you cover a range of styles, feel free to circle more than one number. When you're finished, go through it a second time, circling the numbers representing the styles you would like to have in a few years time. Take into consideration how you would like to develop as a person, what your career ambitions are, what your strengths are and where you see your organization headed (or the circumstances in the organization where you would like to work). If you want to keep the same style, but get better at it, you can make the circle a different color. If you want to "stretch" your style repertoire, circle some numbers representing styles you have difficulty putting into practice.

You now have your leadership development objectives set for the coming years. Without needing to aspire to become the next Richard Branson or Elon Musk, you can still work towards becoming a more effective leader. Your challenge is to work on the leadership style dimensions you have chosen, but without a simple blueprint telling you what to do. You need to experiment

to find out what works for you, then practice and repeat until you feel you're getting it. Just as no great chef learnt haute cuisine from a cookbook, you too are on your own.

Well, not entirely. It's actually a good idea to share your objectives with people around you, in particular the ones you want to lead, for instance your direct reports, your colleagues and your boss. Recruiting your followers to be your teachers might seem counterintuitive and feel a bit awkward, but showing this vulnerability, openness and willingness to learn will tickle their interest, earn you a lot of respect and give them a stake in your development. As John F. Kennedy said four decades ago: "Leadership and learnership are indispensable to one another" – giving the great example of learnership is a sure way to improve your leadership in more ways than one.

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