

Can a Leader be Too Collaborative?

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Can a leader be too collaborative? Unfortunately, yes.

If you've been a reader of my articles, you know that I strongly advocate collaborative decision-making over "command and control" dictatorship. However, in working with specific leaders, I point out that the situation at hand should dictate which is the more relevant approach. At appropriate times, exercising authority is not only a leader's right but also the most responsible action!

An excellent distinction between directive and collaborative styles is contained in a 2002 essay, "Power and Influence in the 21st Century," by Allan R. Cohen and David L. Bradford. Allan Cohen is Distinguished Professor of Global Leadership at Babson College. David Bradford is Senior Lecturer Emeritus in Organizational Behavior and Leadership at Stanford University.

If you have interest in this topic, I strongly encourage you to look up their treatise at:

http://influencewithoutauthority.com/files/power_and_influence_in_the_21st_century_final.pdf

The essence of the essay is that leaders in the 21st century will have to be skilled and comfortable in exercising both directive and collaborative approaches as the circumstances and judgment dictate.

The final two pages of their document summarize characteristics of leaders who are too directive, appropriately directive, appropriately collaborative, and too collaborative.

I'd love to have the space to provide a glimpse of all four styles. However, you can obtain their comparison and contrast for yourself simply by looking up the essay. You can even find out why in the future, perhaps the most effective technique will be a merger of the directive and collaborative approaches. Only when a leader can count on team members to push back when they have information that contradicts the leader can he or she use full strength in pursuing initiatives.

My objective in this article is slightly different. Sometimes I receive resistance from leaders who are too comfortable executing in a directive (and sometimes too directive) manner. They frequently minimize or don't even realize the detrimental effect they have on those under their authority.

These individuals often have observed leaders who have been too collaborative. The result can be something like, "I'm too results-oriented to tolerate that time-consuming namby-pamby silliness. If folks can't handle my 'tell it like it is' style, they can leave!" And sometimes, indeed, the organization loses good contributors who seek a more welcoming acceptance of their experience elsewhere.

One characteristic of an overly collaborative leader is being too accommodating. They are too nice to people at the expense of work. An appropriately collaborative leader is compassionate and responsive to people's needs and feelings, yet focuses on improved approaches to doing the work.

A too collaborative leader gives false praise or praises indiscriminately, failing to give corrective feedback. An appropriately collaborative leader helps people feel valued for their unique contributions and offers (and seeks) constructive feedback to enhance future performance.

A too collaborative leader avoids or smoothes over tense issues that need attention. An appropriately collaborative leader fosters harmony and defuses tension, yet works to identify and resolve underlying conflict.

An appropriately collaborative leader shares opinions yet also solicits the perspectives of others. A leader who is trying too hard to be collaborative seeks the opinions of others, yet doesn't reveal where he or she stands on issues.

These are just four of the nine comparisons addressed by Cohen and Bradford. (The table also includes descriptions for leaders who are directive and too directive in their approaches). Again, I strongly encourage leaders who seek the right balance between directive and collaborative styles to read and incorporate Cohen and Bradford's entire essay.

The essay originally appeared as chapter 12 in a 2002 book entitled *Organization 21C: Someday All Organizations Will Lead This Way*, edited by Subir Chowdhury.

A leader who has historically been directive in style should have little fear of experimenting with a more collaborative approach. The likelihood of going overboard is small. Additionally, a mostly collaborative individual should also learn and experiment with a more directive style, which could be the most effective approach in certain situations.

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