

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS - STEP 3: PREFERRED LEADERSHIP STYLES

In my younger years, I was naive enough to think there was one “right” way to lead people. I knew from my time in the Air Force that I did not like the hierarchical style of leading. “Do this because I tell you to.” While I understand the importance of it in the military, I believed it wasn’t the best approach in a business setting. When I moved to Europe, I started experiencing a more egalitarian style of leadership. Even though I was still young, my bosses treated me as more of an equal. I believed I had found the ideal leadership style.

As I grew up, I took on larger responsibilities, and when I was given my first few teams, I started practicing this egalitarian style of leadership. While my team seemed to like this style of leadership, I started to grow more and more frustrated with it. I would have plans for what my team should discuss in a meeting, and, before I knew it, the team had steered the conversation in a new direction. Or sometimes there would be a clear direction where a project had to go, but I would spend hour after hour helping the team accept the change. Many times wanted to throw up my hands and say, “Hey, I’m the boss and we need to do it this way.”

On top of that, I began to realize I had some direct reports that really struggled under my leadership style. I was constantly asking people to challenge my ideas or opinions, and half of the team struggled with that. While my Danish team members always spoke up, trying to get the thoughts of my Indian team members was like pulling teeth. I would empower them to come up with their own solutions, but they would end up pulling me into a lot of those decisions. What I didn’t realize at the time was that they wanted me to be more hands on with them. They felt like I was leaving them to struggle on their own.

These experiences of leading international teams lead me to study cultural differences, and what different cultures expect from their leaders. But as I studied those differences, I realized something important. I am not the stereotypical representative of every American worker, and the people I meet do not always match their cultural stereotypes. So instead of trying to form relationships based on cultural stereotypes, I started to view people as individuals and try to form relationships based on their individual preferences. And now I want to share my lessons with you.

Over a series of seven articles, I will share with you the different dimensions of collaboration and leadership, and how you can improve your relationships with your colleagues, your customers, and even in your personal life. This is the third article of the seven, and it is focused on the different styles of leadership that people prefer.

The Seven Dimensions of Collaboration

The seven dimensions of collaboration is not a concept I created on my own. It is founded on research by Professor Erin Meyer, from INSEAD. In her amazing book, *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer highlights seven dimensions of collaboration that vary widely across cultures. The seven dimensions are:

1. How do we build trust? - Task based vs Relationship based trust
2. How do we communicate with each other - Low Context vs High Context Communication
3. What is expected from leaders? - Egalitarian Leadership vs Hierarchical Leadership
4. How do we want decisions to be made? - Consensual vs Top-Down Decisions
5. What do we do when we disagree? - Confrontational Discussion vs Avoiding Confrontation
6. How do we prefer to give and receive feedback? - Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback
7. What is our approach to time when it comes to accomplishing tasks and delivering results? - Linear Timelines vs Flexible Planning

I fully recommend everyone read Erin Meyer’s book, especially if you are ever working with someone from a different culture. But even if all of your colleagues and customers are from the same country, there is a ton of value in understanding the seven dimensions. Most people do not match the average cultural profile from their country. That is why I recommend trying to understand their individual preferences across the seven dimensions. By trying to understand their individual preferences, you will be able to form more productive relationships in your teams and more valuable relationships with your customers.

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Dimension 3 - What Kind of Leaders Do We Prefer?

Ask anyone what good leadership means to them, and you are likely to get different results. The role of a manager and how they relate to their direct reports is a critical element to align on. Misalignment can create frustration, disengagement, and, ultimately, a poor working relationship. Similarly, how our customers and suppliers view leadership can view how we work with them. Some will have the freedom to act, while others want leaders involved in the decisions. No matter who you are working with, knowing how the other person views their relationship with their leader will help you in collaborating with them.

While there are many components of leadership, we are primarily going to focus on how the person views the power dynamics in leadership roles. On one hand, we have people that believe that there is little difference between a leader and their direct report. The best leader is seen as a facilitator that helps the team come to their own solutions. These kinds of people will regularly skip hierarchical lines of communication and go directly to the person they want to talk to, no matter their role. This style of leadership is called Egalitarian leadership.

On the other side of the spectrum, some people prefer to have the leadership role distinctly defined and separated from the team. They believe the best leaders direct and guide from the front. Status is important, and these people will give increased importance to the opinions of higher roles. Communication tends to follow hierarchical lines and the leader is informed first before the team. This style of leadership is called Hierarchical leadership.

While you might already have a good idea on which type of leadership you prefer and what type you prefer to have as your leader, there is an easy way to find out. Answer the below three questions, and based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for leadership.

1) If I don't agree with the boss, I say so openly, even in front of others.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2) In meetings with colleagues, clients, or suppliers, I don't pay much attention to the hierarchical positions of the attendees.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3) If I have ideas to share with someone several levels above or below me, I speak to that person directly rather than communicating through my immediate boss or immediate subordinate.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for Leadership styles.	High Preference for Egalitarian Leadership	Slight Preference for Egalitarian Leadership	Mixed Preference	Slight Preference for Hierarchical Leadership	High Preference for Hierarchical Leadership

Collaborating With People With Different Leadership Preferences

It goes without saying that if your preference of leadership styles matches the other person, then working with them will be easier. But what do you do if you prefer Egalitarian style of leadership while the other person prefers Hierarchical? Or what about the reverse? Don't worry ... effectively working with people with different leadership styles is possible. All it takes is a willingness to try and adapt your style to meet their preferences.

What you should do if you prefer a more Egalitarian approach to leadership and the other person prefers a more Hierarchical approach:

- **Start by respecting their preferences** - Don't make the mistake I made by thinking there is one "right" way to lead. We each have our own preferences. Just because they see the role of the leader as differently than you, that doesn't mean they are wrong. They just want something different from the leadership role than you do. It isn't your job to force them to be more Egalitarian in their preferences. Respect that they are different, and be willing to adapt your styles to meet them.

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· **Be OK with more formalized names** - People with a more Hierarchical approach to leadership often prefer to use formal name structures (Mr., Mrs., etc...). Trying to force them into calling you by your first name won't necessarily work, and the person might feel uncomfortable with it. For example, I had a colleague with a more Hierarchical viewpoint of leadership and they always called me Mr. Cary, instead of just Cary. Even if it makes you feel strange, you should respect that they may want a more formal approach to what you call each other.

· **Gather input / opinions in a more roundabout way** - In more Egalitarian teams, everyone will be providing their opinions without filter. But people with a more Hierarchical preference may end up giving more weight to what the leader says. So they end up keeping their personal ideas and opinions quiet, and they just agree with the leader. This can be exceptionally frustrating if you are the leader and you want their opinions. In this situation, we recommend you asking your team to meet without you and to brainstorm ideas as a team. And then calling a second meeting to hear all their different ideas.

· **Respect lines of communication** - People with a more Egalitarian view on leadership will talk to anybody. They are just as willing to talk with the CEO as they are the janitor. But people with a more Hierarchical perspective on leadership prefer to have communication flow through the "proper" channels. Don't go directly to the other person's subordinates without talking to them first. Or, if you need to pass a message to the other person, don't forget to copy their manager.

What you should do if you prefer a more Hierarchical approach to leadership and the other person prefers a more Egalitarian approach:

· **Start by respecting their preferences**- Just as we recommended in the previous situation, don't make the mistake I made by thinking there is one "right" way to lead. Just because they see the role of the leader as differently than you, doesn't mean they are wrong. They just want something different from the leadership role than you do. It isn't your job to force them to be more Hierarchical in their preferences. Respect that they are different, and be willing to adapt your styles to meet them.

· **Be OK with them calling you by your first name** - People with a more Egalitarian approach to leadership see everyone as equals, and they show this through their preference to calling people by their first names. As someone with a more Hierarchical preference, you may see this informality as lacking respect for you and your role. But never forget one thing, just because they call you by your first name doesn't make you any less of a leader in their eyes. They know you are the leader, but they show their respect in different ways than what name they call you.

· **Empower them** - While Hierarchical leaders want to be involved directly with the decision making, people with a more Egalitarian approach want more trust and freedom. They want to be empowered to make the decisions themselves. This can be tough for people with a more Hierarchical approach, who prefer to keep leaders in the loop of decisions. We recommend using management by objectives for people with a more Egalitarian approach. Instead of trying to tell them what to do, help them connect the mission of the company to their individual mission, and then let them run on their own. Of course, regular checkups are also recommended.

· **Don't get mad if they skip communication hierarchies** - While you might never think about talking with your leader's leader's leader, someone with an Egalitarian leadership perspective might think it totally acceptable. So if the other person starts talking with your leader, don't get frustrated or mad at them. If it really bothers you, talk with them and explain your perspective. At the same time, be open to them having a different perspective than you. Focus on finding the middle ground that will work for both of you.



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We Should All Be Willing to Adapt Our Leadership Preferences

Having a flexible approach to leadership is crucial. We can't get hung up on one style of leadership and just assume that it works for everyone else. There is countless research that shows that different styles of leadership will work with different people, different teams, or in different situations. The need for an adaptable approach to leadership is only going to become more important as the world continues to become a more interconnected and global world. Most of us don't work with people that have the same background as we when it comes to nationality, age, gender, education, income level, etc.

While the examples from my career have been working with people from other countries, I see these differences in leadership preferences across many groups. For example, one could easily argue that the younger generations of employees have a higher desire for Egalitarian leadership than the older generations. But just as you are not the cultural ambassador of your country, you and the people you work with are not the ambassadors for your generation. While it is easier to think in terms of groups and stereotypes, it isn't effective to think of your colleague in those terms. So if you truly want to form strong collaborative relationships with the other person, then treat them as an individual, learn about their preferences, and then flex towards them.

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