

15 leadership styles: understanding different approaches

You may have worked with many different types of managers and leaders, some who you're inspired to follow and some who you may not click with straight away.

In fact, there are lots of different leadership styles, from those who tend to be autocratic to those who opt for more of a 'laissez-faire' approach. Each style is different, with its own key features, pros, and cons.

Some people respond more effectively to certain types of leadership than others. And it can be useful to have a few different leadership techniques up your sleeve, adjusting your approach to suit each situation.

In either case, understanding the differences between leadership approaches is important, and that's where this guide comes in. Below, we'll be taking an in-depth look at 15 unique leadership styles.

Autocratic leadership style

Definition: Autocratic leaders, sometimes described as authoritarian leaders, are those that like to be in control. They make all of the decisions themselves and are very clearly in charge of projects and plans, not involving their team members or employees in any decision-making whatsoever.

Characteristics: Autocratic leaders tend to be quite assertive people who know what they want and have high levels of confidence in their ability to make the right calls.

Pros and cons: On the plus side, autocratic leaders demand a certain level of respect and can make clear, unfiltered decisions, while employees have clearly-defined roles and won't interfere with the leader's choices. On the downside, this kind of approach can be considered a bit too strict or overwhelming for some workers.

When to use: The autocratic style is a handy one to use for leaders who have much more experience and qualifications compared to their team members and have a clear vision for how a project should unfold.

Democratic leadership style

Definition: Democratic leaders are very different to autocratic ones. They have a part to play in the decision-making role, but also include their team members in that process. They hold the top level of responsibility, but let other people have a voice and an influence over how a project goes.

Characteristics: Democratic leaders tend to be more easygoing than autocratic ones, with good communication skills and an eagerness to involve others.

Pros and cons: A big benefit of democratic leadership management styles is that they can make team members feel more valued, which can aid with engagement. Including team members in decision-making can also produce innovative, creative ideas. On the downside, having too many people making decisions may have a negative impact on the progress or end result of a project.

When to use: The democratic style has been proven to be one of the most effective, so is recommended for the majority of leadership situations, especially with eager, intelligent team members who can add something to the project.

Laissez-faire leadership style

Definition: Laissez-faire is a French phrase that essentially means taking a laid-back approach and allowing things to run their natural course, without any interference. These leaders have little to no involvement in the decision-making, letting their team make the choices and simply serving as a point of contact or reference, should they need it.

Characteristics: Laissez-faire leaders tend to be very laid-back and trusting of their

team members to make the right decisions.

Pros and cons: One of the benefits of this approach is that it shows confidence and trust in the team, which can engage and motivate them. On the downside, if the team is not capable of making the right decisions, projects can fail terribly with a laissez-faire leader.

When to use: This style is only appropriate to use when the leader has full confidence that their team is fully able to meet the project needs and deliver the right results.

Transformational leadership style

Definition: Transformational leadership is a relatively new and innovative style that has proven popular in recent years. It's all about 'transforming' and inspiring people to be the best versions of themselves, growing over the course of the project to deliver the best possible end result.

Characteristics: Transformational leaders tend to be trusting, inspiring, great communicators, and very empathetic towards others.

Pros and cons: Transformational leaders are often very inspiring and motivating people to follow, and this approach can help you get the very best out of every single team member. On the downside, it demands a high level of effort, and transformational leaders require certain skills and characteristics to succeed, like charisma.

When to use: The transformational style is a terrific choice if you have a set of workers and want to bring out the best in them.

Transactional leadership style

Definition: Transactional leadership is designed around the concept of a 'leader-follower transaction'. By accepting their role as a follower or member of the team, each worker essentially makes a commitment to follow their appointed leader.

Characteristics: Transactional leaders tend to be more calculating and organised than others, desiring a clear and transparent partition of roles among the group.

Pros and cons: A big benefit of this leadership style is that it very clearly outlines the key roles of the leader and the followers. Everyone knows their place in the system,

which should help to limit conflicts and disputes. However, some workers may not be satisfied with their limited 'follower' roles and desire more involvement.

When to use: The transactional style is a useful leadership approach to employ on projects where strict deadlines need to be met and a clear, defined process has to be followed.

Servant leadership style

Definition: As the name suggests, servant leadership is where the leader actually plays more of a 'servant' style role, focusing entirely on the needs of their team. These leaders are fully there to support, encourage, and provide for their teams, giving them whatever they need to succeed, checking in with them for feedback, and keeping them motivated.

Characteristics: Servant leaders are generous, giving people who like to help others. They are driven by a desire to see other workers improve and play a part in that development.

Pros and cons: One of the best benefits of this system is that workers tend to really appreciate it. Many employees like a boss or leader who seems to be there to support and help them, rather than boss them around. This can also help to bring the best out of workers. On the downside, servant leaders can end up being pushed around by their teams and may lack authority.

When to use: The servant style can be an interesting method to use when you have a team and want to bring out the best in them, or in situations where you're setting up a new department or business and want to build a successful, positive culture right away.

Situational leadership style

Definition: Situational leadership is mainly focused on the importance of adjusting one's leadership approach according to the situation. It's more of a flexible leadership type compared to many others, and it demands a certain level of adaptability from the leader.

Characteristics: Situational leaders need to be smart, quick thinkers, able to adjust to new situations and alter their approach to fit the situation.

Pros and cons: A great benefit of the situational approach is that it lets you keep employees engaged and on-track, even as circumstances and situations change and evolve. It can be a powerful method for engagement and motivation. However, it can be tricky for leaders who are new to this method to know how to respond in each situation.

When to use: The situational style is useful to try for projects where circumstances are expected to change and workers may have varying demands and needs over the course of the project.

Charismatic leadership style

Definition: Charismatic leadership, as the name implies, is a style of leadership that is built around charisma. It relies on the leader's own natural charm, charisma, and winning personality to inspire, engage, and motivate the team to succeed.

Characteristics: Charismatic leaders naturally need to be great talkers and inspiring people who are naturally charismatic, with great communication and persuasion skills.

Pros and cons: One of the best things about this leadership style is that it can work wonders for motivation. Many people like to follow a charismatic leader and will feel more encouragement and desire to impress and do their best. On the downside, this style is very personality-dependent, and if you don't have sufficient charisma, it's not really an option.

When to use: The charismatic style is one to try for people who have that natural charisma as part of their personality. It can be fused with other styles too, and it's ideal for those who are [new to leadership](#) and want to get off to a good start.

Coaching leadership style

Definition: Coaching leadership has its roots in the world of sport. With this style, a leader takes on a kind of coaching role, assessing the strengths, weaknesses, and personalities of each team member and adjusting their approach to bring out the best in everyone.

Characteristics: Coaching leaders tend to be very empathetic and understanding of others. They're good judges of character, great at reading people, and motivated by a desire to help others improve.

Pros and cons: This leadership style can be very effective at boosting productivity, inspiring a positive workplace culture, and making every member of the team feel valued and cared about. However, it places high demands on the leaders themselves, and they need to have the right levels of energy to cope with those demands.

When to use: The coaching style is useful when you have a mixed team of people with different abilities, needs, and personalities.

Visionary leadership style

Definition: Visionary leaders are those who have very clear ideas or visions of what they want to do and simply rely on their teams to bring those visions to life. These people tend to be business owners and CEOs, outlining clear plans for their teams to follow in order to turn an idea into reality.

Characteristics: Visionary leaders typically are innovative, creative, and good businesspeople. They also have lots of confidence and self-assurance in their ideas.

Pros and cons: This leadership style can be useful for people who have specific ideas and innovations they want to implement. Many workers also feel [motivated](#) following a visionary leader, but some may lack engagement if they don't share the same vision.

When to use: The visionary style is best-used for projects and plans where the leader has a very specific idea in mind of how they want things to proceed or what end goal they want to achieve.

Bureaucratic leadership style

Definition: Bureaucratic leadership is built around rules, regulations, procedures, and organisation. With this kind of leadership, the leader sets out the rules to follow and everyone is expected to abide by those rules and concepts.

Characteristics: Bureaucratic leaders tend to be those who like order and organisation. These leaders appreciate the power of rules and procedures and like

doing things by the book.

Pros and cons: This leadership style can be useful for keeping everyone on the same page, giving them clear duties to perform and rules to keep in mind. It's good for getting results, but less effective in terms of motivation and engagement, as workers may feel bored or disillusioned if there are too many rules to follow.

When to use: This leadership style is useful when you have a project that needs completing in a certain way, where rules and regulations can be used to benefit the whole process.

Quiet leadership style

Definition: As the name implies, quiet leadership involves leaders who tend to be relatively quiet, thoughtful, and uninvolved for large parts of the process. They still have authority and decision-making power, but won't just say things for the sake of it or get involved if they feel there's no need. This style has some overlap with the 'laissez faire' method.

Characteristics: Quiet leaders tend to be thoughtful, reflective people who don't necessarily want to control others or be the centre of attention. They like to put their trust in team members to do things right.

Pros and cons: This leadership style can be useful at helping team members feel trusted. It gives them more space and freedom to do what they need to do without a loud presence ordering them around or micromanaging them. However, some workers may prefer a more vocal leader, and could get confused about their role or duties if they don't have clear direction.

When to use: This style is useful for those who are naturally quiet and have faith in their team to deliver results.

Task-oriented leadership style

Definition: As the name implies, the task-oriented leadership style is focused around the task at hand. It's a results-driven approach, focused on getting things done and not spending too much time worrying about the people and processes involved.

Characteristics: Task-oriented leaders are often quite determined, scientific, and

logical people who like to see results and aren't always too occupied with the precise needs and expectations of each individual team member.

Pros and cons: Task-oriented leadership helps to keep everyone on-track and usually delivers results. This is a good method for hitting deadlines and making things happen, but if you spend too much time focusing on the task, the moods and engagement levels of workers may suffer.

When to use: This style is a good choice for projects with strict deadlines that need to be met and things that need to get done without delay.

People-oriented leadership style

Definition: The total opposite of the task-oriented style, a people-oriented leadership style is all about people. These kinds of leaders put emphasis on the well-being, satisfaction, and motivation of every member of the team, even if that means that progress on the actual task moves a little slower.

Characteristics: People-oriented leaders are people-focused, with great communication skills, lots of empathy, understanding of others, and a willingness to make people happy.

Pros and cons: This leadership style is useful if you want to get the best out of your workers and keep everyone as motivated as possible. But on the downside, it can lead to slower progress and a lack of focus on the task at hand.

When to use: This style is useful to use when you have a diverse team of people who need plenty of motivation and encouragement.

Adaptive leadership style

Definition: Adaptive leadership is all about adapting, changing, and being willing to do things differently to create systematic change and positive results. Adaptive leaders are always willing to listen to new ideas and take fresh approaches to solve the problems and challenges of the day.

Characteristics: Adaptive leaders are flexible, versatile, and always eager to try new things, rather than being set in their ways.

Pros and cons: This leadership style can be one of the best for making businesses and teams more efficient and effective in the long run, but it can sometimes resort to 'trial and error' as you try to identify the right approach for each situation.

When to use: This style is useful to use if you feel like the current leadership systems and practices in place aren't getting the right results.

Advantages of adopting different leadership styles

Often, it pays to have multiple [leadership](#) styles that you can utilise according to each project and situation, rather than just having a single, fixed style you never deviate from. Here are some of the big benefits of having a flexible, adaptable approach with different leadership methods:

- **Increased effectiveness and efficiency:** Often, teams will react differently to different leadership approaches, and there's usually a 'best style' for every situation. Being able to adjust styles accordingly to suit the needs of your team is a great way to increase both effectiveness and efficiency for group and team-based projects.
- **Improved communication and collaboration:** Having a few different leadership styles to employ can also be very beneficial for [communication and collaboration](#) between you and your team members. Members may not respond too well to one approach, but you can switch to another style to facilitate more communication.
- **Enhanced innovation and creativity:** Being able to adopt multiple leadership styles can even improve employee innovation and creativity. Many leaders find that when they adjust their approach to suit the team they're leading, individual members start to come out of their shells, feeling more confident, creative, and ready to share their ideas.
- **Better employee retention and satisfaction:** If employees see that their managers have a leadership style that they don't like, they won't tend to stick around with the company for too long. They'll jump ship and move on somewhere new. However, if you can switch your style to suit each team,

employees should feel happier and more comfortable.

- **Positive impact on organisational culture:** If employees aren't responding well to one leadership style, this can have a negative influence on the whole [workplace culture](#). But, if you're able to switch things up and try a different approach, like a more laid-back or people-oriented style, you can have a positive impact on the culture instead.
- **Ability to tailor leadership approach:** Naturally, one of the best benefits of having a few leadership styles up your sleeve is that it makes you a more versatile, flexible, and adaptable leader. You'll have the power to tailor your leadership approach to suit each and every situation, making the necessary changes for maximum productivity.
- **Able to meet changing needs:** As time goes by and businesses change and evolve, workers may start to expect or even demand differing leadership styles to match their new conditions. If you only have one style, you may not be able to move with the times, but having a few possible styles lets you change along with your company.
- **Enhanced ability to address complex challenges:** Managers and leaders need to be reliable problem-solvers. When faced with challenges, it's important to have more than one way to solve them. That's why it's so helpful to have multiple leadership approaches you can use to overcome the obstacles in your way.
- **Increased motivation and engagement of team members:** Ideally, you'll want to have all members of your team as motivated and engaged as possible, but they may not all respond too well to certain styles. If you can alter your approach for different people, you'll be able to keep everyone motivated and eager to hit their goals.
- **Improved team morale and well-being:** All in all, having a few different leadership techniques to employ also helps with team morale and general happiness. Employees will feel more content and satisfied with a manager or leader who is able to adjust to meet their needs, and this can help not only with

their output, but also their mental health.

Disadvantages of adopting different leadership styles

Even though it can be beneficial to have a range of leadership styles you can use and turn to for every situation, there are some downsides to this approach:

- **Potential for confusion and inconsistency:** A big issue with having multiple leadership styles is that you risk confusing your team members. If you keep shifting styles, they may not know what to expect from you and could become fearful or confused by your inconsistency.
- **Resistance to change and unfamiliar styles:** Another issue with changing styles is that some workers don't tend to deal well with changes or unfamiliar concepts. They may already be used to your previous style and could struggle to adapt if you start doing things differently.
- **Ineffective implementation and execution of leadership style:** In some cases, certain individuals just aren't suited to certain leadership styles. You may not have the exact skill set or personality type to fit a particular leadership style, making it far less effective and efficient than it should be.
- **Difficulty in maintaining a cohesive team culture:** Ideally, every leader wants to create cohesive, happy team cultures where every member feels content and understands their role. However, switching from one leadership approach to another can cause discontent and a lack of cohesion in the ranks.
- **Increased risk of conflict and division:** Following on from the previous point, if a team breaks down or doesn't function as well due to a change in leadership style, there's a higher risk of clashes and conflicts. Team members may rebel or complain if they feel confused or upset by the sudden change in leadership approach.
- **Lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities:** Every team member needs to have clear roles and responsibilities, understanding their duty and part to play in the overall team unit. However, when a leader keeps changing styles, it can

create some chaos among the team, with members unsure about what they're supposed to do.

- **Difficulty in providing consistent feedback:** [Feedback](#) is an invaluable resource for managers and team leaders. It's so important to hear from your team and find out what you're doing well and how people feel. But if you take different leadership approaches each week, team members will find it harder to provide consistent, useful feedback.
- **Limited ability to motivate team members with differing needs:** Given that every team member is unique, with their own needs and responses, an ever-changing leadership style can make it difficult to motivate them all. Sometimes, just one style is the best way to keep everyone engaged and on the same page.
- **Potential for team members to feel disconnected:** In some cases, when team members suffer confusion and struggle to adapt to the changing attitude of their leader, they might start to disengage and disconnect with the initial goals and values they once shared.
- **Increased risk of turnover:** In the worst cases, if team members are unhappy with your leadership approach, they might even decide that it's time for them to leave the company and look for a more settled and reliable role elsewhere.

FAQs

What is a leadership style?

A leadership style, as the name suggests, is simply a method of leading or guiding people. It's a way of acting when placed in the role of a leader, and styles can be very different, with some being very strict, controlling, and authoritarian, and others being more carefree and laid-back.

What are the different types of leadership styles?

There are many different varieties of leadership approaches. Examples include task-oriented leaders, people-oriented leaders, bureaucratic leaders, coaches, charismatic leaders, visionaries, and more.

How do I know which leadership style is best for my team?

It can be hard to define the right leadership approach for each set of workers or team. Asking for feedback and getting to know team members' strengths, weaknesses, and personalities can be helpful when deciding on which leadership style to use.

Can a leader have more than one leadership style?

Absolutely. Many of the best leaders may have their favourite leadership style but are also capable of adopting alternative leadership approaches when necessary.

How do I improve my leadership style?

Practice and repetition are effective ways to become a better leader. Finding role models and following their example is another way, along with educational courses or online resources. Asking for feedback from your team is also a useful way to learn where you can improve.

What are the advantages of using a specific leadership style?

The advantages of using just one specific leadership style is that you can become very proficient in that particular style, and your team members will always know exactly what to expect from you, which can help projects and team tasks proceed more smoothly.

What are the disadvantages of using a specific leadership style?

A big disadvantage of using only one leadership style is that sometimes, it won't be effective. Some team members may not respond well to your style, which can lead to clashes, conflicts, and problems with productivity.

How can I develop my leadership skills?

Learning from other leaders and role models is a good way to build up initial leadership skills, as well as getting as much practice as possible by volunteering for leadership

opportunities whenever they're available. Also remember to ask for feedback from the teams you lead.

What are the common mistakes that leaders make when choosing a leadership style?

Sometimes, leaders make the mistake of choosing a style that doesn't really suit their skill set or personality, or may not be appropriate for the task and team at hand. Some leaders also pick one style without giving themselves time to try others and find one that works best.

What should I consider when selecting a leadership style for a specific project or situation?

It's important to consider the nature of the project and the people involved when selecting a leadership style. Ideally, you'll want to pick one that will help you get the most engagement and productivity from your team members.