

Managing Your Style

By Robert Whipple, MBA CPLP

Style is a fascinating part of leadership. It covers a vast territory, everything from how you react when angered to how you comb your hair. ***Style has a significant impact on trust*** because it defines how you react under certain conditions. If trust is all about consistency, then a deep understanding of your style can help you avoid unwitting trust withdrawals. That doesn't mean your style must be stagnant. It should evolve over time and be tested in various ways discussed later in this chapter. Conscious changes in style need to happen with care so trust is not compromised in the process.

Understand your Style

Webster defines style as, “the distinguishing way in which something is done, said, written, made, executed, etc.” How you react to people and situations is the basis of your style. It is also helpful to think of style as an art, and mastery of it will help you interact with other people constructively. Your style will be different under a variety of circumstances. It is a complex area that requires an investment of time to master.

You can characterize your own style and work with others to understand their styles. Once everyone is comfortable with the process, then it can be exciting to work together to optimize how people's styles work together. This improves personal bonding, while reducing friction among your team in daily activities. Do this as an exercise whenever you inherit a new team or want to improve relationships in an existing group. You will learn how to work together more effectively. The process is simple.

Using Style Instruments:

1. Select an instrument that helps characterize style (see below).
2. Have everyone on the team take the survey.
3. Analyze the data with the help of a trained professional.
4. Discuss the implications of style differences.
5. Clarify how you can use these data to improve team effectiveness and interpersonal relations.
6. Develop a plan and get commitment.

Since there are thousands of dimensions, how do you characterize a person's style? There are a number of excellent, well-documented, instruments available that make the task manageable. The two most famous ones are the MBTI (Myers Briggs Type Indicator) and the DiSC Profile. Most seasoned leaders have taken one or both of these instruments, and they can spout out their "type." The issue I have with using these methods alone is that they send a subliminal signal of the box you are in with no ability to manage yourself to a different box.

I like to visualize style as a continuum of many variables, where you display preferences and *manage them* based on the circumstances. There are no wrong or right styles, but how you manifest preferences is critical to success.

Ten examples of dimensions that relate to style:

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| 1. Level of trust | Reinforcing people for sharing conflicting views |
| 2. Political acumen | Knowing when to stand firm and when to back off |
| 3. Emotion vs. Analysis | Dealing with situations - gut level vs. logic |
| 4. Tolerance vs. Impatience | Cracking down or encouraging |
| 5. Irrationality and Fear | Using these or avoiding them |
| 6. Do outrageous things to make a point | Creating folk tales about yourself |
| 7. Dealing with bureaucracy | Feeding the animal when necessary |

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| 8. Level of micro-management | Managing by looking over people's shoulders |
| 9. Atmosphere | Having fun in the organization – laughing at ourselves |
| 10. Reinforcement | Making it work as intended |

Thinking of style in this context, you can identify additional items for your situation. There is no such thing as a “correct” set of items, but it is helpful to have a list like those above to increase understanding.

Optimizing Leadership Style

Use the list above as a way to generate dialog among your leadership team. How well are you doing with these issues of style? What is working for you and what is not? Each leader has methods of getting through to people, eliciting responses helpful to the organization. Often these style behaviors are occurring on a subconscious level, where the leader is not even aware of how she is responding. It is helpful to have a forum with other leaders where you can share ideas about style and compare notes. These discussions can be pithy, deep, and very insightful. Try taking your key leaders off site for a day or two to discuss these concepts. They will come away refreshed and stimulated.

Allow yourself to explore reasonable modifications to your style in order to learn new ways of leading. This is key to being a leader in a learning organization. Steven Covey described it this way in “Principle-Centered Leadership”:

“Some may wonder if it’s possible for senior managers, old dogs, to learn a new style or trick. Some may contend that our styles – whether we are vocalists, comedians, or managers – are so deeply imprinted that by the time we turn ten, twenty, or thirty, they’re etched in stone. I think that although it is very difficult to adapt or change our style, it’s not impossible. Our leadership style can be ‘situational,’ but before we’re able to make a change, we may require new mentors and models.”

One leader may be highly successful using an occasional tantrum, while the same technique would backfire for others. The idea of experimenting with style to learn new modes of operation will enhance your leadership. You cannot change your underlying nature, but there are numerous ways to modify style in particular situations to expand your repertoire.

One caution: develop an environment of trust *before* experimenting with style. If you try different styles without first establishing trust, people will become totally confused, and you will undermine efforts to build the right environment. Your behaviors need to form a pattern of consistency before you can venture into

a learning mode on style. When you do, the style must be congruent with your true feelings. You are not playing games with people, only trying a different mode of sharing your feelings. If people react with, “What the heck is he trying to do? He is completely off the wall!” you are too inconsistent. The reaction you are looking for is, “That’s interesting. He is not acting with his typical response on this issue. Something significant must be going on here.”

Real World Examples

In the living laboratory of leadership I encouraged all leaders to understand their style, solidify it, then grow by trying new approaches. I tried modifying my own style too. This was a fun and easy way to learn new modes of style that helped me broaden skills in several areas. Here are a couple examples for clarity.

I hate customer complaints. They are an intolerable failure of the system and must be totally eliminated. When we would get a complaint, I would insist on an analysis of the failure and corrective actions. I especially hated mixed or misidentified product, where the customer thought they were getting Product A but found Product B in the box. My style, when we got a complaint, was great disappointment followed by firm resolve and ultimately gratitude for the good detective and preventive effort put forth by the staff.

Once when we sent out some product with incorrect packaging, I decided to modify my normal style and become more intense. I became visibly angry, insisting that the people involved call customers to personally warn them and apologize. They got the message and things became tighter after that. Also, the workers got a kick out of talking to real customers. The customers were impressed that factory workers would care enough to pick up the phone to warn them of a potential problem. It worked out well for everyone, and it would never have happened without a willingness to experiment with actions outside my normal style.

Another time, we had something mysterious causing a customer defect. We knew it was caused in our production line but couldn’t pinpoint the source. My normal style is to be supportive and patient with the analysis phase, but this time people weren’t attacking the problem with enough intensity. I put my sleeping bag in my car and went into the plant to stay until the problem was resolved. That made a big impression and we got to the bottom of it quickly.

That episode also taught me it is vital to verify information *yourself*. The defect consisted of blue spots on the product that were so small they could only be observed under magnification. A technician was assigned to inspect test sheets for spots. He reached the conclusion there was no pattern to the spots, which made diagnosis more difficult. I believed the technician because he was a former quality inspector familiar with this kind of defect. We struggled for days trying to characterize the source with little progress. Finally, at one point, I picked up the magnifier myself and looked intently at the sheet. The technician was correct; the larger of the spots were random. Looking more carefully, I saw there were many

extremely small particles that did form a pattern. Once we knew that, the source of contamination was easy to determine.

In “The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership,” Steven Sample explained it this way:

“I call this ‘counting the widgets in the stockroom yourself.’ It’s amazing how often you’ll find that the allegedly factual information you’ve been receiving for years about a particular matter is completely erroneous, not because the person gathering the information is malicious or incompetent, but simply because he misunderstood what it was he was supposed to count or misinterpreted how he was supposed to count it.”

There is nothing magic in these examples. The key is to try new things in certain situations so you can grow. After you have a firm foundation in values and vision and you have established an environment of trust, do not always act the same way. Try out new responses in certain situations to see if they work for you. In the process you will be growing in leadership.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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