



Finding the Right Balance — and Flexibility — in Your Leadership Style

By Jennifer Jordan, Michael Wade, and Tomoko Yokoi

There have been many calls for leadership approaches to shift to meet the demands of a fast-changing, unpredictable world. Traditional “command-and-control” styles are considered outdated, while newer, more agile, and collaborative approaches have become de rigueur.

However, the reality for today's leaders is more complex than “out with the old, in with the new.” For example, we found that some aspects of leadership that seemed to be outdated, such as top-down decision-making and a focus on tactical execution, were extremely valuable to get through the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, rather than settling on a more static model of emerging behaviors, we found that “seven leadership tensions” between the traditional and emerging worlds were a much more accurate way to describe the current state of effective leadership.

Our research, conducted with more than 1,000 managers across the globe, suggests that what's out-of-date is the idea that a leader should adopt a fixed leadership style that's agnostic to the specific context in which he or she is operating. A single approach to leadership, whether traditional or emerging, is not going to meet the myriad of challenges that today's leaders face.

Thus, rather than perfecting a “leadership sweet spot,” a leader needs to develop and broaden his or her “leadership sweet range.” The wider this range becomes, the more effective or versatile the leader will be.

Broadening the range of leadership capabilities requires progressing through three distinct stages.

Stage 1: Understand yourself

Cognitive self-awareness. The first step to building your leadership sweet range is to be aware of your own natural strengths and weaknesses — that is, to build your cognitive self-awareness. This will provide you a baseline or default range where you feel most comfortable. Becoming more self-aware requires being open to external feedback (both formal and informal), as well as paying attention to areas in which you struggle or seek to avoid, or noticing when your colleagues aren't relying on you to complete a task or assignment.

One leader we worked with noticed that his colleagues tended to give him projects that required him to “go deep” and exploit an existing idea (Miner) rather than venturing out with the team to explore new opportunities (Prospector). After receiving direct feedback that confirmed his assumption, he realized that he needed to develop a broader, more curious outlook to provide the leadership his team needed during a time of disruption.

Stage 2: Understand your environment

Situational awareness. Leaders facing disruption must be able to interpret their environment, understanding what features are present and what implications they have for the task at hand. It's both sensing and making sense of the world. First, you need to experience a given situation in a present and non-judgmental way. Next, you must identify the relevant stimuli from the environment and separate those from the noise.

For example, a leader of a multinational fast-moving consumer goods company found that she was struggling with several complex problems that could benefit from wider viewpoints. After getting feedback in her annual 360 that she tended to speak more

than listen, she realized that moving along the spectrum from a Teller to more of a Listener would improve her leadership effectiveness.

Inter- and intra-personal emotional awareness. Leaders need to develop cognitive empathy, which is an awareness of the emotions of the people around them. This is both a trait and a skill: While some people naturally have stronger tendencies to sense others' emotions, this skill can also be improved through focused effort and practice.

For example, the director for multichannel marketing at a consumer goods firm proposed an ambitious plan for an upcoming campaign but sensed doubt from her team, which lacked enthusiasm and seemed to procrastinate more than usual. She realized that she was placing too much emphasis on her gut feeling (Intuitionist), so she started to amass data to support her point of view (Analyst). Some of this data went against the plan she was proposing, which ultimately led to some key adjustments in the campaign.

In addition to interpersonal awareness, a leader needs to develop intrapersonal awareness, or the ability to accurately sense one's own emotional state. We found that leaders who sensed a strong emotion about a situation — and listened to this emotion — were using their Intuitionist ability. Ideally, these leaders then also cross-checked these internal signals with what the relevant data was suggesting.

Stage 3: Broaden your range

If you are fortunate, the most appropriate behavior in a given situation falls within your leadership sweet range. In this case, the action is relatively straightforward.

However, if the situation calls for a behavior beyond your range, then the gap will need to be bridged. There are three approaches you can take to do this.

Practice micro-behaviors. Rather than undertaking a grand move to shift your behavior, you can target micro-behaviors that move you closer to your end goal. A micro-behavior is something small, maybe even seemingly insignificant, but consistent with the direction you want to move.

The multichannel marketing director mentioned above was trying to become less driven by her desire for perfection (Perfectionist), and more comfortable with speed (Accelerator). So, she pushed herself to make decisions by a particular point in time, say by end-of-day, regardless of whether or not she had all the available data.

Seek out role models. You can often find motivation from peers who possess different capabilities and can act as role models for the kinds of behaviors you seek to develop and apply.

For example, a finance executive leading a new risk-management team for a shipping company received feedback that he was giving too many detailed, short-term directions rather than painting a long-term picture of the future (Tactician-Visionary). In response, he actively sought out individuals (both above and below him) whom he identified as visionary and sought to learn from their behavior.

Look inside and outside your team for help. Sometimes, working to bridge the gap between your default style and the most appropriate response would be inefficient in terms of time and effort. In such cases, the wisest plan of action is to look either inside or outside your existing team to fill the gap.

For example, a young risk manager at a fintech company realized that he was strong at adapting his behavior to meet the context of their fast-changing environment (Adapter). However, his team was often confused, as they were unsure about which “constants” that they could rely on. Noticing that several team members were strong communicators about fundamental values, he relied on them to edit all of his internal presentations to always have a “red thread” that linked with previous messaging (Constant).

The time has passed when a precisely sharpened set of leadership skills was enough to steer an organization into the future. The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us that leaders who are able to pivot their approaches perform better than those who can do a few things very well. Thus, organizations need leaders who can shift along with the environments in which they operate, which requires a continual progression of self-awareness, situational and emotional intelligence, and behavioral experimentation in order to broaden their behavioral range. Leaders need to experiment with different behaviors and approaches, learning over time which ones are right for a given context, as well as amassing new behavioral experiences. This is a learning loop wherein they enact a behavior and then reflect back on the situation to understand what went well, what didn't, and how to improve for the future.

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