



Why Command-and-Control Leadership Is Here to Stay

Travelling through Zurich airport, one billboard always catches my eye. The ad for IWC luxury watches says “Engineered for men who don’t need a copilot.”

My friends who study advertising as both a reflection and shaper of cultural norms would not disagree with my impression: We talk about the death of command and control leadership, and praise the rise of a new, more collaborative, breed of leader. But when push comes to shove, being in control sells. Collaborative is vegan; directive is meat and potatoes.

When I was a PhD student at Yale, I studied with one of the fathers of situational leadership, Victor Vroom. In the 1960s Vic developed the then-famous Vroom-Yetton model of leadership, a decision tree in which a few simple parameters (does the leader have all the relevant information, are the followers knowledgeable or inexperienced?) allowed the leader to choose from a menu of styles ranging from A1 (the most autocratic decision-making) to G2 (group-based decision-making, the most participative) the one most suited for the situation. An avid boatman, Vic had a large sailboat parked in the Caribbean. Its name: A1. On my boat, I call the shots.

An early proponent of participative management, Vic also knew when and how to be in charge. No one quarrels much with the wisdom of situational leadership anymore. Even if we can no longer pin it on a few simple dimensions — the world today is much more turbulent and complex — we all know that what works depends on the context.

The questions today are how we select “horses for courses,” and perhaps more importantly, how we assess whether talented individuals are capable of broadening their repertory of styles so that they can be effective in a wider array of situations as their careers evolve.

In the business school classes I teach, almost every leader we analyze is “situationally limited:” Her natural tendency tilts either towards the directive or towards the collaborative end of the spectrum or his past experience has rewarded one over the other. Inevitably we ask, is this way of leading sustainable as the company grows? Once the turnaround is

over? As the environment grows harsher?

My students’ questions apply equally to the collaborators and the autocrats. But over the years I have noticed a subtlety. We easily infer that a competent autocrat can learn to become more collaborative. We have a harder time believing that a competent collaborator can become more directive.

In the end, we seem to want evidence that a leader can do without a co-pilot before we are willing to groom him or her for more collaborative roles. I wonder if that is not one reason why command and control isn’t dead at all but alive and well, at least at Zurich airport.

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