

## 4.11: Leadership Styles and Servant Leadership

Leadership is a function of both the personal characteristics of the leader and the environment in which the leadership must occur. Several researchers have attempted to understand leadership from the perspective of the characteristics of the leader and the environment of the situation. These researchers described leaders as either autocratic or democratic (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958)<sup>[1]</sup>, as pathfinders (visionaries), problem solvers (analytical), or implementers (team-oriented) (Leavitt, 1986)<sup>[2]</sup>, and as either transactional (focused on actions and decisions) or transformational (focused on the long-term needs of the group and organization) (Burns, 1978)<sup>[3]</sup>.

Fred Fiedler introduced contingency theory and the ability of leaders to adapt their leadership approach to the environment (Fiedler, 1971)<sup>[4]</sup>. Most leaders have a dominant leadership style that is most comfortable. For example, most engineers spend years training in analytical problem solving and often develop an analytical approach to leadership. A leadership style reflects personal characteristics and life experiences. Although a project manager's leadership style may be predominantly a pathfinder (using Leavitt's taxonomy), most project managers become problem solvers or implementers when they perceive the need for these leadership approaches. The leadership approach incorporates the dominant leadership style and Fiedler's contingency focus on adapting to the project environment.

PMBOK Guide 6th Edition provides a list of leadership styles as below:

1. Laissez-faire: Leaders allow the team to make their own decisions and establish their own goals. It is also referred to as taking a hands-off style.
2. Transactional: Leaders focus on goals, feedback, and accomplishment to determine rewards.
3. Servant: Leaders demonstrate a commitment to serve and put other people first. They focus on other people's growth, learning, development, autonomy, and well-being. They concentrate on relationships, community, and collaboration.
4. Transformational: Leaders empower followers through idealized attributes and behaviors, inspirational motivation, encouragement for innovation and creativity, and individual consideration.
5. Charismatic: Leaders are able to inspire with high energy. They are enthusiastic and self-confident and hold strong convictions.
6. Interactional: This leadership style is a combination of transactional, transformational, and charismatic leadership styles.

Among them, the "Agile Practice Guide" accompanying PMBOK Guide Sixth Edition highlights the servant leadership style in particular for the agile project management approach. Although servant leadership isn't unique to agile, project managers and organizations can observe and experience that this leadership style integrates into the agile mindset value. As the name refers, servant leaders serve those on the team by promoting self-awareness, listening, helping team members and stakeholders improve themselves, coaching rather than controlling, facilitating coordination, removing obstacles and organizational impediments in front of the team, the members, and the project, promoting safety, respect, and trust, and promoting the energy and intelligence of others<sup>[5]</sup>.

No particular leadership approach is specifically appropriate for managing a project. Each project has a unique set of circumstances because, by definition, projects are unique endeavors. The leadership approach and the management skills required to be successful vary depending on the complexity profile of the project. The Project Management Institute published research that studied project management leadership skills and concluded that project managers needed good communication skills and the ability to build harmonious relationships and motivate others (Shi & Chen, 2006)<sup>[6]</sup>. Beyond this broad set of leadership skills, the successful leadership approach will depend on the profile of the project.

A transactional project manager with a strong command and control leadership approach may be very successful on a small software development project or a construction project, where tasks are clear, roles are well understood, and the project environment is cohesive. This same project manager is less likely to be successful on a larger, more complex project with a diverse project team and complicated work processes.

Each project phase may also require a different leadership approach. During the start-up phase of a project, when new team members are first assigned to the project, the project may require a command and control leadership approach. Later, as the project moves into the conceptual development phase, creativity becomes important, and the project management takes on a more transformational type leadership approach. Most experienced project managers can adjust their leadership approach to the needs of the project phase. Occasionally, on very large, complex projects, some companies will change project managers after the conceptual phase of the project to bring in a different project leadership approach or change project managers to manage the closeout of a project. Changing project managers may bring the right level of experience and the appropriate leadership approach

but is also disruptive to a project. Senior management must balance the benefit of matching the right leadership approach with the cost of disrupting the project.

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1. Tannenbaum, R., & Schmidt, W. (1958). How to Choose a Leadership Pattern. *Harvard Business Review* 36, 95–101. [↩](#)
  2. Leavitt, H. (1986). *Corporate Pathfinders*. New York: Dow-Jones-Irwin and Penguin Books. [↩](#)
  3. Burns, J.M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row. [↩](#)
  4. Fiedler, F.E. (1971). Validation and Extension of the Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness. *Psychological Bulletin*, 76(2), 128–48. [↩](#)
  5. Project Management Institute, & Agile Alliance. (2017). *Agile practice guide*. [↩](#)
  6. Shi, Q., & Chen, J. (2006). *The Human Side of Project Management: Leadership Skills*. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute, Inc. [↩](#)
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