

Your Leadership Style - Changing or Adapting?

Written by: Richard L. McElroy, PhD | April 6, 2016



It seems that there is a lot of talk in the business community about changing leadership styles. However, the academic community has produced little research centered on changing leadership styles in the last two decades (see, e.g., [Fazio, 1999](#)) and little scholarly exploration in the last three (see, e.g., [Zanecchia, 1985](#)). Much of the recent literature about leadership style has been written about its specific application in the context of organizational change: *transformational leadership*^[1] (n = 120, or 31% of all published doctoral research^[2]). **So, why the interest in changing one's leadership style?** The interest is because of the context in which it is applied: the organization. We know that organizations are systems ([Scott, 1998](#)); further, we know that organizations are complex dynamic systems ([Axelrod & Cohen, 2000](#); [Gharajedaghi, 1999](#)). The principal elements in these workplace systems are the employees who act and react to given workplace situations. They exhibit dynamic behavior reflective of this task at hand, their experience and comfort with it, and their general competency to engage in the activity. Leaders must be as dynamic in their *style* as are the workplace demands placed on those they are tasked with leading ([McElroy, 2005](#)). **So to which style would one change?** None, or at least not a single style! Scholars contend that leadership styles fall on a continuum from autocratic to democratic. Relative to changing one's style begs the question, is one style better than another? It appears not; Edgar Schein, a recognized expert in organizational psychology,

suggests that trying to find the one *best* style is “doomed to failure” ([1980, p. 135](#)).

Therefore, leaders shouldn't change styles from one static constant to another; but rather, adapt their style to the situation! The next time you are in a discussion with colleagues, and the topic of changing one's leadership style is broached, it will prove beneficial to know: 1) What is this “style” which we ascribe to leaders; what constitutes “style?” 2) Why would one want or need to adapt it? And, if it is feasible to do so, 3) how would one go about adapting it? This is the principal organization of our review here: The *what, why, and how* of adapting one's leadership style.

What?

What is a Leadership Style

Leadership style only has meaning within the context of behavior. Most agree that the principal essence of a leadership style is one's exhibited behavior toward followers and, most importantly, the follower's consequential responsive behavior. Leaders influence action. This is what Kouzes and Posner speak to when they claim that leadership is “the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” ([1995, p. 30](#)). This is what leadership style *does*. But, what *is* leadership style? In our exploration here in changing style, it is important to understand the constituent elements of style are the leader's beliefs, knowledge, and recurring patterns of behavior. A leader's belief system about workers is a significant element in determining his or her adopted style. As an example, most are familiar with Douglas McGregor's classic 1960 Theory X and Theory Y organizational approaches toward people. He assumes in his Theory X that “lower-order needs dominate individuals” ([Robbins, 2003, p. 45](#)) and that “punishment, threat, and close supervision may be necessary” ([Johns, 1981, p. 149](#)). Theory Y, conversely, assumes that “higher-order needs dominate individuals” ([Robbins, 2003, p. 45](#)), and “work is inherently motivating” ([Johns, 1981, p. 150](#)). Similarly, it is important to note that leadership is intertwined with an organization's culture ([Schein, 1997](#)) or the fundamental belief system that undergirds exhibited behavior towards survival in the organizational setting. Such views will influence the leader's adoption of “style,” one based on beliefs about what is necessary to influence desired employee behavior. Knowledge also undergirds observable behavior. All knowledge (formally derived or extrapolated from life experiences) fundamentally exists as neurological networks ([Changeux & Konishi, 1987](#)). Their alignment and action give rise to patterns of thought ([Kelso, 1995](#); [Thelen & Smith, 1994](#)), to which we ascribe observable behavior. Leaders, as is generally true, exhibit behavior (physical or intellectual) that corresponds to their highest level of development ([McElroy, 2012](#)). We are, then, “wired” to think in accordance with our knowledge ([Schwartz & Begley, 2002](#); [Schwartz & Beyette, 1996](#)). Beliefs and knowledge in action equal recurring patterns of behavior. Over time, leaders develop recognizable recurring patterns of behavior toward their followers. Some define *leadership style* as a “behavior pattern that a person exhibits when attempting to influence the activities of others as perceived by those others” ([Blanchard & Hersey, 1993, pp. 128-129](#)). We in organizational leadership have read various reference to this as, for example, in exhibited *emotional intelligence* ([Goleman, 1995](#)) or *systems thinking* ([Senge, 1990](#)). One's style is one's behavior! So, if one is “wired” for a specific leadership style, why

the need to adapt to another?

Why?

If one has a dominant style, why adapt it?

Leadership style cannot be static. Organizations aren't! The workforce, technology, competition, and government regulations and laws are changing. The performance demands placed on businesses are changing. Business is a dynamic system for which one static, non-changing leadership style will not suffice. As McFarland, Senn and Childress explain in *21st Century Leadership* ([1994](#))

“Just as organizations have required dramatic transformation, the face of leadership too must change ... new behaviors will be required, and old habits will have to be broken. Many of the existing behaviors of leaders are based on their past successful experience and their beliefs about what it took to win” (p. 183).

But, leaders cannot merely “change” from one static style to another equally static style. Changing leadership style must be as dynamic as the environment in which the contemporary organizational leader operates and, as previously explained, has to be considered within the context of the desired follower behavior. Leadership has been referred to as a “dynamic process, varying from situation to situation with changes in the leader, the followers, and the situation” ([Blanchard & Hersey, 1993, p. 100](#)). An appropriate leadership style, then, is situational. It has been shown that when leader and follower mutually embrace the situational leadership methodology that the leader can in practice provide the right level of direction and support ([Thompson & Glasø, 2015](#)), matching both to the needs of the follower given the specific circumstance. Such alignment has been shown to improve employee performance and productivity ([Mitchell, 2015](#)); misalignment has been shown to have adverse effects to quality ([Lewis, 2014](#)). So, why adapt style? To keep pace with the dynamic system in which it leads. Your leadership style should not be changed (from one to another) so much as adapted! Leaders that can adapt their leadership styles to dynamic circumstances will benefit by greater employee performance, increased productivity, and improved quality.

How?

Adapting Your Style via Situational Leadership

Being *wired* with neurological networks dictating thoughts and, then, behavior, can one change style? Yes ([Cozolino, 2002](#)). Can there be a basic stepped process? Yes ([Schwartz & Beyette, 1996](#)). Is it all based on scientific fact, with proven guidance on how to go about it? Yes ([Julesz & Kovacs, 1995](#); [Kolb, 1995](#); [Shaw & McEachern, 2001](#)), and yes ([Demetriou & Raftopoulos, 2004](#))! Let's explore the four fundamental steps in adapting leadership style to the presenting situation.

1. Leaders will find it best to start with the Greek aphorism “know thyself!”

All change, including the adaptation of leadership styles as we discuss here, starts with a recognition of the current state. This is readily evidenced in self-improvement programs (from weight loss to addiction recovery). It is also the first step in various schools of psychological change (from behaviorism to Gestalt and cognitive therapies), including, and perhaps solely, the view of Martin Heidegger (1988; Steiner, 1989) and phenomenology, his philosophy of consciousness. About my work in cognitive development (McElroy, 2012), I learned that a proposed change to cognitive patterns starts with a careful review of the current dominant patterns of thought (Kelso, 1995).

So, what should the leader do to recognize their recurring patterns of thought and behavior?

Take note! Make a list! Recurring behavioral patterns are, by definition, repeating, habitual, and routine. The leader should consider how they have approached problems in the past and note how they have historically solved similar problems. How they have offered guidance, direction, and leadership to subordinates. What have the subordinates seen, evidenced? What do peers witness? And then ask or consider: Do themes emerge? Do scenarios seem to repeat themselves?

2. Leaders are aware of their emerging behavioral patterns.

Having self-awareness is what Goleman (1995) speaks to *Emotional Intelligence*. In his later book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman (2000) suggests that “self-awareness serves as an inner barometer, gauging whether what we are doing (or about to do) is, indeed, worthwhile” (pp. 57-58). Aided by the leader’s predetermined patterns of behavior (from the previous step), leaders can learn to be alert to the recurring, non-supportive patterns of behavior toward subordinates.

3. Leaders interrupt their non-supportive behavioral patterns.

Perhaps the most difficult step in the process, leaders will have to resist behaving in a manner that is, from historical experience, “hardwired” into their behavioral repertoire. The leader will have to make a choice *not to act* in a way that is very familiar, very comfortable. This requires great mental effort, or as Schwartz describes it “directed mental force” (2002, p. 317), or Kelso as “deliberate, conscious effort” (1995, p. 147). Marshaling will-power, the leaders will have to decide not to act on emerging patterns of non-supportive behavior.

4. Leaders present a “style” that corresponds to subordinate needs.

Familiar with established patterns of non-supportive behavior, aware of the emergence of these patterns in organizational situations, and able to interrupt the automatic running of the behavior leaves the leader with a last all-important task: substituting an effective supportive leadership behavioral style! Of course, this will

require an element of pre-study in the dominant model: Blanchard and Hersey's *Situational Leadership* ([for an overview see Blanchard, 1996](#); [for a detailed description see Blanchard & Hersey, 1993, pp. 183-219](#)). It is a study worthy of a leader's effort!

[1] This work focuses on the perspective of transformation leadership and, more specifically, inspired group transformation of business organizations and schools; most published literature centers on the transformational leadership style in execution of organization and school change.

[2] A non-scientific study of published doctoral dissertations through the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global database for the twelve-month period January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2015 on the subject search terms "leader style" or "leadership style" (n = 389).

About the Author



Richard L. McElroy, PhD

Dr. McElroy is the president of the American Institute of Organizational Effectiveness in Raleigh, NC where he conducts research in management, leadership and adult development. He is a management consultant and organization effectiveness expert, based in and having wide, proven experience in management consulting and academia. Demonstrated results-driven expertise with superb credentials: Client-valued 14+ years consulting in organizational effectiveness; graduate work in organizational theory, design, operation, and change with PhD in Human and Organizational Systems. Rick is also a member of the ICPM Board of Regents.