

# Leadership Styles

In class I often use a leadership exercise to dramatically convey the three different leadership styles found among event managers. I divide the class into three groups and give each team a set of popsicle sticks. I then instruct each group to construct an event site using the popsicle sticks. One group will do this using a democratic approach, the other with autocratic principles, and the third from a laissez-faire approach. The *democratic group* arranges the popsicle sticks easily and efficiently in a pleasing formation, and their conversations, discussions, and decision making flows smoothly. The arrangement of the popsicle sticks is a dramatic representation of the effectiveness of their process. The *autocratic group* can barely decide how to place their Popsicle sticks, due to dissension and arguments regarding turf. This group is too busy battling among themselves to accomplish the goals required by the event. The *laissez-faire group* constantly arranges and rearranges their popsicle sticks, as without clear direction or facilitation they have trouble achieving consensus and their popsicle sticks demonstrate this confusion. Each of these event leadership styles has an important role to play in the event management process. Your ability to navigate among these styles and use the one that is appropriate at the right time is essential to achieving success.

## **DEMOCRATIC STYLE**

Typically, this leadership style is used during the early stages of the event process. It is an excellent approach for facilitating discussions, conducting focus groups, and building consensus as you assemble your stakeholders. It is also effective as you move from the design phase into the coordination phase. Before you can coordinate your team members' efforts, you must demonstrate that you are willing to listen and that you are able to function as a good facilitator. These two skills—listening and facilitation are hallmarks of democratic event leadership.

## **AUTOCRATIC STYLE**

When the fire marshal tells you to evacuate an event site, you should not use the democratic approach. The democratic event leadership style has one major drawback: It takes time to reach consensus. When an emergency evacuation is required, there is no time or any reason to try and reach consensus. Instead, you must use the autocratic approach and give the order to evacuate. Then you must supervise carefully to make certain that your instructions are being followed. The autocratic approach should be used sparingly. It is impossible, for example, to force volunteers and increasing staff members to do things they do not wish to do. Therefore, the autocratic approach should be used only when time is of the essence.

## **LAISSEZ-FAIRE STYLE**

This approach is least used in event management because it requires a team with skills equal in level, and therefore the event manager does not have to facilitate to ensure that goals are being achieved. It is rare that an event organization has a team with skills at a similar level. Most event organizations are comprised of many people with a variety of different skills and even commitment levels.

Therefore, it is impossible for the event manager to sit back and let the group decide for themselves how to proceed. Beware the laissez-faire event manager. He or she may be unskilled and is trying to transfer his or her incompetence to the entire event team. When you are faced with this scenario, move quickly to empower others on the team to assist this person with facilitation decision making to ensure that the event goals and objectives are being met. The most common way to reduce large amounts of complex information about an event to a manageable communications process is through published policies and procedures. All events of substance have such a document and it helps drive the decision making of the event.

## Leadership Characteristics

Throughout ancient and modern human history a number of people have been identified by historians as effective leaders. Some of these people became leaders due to a defining moment or event in their lives, while others sought leadership opportunities to cause positive change. In Table 6-1 the general traits associated with effective leaders are compared to those specialized characteristics that Higgison and Rutherford-Silvers have identified within successful event managers. Although some will argue with this list and ranking, I am firmly convinced, based on my observation of literally thousands of event managers throughout the world, that the six characteristics listed in the right column of Table 6-1 generally define the qualities of the top event management leaders. These qualities or characteristics are ranked in this order for a specific purpose. It is important for event managers to understand that not all leadership characteristics are equal; however, integrity is paramount. Integrity is the value that determines the external perception by others.

**Table 6.1 : Leadership Characteristics**

Traditional Leaders	Event Leaders
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication skills</li> <li>2. Confidence</li> <li>3. Courage</li> <li>4. Decision making</li> <li>5. Enthusiasm</li> <li>6. Integrity</li> <li>7. Persistence</li> <li>8. Planning</li> <li>9. Problem solving</li> <li>10. Vision</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Integrity</li> <li>2. Confidence and persistence</li> <li>3. Collaboration</li> <li>4. Problem solving</li> <li>5. Communication skills</li> <li>6. Vision</li> </ol>

### INTEGRITY

The event leader must set the standard for integrity. If he or she does not exemplify integrity in performance and decision making, event stakeholders will soon lose faith and trust not only in the

event leader but also in the event organization. For example, if an event manager reminds his or her staff that it is inappropriate to accept gifts from vendors and then is seen by his or her subordinates receiving a substantial gift from a vendor, the credibility of the person as well as that of the organization may be shattered. The event manager who exhibits high integrity will not only refuse the gift but will effectively communicate to his or her colleagues that the gift has been refused and why it would be inappropriate to accept this gift. Table 6-2 demonstrates perceptions of high and low integrity by event stakeholders.

### CONFIDENCE AND PERSISTENCE

When your back is against the wall, will you have the confidence and persistence to forge ahead? Typically, most events have a reality check where funds are low, morale is even lower, and impending disaster seems just around the corner. During these times of trial and tribulation, all eyes will be on the event manager. Your ability to stay the course, maintain the original vision, and triumph is what is expected by your event stakeholders. Let us suppose that you are responsible for acquiring sponsors for your event. Only a few weeks before the event, your biggest sponsor backs out. There is no time to replace the sponsor. In addition, the neighbors whose houses are near your event venue are starting to make rumblings in the media about noise, traffic, and other disruptions that they believe will result from your event. A traditional manager would collect all the necessary information and perhaps assign each problem to an appropriate subordinate after making a decision as to the best course of action. An event leader, however, will use these challenges as opportunities for the event organization to learn and grow. The event leader may ask members of the board as well as staff for recommendations on how to replace or at least mitigate the damage that could be caused by the missing sponsor. Furthermore, the event leader will meet with the neighbors or their association and work collaboratively with his or her staff to provide the assurances they need to provide new and long-term support for the event. Event leaders use their confidence and persistence as teaching tools to influence other event stakeholders.

**Table 6-2** Integrity Quotient

Perception of High Integrity	Evidence	Low Integrity	Evidence
Consistency	Punctuality	Tardiness	Communications
Inclusiveness	Participation	Absenteeism	Intolerance
Participation	Consistency	Inconsistency	Participation
Tolerance	Inclusiveness	Exclusiveness/favoritism	Exclusiveness
Punctuality	Tolerance	Intolerance	Inconsistency

### COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING

Since Taylor created the management methods used to propel industrialized America, most management theory has focused on achieving efficiency to maximize profits. As workers began to organize into labor unions, they challenged this approach and sought an equal share in the decision-

making process regarding not only the type of work they do but how they do it. Event organizations are not linear organizations such as factories. Instead, they are pulsating organizations that may start with a small staff, swell to a large part-time and volunteer organization as an event grows near, and then rapidly deflate to the original small staff as the event winds down. This type of organization requires close collaboration between the event leaders and those who will actually deliver the services that provide the final perception of the event by the guests. Collaborative organizations or quality teams have been used for the past three decades by numerous for-profit and not-for-profit organizations to achieve high quality and consequently, better financial results. Event leaders should always perceive their associates (permanent and part-time staff), volunteers, and others as collaborators who share a mutual goal of producing a successful event. Therefore, all decisions should be preceded by close collaboration among the stakeholders. However, there are also times when the event manager must lead by making timely decisions without consulting all affected stakeholders. For example, when the event manager is notified of an unsafe or illegal or unethical activity taking place, he or she must intercede swiftly. Following the decision to act, the event manager must make certain that he or she has used this action as a teachable moment to explain why it was important. They must notify the affected stakeholders that he or she has taken an action. He or she should then seek their input in case a similar decision would have to be made in the future.

## **PROBLEM SOLVING**

A colleague of mine once said that she counted thousands of potential problems during the development of an event and therefore concluded that events consist of a series of problems whose solution determines the level of success achieved by event stakeholders. I prefer to see a problem as a challenge that is temporarily testing the skills of the event leader and his or her stakeholders. Few event managers continue in the field unless they are comfortable with their ability to solve problems. Therefore, it is understood that event managers who are experienced and trained possess the skills not only to analyze problems but also to provide a solution or solutions that will improve the outcome of the event.

The following list provides the event leader with a framework for understanding, analyzing, and solving event problems.

1. Make certain that you thoroughly understand the size, scope, and time sensitivity of the problem.
2. Identify the key informants and stakeholders affected by the problem.
3. Determine if there is a model or comparable problem whose solution could be used for this problem.
4. Test the potential solution by seeking the collaborative input of those affected by the problem. If the problem is urgent and requires an immediate response, use a precedent or other model to frame your response.
5. Once a decision has been made, monitor the impact to determine if anything further must be done to mitigate future problems resulting from your decision.

Here is an example of how this model would work during an actual event. A Texas university had a tradition of allowing students to construct a giant bonfire before the major football game of the year. This tradition stretched back several decades and had become a hallowed ritual/rite for students and alumni. Unfortunately, the bonfire materials collapsed and killed several students while critically injuring many others. University officials then had to decide whether or not to allow the bonfire to be rebuilt the following year. The framework above may be applied to this problem to produce an outcome that can be accepted by a majority of stakeholders. First, the president of the university and other administrators had to hold a thorough investigation to make certain that they had all the facts concerning the scope, size, and time sensitivity of the problem. Next, they had to make certain that their empirical information represented input from key stakeholders (those most seriously affected by the problem). Then the president and administrators had to conduct further research to determine if there is a similar problem and solution that may be used as a model for this incident. By researching academic journals, conducting interviews with administrators at other schools, and seeking anecdotal information from other institutions, the administrators may identify responses that may guide them to an appropriate solution. The institution must first test the potential solutions with key informants and other critical stakeholders to make certain that their response is accurate, thorough, and appropriate. The input that will be received from other stakeholders will further refine not only the strategic solution but also the implementation tactics. Due to the gravity of this problem, university administrators decided immediately to cancel further bonfire structures for the next twelve months pending an official investigation and analysis of the problem. This decision was made to prevent other groups, including off-campus organizations, from continuing the tradition. Finally, the solution to the problem (canceling the bonfire for a period of years) must be monitored to determine if other challenges occur as a result of the solution. Indeed, as soon as the cancellation was announced, an offcampus alumni organization announced that it wanted to build a bonfire to continue the tradition. University administrators strongly discouraged this activity and promoted their concern to media to go on record opposing this activity. Most event problems are not of the magnitude of the university bonfire tragedy. However, unless problems are solved efficiently and appropriately, they can easily escalate to a level that may threaten the reputation of the event. Once the reputation is injured or ruined, it may be difficult to sustain the future of the event.

## **COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Although communication is a critical component of the entire event process, it is also the single largest culprit when it comes to problems that may arise. How many times has a lack of communication or, more often, miscommunication resulted in a missed opportunity, an error, an oversight, or even a dangerous situation? Although an event manager need not be particularly articulate or even eloquent, he or she must be an excellent communicator. Communication is a continuous process that involves both sending (transmitting) and receiving information. This information may be verbal, written, or even abstract symbols such as body language. The event leader must be able to receive and transmit complex information to multiple stakeholders throughout the event process. The glue that literally binds the various disparate components of the event plan

together is the communications process. Therefore, the event manager must lead through excellent communications from research through evaluation. Following are the most common communications problems that may affect the planning process in event management and how to correct them.

- *Communication is not received by stakeholders:* Confirm receipt.
- *Communication is misunderstood by stakeholders:* Ask questions.
- *Communication is blocked among stakeholders:* Promote open communications.

Without open and continuous communication, event stakeholders cannot form the collaborative team needed to achieve common objectives. To promote open communications the event manager must listen, analyze, and act. To listen effectively an event manager must be intuitive, set specific criteria for the analysis of facts, and when necessary, act quickly and decisively to unblock communications among stakeholders.

### **VISION**

The professional event manager must clearly demonstrate he or she has a vision of the outcome of the event. During the early meetings with the stakeholders the event management leader must describe in a visual manner the outcome that will result from the event. For example, the event manager may state that “on the opening day thousands of guests will line up to buy tickets and once inside they will smile, participate, and have a good time all due to your efforts.” Furthermore, the event manager must “lead” the stakeholders toward that vision of the event by asking leading questions such as “Can you see this happening? Are you prepared to help me make it happen? What will you do to help us achieve this goal?”

### **THE EVENT LEADERSHIP FACTOR**

These six leadership factors ultimately result in an event manager who has the skills, experience, and intuition to form the best judgment and act appropriately to advance the goals of the event organization. This is no small task. It requires continuous monitoring by stakeholders to ensure that the event manager is doing his or her best to lead the team. Event leadership requires constant vigilance and continuing education to ensure that the power that is entrusted to the event manager is used wisely, judiciously, and thoughtfully. Finally, it is important to note that event leadership is neither charisma nor control, the ability to command nor the talent to inspire. Rather, it is that rare commodity, like good taste, that one recognizes when one sees it. Every event manager should aspire to become the kind of event leader that others will not only recognize but also follow to see where they lead them. Ultimately, the best event managers become leaders that other event stakeholders not only admire but also emulate as they seek to develop their own leadership potential. Through this admiration and emulation, these event stakeholders will soon become leaders themselves, producing even greater events in the twenty-first century.