Different Leadership Styles for Different Situations: A Practical Guide

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Why a single style is rarely enough

Many leaders develop a default style early in their careers and apply it fairly consistently across situations, largely because it reflects their natural temperament rather than a deliberate choice. Research on leadership style, notably Daniel Goleman's 2000 Harvard Business Review article "Leadership That Gets Results," found that the most effective leaders are those who can draw on multiple styles and consciously choose between them based on the situation, rather than relying on a single default regardless of context.

Goleman's six styles, briefly

Coercive ("do what I tell you") is useful in genuine crises requiring immediate compliance, but damaging if used as a default, since it suppresses initiative and engagement over time.

Authoritative ("come with me") sets a clear direction while giving people latitude in how to get there, and tends to work well when a team needs a new, compelling vision.

Affiliative ("people come first") prioritises harmony and relationship, useful for healing team rifts or during high-stress periods, but insufficient alone for driving performance.

Democratic ("what do you think?") builds buy-in through participation, well suited to situations where the leader genuinely needs the team's input, but slow and poorly suited to urgent decisions.

Pacesetting ("do as I do, now") can drive fast results with a highly capable, self-motivated team, but tends to overwhelm and demotivate teams that need more support or development.

Coaching ("try this") focuses on long-term development, well suited when a team member has the will to grow but needs guidance, though it requires time the leader does not always have.

Matching style to situation: a practical process

Assess urgency. A genuine emergency calls for a more directive style; an exploratory or developmental situation allows for a more participative one.

Assess the team's competence and confidence for the specific task. This draws directly on the Situational Leadership model developed by Hersey and Blanchard, covered in more depth in a companion article on this site: a new or underconfident team may need more direction, while a highly capable, confident one usually performs better with autonomy.

Assess what the relationship currently needs. A team that has recently been through conflict or disruption may benefit from a more affiliative approach before a more demanding style is reintroduced.

Check your own default, and whether it fits. Most leaders have a strong natural preference, and the

discipline this framework demands is noticing when the situation actually calls for a different style than the one that feels most comfortable.

A caution against mechanical style-switching

These frameworks work best as a lens for genuine judgement, not as a rigid formula applied mechanically. Switching styles too visibly or too frequently, without a clear, honest rationale, can read as inconsistent or manipulative rather than thoughtfully adaptive. The goal is genuine responsiveness to what a specific situation and specific people need, grounded in the leader's actual read of the context, not performance of flexibility for its own sake.

Building this capability over time

Leaders who develop genuine range across these styles, rather than relying on a single comfortable default, consistently show stronger team outcomes across Goleman's research and subsequent studies building on it. This range is built through deliberate practice, consciously choosing a less natural style in lower-stakes situations, and through honest feedback about how different approaches actually land with a specific team.