Leadership style

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Core ideas

Leadership style is the pattern of behaviour a leader uses when making decisions, giving direction and working with followers.

Muczyk and Reimann describe leader behaviour using two dimensions: how much followers participate in decisions and how directive the leader is during implementation.

Their four styles are directive autocrat, permissive autocrat, directive democrat and permissive democrat.

Scouller's three levels separate public leadership with the whole group, private leadership with individuals or small groups and personal leadership based on the leader's own qualities and self-management.

Leadership style and gender research asks whether the same behaviour is judged differently when the leader is described as a woman or a man.

Cuadrado et al. can be used to discuss how stereotypes, experimental design and generalisability affect conclusions about gender and leadership.

Key terms

Leadership style: A leader's usual pattern of directing, involving and influencing followers.

Directive autocrat: A leader who makes decisions and gives strong direction during implementation.

Permissive autocrat: A leader who makes decisions but gives followers more freedom in carrying them out.

Directive democrat: A leader who involves followers in decisions but gives clear direction during implementation.

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Permissive democrat: A leader who involves followers in decisions and gives freedom during implementation.

Public leadership: Scouller's level focused on leading the group as a whole.

Private leadership: Scouller's level focused on one-to-one or small-group leadership.

Gender stereotype: A generalised expectation about behaviour based on gender.

Further detail and evidence

Key study: Cuadrado et al. (2008) tested role congruity: whether leader gender and stereotyped style affect evaluations and help explain women's leadership underrepresentation.

136 Spanish psychology students, 53% women, were randomly allocated to four groups of 34.

A 2 × 2 experiment varied leader gender and masculine-stereotyped versus feminine-stereotyped style in a hospital-emergency-service narrative.

The masculine-stereotyped style was autocratic/task-oriented; the feminine-stereotyped style was democratic, relationship-oriented and individually considerate. These are manipulated stereotypes, not innate sex differences.

Participants rated competence, efficacy and traits. The feminine-stereotyped style received more favourable ratings regardless of leader gender.

There was no main effect of leader gender: the result did not simply confirm that equivalent female leaders were rated worse.

Muczyk/Reimann combine participation in decisions with direction during implementation. Directive autocrat: leader decides and closely directs. Permissive autocrat: leader decides but allows implementation freedom. Directive democrat: followers participate in decisions, then implementation is closely directed. Permissive democrat: participation and implementation freedom are both high.

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Scouller: public leadership concerns the collective group, private leadership concerns one-to-one work with individuals, and personal leadership concerns the leader's own self-awareness, skills and psychological development. Personal leadership supports the other two; it is not merely private life.

Cuadrado's gender/style experiment uses role-congruity expectations as its context. Its finding favouring the relationship-oriented/democratic style across leader genders should be distinguished from the hypothesis that women would be penalised simply for holding leadership roles.

Applying the ideas

A team may help decide a project method while the manager closely monitors implementation: directive democracy. A manager can unilaterally choose a goal but leave an experienced team to decide how: permissive autocracy. Participation and follow-up are independent decisions.

Evaluation and connections

Random allocation and controlled narratives aid validity; reliable multi-item ratings aid consistency. A hypothetical scenario and student sample limit real-hiring generalisation.

Evaluate nature/nurture, individual/situational explanations and cultural differences. Fictional-leader ratings do not demonstrate actual managerial effectiveness.

Written scenarios isolate gender/style information but omit real interaction and consequences. Student competence ratings are not hiring decisions or productivity. The labels masculine/feminine refer to stereotypes manipulated in the study, not biological properties. No main gender effect does not show that discrimination never occurs in any workplace.