



Leadership Is Situational

It's crucial to identify what kind of leadership is called for

Tim Stevenson

A FIRE COMMANDER leads his team into a house to fight what seems to be a simple kitchen fire. After trying conventional methods for a few minutes, the commander is puzzled to find they don't work. He suddenly feels uneasy, and barks, "Everybody out! Now!"

Just as the team reaches the sidewalk outside, the first floor of the home caves in, revealing the huge fire that had been burning unknown in the basement. The lives of the team members were saved because of the commander's ... what? ESP? Sixth sense? Experience? If it's "experience," what exactly does that mean? The commander himself could

not explain. He "just knew" there was something very wrong.

The power of recognition

Gary Klein made it his business to investigate the subject of intuition: What it is, how people do it, and how someone can learn it. He wrote a book explaining his findings called *Sources of Power: How people make decisions*, which contains the firefighter story.

In short, Klein does not believe in ESP. He says that experienced decision-makers *see the world differently* than novices. The beginner observes a situation and asks, "What should I *do*?" **An experienced leader first asks, "What's going on?"** It is his or her mental catalogue of past experiences that allows them to speedily file through them and recognize the current situation, and see what to do.

This interests me, not just because it's fascinating to explore the mysteries of intuition, but because I believe *the most effective leaders always do this*. They don't walk into a situation and start giving directions. **Effective leaders first recognize**



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the situation. Their first question is also, “What’s going on?” Only then do they decide what to do.

Matching person and situation

Many leaders with long track records of success have walked into a new situation and fallen flat on their face. Others with modest track records have encountered a huge challenge and risen to the occasion, displaying strengths and character previously unknown. Whether someone succeeds or fails as a leader often depends on whether they are a good match of person and situation.

Gandhi was a world-changing leader through his nonviolent protests in colonial India. However, I don’t believe he would have lasted a month leading a nonviolent revolutionary movement in Stalin’s U.S.S.R. He would simply have “disappeared.”

Abe Lincoln’s character, strength, and perseverance were brought to light during the trauma of the Civil War. But how would he have done as President during the Roaring 20s?

General George S. Patton was a fiery, egotistical, and ambitious soldier; just the sort of leader you want if you need an army to make an impossible march to rescue the besieged city of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. He was not made to be a peacetime soldier, as he himself admitted, and was your typical bull in a china shop. He drove his superiors crazy enough during the war, when his aggression and drive were assets.

In short — as much as egotistical leaders hate to admit it — there really is a luck element in leadership success. By “luck,” I do not mean a metaphysical power akin to superstition. I am using it in the sense defined by Bill Oncken: “A situation or event which could not be predicted with accuracy and over which you have no control.” Obviously, no one has control over the time of their birth or the

conditions they encounter in life. Not only that, but conditions can change rapidly without warning, bringing new challenges.

Recognition of this stimulates wise leaders to maintain an attitude of humility, as well as a spirit of vigilance continually on alert.

Different kinds of leadership

Leadership is not monolithic. There are many kinds of leadership, each requiring different qualities and actions from the leader. Knowing how and when to shift from one type to another can determine your success. Here are a few you should definitely know:

1. Authoritative leadership.

This is what most people think of when they hear the word, “leader”: The person who says, “OK, here’s what we’re going to do. You go do this. You do that. You work over there. Then we’ll do this. Let’s get it done.”

- A captain on the bridge giving orders to the crew, guiding the course of the ship.
- The surgeon directing her team, telling assistants what to do during an operation.
- The coach giving his team the game plan, organizing practices, and calling the plays during the game.

In each of these, the leader knows what to do, and directs team members regarding their roles. So-called “natural born leaders” take to this style like ducks to water. It is not enough, however, and authoritative leaders can find themselves in situations where their knee-jerk style is not effective.

2. Adaptive leadership.

This term was coined by Ronald Heifetz and introduced in his important book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Unlike

authoritative leadership where the leader “knows what to do,” in an adaptive leadership situation the leader **does NOT** know what to do to fix a problem; in some cases, *there is no answer at all*. **The leader must guide a group through the process of adapting to a new reality.** The group *itself* needs to change. Adaptive leadership is hazardous because people often don’t like it and will focus their unhappiness on the leader. It could be:

- An executive leading her team through a merger, doubling the size of departments and moving to a new location. The comfortable and familiar are gone. There are many new working relationships and processes to learn; a lot of stress and anxiety to be managed and worked through.
- A doctor guiding a family through the process of coming to grips with an unavoidable and unhappy reality: That a member’s illness is incurable, for example.
- A CEO leading his company through the process of redefining itself after a major change in the business environment. They can no longer conduct business the old way. They must adapt, perhaps drastically, or go out of business.

The Eastman Kodak Company is a striking example. Founded in 1888, it ruled the world of photography for a century. Beginning to decline in the 1990s, it went through bankruptcy shortly after the turn of the 21st century.

What happened? Kodak stubbornly maintained its commitment to film photography and development even as the whole world was turning to digital photography. The really ironic fact: Kodak actually developed the first digital camera in 1975, and owned more patents touching on digital photography than any other company. But they failed to see that the world was changing ... until it was too late.

The failure to recognize an adaptive leadership situation has taken down many leaders. Typically, the scenario is a person with a long track record of success as an authoritative leader who finds him- or herself in an *adaptive* leadership situation, *but doesn’t know it*. Their authoritative methods don’t work with the new reality, and the leader fails. **Knowing this distinction might be critical to your career.**

Adaptive leadership calls for a very high degree of awareness and finesse. Heifetz describes it as “**disappointing people at a rate they can tolerate,**” like managing a pressure cooker. It’s one of the greatest tests a leader can face, even for the most experienced ones. This is a complex and profound subject, and I recommend the writings of Ronald Heifetz if you’d like to explore further.

3. Crisis leadership.

Typically, crisis leadership responds to a state of emergency. In this situation a leader’s personal makeup and style are very relevant.

We process new information and situations differently. Some process extremely quickly; others are slower and more systematic. Either can be a strength or a weakness depending on the need.

Slower processors tend to be less effective in an emergency. They can, however, compensate by learning through experience and by doing contingency planning, playing out possible scenarios in advance. No one can predict the future, but this kind of preparation can help a slow processor function in a crisis and make better decisions in real time.

There are other categories, but these three are the ones you will most often face. Before you rush in with answers, be sure you’ve asked the right question: **What’s going on? **