

AMA RESEARCH

Management Styles: Are You the Manager You Think You Are?



If you're a manager, you've spent time thinking about your management style. Would you categorize your predominant style as autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire or facilitative? And do you really have a strong sense of what these styles are, and when it's appropriate to use them?

In addition to your predominant approach, do you have a versatile palette of styles? Are you able to sense when to use each one, and shift between them as needed? How does your use of styles compare with other managers? Do women use styles differently from men?¹ How do styles shift at different management levels?

Perhaps more importantly, what do you know about how your staff perceives your style? Do they concur with your understanding and use of styles? Do they think the style in which you manage is appropriate and effective? Or do they feel mismanaged?

To explore these and related questions, the American Management Association surveyed 1,139 professionals, including 905 managers and 234 staff, in spring of 2024. We found that managers may not be using management styles as effectively as they think.

Consider these high-level findings:

- Style is top of mind for employees of all levels. The overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that it's important. Yet there were stark differences between managers and staff on how, and how effectively, managers were deploying style.
- A majority of managers (55%) identified their predominant style as democratic, but only a third of staff said they were managed in this way.
- Just over half of staff respondents indicated that they were managed in the style that they preferred, leaving a large proportion dissatisfied with their manager's style.
- Nearly 1 in 5 staff (17%) said their managers were autocratic, although no respondents indicated a preference for that style.
- More than 90% of managers said they flex between styles and that doing so is essential. Yet only 3 in 5 (60%) staff said their manager had this ability.



Nearly 50% of staff respondents were not managed in their preferred style

Read on to learn more about how managers use styles, and where they may and may not match the preferences and perceptions of staff.

¹Slightly over 1% of respondents identified as transgender, gender variant or gender non-conforming. Because the sample was small, we have omitted them from gender comparisons to avoid potentially inaccurate analyses.

The Four Major Management Styles

As explained by AMA faculty member Joseph Reed, PhD, an expert in organizational effectiveness with over 30 years' experience providing training and other services to corporations and institutions.

More than 80 years ago, Kurt Lewin, the father of social psychology, identified three major management styles—authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire. More recently, researchers have added a fourth: facilitative, and “autocratic” has become common, often replacing “authoritarian.”

Your style determines how you communicate, decide, and exercise power. It has a significant impact on the work that gets done, how it gets done and what it feels like to be on your team. As we discuss below, there is no single best style. Rather, managers must shift between them depending on the goal, context and the team’s qualities.

1

AUTOCRATIC (OR AUTHORITARIAN): The manager does most of the talking. They decide what to do and how to do it, and they provide explicit instructions to the staff. Despite the name, the autocratic style is not necessarily unpleasant or unfriendly. It is efficient and useful when the manager is an expert and the team members don’t have much experience or expertise. In the wrong context, however, it may be perceived as micromanagement, which can demoralize and demotivate. If the team already knows what to do, an autocratic approach can waste the time of both the manager and the staff.

2

DEMOCRATIC: Participation in discussing goals and methods for achieving them is split roughly equally between the manager and their staff, although the ultimate authority resides with the manager. The team must have adequate skills to make the collaboration fruitful. The democratic style can generate a feeling of inclusion, leading to greater trust and relationships between the manager and team. On the downside, this type of collaboration takes more time, so it may not be appropriate in a crisis or under extreme pressure.

3

LAISSEZ-FAIRE: The French term laissez-faire translates roughly as “hands off” or “let (them) do as they choose.” In this style, the locus of control is with the staff. There’s a minimum of discussion. In its purest form, the manager allows team members to pursue the goals and use the means they choose. Alternatively, managers set goals and the staff decide how to achieve them.

Laissez-faire management is appropriate when people are experienced, knowledgeable and motivated. It has some serious drawbacks. Strategies may be misaligned or may not be executed successfully. The staff may do the wrong thing perfectly, expending energy and resources without contributing to the organization’s goals. Additionally, if the team lacks the requisite background or skills, they may feel lost or directionless, damaging the relationship between the manager and staff.

4

FACILITATIVE: The manager actively participates in a dialogue with the team member to define the goal. They think through the best way to achieve the goal, but the locus of control rests with the team member, who generally dominates the discussion 70% to 30%.

The facilitative style is useful for staff who have some relevant skill and experience, but lack motivation or confidence in their ability to accomplish the goal. It takes more time than the laissez-faire approach, but it keeps the staff on target, helps reduce self-doubt and prepares them emotionally to take on the assignment.

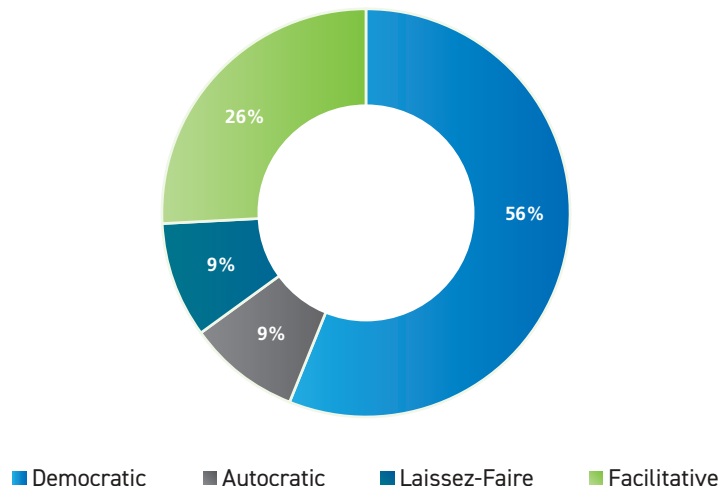


How Managers Self-Identify Their Dominant Style

Using an optimal management style is of paramount importance for your team and organization. Style choices influence culture, productivity, morale, motivation, work relationships and more. A manager who employs the appropriate style can more effectively lead their team in achieving its goals, in the short and long term. Style choices may also affect career trajectories. Managers with the skills and empathy needed to choose the optimal style are bound to achieve more and elicit better reviews from their team members.

The survey identified respondents as either managers (anyone who manages others) or staff (team members, individual contributors and others who don't manage people). We then asked managers to self-identify their predominant style. Most said they were democratic (56%), followed by facilitative (26%), laissez-faire (9%) and autocratic (9%).

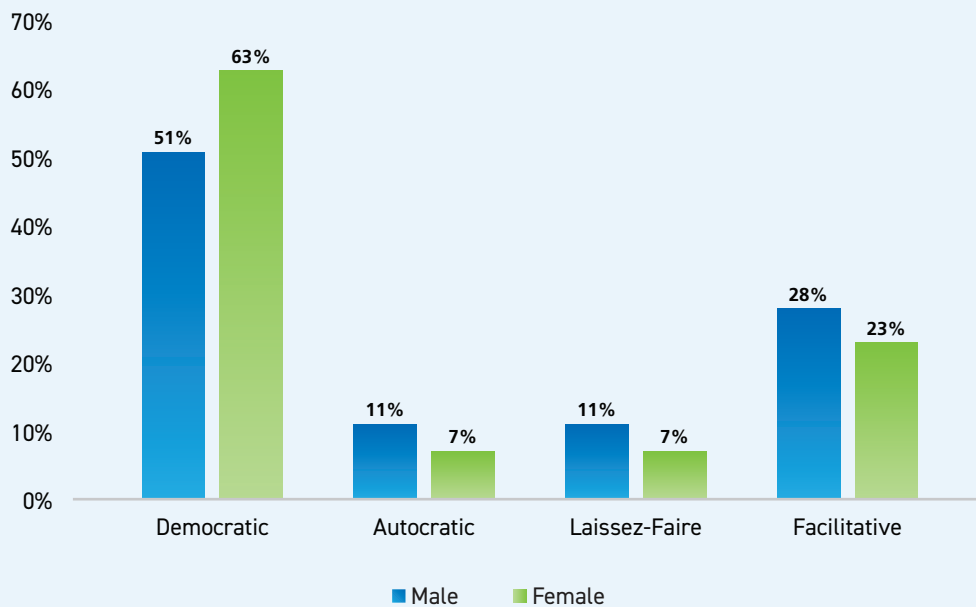
Managers Identified Their Style As...



Women were significantly more likely than men to identify their style as democratic (63% vs. 51%), while men tilted more toward facilitative, laissez-faire and autocratic styles.



More Women Said Their Management Style is Democratic

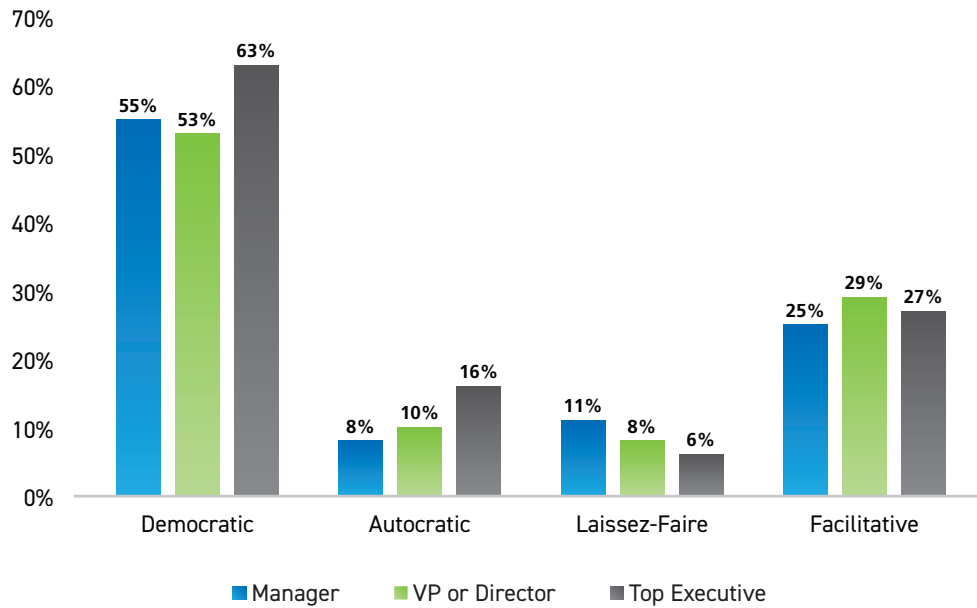


Top executives tended to identify as democratic or autocratic, and less so laissez-faire. Presumably, many high-level managers use a democratic style to benefit from the observations and advice of their relatively senior direct reports, while busy leaders benefit from the time efficiency of the autocratic approach.

A third (34%) of top executives in the survey were women; among them, three-quarters (75%) said their predominant style was democratic, one-fifth (20%) were facilitative, and none identified as laissez-faire, although the sample size was too small (44 female executives) to call these findings definitive.

Top female executives' predilection for democratic leadership is intriguing, particularly given that only 56% of male top executives share this style. It could be that women with this style are more likely to rise to the top, or women adapt this collaborative approach as they rise, or both. Generally speaking, this is consistent with numerous studies finding that women possess superior social-emotional skills, which are needed to effectively manage in a democratic style. Whatever the explanation, this finding supports the need for a greater number of top female leaders, particularly given team members' preference for being managed in a democratic style.

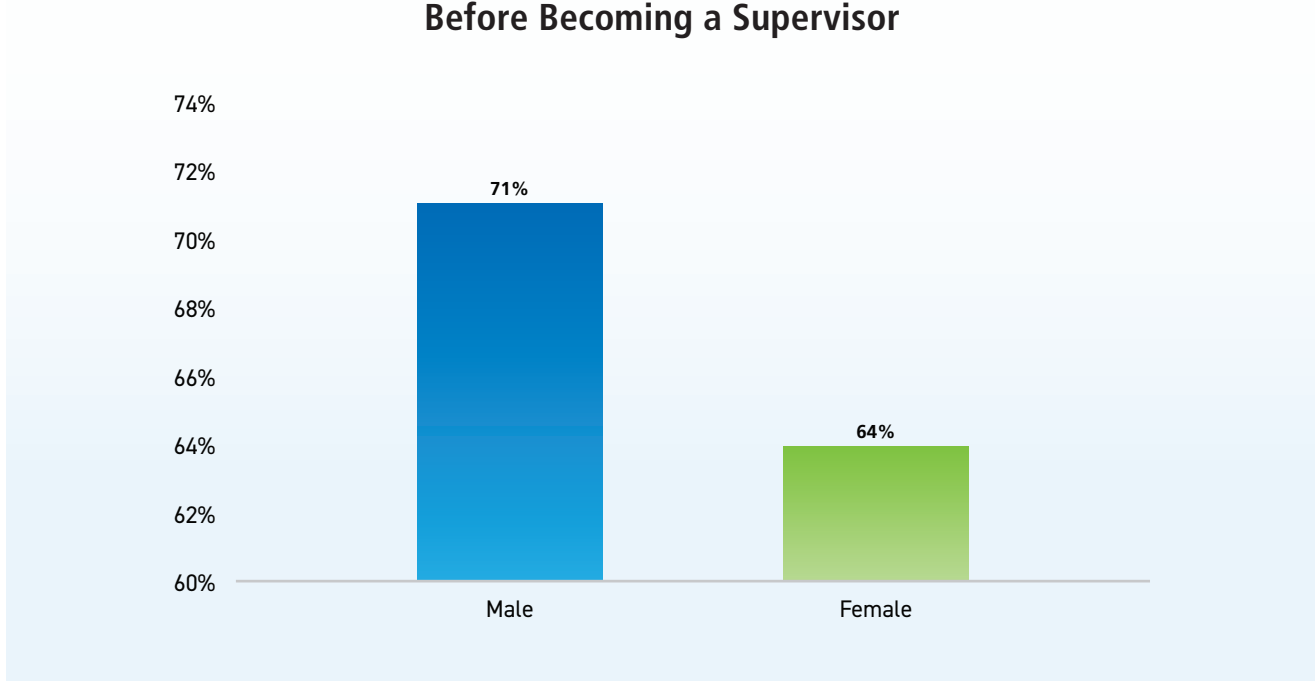
Top Executives Were More Likely to Identify as Democratic or Autocratic



Interestingly, staff respondents were nearly unanimous (98%) in saying that management and leadership training is important, but we found that more men (71%) than women (64%) received formal training before becoming a supervisor. This signals not only room for improvement for management and leadership training, but also that not all managers and leaders are prepared and set up for success when moving into these important roles.



More Men Than Women Received Formal Training Before Becoming a Supervisor



Key Influences on Managers' Style

A manager's predominant style is generally understood to be influenced by factors such as their personality, training, work experience and organizational context. For instance, a manager who is at ease with communicating and confident in their leadership abilities may choose a more democratic approach. If a manager reports to a supervisor who believes in "wielding the whip hand," they may feel that a laissez-faire approach would be career sinking. Or if a naturally hands-on manager works for a technology firm that cares only about innovation and results, laissez-faire or facilitative styles may be appropriate.

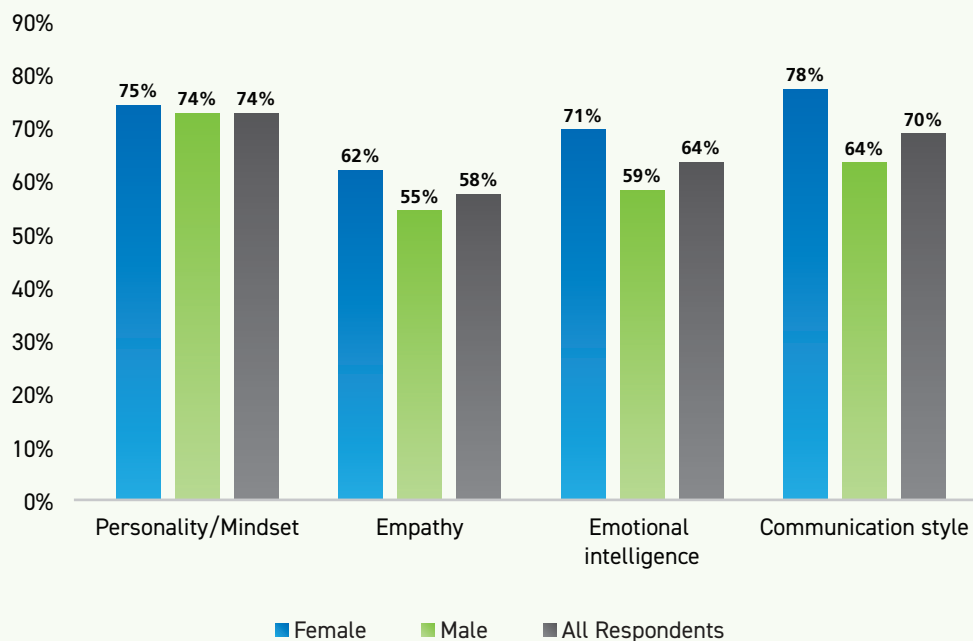
Personal factors influenced more respondents than organizational factors. Female respondents were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to say that emotional intelligence and communication style influenced their approach. The differences among job levels on how personal factors influenced management styles were negligible.





Personal Factors Influencing Management Style

Q. Which personal factors affect your management style?

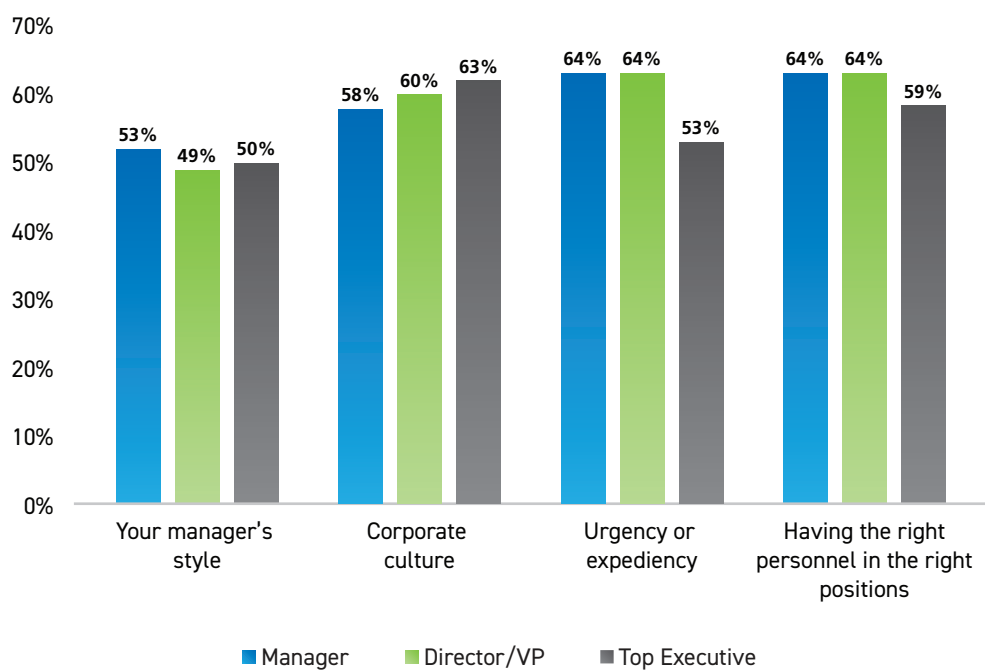


More women than men said their style was influenced by corporate culture (62% vs. 57%) and urgency or expediency (68% vs. 56%). Manager-level respondents were slightly more likely than VPs and directors to be influenced by their manager's style (53% vs. 49%). For executives, corporate culture was the dominant factor, while urgency or expediency and personnel issues were less likely to affect style.



Organizational Factors Influencing Management Style (Job Level)

Q. Which organizational influences affect your management style?



Managers vs. Staff on Management Styles

Clearly composed definitions aside, style is inherently subjective. One person's idea of a democratic style might seem facilitative or laissez-faire to another. A team's perception of their manager's style might be just as important, or even more so, than the manager's own view. After all, a manager's job is to get the team to collaborate toward common goals. How the team receives the message and feels about their supervision is paramount to achieving that.

Of course, team members may not know best. Chances are they have never walked in their manager's shoes or understand their organizational constraints. Staff may not be astute observers of management style, and they may not have an appreciation for how difficult it is to determine and deploy the optimal style for each particular situation, project and team member.

But their opinions matter. Being managed in a preferred style has numerous potential benefits, including better communication, greater productivity, reduced stress and increased job satisfaction. Gaps between how a supervisor manages and how team members perceive their style represent a gray zone of potential hard feelings and needlessly eroded motivation.

A hard-working, skilled and self-motivated staff with an autocratic supervisor may feel micromanaged and disgruntled. A staff in need of guidance with a laissez-faire manager is bound to be frustrated, adrift or ineffective. And an experienced, driven, independent-minded employee with a democratic manager may feel frustrated with the pace of progress, or they may be held back from achieving their potential.

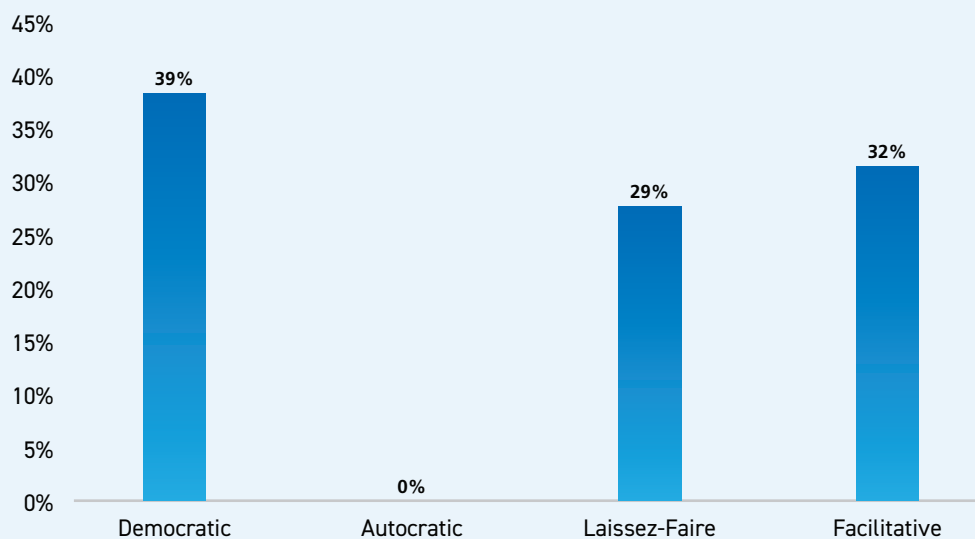
Our study suggests that the style that managers think they are using is often not the way team members believe they are being managed. When we compared all the responses of staff and managers, we found (as mentioned above) an enormous gap between the proportion of managers who believe they are democratic (56%) and staff who perceive their managers as such (33%).

Which management styles took up the slack? Compared to how managers self-identified their style, staff were twice as likely to believe that their supervisor was autocratic (17% staff perception vs. 9% manager self-identification), a style that not a single staff respondent preferred. The survey revealed an even greater discrepancy between staff who said they operate under a laissez-faire style (23%) and managers who identified that as their predominant approach (9%). This may suggest that a large fraction of supervisors are perceived to be less engaged than they think, or that staff may lack adequate direction or oversight.





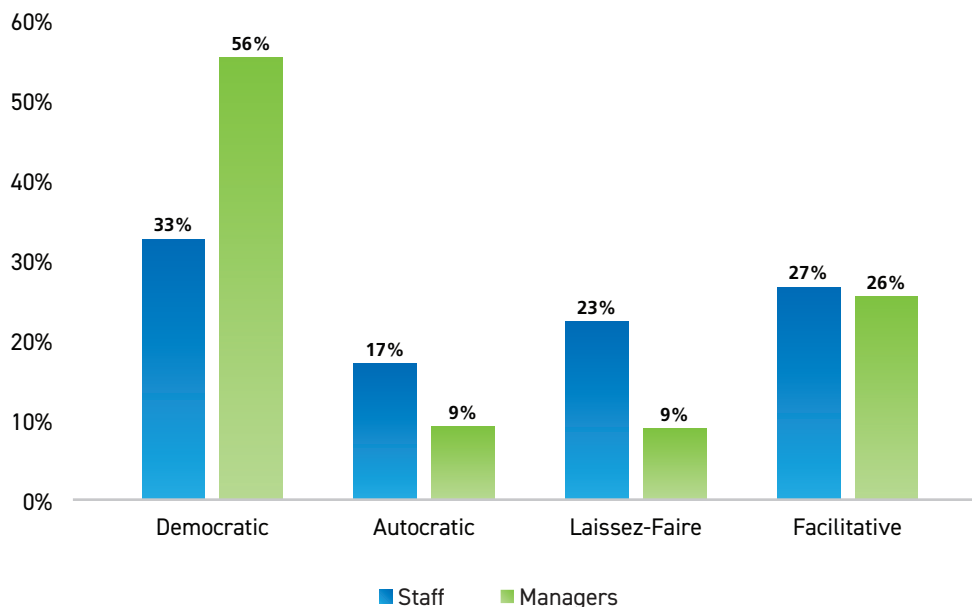
Staff Respondents' Preferred Management Style



Three out of five staff respondents (59%) expressed a preference for a particular management style (the others were indifferent). Among them, the democratic style was most commonly favored (39%), followed by facilitative (32%) and laissez-faire (29%). No staff chose autocratic.

Managers Believe They Are Democratic. Staff Often Don't Agree.

Q. What is your (or your supervisor's) predominant management style?



The survey revealed a stark gap between respondents who preferred to be managed in a particular style vs. the style they identified as their manager's predominant approach.² Only slightly over half of respondents (54%) said that their supervisor managed them in their preferred style (54% for those who preferred democratic, 51% for laissez-faire, and 57% for facilitative). That means nearly half (46%) were managed in a style that did not match their preference. The sample size for this part of the survey was small (133 people), given that respondents had to a) be staff, and b) have a preference for the style in which they preferred to be managed.

Nonetheless, the data suggest that a large fraction of employees are managed in a style that doesn't match their preference. The takeaway: Although nearly every manager (94%) said they were adept at knowing when to flex their management style, a significant proportion of staff feel mismanaged, suggesting that managers might be overconfident and could benefit from improving their ability to deploy a range of styles and match them with the appropriate business context.



Although nearly every manager said they were adept at flexing their style, many staff feel mismanaged, suggesting managers should improve their skills in this area.

² In interpreting the results, it's important to know we cast a wide net for respondents. The staff were not supervised by the managers (unless solely by coincidence).

Pain Point: Management Style Flexibility

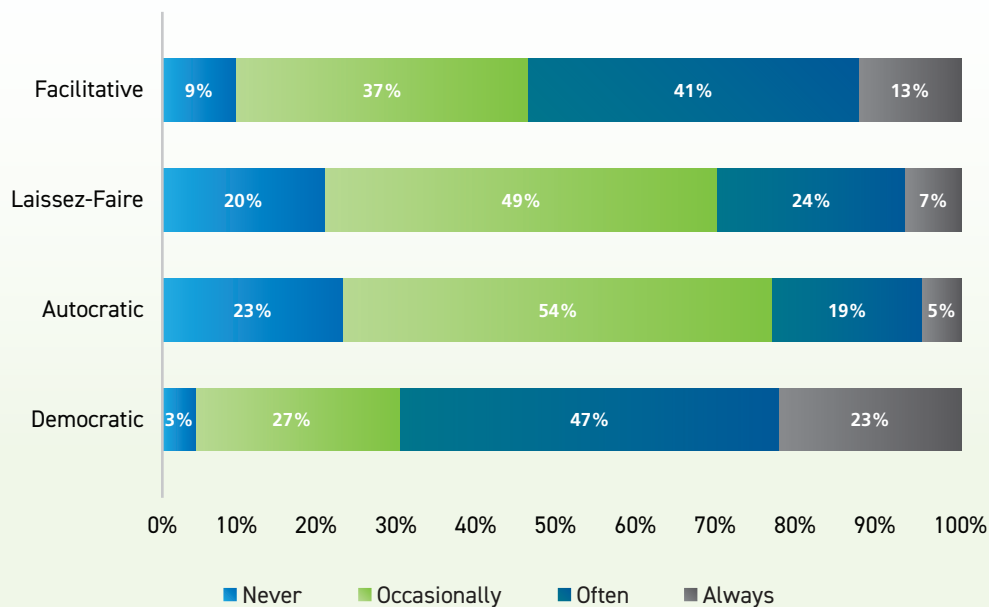
Being able to flex between styles is a critical skill for managers. Team members and tasks vary greatly. There is no single management approach that works for every employee, in every situation. Effective managers are nimble and responsive. They have the strategic foresight and emotional intelligence needed to understand when to pivot, and the versatility to adapt to a wide variety of employees, projects and situations.

Obviously, a team member who has effectively completed a task numerous times will not need the same level or style of supervision. An employee’s learning curve also affects style choices. A new employee cannot be expected to thrive with the same type of oversight as a veteran. A seasoned and successful team member whose manager is monitoring and commenting on minutiae will probably feel micromanaged and perform less effectively.

Virtually every manager surveyed said it was very (76%) or somewhat (22%) important to flex their style. Similarly, more than 4 of 5 staff respondents agreed that flexing is important (84%) and said that using a combination of styles makes a manager more effective (88%).

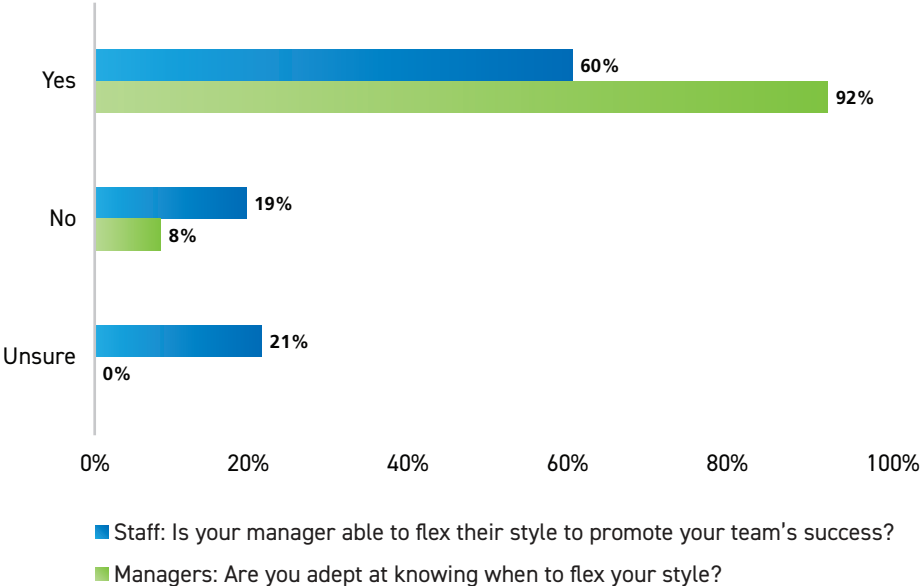
A question about how often managers use each of the four styles suggests that managers believe they are successfully flexing. Notably, more than half of respondents (54%) said they resort to an autocratic style occasionally, while 23% said they never use it. Similarly, 49% said they employ laissez-faire occasionally, and 20% said they never use it.

Managers: How Often Do You Use Each Style?



What do staff respondents think? The survey revealed significant differences between how managers and staff viewed managers’ ability to adapt. Ninety-two percent of managers believe they are adept at knowing when to flex their style. Only 3 out of 5 (60%) staff agreed. Forty percent of staff said either that their manager was unable to flex their management style (19%) or they were unsure of their manager’s ability to do so (21%).

Managers Said They Know When to Flex Between Styles. Many Staff Don't Agree.



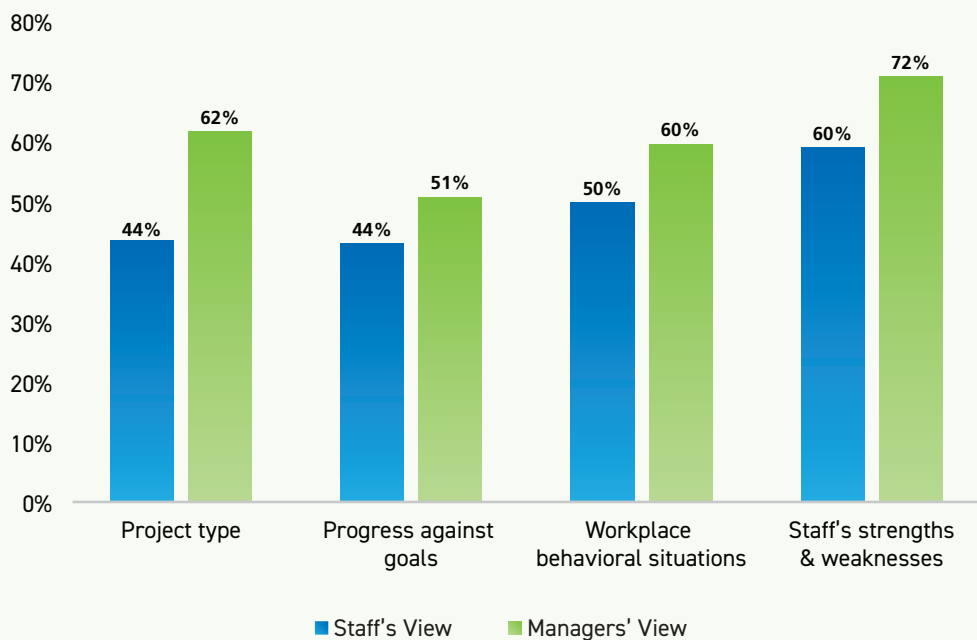
Managers and staff both agreed that managers most frequently flexed their style based on team members' strengths and weaknesses. Managers were significantly (18 percentage points) more likely to say they adjust their style based on project type. Across the board, staff saw less evidence of style-change prompts than managers. This is consistent with the fact that staff are less convinced that managers are able to flex. It could also be because staff have a limited view of supervisors' oversight styles.





Style-Change Prompts Managers vs. Staff

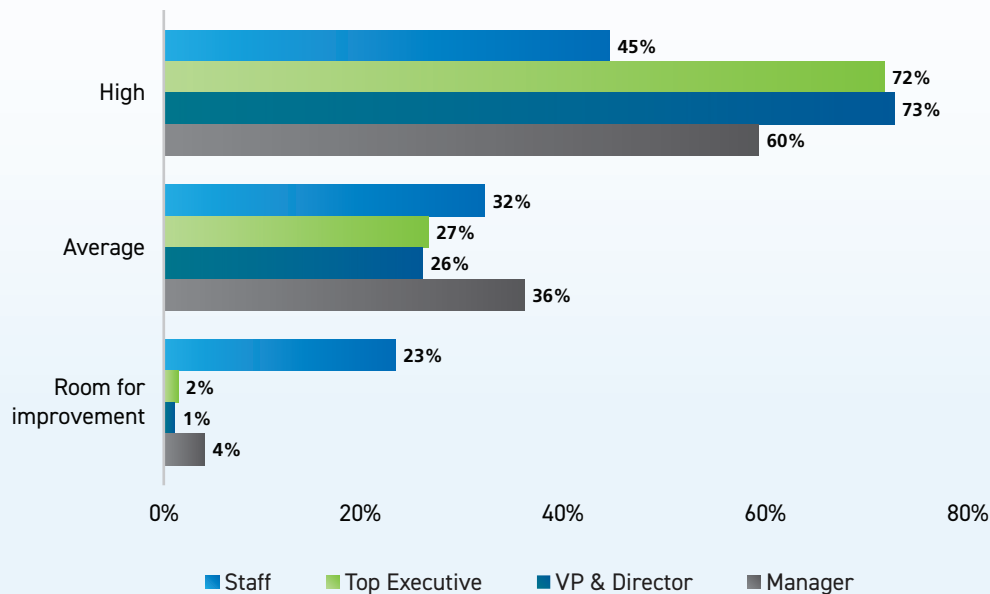
Q. Which of the following causes you (or your manager) to flex your (their) style?



Finally, emotional intelligence and behavior are key to enabling managers to identify and flex between styles. Yet staff respondents had a relatively dim view of managers' self-awareness, self-regulation and self-management. Managers on all levels—particularly executives, VPs and directors—rated themselves highly in these areas; only a small percentage admitted they had room for improvement. Yet staff said fewer than half of managers (45%) excelled, and nearly a quarter (23%) had room for improvement. If the staff's view is accurate, then improving performance in this area could help managers do a better job of deploying the right styles.

Staff Were Less Convinced of Managers' Emotional Intelligence and Behavior

Q. How would you rate your (or your manager's) self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-management?



Conclusion

Managing people is difficult. There are egos, personalities and jealousies to contend with. Adults often begrudge having someone else wield authority over them. And not everyone is as intrinsically motivated as a manager would like.

As we have described here, deploying the optimal style for each situation can go a long way toward boosting your effectiveness. Our survey found evidence that many managers could benefit from expanding their style palette and enhancing their ability to understand when and how to use it. In addition to experience, we believe that training can be instrumental in helping managers better achieve these goals.

But you don't need to take our word for it. As we mentioned in this report, 98% of staff respondents said that management and leadership training is important. Yet 29% of male and 36% of female managers didn't have formal training before becoming supervisors. A third of managers (34%) indicated that they could benefit from improving their ability to read others and recognize their strengths and weaknesses, in order to help them achieve their goals. And about two-fifths (40%) of staff respondents were not convinced that their manager was able to flex their style to provide team members with what they needed for success. Training could go a long way toward addressing these deficiencies and improving efficiency, productivity and well-being. For additional resources on management styles and training, visit www.amanet.org.