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Ronny J. Coleman

What's Your Leadership Style?

A few years ago, there was a considerable amount of attention paid to a concept called Theory X and Theory Y. These two theories, if you will recall, focused on the two extremes of man's opinion of his fellow man. Theory X saw people in a most favorable light, ready to do the job with a minimum of supervision. Theory Y saw people in a most unfavorable light, ready to goof off at the slightest provocation, requiring constant supervision.

I'll almost bet a good percentage of the fire officers who studied this theory got caught up in the idea that everyone was closer to Theory X or was closer to Theory Y. The terms used for the two extremes were "dictator and democrat." Considerable debate rose up among management students as to where they were on the scale. Of course, as one might expect, the primary focus of most people was to prove that they were in the middle. As if this implied fairness and assertiveness at the same time.

Nothing could be further from the truth. And besides - who cares where you are on a scale. Only two things really count as far as your leadership style is concerned.

1. Are you comfortable with it?
2. Does it get the results you want?

These two questions become very important to the modern fire officer because if the answers to either question is no, you have the potential for personal distress.

Let's talk about you for a moment. Go back to those questions a minute. What are your answers? If you answered question number one as yes, then probably you are comfortable with yourself as a person and have a good self image or feeling of personal confidence. That's good.

If the answer to question two is yes also, I wonder why you'll even keep reading. For if your style works, it's because you have found it successful under a variety of circumstances and conditions. You are probably already adept at the subtle nuances of change that is required when situations move from low risk to high risk decisions or vice versa. This doesn't mean you can't improve on your execution of leadership in an environment. We can all improve. But two yeses mean you're feeling o.k. about who you are and what you are doing.

Now, let's say answer number one is no. You are not comfortable. Perhaps you feel like a square peg in a round hole. Don't feel alone. A lot of people have been trapped into "adopting" a leadership style that is not them. This comes about by trying to conform to a role model advocated in some leadership and



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supervision classes. Or it can come about from trying to conform to someone else's perceptions of what you ought to be.

Let's look at a few examples. One officer I knew of was basically a very humanistic person. His personality was structured around working closely with people and soliciting help. He, in turn, was always available to give support himself to anyone who asked for it. As a Captain, he was a very successful person. The troop thought of him as being a real "team man;" a good leader.

Promotion time came and he made Battalion Chief. Someone told him his "style" was too loose! He was perceived as being too "laissez-faire." He was told to "toughen up." Boy, did he ever! Over compensating for his basic desires, he almost became a martinet. Result: He was not happy with himself, his subordinates were unhappy with him, and he went from one confrontation to another as a very unhappy person.

Granted, this is an extreme. But, the example is there nonetheless. Your basic style of leadership is your perception of yourself. The more you know about yourself, the more you gain in leadership attributes. Let's repeat that statement so you'll get the full impact of it. **THE MORE YOU KNOW ABOUT YOURSELF, THE MORE YOU WILL GAIN IN LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES.**

In effect, what we are saying here is that all too many officers, both the current and future cadre study "leadership," but they don't examine themselves closely enough to maximize their use of the skill of leadership.

Each and every fire officer has an inventory of latent skills. They have been forming since they were first used as a child. These skills were exercised in kindergarten, on the baseball fields of little leagues, in high school classes and so forth. Those latent skills and the person's basic philosophy are extremely important to a person's sense of perspective about themselves.

What I'm suggesting here is that a person has got to "know themselves" before they can utilize any of the so called leadership attributes. Quite frankly, there is no one leadership style that is the style of success. Not in the fire service, not in the business world, not in the military.

Can you see, for example, the distinct differences in the styles of Dwight Eisenhower, George S. Patton and Douglas McArthur? All three men were successful. All three had a great deal of confidence in their styles. They did not adopt a style as a leader. They were who they were.

Being more specific then, if your answer to question number one is no, look first to yourself, ask yourself what you are comfortable with. There are literally hundreds of evaluation instruments that are used by



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professional school counselors in this regard. Locate them in your local area and develop a personality profile to see just what kind of person you really are.

Examples of this type of instrument are the FIRO-B, (MMPI) Minnesota Multi-Phasic Personality Inventory, (LIFO) Life-Orientation Analysis, (LEAD) Leadership Effectiveness and Adaptability Description. The list goes on and on. Any good high school or community college counselor can help you locate these types of instruments.

By using these devices, you can often see right away what your comfort problem is. For example, your FIRO-B score could show that you do not like having someone exercising strict controls over your life, yet you like exercising control over others. If you have a predicament where most of the tasks you are given are mandated by a superior, and you have little direct authority over having the task performed at a lower level, you may adopt an assertive style that keeps you in distress most of the time. By the way! This is not an uncommon problem for staff officers.

The bottom line of this discussion is that comfort factor as a leader begins with your complete and consenting agreement that your basic personality style is what determines your leadership style.

I can almost hear the arguments now. I'll bet there are those of you who claim to be one person on the job - another person off the job. It might be true, but I'll bet it causes conflict. And sometimes it causes confusion on the part of subordinates and superiors alike. They don't know how you'll react unless they can see what kind of attire you are in! Badge on - Leadership on. Badge off - nice guy, or whatever.

To increase your comfort as a leader, know thyself and be satisfied with yourself!

Now to question number two. If what you are is not getting the results you want, you probably said no to the question. The next question is what can you do? There are two options.

1. Change yourself to conform to a new style and hope it works,
2. Stay yourself and study your subordinates to see why nothing is happening.

Of the two options, number one has obvious pitfalls. Refer back to question number one. Option number two means that you must learn as much about the expectation of these people you are trying to lead, if you expect to lead them. In short, this means your leadership style has to match the leadership needs of your group. Those people have definite concepts of themselves, too. Their perception and acceptance of your style is a part of the synergistic aspects of leaders and followers.

Another example of an extreme might help here. A fire department that had operated under a very open, very flexible management style changed chief officers. The previous chief had openly developed



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his officers to be decisive, delegated a lot of authority and solicited their input. They perceived themselves as a team and the chief was the coach. A very successful combination. The chief moved on (to another department as I recall), and a staff officer moved in as the chief.

Coming from within, you would expect him to “understand” the system. But he perceived that the system was too loose. He began to place more and more demands, continue to pull back authority and was not open to much constructive criticism. He saw himself as a very dynamic leader. The troop saw him as an interference. Result: poorer performance.

Now, that chief could still have been a dynamic leader without destroying his relationship with the troops. If he would have analyzed their needs, he would have quickly recognized that they saw themselves as dynamic, too. The first chief gave the appearance of being more lethargic, but he got more work than the other guy. So then, what to do?

Chief number two does not need to change himself. What he should do is to evaluate more closely the profile of the group he is leading. Understanding their collective strengths and weaknesses can go a long way in helping a leader mix and match his needs with theirs.

Team builders can use the same instruments referred to when we were discussing question number one. All of those same instruments can be used to develop a group profile. Then a leader can analyze what the group expects of him. Without changing his style, he can still meet the needs of the group by avoiding unnecessary conflict.

This all sounds a little Machiavellian, but it isn't. You've probably heard the old cliché “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” That's not true as a leader. You do unto them what they want done, to get them motivated or involved. Knowing what makes a person tick can be invaluable in helping you structure your leadership role with them.

The most successful team managers I know of are ones who have a style, do not try to make anyone into their image, recognize the style of their subordinates, let them use their strengths to the maximum, and finally, let the weaknesses of each style be contradicted by the overlap of each other's strengths.

Sounds difficult, doesn't it? Well, it really isn't. A good leader does this sort of thing intuitively. They know themselves and they know their followers. Some of us have to work harder at it, however.

If you've got two yeses to those questions, go out and help someone else get two yeses. If you've got one or two no's, then go to work in the mirror or on studying the attributes of the troops.



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There are no bad leadership styles or bad followers. There are only uninformed leaders and mismanaged groups. As the physicians once recognized, and pardon the plagiarism, if you want to be a leader, leader, heal thyself!