

Leadership Styles for Dealing with People

Part 1: Identifying Your Personal Style in Dealing with Others

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Do people react differently depending upon how you approach them? Should a leader change his or her style when dealing with different people? Is there an optimum style for influencing others?

These and other questions will be addressed in this two-part series designed to first help you identify your behavioral style when dealing with people and then help you learn how to adjust your style to become more effective as a leader.

This first article focuses on defining the various styles of dealing with people. In the second article in the series, which will be published in our next newsletter, you will have the option to complete an instrument that will help you identify your predominant style in dealing with others. We will then focus on when and how to change your style to be highly effective in influencing others.

Five Distinct Styles for Dealing with People

What do we mean by leadership style? We define leadership style as the broad, characteristic way in which a leader interacts with others across in various situations and occasions. In helping to develop leaders over the years, we have found it beneficial to focus on the degree of assertiveness the leader uses in dealing with people. This aspect of

behavior seems to capture not only the leader's underlying philosophy of how to treat others, but also his or her beliefs about how best to communicate and involve others in the workplace. Moreover, the degree of assertiveness a person uses in dealing with people provokes fairly predictable reactions by others, which in turn help determine how effective the leader can be.

Figure 1 is an illustration of this single continuum of assertiveness behavior. This article narrows in on five variations, or degrees, of assertive behavior. Each degree is depicted in Figure 1. This Figure shows Aggressive style at one extreme end of the continuum and a Submissive style at the other extreme. In between these extremes are three different styles of dealing with others: Low Assertive, Mid Assertive, and High Assertive.



Figure 1

Let's define these five broad styles in more detail, beginning with the extreme right end of the continuum, the Aggressive style (Figure 1). When we think of someone behaving aggressively toward another, this often conjures up negative images. In my consulting role, I have asked employees to generate a list of synonyms for the word Aggressive when used in this context. The typical traits people list include:

- Mean
- Pushy
- Intimidating
- Loud
- Uncaring
- Belligerent
- Malicious
- Unkind
- Unpleasant
- Hostile
- Antagonistic
- Loud-mouthed
- Confrontational
- Hard line
- Destructive
- Argumentative
- Unfriendly

These descriptors are obviously extreme caricatures, but are useful in understanding the associations people make when they think of a leader who employs an aggressive style of dealing with others. When a leader behaves aggressively toward a subordinate, the reaction of others is usually to feel hurt, to withdraw, and/or to get angry. Since the leader is in a position of power in an organization, the aggressive-style leader will almost always get compliance from subordinates, but often at the expense of long-term loyalty, enthusiasm, and motivation. In extreme situations, a highly aggressive leadership style can result in other negative outcomes, such as passive aggressive behaviors, resentment, alienation, dissatisfaction, sabotage, and, in some cases, high turnover rates.

At its root, being aggressive involves getting your way at the expense of others. This is obviously an extreme way of dealing with people. In essence, an aggressive leader runs over people. He or she acts out the message, “I win, and you lose.” This leadership style demonstrates very little emphasis on showing respect for the dignity of fellow human beings or consideration for the problems of others.

To look at the constructive side of aggressive-style leaders, I have also asked employees to

list positive traits of an aggressive leader. Employees often mention the following traits:

- Task-motivated
- Goal-oriented
- Gets results
- Hard charger
- Clear cut
- Direct
- Driven
- Purposeful
- Definite
- Ambitious
- Enthusiastic
- Explicit

Although these are useful traits in a leader, the overall problem with the aggressive style is that the above-listed positive characteristics are overshadowed by the resentment, fear, and even anger that build when interacting with a leader who uses an aggressive manner of behavior toward others.

At the other extreme of the continuum in Figure 1 is the Submissive style of dealing with people. Using this style, the leader avoids conflict and generally acquiesces to the needs and wants of others. In my discussions with employees, the submissive person is often characterized as:

- Weak
- Wimp
- Timid
- Quiet
- Indifferent
- Not Sure
- Meek
- Docile
- Compliant
- Reactive
- Passive
- Detached
- Feeble
- Frail

A great fear of the submissive leader is to be forced to take a stand that that might be unpopular. The submissive person is driven to avoid conflict and thus is reluctant to “rock the boat.” Many submissive leaders have a high need to please others and to be liked by others. The submissive leader often is perceived as weak, not willing or able to fight

for resources needed by the department, and not willing to enforce rules. Paradoxically, the submissive leader, who seeks to be liked by others, is in fact often not popular, not respected, and therefore often not effective. Despite the above depiction, people recognize that submissive leaders do have positive traits. When asked, observers list these positive traits for the submissive style:

- Team player
- Good listener
- Respectful of others
- Concerned about others
- Unselfish
- Thoughtful
- Considerate
- Sympathetic
- Kind
- Helpful
- Understanding
- Dutiful

Typically, these perceived positive traits of the submissive style are overshadowed by the more negative traits listed earlier. For this reason, submissive leaders are tolerated, but usually neither admired nor respected.

To contrast the aggressive and submissive styles: the underlying purpose of being aggressive is to run over people while the underlying purpose of being submissive is to avoid conflict.

The three styles in the middle of the continuum of Figure 1 are all **Assertive** styles of dealing with people. The assertive style takes some of the positive characteristics of being aggressive (such as goal-oriented, strong-willed, direct, energetic, and purposeful) and combines it with some of the best characteristics of being submissive (such as a good listener, unselfish, empathic, thoughtful, and considerate). *Thus, the assertive leader walks a tightrope that bridges the most positive aspects of these two styles of behavior while at the same time avoiding the negative aspects of these two styles.*

The assertive leader is someone who honestly expresses his/her feelings, enforces rules, and requires results, but at the same time does so

in a way that shows respect for the dignity of his/her fellow human being. The assertive style is both a good human relations style and a good team building style for any organization. The assertive leader is seen as someone who is strong, energetic and is both able and willing to fight for resources needed by the department. Further, the assertive leader does not appear to play favorites, since he or she does not bend rules nor fail to enforce rules in an effort to be liked by others. This leadership style is most admired by team members and employees.

We differentiate three levels of assertiveness along the continuum pictured in Figure 1. Leaders can be assertive towards the submissive end, called **Low Assertive** style. A low assertive leader is someone who cares for others and is a good listener, but at the same time will speak up when needed. With low assertive leadership, there is a larger emphasis on listening and understanding others than there is on trying to be understood by others. However, the low assertive leader never crosses the line to become submissive. The one-word descriptor we use to characterize the low assertive style is “**Caring.**”

People can be assertive towards the aggressive end of that continuum, called **High Assertive** style. The high assertive leader is typically firm and places an emphasis on ensuring others understand his or her views. However, the high assertive person still never behaves aggressively toward others. The high assertive leader can make a compelling argument and will spend considerable time persuading others to a course of action. With the high assertive style, there is more of an emphasis on being understood by others than trying to understand others. This style is not aggressive, however, because the leader with a high assertive style never crosses the line to “run over” people. High assertive leaders can seem pushy at times, but they are still respectful toward other people. The one-word

descriptor that characterizes the high assertive style is “**Compelling**.”

The **Mid Assertive** style falls between the High and Low assertive styles of behavior. The mid assertive leadership style is achieved when there is an equal balance between the energy needed to understand others and the energy needed to be understood by others. This approach is more of a collaborative, or teamwork, style with appropriate give and take in interpersonal relationships. The mid assertive leader is a mixture of caring for others while at the same time being compelling or persuading others. The one-word descriptor we use for the mid assertive style is “**Collaborative**.”

The Full Model in a Table Format

Figure 2 on the next page illustrates in a table format these five distinct styles that a leader can use in dealing with people. For each of these five styles we demonstrate the degree of assertiveness involved, how a person comes across to others when employing the style, the degree to which the style encourages the involvement and participation of others, as well as the overall effect each style has on people. Also notice that we have put category labels on these five styles as follows: (1) Submissive, (2) Caring (Low Assertive), (3) Collaborative (Mid Assertive), (4) Compelling (High Assertive) and (5) Aggressive.

Figure 2
Five Distinct Behavioral Styles for Dealing with People

	(1) Submissive	(2) Caring	(3) Collaborative	(4) Compelling	(5) Aggressive
Degree of Assertiveness	No assertiveness	Low assertiveness	Mid assertiveness	High assertiveness	Off the scale into intimidation
How You Come Across	Disinterested, passive, shy or not opinionated	Interested, caring and supportive	Collaborative and a team player, willing to both give and take	Persuasive and assertive, yet not running over others	Aggressive and overbearing
Behavioral Emphasis	Avoid conflict, don't rock the boat	Show empathy and understanding to others	An equal emphasis on personal needs and the needs of others	Emphasis on personal needs and asserting personal views	Run over people to get your way
Involvement of Others	No involvement ("Whatever you want is find with me")	High Involvement	Mid Involvement	Low Involvement	No involvement ("My way or the highway")
Communication Style	No openness in communication	Asking questions, clarifying, summarizing, and empathizing (emphasis on trying to understand others)	Equal mixture of asking questions and selling your viewpoint	Persuading, selling and showing enthusiasm for your viewpoint (emphasis on trying to be understood by others)	One-way communication; little or not listening
Effect on Others	No respect; take you for granted; low morale	Willingness to respond honestly	Desire to work together; teamwork	Willing to respond positively if ideas are good	Compliance, resentment, feeling defeated; anger

While these five descriptions only capture a one-dimensional snapshot of human behavior, this simple model can be extremely helpful in developing the personal interaction skills of leaders. This model provides a comfortable framework and language for analyzing the different ways people can interact with one another in the workplace.

An Illustration

To help bring these five styles to life for you, please review the following example, taken from an actual office work situation.

The Situation:

You have a secretary you share with several other people. Often it seems that it takes too long to get your work completed and back from the secretary and you know that your work sometimes gets put behind the work of others. You feel this situation must be changed if you are to perform effectively. You decide to speak to the secretary to discuss this situation.

Here are five different ways you could approach this person, each one demonstrating a different behavioral style.

Submissive:	"I sure am having a hard time doing my job. Are things difficult for you too?" <i>Result:</i> Afraid of confrontation; much too indirect; avoids the issue
Aggressive:	"I am fed up with your sloppy way of not doing my work on time and if this continues, I am going to take drastic steps to change things." <i>Result:</i> A deliberate put down; tries to run over the person; shows no respect for the coworker
Low Assertive:	"There may be some problems associated with your having to do work for several of us. Why don't you tell me how you see this setup so we can discuss it?" <i>Result:</i> Brings up the issue (i.e., does not avoid the issue); shows a lot of concern and empathy; emphasis on hearing the other person's views; a caring approach
High Assertive:	"There is a problem with the arrangement of you working for several of us. My work never seems to be completed on time. Let's see if we can come up with a solution to this problem." <i>Result:</i> Brings up the issue and does so in a strong way; emphasis is on the office worker's problem and not the secretary's problems; does not cross the line and run over the person, however, does try to compel the secretary to change
Mid Assertive:	"You know, this arrangement of you working for several of us seems to be creating delays in my getting work completed. Why don't you tell me how you see things and I can do the same in hopes of resolving this problem?" <i>Result:</i> Brings up the problem, but not in as strong terms as above; an equal emphasis on listening and telling; seems to be both caring and compelling; comes across as a collaborative approach to dealing with the problem

Summary

In this article we discussed leadership style as the broad, characteristic way in which a leader interacts with others in various situations and occasions. You have learned that there are five distinct styles based on the degree of assertiveness that the leader exhibits in his or her relationships with others. We have labeled these five styles as Submissive, Caring, Collaborative, Compelling, and Aggressive.

Coming soon

In our sequel to this article, which will appear in our next newsletter edition, we will have you complete an instrument that measures your predominant style and we will explore how the most effective leaders change their styles to match the given situation.