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How to Find the Right Management Style

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The ability to make good decisions is an art all leaders must learn, but it is especially vital for the entrepreneur. In many cases, when you started your business, there was no one else. You were technician, manager, and leader -- responsible for making every decision both tactical and strategic.

As your business has grown, you've included more people in the operations of your business. But have you included others into your decision-making process? Should you?

There is no clear-cut answer to this question, which is why skillful decision-making is more art than science. Different situations call for different approaches ranging from autocratic to consensual. It can be as detrimental to be autocratic all the time as it is to be too inclusive.

As a result, the best decision-makers are flexible. They know when to be autocratic, when to be seek consensus, and when to do something in-between. But how do you know which approach is right for any given situation? You can start by examining your personal decision-making style.

Understanding your style

To improve your decision-making, you must first understand your decision-making preferences. To do this, ask yourself: when faced with a decision, do I tend to go it alone, or do I usually seek consensus? Or do I always do something in between -- seeking the input of others but making the final decision myself.

One way to determine your decision-making style is with an assessment instrument. One such tool, the Decision Style Profile*, evaluates the appropriateness with which respondents include others in the decision-making process. After reading 10 cases and deciding how autocratic or inclusive they would be in each instance, users can determine

which of five basic decision-making styles most closely describes their personal tendencies.

The five decision-making styles presented in the Decision Style Profile are:

1. Director -- The most autocratic style, the Director assumes he or she knows everything they need to know to make a decision and makes it alone.
2. Fact Finder -- Also an autocratic style, the Fact Finder doesn't share the problem or seek advice from others; instead he or she collects the information they think they need to make a decision and make it alone.
3. Investigator -- A more inclusive style, the Investigator will choose select stakeholders and ask their advice, taking their opinion into account when making a decision, but still making it alone.
4. Collaborator -- Still more inclusive, the Collaborator shares the problem with all stakeholders, seeking their input but reserving the right to make the final decision.
5. Teamer -- The most inclusive style, the Teamer seeks complete consensus when making a decision.

Clarity, Comprehension, and Commitment

Only once you understand your decision-making style can you consider whether each situation requires flexibility from your normal tendencies. You can do this by determining your clarity of the problem, comprehension of the information needed to make any decision, and the commitment necessary to implement the decision. In each situation, ask yourself:

1. Am I completely clear about the problem? (Clarity)
2. Do I have all the information I need to make the decision or do I know where to find it? (Comprehension)
3. How much help from others will be necessary to implement the decision? (Commitment)

The more clarity and comprehension you have, the more autocratic you can be in making the decision. The less clarity and comprehension you have, the more inclusive you must be. Conversely, the more commitment you need to implement the decision, the more inclusive you need to be. When you need less commitment, you can afford to be more autocratic.

Once you've answered these questions, you are better equipped to determine when it's best to go it alone, get input from others, or seek full consensus in making your decision.

The critical factor: Time

Sometimes, time doesn't allow this ideal approach. Time is always the most critical factor in any decision-making process.

Taking any extra time on the front end of what seems like an emergency can be painful. But talk to anyone who's wasted valuable time, money, and brainpower working on the wrong problem, and they will attest to the value of a more thoughtful approach. It is surprising how often there is not time up front to get appropriate input but there is always time to go back and readdress the decision when it becomes clear it cannot be implemented.

It is in those situations when you have no time to seek input from others that you'll see the benefit of having a decision-making process in place that is transparent to everyone involved in making decisions at your company.

Transparency = Trust

Realizing how visible your decisions can be, it comes as no surprise that successful leaders are transparent in their decision-making logic and rationale.

The trust you build by allowing your organization to see how decisions are made will earn you the confidence, understanding, and buy-in you need when a lack of time forces you to make decisions with little or no involvement from others. Transparency helps to foster understanding even when there isn't agreement, which is invaluable when it comes to actually implementing the decision successfully.

While making good decisions is definitely an art, having proven guidelines to follow can improve the quality of every decision you make. Understanding your own decision-making tendencies and taking the time you have to be clear about each situation will help you determine when to go it alone and when to include others. And keeping the entire process visible will earn you confidence and trust in your capabilities while modeling good decision-making skills to all.

** The Decision Style Profile is a product of Discovery Learning Inc. It is an enlightening management-assessment tool that leads to the development of improved decision-making skills. It evaluates the appropriateness with which respondents include others in the decision-making process and the extent to which respondents consider five critical Decision Factors in their decision processes. It takes 10-15 minutes to complete. For more information, visit www.discoverylearning.com.*

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