

Searching for the Rosetta Stone of Leadership Styles

Wouldn't it be terrific if, after so many decades of intense effort by so many dedicated practitioners and academics, finally someone broke the code and identified the true key to leadership effectiveness? Find that Rosetta Stone, just tell us all the formula, and we'll blissfully and gratefully follow that religion forevermore.

Seriously, after all these years of trying, wouldn't you think *someone* would've figured it out by now? The truth is that we probably have figured it out, but the answer may sound like a cop-out to some. Put simply: There is no one right style. This is far from a cop-out; what it means is that leadership effectiveness is situational, and alas, there can be no "one size fits all." What works well under one set of circumstances may be just the wrong prescription for the next.

The implications for leaders, and particularly new leaders, are profound.

- The first "aha" for many is the realization that "Wow, everyone isn't just like me!" Effective leaders learn that employees differ along many dimensions ranging from what motivates them, to how they learn and process information, to their preferred methods of communication.
- Many of us will admit learning this lesson the hard way, after getting nowhere trying to force fit what suits us onto someone else. A more effective (and less frustrating) strategy is simply to take the time up front to engage people in conversation, asking them questions like:
 - What gets you excited on the job?
 - When receiving information, do you prefer a lot of detail, or are you a "just the headlines" kind of person?
 - Do you prefer email, voicemail, face-to-face or telephone communications?
 - Are you most comfortable learning by trial and error, learning from other people, or reading the users' manual?
 - Do you typically like to go with your first instincts, or do you get a better result after mulling things over for a while?
- Savvy leaders are constantly using their radar to scan for cues others give out about what they want and need. They usually accomplish this with well developed questioning, probing and listening skills, in addition to keen observation skills. The concepts are simple. Figuring out where people are and what they need, then meeting them there and giving them just what they need leads to more productive business outcomes. And make no mistake, this is far from a touchy-feely, feel good strategy; it's a

rational investment of your time because it creates more productive business results.

- It gets just a tad more complicated when we realize that sometimes the same people need something different depending on the task. This is the essence of “situational leadership” where Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey teach that people need different degrees of direction and support depending on how much skill and commitment they have to a particular task. Ask me to administer 360° feedback to a team of executives, and I don’t need much direction or support. Ask me to lead the company’s annual inventory process and I need a whole lot of both from my boss. As Ken Blanchard counsels, “different strokes for different folks, and different strokes for the same folks on different tasks.”¹

Despite the best efforts of many capable management gurus, my guess is that we never will agree on any one best style. Given that prediction, the most successful leaders will continue to be those who are the most versatile, able to read their audiences and adapt accordingly. Whether dealing with bosses, peers or direct reports, these folks have fast-forwarded beyond “it’s all about me.” They’re the ones who know that when it comes to bringing out the best in people, it’s all about the other guy, and the other guy is often a moving target.

¹ Ken Blanchard’s Situational Leadership®, 1994 Blanchard Training and Development, Inc.