Six Emotional Leadership Styles

Choosing the Right Style for the Situation

Find out how emotional leadership styles can affect your team's happiness.

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Imagine that you work with a positive, charismatic leader. She's excited about the future of the organization, and she shares this excitement with her team.

She makes sure that people understand how their efforts contribute to this future, and this inclusion sparks loyalty and intense effort in the team. Generally, morale and job satisfaction are high, because team members feel that they're making a difference.

However, some people in her team don't respond well to this style of leadership. And when there's a crisis, she struggles to get some of them to focus on short-term objectives.

She could be more effective by varying her approach to leadership, depending on the situation; and she could do this by using "six emotional leadership styles", each of which is useful in different circumstances.

In this article, we'll look at these six emotional leadership styles. We'll explore each style, and we'll look at the situations where each is most useful. We'll also
explore how you can develop the skills needed to use each style effectively.

The Six Emotional Leadership Styles

Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee described six distinct emotional leadership styles in their 2002 book, "Primal Leadership." Each of these styles has a different effect on people’s emotions, and each has strengths and weaknesses in different situations.

Four of these styles (Visionary, Coaching, Affiliative, and Democratic) promote harmony and positive outcomes, while two styles (Commanding and Pacesetting) can create tension, and should only be used in specific situations.

Goleman and his co-authors say that no one style should be used all of the time. Instead, the six styles should be used interchangeably, depending on the specific needs of the situation and the people that you’re dealing with.

We’ll now examine each style in more detail.

1. The Visionary Leader

People using the Visionary leadership style are inspiring, and they move people toward a common goal. Visionary leaders tell their teams where they’re all going, but not how they’re going to get there – they leave it up to team members to find their way to the common goal. Empathy is the most important aspect of Visionary leadership.

When to Use It

Visionary leadership is most effective when the organization needs a new vision or a dramatic new direction, such as during a corporate turnaround. However, it’s less likely to be effective when you’re working with a team more experienced than you are – here, democratic leadership is more likely to be effective.

This leadership style can also be overbearing if you use it too often.

How to Develop It
To develop a Visionary style, focus on increasing your expertise, vision, self-confidence [2], and empathy [3]. Get excited about change, and let your team see your enthusiasm.

You also need to convince others of your vision, so focus on improving your presentation skills [4].

Example

Imagine that, in order to reach some aggressive sales goals, you've decided to overhaul the way that your department connects with new clients. The techniques and processes you've developed are radically different from the ones that your people are used to.

As you tell your team about the new process, you can’t help but be excited. You believe that these changes will make a real difference to your results, and you want your people to succeed.

Your team immediately picks up on your excitement and sincerity, and they get excited too. They know it’s up to them to use the new system to make things happen, and they're willing to put in the extra work needed to learn new skills.

2. The Coaching Leader

The Coaching leadership style connects people’s personal goals with the organization’s goals. A leader using this style is empathic and encouraging, and focuses on developing others for future success.

This style centers on having in-depth conversations with employees that may have little to do with current work, instead focusing on long-term life goals and how these connect with the organization’s mission.

This style has a positive impact on your people, because it’s motivating, and it establishes rapport and trust.

When to Use It
The Coaching style should be used whenever you have a team member who needs help building long-term skills, or if you feel that he or she is “adrift” in your organization and could benefit from a coaching or mentoring relationship.

However, coaching can fail when it’s used with an employee who is not making an effort, or who needs a lot of direction and feedback – here, pacesetting or commanding leadership may be more appropriate.

How to Develop It

To develop a Coaching style, learn how to engage in informal coaching[5] and mentoring[6].

It’s also important to get to know the people on your team. When you know your people, you’re better able to see when they need guidance or advice. Use Management by Walking Around[7] to keep in touch with their needs.

Example

Jim, a new hire on your team, is having trouble fitting in to his new role. He’s only been with the organization a month, but you can tell he’s dissatisfied. Your organization requires “face time” at the office, and Jim misses the freedom of telecommuting, as he did at his old job. You also get the feeling that he’d like a position with more responsibility.

You meet with Jim, and you help him see that being in the office five days a week does have distinct advantages over telecommuting. For instance, showing up every day allows him to bond with the team and network with colleagues who could turn into strategic allies in the future. You also encourage him to use your organization’s immense training library, which he can visit in his lunch break to learn the skills he needs for a promotion.

To inspire and motivate Jim, you assign him projects that will stretch his skills and knowledge base. Instead of being overwhelmed, he expresses excitement about the opportunity.
After your talk, Jim takes your advice and starts making the most of his time in the office. He works on his projects with dedication, impressing both you and your boss.

3. The Affiliative Leader

The Affiliative leadership style promotes harmony within the team. This style connects people together, encouraging inclusion and resolving conflict. To use this style, you must value the emotions of others, and put a high value on their emotional needs.

When to Use It

Use this style whenever there is team tension or conflict, when trust has been broken, or if the team needs to be motivated through a stressful time.

How to Develop It

Leaders who use the Affiliative style are highly focused on emotion. So, learn how to resolve conflict \(^8\) and how to be optimistic \(^9\). Our article on managing emotion in your team \(^10\) will also help.

Example

After a difficult year, Sarah’s boss has finally been asked to leave her department. Although she was proficient at her job, her management style was dictatorial. It didn’t matter what she had to do or whose feelings she hurt – meeting department goals was her top priority.

Sarah’s been asked to take over her position, and, although she’s excited about the opportunity, she’s now in charge of a team that is emotionally battered and untrusting.

Sarah decides to focus on her team’s emotional needs before doing any work on department goals and future projects.
Her first few meetings are just spent talking. She allows everyone to open up about how their old boss made them feel. Every person on the team is allowed time to vent. The group quickly realizes that although they went through their own tough times, they all experienced similar things.

After two meetings, the atmosphere in the team is better and more open to new relationships. Because their emotional needs were met first, the group is now ready to focus on new projects and goals.

4. The Democratic Leader

The Democratic leadership style focuses on collaboration. Leaders using this leadership style actively seek input from their teams, and they rely more on listening than directing.

When to Use It

This style is best used when you need to get your team on board with an idea, or build consensus. It's also effective when you need your team’s input.

The Democratic leadership style shouldn't be used with people who are inexperienced, lack competence, or aren’t well informed about a situation. It's best to ask for input from team members who are motivated, knowledgeable and capable.

How to Develop It

To develop a Democratic leadership style, involve your team in problem solving and decision making, and teach them the skills they need to do this. You should learn active listening and facilitation skills.

Example

Your department has lost money over the past two quarters, and you’re anxious to reverse this – you know that if you can’t figure out how to make your department profitable soon, something radical (and unpleasant) will have to be done to stem the losses.
You call a meeting with your team and explain the situation. You ask them if they have any ideas that could turn the department around. Then, you give them the floor: For the rest of the meeting, all you do is listen.

Your team members talk through their options, and you reach a consensus on what to do next.

**5. The Pacesetting Leader**

The Pacesetting leadership style focuses on performance and meeting goals. Leaders using this leadership style expect excellence from their teams, and often the leader will jump in him or herself to make sure that goals are met.

The Pacesetting style doesn’t coddle poor performers – everyone is held to a high standard.

While this can be a successful style, it can have a negative effect on the team, leading to burnout, exhaustion and high staff turnover.

**When to Use It**

The Pacesetting leadership style is best used when you need to get high quality results from a motivated team, quickly.

**How to Develop It**

Because the Pacesetting style focuses on high performance, learn how to improve the quality of your team’s work using techniques like Six Sigma \[^{14}\] and Kaizen \[^{15}\]. Train your people properly, and engage in high-performance coaching \[^{16}\] to help them become as effective as possible.

You may also want to work on your motivation skills \[^{17}\], so that you can get the best from your people.
Example

Although the holidays are coming up, your boss is pressuring you to improve your team’s numbers by the end of the quarter, which is only a few weeks away. Your team is motivated, but they’re also tired. They’re not looking forward to a last minute push right before their break.

You decide to move forward anyway. They can handle the pressure, and if they can meet their performance goals they’ll be rewarded with a great end-of-year bonus. So you get them fired up one last time, asking everyone to work extra hours to ensure success. You also work extra hours yourself, and you help anyone who falls behind.

6. The Commanding Leader

Commanding leaders use an autocratic approach to leadership. This style often depends on orders, the (often unspoken) threat of punishment, and tight control.

People in modern, democratic countries are used to having a level of control over their lives and their work, and this approach deprives them of this. What’s more, because this leadership style is so often misused, it can have a profoundly negative effect on a team.

When to Use It

The Commanding leadership style is best used in crisis situations, to jump start fast-paced change, and with problem employees.

How to Develop It

Be cautious when setting out to develop a Commanding leadership style. Remember, this style is very easily misused, and should only be used when necessary.

To work effectively in these high-pressure situations, learn how to manage crises, think on your feet, and...
make good decisions under pressure.\[20\]

Example

Vijay has just learned that his CEO is stepping down, as of today.

As the Executive Vice President, he's naturally next in line for the position. But right now, the board is in turmoil. Everyone is trying to decide what to do before the financial markets open and shares plummet on the news.

He tries to collaborate with some of his allies, but everyone has their own idea of what needs to happen. The team is arguing constantly, and Vijay realizes that nothing is going to get done unless someone takes charge.

He starts issuing orders to those closest to him, almost without thinking. His tone is firm and authoritative, and there's no room for debate. Quickly, the room quiets down and he outlines what needs to happen within the next few hours. He ends up quieting the fears of everyone in the room, and things get done quickly.

Having passed the crisis, he switches to a more democratic leadership style, respecting the experience and expertise of his executive team.

Key Points

According to Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, there are six emotional leadership styles – Visionary, Coaching, Affiliative, Democratic, Pacesetting, and Commanding. Each style has a different affect on the emotions of the people that you're leading.

Each style works best in different situations, resonating differently with your team, and producing different results.

Anyone can learn how to use these leadership styles. But it's important to remember that these styles are meant to be used interchangeably, depending on the needs of your team, and the situation.
Did you find this article helpful?

Where to go from here:
View print friendly version [21]
Ask questions, or share your experience [22]

What members say...

MJ08 wrote

Thanks Dianna

February 5, 2013

Dianna wrote

Hi MJ,
I’ll pass this feedback along to our editorial team for consideration. They have lots of new things in the pipeline and there is capacity for updates and improvements as well. Now that you have posted to this thread you will be advised when other people comment on the article as well as when an update is made.

Cheers!
Dianna

January 30, 2013

MJ08 wrote

This is a great article. Is it available as a visual at all? e.g. as a table with the
different styles of leadership with the summary of "When to Use it" and "How to develop it". Its good to read the detail of the article and then to have something visual as a reminder would be really helpful, thanks

January 30, 2013

James wrote

Hi Muyis

Our pleasure - I’m very pleased that you’ve found the resources useful!

James

March 19, 2011

muyis wrote

Hi,:D

I find your emotional intelligence and Leadership resources absolutely valuable and must commend the author(s) for a wonderful job. I do on a personal note apply these to myself or to scenarios that presents itself in the resources i have come across as a new member. Welldone.

Regards

March 18, 2011

Dianna wrote

Interesting situation. My personal approach would be to be as open and honest as possible about your reasons for keeping this person in loop. With the affiliative leadership style you can rely on open communication to keep emotions in check and encourage people to talk about what is bothering them instead of building resentments that can become huge obstacles as the project progresses.

We’d love to hear how things turn out and what methods you decide to use. Keep us posted!

Dianna
March 15, 2011

go_nomad wrote

Abolutely agreed, Yolanda - I'm using the information in this article to help me in my role as a Project Manager. Here's a "live" example, I need this right now for a (what should be small) issue that's occurring right now: agreement from project team on who should/should not be invited to project planning work sessions! I'd like to include someone who, while not needed in the immediate planning at-hand, will be a "recipient" down the road. I want to include that person now to give them full understanding of what will be happening so when his piece comes to life, yadda yadda yadda. But I'm getting resistance. I have to handle this properly or team relations could be jeopardized... Wish me luck! Thanks.

March 15, 2011

Yolande wrote

Hi all

What a great article! Having knowledge about the different emotional leadership styles, may help you make a conscious decision to move between them as the need arises. Not only is this helpful in the office situation, but also at home and even when managing personal relationships. There is a natural rhythm of ebb and flow in most things in life: times when things at the office seem to go smooth and times that call for harder measures; times when relationships are blooming and times when it's more difficult to keep peace and harmony; times when business and income flows well and leaner times. Each situation calls for a connected leader who knows how to handle the situation emotionally.

It will be great to hear about experiences from some of our members.

Kind regards

Yolandé

March 2, 2011