

Creative Problem Solving: Your Role as Leader



ON A ONE-ON-ONE LEVEL, YOU CAN ENCOURAGE THE individuals within your work crew to use their creative abilities. To do this, though, you need to know which of four leadership styles is most appropriate for each member of the group. Leadership styles must be flexible, and nowhere is this flexibility more important than stimulating creativity and self-initiative in problem solving.

By Edward Glassman

You, as manager of your work unit, are on the hot seat. What you do sets the style for the rest of the work unit. And according to some observers, you are interrupted on an average of once every nine minutes. Unless you lock yourself in and tear out the telephone, you will not be able to find the uninterrupted time necessary for creative thinking. But then this may not be your job anyway. Your job is to manage and develop your people, give them

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the resources they need, a buffer them from distractions so that they can engage in uninterrupted time creative thinking and effort require. a leader, are you doing this?

Your leadership style

Research has shown that most leader interactions work fall into two basic types: *task behaviors*, which are directive, one-way communication explaining what each person to do and when, where, and how it is to be done; and *supportive behaviors*, which involve

two-way communications, non-evaluative listening, stroking, and encouraging behavior. The relative frequency with which you combine and use these two types of interactions constitutes your leadership style—and influences the level of creativity in your work group.

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A factor in choosing which leadership interaction to use is the ability of the person to work independently.

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Various task and relationship interactions can be combined into four useful leadership styles, each defined by an array of effective behaviors (see page 39).

Style 1. Directive style. Your predominant behaviors are telling, asserting, and modeling.

Style 2. Participative style. Your predominant behaviors are coaching, negotiating, and collaborating.

Style 3. Catalytic style. Your predominant behaviors here are encouraging, facilitating, and consulting.

Style 4. Nondirective style. Your predominant behavior is delegating.

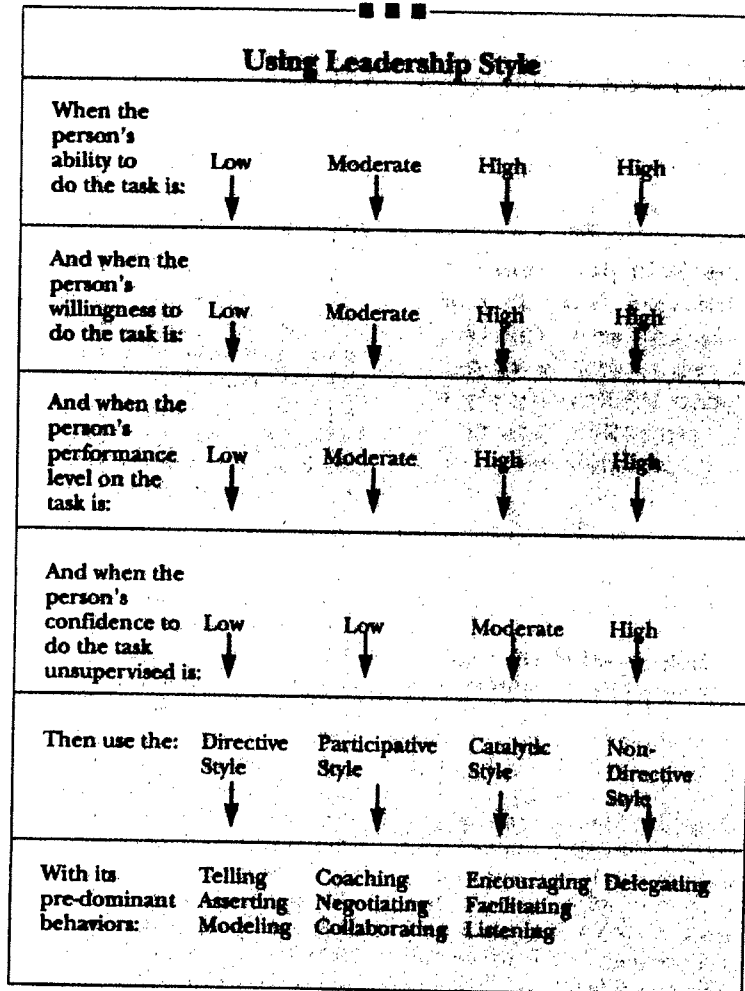
One factor in choosing which leadership interactions to use is the ability of the person in your unit to work independently of you. That is, he or she is willing and motivated to do the task, has the ability and skills to do the task, has a high performance level with respect to the task, and is confident he or she can accomplish the task. A directive style is needed if the person in your work unit has low abilities to be independent.

Adjust your leadership style

Can you see how this relates to creativity, how you can make your leadership style work for you in encouraging creative problem solving? Admittedly, it is fairly difficult to change a leadership style. Yet to help your work unit be more creative, you need to be flexible and use the skills from all four leadership styles. How can you do this? One way is to add on enough skills one at a time so you can respond flexibly to the people in your work unit. To become a more flexible leader who encourages creativity, you might decide to obtain training to learn *how to assert* for a more effective directive style; *how to coach* and *how to negotiate* disagreements for a more effective participative style; *how to listen* and *respond nonevaluatively* for a

more catalytic style; *how to delegate* for a more effective nondirective style; and, of course, *how to manage* and *motivate* for on-the-job creativity.

Many managers are unaware that their own habits, productive at other times, can contribute so directly to their work unit's lack of creativity. To stim-



ulate the creativity of work units, managers must form the habit of setting direction, of giving a clear idea of the end product wanted, of delegating within the person's areas of expertise using the non-directive leadership style, and then of taking the risk of letting people set their own goals and run their own business with occasional encouragement and sup-



To help your workers become more self-directed and creative, you have to cycle your leadership style, from directive to nondirective.



port using the catalytic style of leadership.

Help creativity through responsible self-direction

Self-directed activity in which intrinsic motivation is high has been shown to help creativity. There are lots of internal reasons to perform a task. These include challenge, enjoyment, interest, novelty, a sense of control over one's work, curiosity, and positive feedback to oneself on competence. Thus, one

crucial issue in managing for creativity revolves around helping the people in your work unit move toward responsible self-direction: "responsible" because they recognize and respect organizational goals; and "self-direction" because they are motivated to perform their job competently and effectively; take responsibility and set high and realistic goals; negotiate and keep agreements; solve problems creatively; accept direction from others, when necessary; plan and use their time wisely; handle and reduce stress at work; and work productively alone and with others to accomplish goals.

To help the people in your work unit become self-directed and more creative, the key is to cycle your leadership interactions from directive to nondirective behavior. This cycle starts with overseeing new tasks or inexperienced people, and your behavior changes with their increasing ability to take charge and independently carry out each specific task that needs to be done.

The leadership approach described here values four leadership styles (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982). Some other leadership theories value only the participative leadership style. Yet people in your work unit are less likely to become self-directed and motivated to

be more creative if you only use the participative style. The independence found in the non-directive style is important to the creativity process, as is the encouragement you provide using the catalytic style of leadership.

Encourage participative interactions in meetings

When you dominate meetings, you hinder the people in your work unit from being creative and becoming more self-directed. Indeed, much resentment may occur. Admittedly, participative interaction in meetings is difficult to achieve, but it will occur when you and your work unit use effective group discussion skills, collaborate instead of compete, use consensus decision making, rotate the chair, and periodically discuss ways to improve work unit creativity and effectiveness during meetings. If these skills are lacking in your staffers, you may want to consider team effectiveness training for your work unit.

Negotiating disagreements using win-win problem solving techniques can also help the people in your work unit become more self-directed and more creative. Success depends on your ability to assert, listen for understanding, respond non-evaluatively, and mutually

generate and agree on solutions with the people in your work unit. If you do not possess these skills, you may want to learn them or call in a third party to help manage excessive conflict.

Use participative goal setting and performance appraisal

If performance appraisal is secretive, if frequent feedback

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If your employees' self-initiative is discouraged, then resentment may develop, curtailing self-directed efforts and curtailing creativity.
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is not provided, if the people in your work unit are not encouraged to respond, then resentment may develop, curtailing self-directed activity and on-the-job creativity. Try reversing the usual goal setting procedure. Instead of telling what your goals are, ask each person in your work unit to state his or her goals. If you like them, back them to the hilt and encourage creative effort. If you do not accept them, negotiate mutually acceptable goals. Creativity and productivity can

flourish with this approach.

Enriching the jobs of people in your work unit through challenging tasks is another way to help them become self-directed and more creative. But do not confuse this with making changes in routine work tasks

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Enriching the jobs of people by giving them more challenging work is one way to help them become more self-directed and more creative.

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that lead to job enlargement or job rotation. True job enrichment occurs when you remove some controls; increase accountability for your employees' own work; assign a complete unit of work; grant additional authority; introduce more difficult tasks; or assign unique roles. Only changes like these will encourage more self-direction and creativity.

Dr. Edward Glassman has presented creativity and leadership workshops for many organizations, including FORTUNE 500 companies. Professor and head of the Program for Team Effectiveness and Creativity at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Dr. Glassman does leadership and creativity consulting. This article is adapted from material from Dr. Glassman's book Creativity-on-the-Job: Stimulate Creativity in Your Work Unit, available by writing the author at 112 Kenan Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516 (919-966-3163).

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Next Month

Next month's issue of SUPERVISORY MANAGEMENT will examine your role in your company's strategic planning process, plus offer you some professional advice about projecting the right image. You'll get insights into why your instructions sometimes don't get followed, how you can make performance appraisals more objective and consequently more acceptable to your employees, and how to work more successfully with your department's informal leaders.

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