



Match Your Leadership to the Challenge

A single style of leadership is not sufficient for varying situations

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LEADERSHIP IS HIGHLY situational. Success is usually determined by matching the right person with the right situation. Even the right person, however, will find it necessary to vary their leadership style depending on changing circumstances and needs.

Examples of leadership styles:

- Authoritative leadership
- Adaptive leadership
- Change leadership
- Crisis leadership
- Inspirational leadership
- Servant leadership

Each of these is a fascinating study. All of them are appropriate at the right time. The most effective long-term leaders are those who can recognize their current leadership challenges and shift from one style of leadership to another as necessary.

The call for self-motivated, high-performing teams

“Innovation” is one of the buzzwords of the day. Every company seems to talk about it. Many boldly announce innovation as one of their core values. Truly innovative teams and organizations remain exceptions, however.

You don’t get innovative performance by talking about innovation. Innovation is a *result* of developing self-motivated, high-performing teams and matching them with the appropriate style of leadership. Such teams require certain *preexisting conditions* to develop and thrive. The first requirement is **order**. Where chaos reigns they cannot develop. Where order has been established, teams are able to develop the qualities of problem-solving, creativity, and innovation.

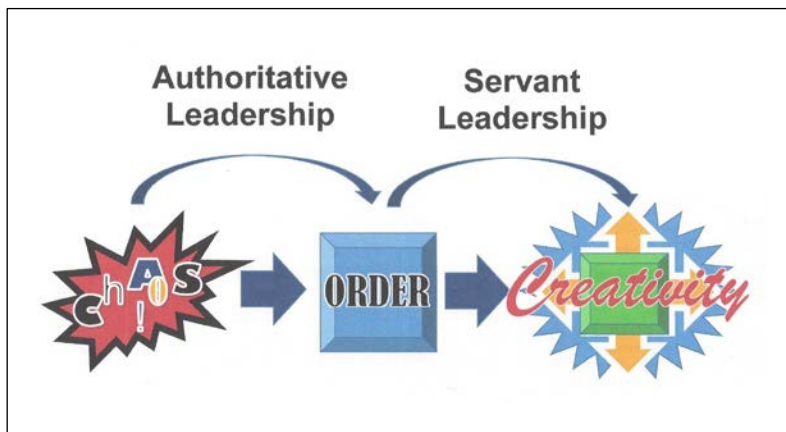


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Thanks to my long-time friend Dave DeWitt, who first called my attention to the Chaos-Order-Creativity continuum in a context other than leadership.

These two phases require different styles of leadership. Authoritative leadership is needed to move a group from chaos to order. Servant leadership is the way to move them from order to creativity. The following true story of one of my coaching clients illustrates these principles.

When authoritative leadership is needed

When Jason became the new CEO, he found that he had inherited a nonprofit organization in chaos. People held conflicting visions of their overall purpose and goals. Departments were operating by their own sets of policies and unwritten rules. The quality of work varied widely. Competition between leaders frustrated efforts to cooperate.

Jason quickly realized that he needed to get control and impose order. Using the leader's power of defining reality backed by appropriate authority, he clearly laid out the purpose and goals of the organization. He stated his expectations regarding acceptable attitudes and behaviors. Where there had been competition and resistance, Jason confronted the issue with individuals and insisted on teamwork. He waded into an evaluation of his employees' work, and gave strict guidelines, which he diligently followed up. To clean up previously mixed messages, he insisted on approving all public print communications.

Jason is a gifted leader and his efforts were successful. He lost a few staff members

unwilling to go along. By and large, most of his people welcomed the changes, knowing that the chaotic environment wasn't working.

The problem with successful leadership

When I began coaching with Jason a few years later, he was still firmly in control. His organization rested on a solid foundation, staff members were enthusiastic and happy, and they were well-focused on their purpose and goals.

Jason's story illustrates the proper role of authoritative leadership: Moving a team or organization from chaos to order. Traditional command-and-control managing is mostly considered out of date, but there's still a time and place for a strong authoritative approach.

At this stage, however, Jason was frustrated. "I'm never left alone to do my own work," he said. "I have smart, gifted people around me, but they won't act on their own. They bring every decision to me." Behavior in the organization resembled an inverted pyramid, with Jason as the point at the bottom. They had become thoroughly conditioned to respond to Jason's authoritative direction.

He realized that he and his entire staff were now stuck. Where he had once needed to establish order, he now needed to lead his team to a new level of performance, one where they were not dependent upon him. He needed staff who were more self-sufficient and self-managing; people who took initiative, made

their own judgment calls, and exhibited creativity and innovation. Through our coaching engagement, Jason came to see that his past *success* as an authoritative leader was now *hindering* his organization's progress. He needed to shift into a **servant leadership** style to take his organization to the next level.

Principles for analyzing your leadership challenge

- ***Organizations cannot move directly from chaos to creativity.*** Chaos is defined as confusion regarding purposes and values, and by dysfunctional behavior, such as competition, manipulation, and dishonesty. A toxic culture kills creative juices in the human spirit. People burn too much mental and emotional energy in self-protection and drama to have any left for creativity.
- ***Creativity and innovation can only thrive where there is sufficient order.*** People's creative impulses require space, focus, and a degree of security to flourish. People need to feel they are in an environment of predictability and safety before they will relax enough to focus and work together to problem-solve and create.
- ***Authoritative leadership is the way to move a group from chaos to order.*** A leader who recognizes that chaos has reigned will apply strong authority and accountability to bring order to the environment. They will define purposes, values, and proper behaviors, and enforce them impartially. Where dysfunctional behavior has been the norm, most people will welcome the change as a breath of fresh air and get on board quickly. The culture becomes healthy and conducive to productivity.
- ***Moving from order to creativity requires servant leadership.*** Leaders who have been successful in an authoritative role will find their stiffest test here: Will they recognize the need to adapt their leadership style to the challenge of the future? Or will they stubbornly continue doing what worked in the past but now limits them?
- ***Where creativity has been achieved, you still must be ready to downshift to authoritative leadership to address pockets of chaos.*** The law of entropy is always at work: The tendency of all things to decline to disorder. The best servant leaders realize that they must use their authority to address pockets of chaos, whether in individuals or teams, to protect the culture of creativity. They need to reestablish order on occasion to enable a shift back to servant leadership.

Taking stock

Jason found this shift of styles to be a real challenge, as it is for most leaders. Habits are hard to break, both for leaders and teams. He successfully worked to adapt and succeeded. His organization made a great turn toward unleashing their human potential toward a more innovative future.

If you want to lead your team to develop creativity and innovation, it may mean learning a new way of thinking and leading. Take stock of where you are. Honestly consider the culture and state of your team or organization. Where do you rate on the Chaos—Order scale? Healthy or unhealthy? Empowering or stifling? Identifying where you are today is the first step before deciding what kind of leadership is required. **L**