

Introduction

This essay will present an overview of the three different leadership styles the author has served under (authoritarian, democratic & laissez-faire), and will discuss the traits necessary toward successfully leading project teams in his current place of employment.

Background

There have been two broad categories of leadership styles observed by the author during service in the military and in the private sector: The first is the authoritarian or formal type of leadership; and the second is the supportive and more flexible type of leadership. According to the situational leadership model of Hersey and Blanchard (1977), different objectives and circumstances require differing leadership traits in order to accomplish the goals of different organizations.

Authoritarian leadership was prevalent during much of the author's military training and in close combat operations, characterized by the dominance of officers and non-commissioned officers giving detailed orders and making all decisions. The work required speed and efficiency, and therefore the quality most required of the unit members was obedience. Such a leadership style was extraordinarily effective when dealing with teams operating under the most stressful circumstances and whose actions necessitated precise coordination at a centralized control point.

On the other hand, supportive leadership was more customary during the author's periods of employment in academic and service-based organizations, characterized by flexible management, incorporating participatory decision-making and a high degree of professional freedom and initiative. For an instructor to effectively impart knowledge, as well as for a customer-oriented serviceperson to successfully perform tasks, much discretion must be given by management for the individual to blend intuition with reason. Such occupations involve mostly one-on-one approaches, requiring rapport-building in order to effectively move the student or client toward the desired outcome.

Manufacturing operations gave witness to a blend of both flexible and formal styles, with managers and supervisors being given considerable latitude in their personal methods of implementing the strategic objectives of management; yet employing fairly rigid controls with the hands-on workers whose tasks required a high degree of precision. The particular degree of flexibility or control depended on the related factors of the type of task (e.g., precision machining versus handicrafts) and the necessary skills of the workforce.

Generally, the author has perceived that a well-educated, competent and professional work group desires greater initiative and decision-making power. Such people believe they have a great deal to offer and will feel frustrated if they are expected merely to obey. A less educated and less

technically competent group will feel a need for greater authoritarianism and formal structuring, and may feel as if they should not be required to show initiative or to make decisions. Moreover, inexperienced people and learners appreciate a greater degree of structuring and detailed instructions they can follow.

Currently

My present work involves managing corporate-wide data integration projects for a large financial institution, operating six affiliated commercial banks in eight western states. What makes the institution so distinctive is its unique operating philosophy of retaining the local touch, and thus customer loyalty, while also giving senior managers a considerable amount of autonomy. As described in the Spring 2003 issue of Bank Director Magazine (Milligan, 2003), The CEO stated: "...our determination was to do something different that would recreate the kind of local franchise that had a lot of appeal to customers. And that has allowed us to attract some very good people to run these franchises for us, people that would not find themselves happy working in a very large organization. I think they are by nature more entrepreneurial and we give them license to be more entrepreneurial. We [at the parent company] try to stay out of the way as much as we can."

While the bank's philosophy serves it well in retaining employee and customer loyalty, leading projects in an environment where each of the sibling banks is allowed to retain its own brand, operations and culture, presents enormous challenges involving widely diverse personality, logistical, geographical and organizational issues. The precise processing of time-sensitive data is critical, yet the management style of the institution's senior executives, being basically laissez-faire, does not incorporate the traits of command and control necessary to guide the staff in conducting efficient operations. Such matters are turned over entirely to project managers, many of whom - like the author - are contractors with no authority over the individual project team members.

To be a successful in such a loosely controlled environment requires the author to exhibit a rather special mixture of management traits, such as:

Forgetting Rank, Titles, Positions

Project managers, particularly those who are contractors without any direct authority, need to forget where team members sit on the organizational chart, focusing on objectives, timeframes and the tasks that people need to accomplish.

Not Giving Orders

Trying to force a deadline or accountability usually does more harm than good. It is very important to focus on asking for what is needed, rather than issuing directives.

Asking Questions

Many times team members will best respond well to task accomplishment when the project manager asks the right questions in the right context, and letting someone else take the stage.

Involving Everyone in Planning Sessions

When projects are large and complicated, and involve persons from many different departments and banks, they must all be involved in the planning process, in order that they will have a psychological buy-in and a stake in the outcome.

Stroking Egos

Team members are flattered to be asked for an opinion or for help.

Being Straightforward when Mistakes Occur

The author needs to be willing to admit that perhaps details of the task were not communicated correctly, allowing himself and other project members to make progress without assigning blame, thereby concentrating on fixing what went wrong.

Issuing Kudos and Thanks

Since most project teams in the author's current working environment participate without the direct oversight of their evaluators, it is important for the project manager to congratulate people in writing for their specific contributions and to copy their bosses on the correspondence.

Conclusion

I have observed that the trend in the financial services business may be heading away from hierarchical reporting relationships with command-and-control styles of management. In such environments a mix of leadership types is needed, so part of the author's project management style involves analyzing such factors as the makeup of the work group and the culture of the sibling banks, then working with project team members in a collaborative fashion toward accomplishing tasks in a precise, timely, and cost-effective manner.

References

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