Leadership Style Essay, Research Paper

Leadership style

Leadership style has been shown to be a major factor in the effectiveness of the organization, and different leadership styles are sometimes more effective in different situations. DuBrin, Ireland, and Williams (1989) note that effective organizational leaders are generally consistent in the way they try to influence the behavior of group members, with this consistent pattern of behavior being the leadership style of a given manager. The behavior of most managers is too complex to be described by a single style, and a manager may modify his or her style to match a given situation. Different approaches have been used to try to categorize leadership style, using different terms and different criteria for analyzing the issue.

The classical method of classifying leadership styles is based on a continuum of authority exerted by the leader. The styles of leadership identified under this approach are autocratic, participative, and free-rein, as indicated by DuBrin, Ireland, and Williams. The autocratic leader maintains the most authority by issuing orders without consulting group members. The basis for leadership is formal authority. Such a leader may have a few favored subordinates, but in general the autocratic leader regards close interpersonal relationships with group members as superfluous. In some situations, the autocratic style is appropriate, but one argument against this style is that executives using it are not completely effective because they create so much turmoil for their subordinates.

Three levels of participative leadership are identified. A participative leader is one who shares decision-making authority with the group. The consultative leader is one who solicits opinions from the group before making a decision, though he or she does not feel constrained to accept the thinking of the group. A consensual leader encourages group discussion on an issue and then makes a decision reflecting the general consensus, so such a leader gives more authority to the group than does the consultative leader. A democratic leader places final authority in the group, functioning as one who collects opinions and takes a vote before making a decision. Such a leader may give away so much authority as to be classified as a free-rein leader.

The free-rein leader turns over almost all authority to group members and provides as little leadership as possible. Such a leader maintains a hands-off policy as long as the situation is one in which the work to be done by each subordinate is clearly defined. The free-rein style may be held by an abdicator who cares very little for achieving productivity or efficiency, while in other cases this may be an appropriate style leading to high productivity.

One dimension of this type of categorization is the level of decision-making authority. Hersey and Blanchard (1988) note that managers spend much of their time reviewing and acting on the proposals of associates, upper management, and nonmanagement personnel. It is common to hear some managers talked of as being “decisive” and others as “lacking prudent judgment.” The authors find that decision making may seem like a very straightforward process and that there may seem to be simple steps for collecting and analyzing data, weighing alternatives, testing possible solutions, and arriving at a course of action. In actual practice, however, real-life decision are made in a pressure-packed environment in the face of inadequate input, conflicting information, budget restraints, time squeezes, scarce resources, and other elements that cloud the issues and threaten the quality of the decisions made. What the manager needs is a simple and logical framework for making decisions that will be successful.

The authors find that there are four basic decision-making styles–authoritative, consultative, facilitative, and delegative. Each style has a high probability of getting results depending on the readiness of the followers of the given situation, and the leadership style determines the relationship between the leader and his or her followers. Authoritative decision making is applicable in situations where the manager possesses the necessary experience and information to reach a conclusion and where followers do not possess the ability, willingness, or confidence to help. The manager makes the decision without seeking assistance. This style requires direct leader behavior. Followers are not usually active in determining a course of action, and the followers do not usually know what the decision is until the manager announces it. Authoritative decisions are required in cases where the manager has knowledge not possessed by others or where the manager is the only source of information or expertise.

Consultative decision making becomes a valuable strategy in cases where the manager recognizes that the followers also possess some experience or knowledge and are willing but not yet able to help. The best strategy in this case is to seek input before making the decision. The manager using this approach selects those followers who can help reach a decision and asks their assistance. The manager may or may not share with them all the details of the problem, and in any case it is the manager who makes the final decision.

Facilitative decision-making is a cooperative effort in which the manager and the followers work together and reach a shared decision. Delegate decision making occurs when the manager delegates the authority to make the decision, an approach that presumes that followers have the necessary knowledge and motivation to handle their tasks (Hersey & Blanchard: 412-415).

Another approach noted by DuBrin, Ireland, and Williams is the Managerial Grid, a framework for classifying leadership styles based on an examination of a leader’s concern for task accomplishments and people at the same time. The Grid has also been used as a comprehensive system of leadership training and organization development. Two dimensions of leadership are considered particularly important on the Grid–consideration, or the degree to which the leader creates an environment of emotional support and trust; and initiating structure, of the degree to which the leader initiates structure for employees with activities such as assigning specific tasks or scheduling work.

DuBrin et al. also explain Theory X and Theory Y, a classification method based on differences in assumptions made about people. The Theory X leader bases his or her actions on certain assumptions about people:

1) People dislike work and try to avoid it.

2) People dislike work, so managers must control, direct, coerce, and threaten subordinates to push them toward organizational goals.

3) People prefer to be directed, to avoid responsibility, and to seek security, since they lack ambition.

The Theory Y leader has a different set of assumptions about people:

1) Physical and mental work are natural parts of life and are not disliked by people.

2) People are self-motivated when they feel committed.

3) People are committed to goals if they attain rewards once the goals are reached.

4) People will seek and accept responsibility under favorable conditions.

5) People can be innovative in solving problems.

6) People are basically bright, but their abilities are generally underutilized in most job settings.

De Vries (1989) notes that Max Weber popularized the concept of charismatic leadership. This is a leadership style that Weber saw as possible for the gifted but not for every leader: “For Weber, charismatic individuals differ from others in that they have the capacity to personally inspire loyalty, which is quite distinct from authority derived from office or status” (13). The charismatic leader is usually seen as one who is born with this ability rather than as one who has developed it.

The different approaches to categorizing leadership styles all involve an analysis of leadership behavior in the organizational setting, with particular reference to how the leader relates to subordinates. The various investigations of decision-making style also involve the issue of how the leader relates to subordinates, here in terms of how much involvement the leader and the subordinates have in the decision-making process. Giving authority to employees is seen as an act of empowerment that is beneficial to subordinates and the organization: “Participation in organizational decision making allows workers to feel control over the direction of the organization and feel that management respects their opinions. For the organization, worker participation in decisions opens up a communication channel so that management can access an important source of knowledge and innovation–the workers” (Northcraft and Neale, 1990: p. 498).

The leader has a position in the hierarchy of the organization that makes him or her a leader, but how that leadership is manfested can vary widely. Kouzes and Posner (1987) examine successful leaders and state that there are five leadership practices common to these leaders: 1) challenging the process; 2) inspiring a shared vision; 3) enabling others to act; 4) modeling the way; and 5) encouraging the heart. These traits seem to describe the supportive, delegative, and participative leadership styles best, but as noted, other leadership styles can be effective in given situations.

References

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