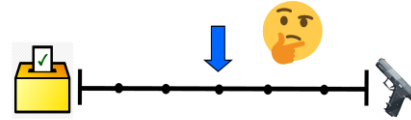


The Workplace: Democracy or Dictatorship?

The culture survey results were shocking: key employees were leaving the organization because they perceived their managers were autocratic and they were never consulted for their opinions. That's when I received a call asking what we could do to help.



This company has a high engineering focus, with many data and software engineers and specialists. Very difficult to recruit at the best of times, well-nigh impossible now in the context of demanding, well-educated millennials arriving on the job market, but in not enough numbers, and a pandemic making everyone rethink the priority they place on having a job in the traditional sense. Starting to work on this mandate made me relook at the balance leaders and managers should be aiming for between allowing employees free reign in taking decisions. The whole range, between complete freedom of action with little or no input from their boss, to the boss simply dictating what has to be done: in other words, choosing between a “democratic” and a “dictatorial” approach.

The problem is that the workplace has always been behind societal trends. After the Second World War, employees fresh out of the military were used to giving and receiving orders. People didn't much question that an autocratic management style was acceptable and necessary to get things done. This style had been around for centuries and was given some scientific credibility by Taylorism, the very directive approach based on the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor at the end of the 19th century. Henry Ford built his cars and roared to new heights of productivity using Taylorism, so who could argue with success?

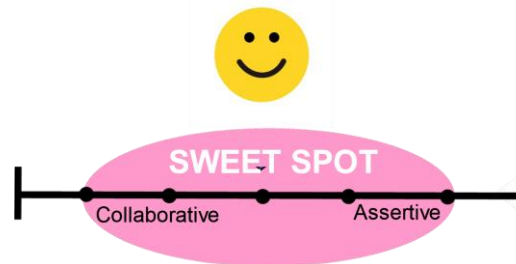
The first people who started to question autocratic leadership were in the “Baby Boomer” generation. They were more educated, felt themselves to more capable of making significant contributions, at whatever level in the company they occupied, and they demanded more autonomy. This was even more so with women and people in visible minorities who felt they should be given more responsibility and allowed to move up the decision-making chain. This tendency only accelerated with the succeeding generations, sometimes referred to as “Generation X”, “Generation Y” and then “The Millennials”. What made the tendency accelerate was, on the one hand the increasing complexity of the goods and services that needed to be produced, and on the other, the higher levels of education and specialization needed from every member of the

workforce. Leaders and managers could not know everything and the only way forward was to envisage a more participative approach to leading and managing their people.

And that's where we are today, how do we strike the right balance? Luckily, there is a lot of research available on leadership, what makes it effective or less effective.

The Leadership "Sweet Spot"

We often use the Human Synergistics® 12-style model, because it is based on over 50 years of continuous research and, like much other research, it points to the most effective leaders as being capable of considerable flexibility in choosing which style of leadership to use and in which situations. They tend to act in a leadership "Sweet Spot" delimited by the use of a more or less collaborative, or participative approach.



Leaders are paid to lead, to take decisions and this means they need to be assertive at the right time. It is rare that they will use a fully democratic or fully dictatorial approach, but they will mostly navigate somewhere in a flexible continuum between the two.

An example of a rare, almost 100% democratic approach was given to me by a client a few years ago. As the owner of a pharmacy which had to offer 14-hour 7-day-a-week service, she had to ensure she had adequate staffing at all times, including during the least popular late-evening shifts. Her approach was to delegate the job of setting up the staffing schedule to all her staff and telling them that she could live any schedule they all approved, as long as it kept the pharmacy open during the mandatory hours. She gave the staff full responsibility for the schedule because she could, and with no downside negative impact.

An opposite example of a more or less dictatorial decision came from another client, a manufacturing company that was renovating the employees' cafeteria. Management at first thought it would be a good idea to let employees vote on the best color scheme. However, participation was low and the voting system created more divisiveness than agreement, albeit only among the few employees who participated. So management imposed a color scheme in order to move forward quickly. Again, they did so because they could. The stakes in this case were low and a collaborative approach was proving ineffective and even counterproductive.

Currently, research, for example that of Human Synergetics cited above, points to the most effective leaders using the rule of thumb that leads them to favour being as collaborative or participative as situations allow. This leads to them seek maximum input and discussion from both their teams of direct reports and also from their “ecosystem” of colleagues and clients, both internal and external. The specific leadership behaviours we encourage our participants in our leadership development programs are:

Demonstrating energy and enthusiasm. This in turn leads to encouraging people at all levels to innovate and be adaptable and not to fear punishment for taking measured risks.

Focusing on continuously developing others. Leaders need the people around them to be as competent as possible. This means they need to use key behaviours such as highly effective listening and influencing skills to develop others to their maximum potential.

Focusing on excellence. This means always pushing others to deliver the best possible performance the circumstances allow. This set of leadership behaviours sometimes results in swinging the needle more to the “assertive” side of the leadership “sweet spot”.

Using team input wherever possible. Leaders using this focus tend to seek maximum collaboration from all stakeholders before moving ahead with a decision. This is not always possible - think of the Fire Chief deploying his brigade in an emergency fire situation. But, in most situations getting the team’s input is a very possible behaviour to deploy and it will greatly increase the quality of the final team performance.