



Balanced Leadership

Is it better to be feared than loved?

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In his article on balanced leadership, Lisbon-based leadership trainer and coach Ulrich Geuther shows that effective leadership depends partly on the ability to achieve a balance between two different values, allowing each one to achieve its full effect. Taking empathy and assertiveness as examples, he shows how understanding the dynamics between apparently opposing values can help leaders increase their power of persuasion.

The general manager of an international financial service provider asked for a few coaching sessions following his first 360-degree feedback¹ in his new job because he had been horrified to receive catastrophic evaluations for trust – one of his company's core values. An analysis of his feedback showed that his highest scores were all in the area of another core value: "passion to win".

During coaching it quickly became apparent that the general manager was not lacking in skills, ideas or good intentions. What he appeared to be missing was the ability to identify with others: empathy. This made it difficult for him to build trust.

However, it soon emerged that he did in fact possess the *ability* to empathise with others.

He was able to demonstrate this ability in many other areas of his life, e.g. in his family and among friends. The problem was rather that he was convinced that his priority, in his role as general manager of a company with 250 employees, was to command respect, not to show any sign of weakness and to ensure that targets were met. This set of beliefs prevented him from showing empathy and inspiring trust.

The tool that coaches often use in such cases is a value quadrant.² The value quadrant provides a very clear illustration that leaders not only need to know the importance of key leadership values and to develop the skills to apply them; they also have to be aware that there is a certain tension between some key values, which makes it necessary to maintain a balance between the two, constantly adapting to the situation at hand.

The following example illustrates this.

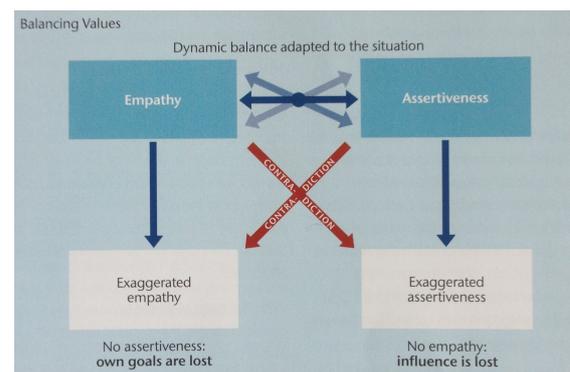


Figure: Balanced leadership: Balancing values

Key leadership values include assertiveness and empathy. These two values appear somehow contradictory. Assertiveness is about achieving my own goals; empathy is about identifying with others so as to improve my understanding of their thoughts, feelings and objectives.

In fact, however, the perceived contradiction is not between assertiveness and empathy, but between one of these values and an **overemphasis on the other**. Overemphasis occurs when the other value in the pair is absent or is too weakly expressed and can no longer provide a counterbalance. The values become unbalanced and you are left with just the one, now dramatically exaggerated value which, without its compensating counterpart, derails the entire leadership style.

¹ 360-degree feedback is an appraisal system that includes self-assessment and evaluations by superiors, internal and external customers, colleagues and peers.

² A detailed description of the value quadrant can be found in Schulz von Thun: Miteinander Reden 2. Reinbek bei Hamburg 1999.

So if we have a manager who empathises with others and forgets to assert his own aims (exaggerated empathy), the results will be just as bad as they would be for a manager who rigorously asserts his own aims without any understanding for others' concerns, and simply steamrollers over them (exaggerated assertiveness). Exaggerated assertiveness makes us lose contact with others, which means we also lose the ability to influence and lead them.

We all follow people we trust. If we don't trust someone, we won't follow them. And that was precisely the problem faced by the general manager.

His "passion to win" meant he was unstoppable in implementing his plans. He refused to accept any reservations expressed by others, and gradually lost the early trust that his superiors and colleagues had shown towards him. In addition, everyone felt that the general manager was **not being authentic**. He actually wanted to listen more and respond more to others, but was repressing these impulses so as not to appear indecisive.

This made it very difficult for everyone to learn to trust him. As we know, authentic behaviour is one of the basic conditions for building trust.

We *don't* believe or trust someone who sends contradictory signals and behaves in a contradictory manner.

The goal when coaching the general manager was for him to become aware of which of the two values – assertiveness or empathy – he needed to place more emphasis on with which people in which situations.

We discovered that he could demonstrate still more assertiveness in discussions with his superiors from the group head office in some situations. But in meetings with his management team, there was a need to empathise with the situation and difficulties of his managers, so that he could help them find appropriate solutions to the problems in their departments.

Which value is more important? Which comes first?

"Which is more important: empathy or assertiveness?" is not an easy question to answer. We have seen that both are important. As a leader, I cannot take away either value without destroying the positive effect of the other. It is the same with "proactive" versus "reactive" and "freedom" versus "direction", to name two more value pairs that leaders have to keep in balance at the **strategic and operational** level.

We can only decide which value to give more weight to in a given situation on an individual, case-by-case basis. However, there is much evidence that leaders choose objective, logical priorities.

Proactive versus reactive

In general, leaders see being **proactive** as a **basic leadership requirement**, despite the fact that some situations require a particularly reactive approach. Leaders cannot wait for others to act. After all one of the reasons why people are leaders is because they take the initiative and take the lead.

Freedom versus direction

There is a similar attitude to freedom versus direction. Freedom to act is a basic prerequisite for delegation and empowerment, even though the degree of freedom and direction depends on the complexity of the task and the abilities of the person to whom it has been delegated.

Returning to empathy versus assertiveness

The priority between empathy and assertiveness is a particularly interesting question to investigate. Which comes first for leaders? Is there a rational answer? There is, and it can be found in the theory of leadership communication and communication in general.

Since Watzlawick,³ we have differentiated between the relationship and content

³ In their ground-breaking book *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin and Don D. Jackson differentiate for the first time between the two aspects of communication: a content aspect and a

aspects of communication. As Watzlawick correctly ascertains, it is the relationship aspect of communication that dominates the content aspect.

In other words: how our messages are **understood** depends on the **relationship** between us and the people we are speaking to.

We all have experiences of simple things becoming incredibly difficult the moment they involve people with whom we have a problematic relationship. Conversely, extremely difficult problems are much easier to solve if we get on well with the other person. When dealing with someone we trust and who trusts us we can find a solution even in an extremely complicated situation.

This means then that for every communication we need to emphasise the **relationship aspect first**, if we want the content aspect of our communication to get through to the other person.

To do this we establish firm contact and put ourselves in the other person's position to find a way of getting through to them, so that our message will be communicated effectively.

With the help of all these considerations, the general manager in our coaching example succeeded in developing a new understanding of the importance of the relationship aspect of communication and the significance of empathy in leadership, and consciously found a new balance between empathy and assertiveness in a wide range of situations.

Warmth and strength (instead of love versus fear)

What we can observe in this case and many others is an empirical refutation of Niccoló Machiavelli's⁴ claim that leaders should be feared rather than loved. In his book *Il Principe*, Machiavelli claimed that,

relationship aspect. The content aspect conveys the facts; the relationship aspect conveys how they are to be understood. New York 1967.

⁴ Niccoló Machiavelli (1469-1527), Italian diplomat. "Since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved" (The Prince).

since it is impossible to be both loved and feared at the same time, leaders should rather be feared.

We are in no doubt that leaders need to show strength. However, we do not believe it is a good idea to inspire fear in colleagues. The neuro-physiological and neuro-psychological evidence for the inhibiting effects of fear is too clear.

The best way to influence others – in other words, to lead them – is to combine empathy and assertiveness, warmth and strength in such a way that both values in each pair are given the weight they need in a particular situation – with a clear preference for empathy and warmth.

Only when leaders succeed in recognising these priorities and find a good balance between leadership values will they become effective, authentic and convincing leaders.

About the author



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