



What's Your Leadership Style?

How well you collaborate can have an effect on student performance and school success

By Ian P. Murphy

Over the course of a career in education, you'll likely bear witness to—and exercise—different styles of leadership. APs and principals come into the profession with a variety of experiences, backgrounds, and temperaments, and how they accomplish the overarching goal of educating children effectively can differ from day to day.

For example, men and women might approach the job differently due to long-standing societal expectations that influence their behavior as decision-makers or authorities. Or a former teacher who was used to a great deal of autonomy at his or her last school might struggle to collaborate as an AP asked to support a larger administrative team.

The success or failure of an effort to improve school performance will likely depend upon the leadership styles exhibited on a team. Principals can encourage APs to build their competencies in collaboration and delegation, but they may also have to ask themselves what leadership style they're using and whether it advances school goals.

Defining Styles

In 1994's *The Managerial Grid*, authors Robert Rogers Blake and Jane Srygley Mouton sorted supervisory styles into eight categories:

Collaborative leadership. A "collaborative" leadership style suggests that leaders involve their staff in decision-making. An administrator establishing a teacher academy would survey teachers on what they needed to improve student achievement, for example, deciding together what might be most practical and effective.

Cooperative leadership. Cooperative leaders help staff members move in the direction that the majority agrees to move. For example, a principal who employs this leadership style effectively might offer an approved list of instructional innovations for teachers to pick from, then encourage and support exploration of whichever the teachers choose to implement.

Participative leadership. Participative leaders work with staff to guide school programs by learning about a concept or strategy and directing its implementation. They then experiment with classroom implementation alongside teachers, parents, and students and solicit suggestions for continuous improvement.

Bureaucratic leadership.

Bureaucrats prioritize according to established rules and regulations. Since a change effort often depends on making a departure from current practices, bureaucrats rarely offer more than gradual change.

Charismatic leadership. Charismatic individuals may use their charisma to garner sufficient staff support to move the organization in a chosen direction, but the innovations they produce may fizzle after they leave the school or change jobs.

Laissez-faire. Laissez-faire leaders allow staffers to determine the direction they wish to move. Not many leaders embrace such a hands-off style, but if it encourages staff experimentation, it can produce improved performance.

Benevolent despot. While mandating the specifics of a strategy unilaterally, the benevolent despot rewards staff for participation in the plan.

Autocratic. People are often drawn to leaders who exercise power freely, but they can also inspire dissent and dissatisfaction. Success depends on the quality and efficacy of the directives that come from the top in this my-way-or-the-highway approach.

While collaborative, cooperative, and participative leadership styles carry mostly positive connotations, other styles have sometimes proven effective in improving student performance. St. John's University researchers Rita Dunn and Robert Brasco wrote in "Supervisory Styles of Instructional Leaders," a 2006 article published in AASA's *The School Administrator*.

Examining programs that helped improve students' standardized test scores successfully and interviewing the administrators behind them, the authors uncovered a variety of

leadership styles. Generally speaking, positive styles prevailed, they said, but leaders may employ different leadership styles at different times.

Four out of 5 leaders interviewed chose a new instructional program autocratically, Dunn and Brasco found, but many also allowed staff considerable leeway in determining how to teach it. Others directed change as benevolent despots but rewarded teachers for their participation, and some worked side-by-side with staff in a participative style.

Improved Integration

Elementary APs are more likely to be asked to collaborate in today's educational environment. "The elementary leadership mindset is more holistic, more child-centered, and more integrated," says Alice Shull, a coach and mentor who served 32 years as a principal.

"APs are more able to collaborate because that is their mindset to begin with," she says. "Maybe the AP does discipline or PBIS and SEL, but does these things collaboratively. The principal and the AP figure out how to support the program in the context of their school."

Shull started her career in the 1970s under a female principal who exhibited a collaborative style at a time when mostly male administrators managed schools autocratically. Since then, the emphasis on social-emotional learning has helped more leaders relate to children and to one another as humans and educational professionals first.

"It depends on who it is, what role they are in, and how they define their leadership style," Shull says. In mentoring APs, "I see their style—who they are and what they're doing, and maybe what their issues are, as well."

Gender Differences

Subtle, observable differences are often evidenced between men and women when it comes to leadership style, says Carol Leveillee, who has worked with a dozen APs in her 23 years as a principal in Maryland and Delaware elementary schools. "I have had a lot of men and a lot of women, and they do the job differently," she says.

Male APs tend to be more matter-of-fact and more comfortable with firm directives, indicating they may be more accepting of leadership styles on the autocratic end of the scale. "They want to follow the calendar; they want tasks. They want to know what they need to do to get from point A to point B," Leveillee says. "Women focus more on what it looks like, what it feels like, what the perception is, and the neatness of it."

APs also handle the task of building student relationships differently based on their own individual strengths. An AP who has a background in athletics might engage with students by participating in a pickup basketball game, for instance, while another might get to know kids by setting up a lunch bunch or a phone call home.

"These are subtle differences," Leveillee says. "How they build relationships with kids varies, and it's based on what they are good at and want to share with the child." She models proper relationship-building behaviors to play to each AP's strengths. "I start with their strengths and try to build on them. Eventually, the weaknesses will work themselves out."

Men and women also tend to communicate differently due to societal expectations. "Men in leadership can speak their minds freely, whereas

women [need] to be diplomatic in our leadership approach,” says Michelle Penn, principal and leadership development coach at the High School for Global Citizenship in the New York City Public Schools, a Wallace PPI district. “We are forced to really be thoughtful about how we communicate.”

Men are often more curt or direct, she adds, and she has asked her AP to try to be more mindful of how he communicates. On the one hand, direct, honest feedback is to be applauded, but on the other, leaders have to maintain goodwill and working relationships. He can be stern but “also loving, like a dad,” Penn says. “He does that dance very well. My AP is my right-hand person—I can count on him.

“The advice I usually give aspiring leaders is to build relationships,” Penn notes. “That, I think, is crucial. When you have the relationship first and it’s built on respect, you can say what you want to say without being put off.”

The Rare Mismatch

On the rare occasions when an AP wasn’t successful, Leveillee says, gender hasn’t come into play—the person either didn’t have the drive to do the job or the desire to learn what it takes. “They thought they had learned everything they needed to learn as a teacher,” Leveillee says. “I will tell you as a veteran principal, you will learn new things every day if you want to.”

Regardless of leadership style, leaders should know what they’re projecting. “In a broad sense, they need to reflect on their own style and be self-aware,” Shull says. “There are surveys they can take—self-assessments—to look at their own style and decide where they fall on the continuum from authoritarian to collaborative. Is it authoritarian or top-down, or is it collaborative or distributed?”

Shull recommends using self-assessments to aid principals in examining their own leadership styles and those of the APs in their charge, discovering each person’s strengths and weaknesses, and adjusting tasks accordingly.

“Studies show that people who work through their strengths are six times more impactful,” she says. “The way we can most effectively set up teams is to say, ‘You’re good at creative, and I’m best at organizing and scheduling.’ Put those two together on a team, and you can capitalize on everyone’s strengths.

“Collaboration is the only way we will succeed in terms of educating our kids,” Shull says. “When the principal and an AP and whoever else is on the leadership team collaborate, you get a powerhouse product. You have a culture that is way more positive—way more empowered.” ●

Ian P. Murphy is senior editor of Principal magazine.



Extra! Extra!

Looking to better manage the tasks on your plate? One AP uses the “Eisenhower Matrix”—a simple, time-tested grid system—to sort all of his to-dos according to urgency and importance. Want to read more? Be on the lookout for the next *APs Rising*, hitting your email inbox in April just in time for Assistant Principals Week April 5-9.

