

One-size management doesn't fit all

Today's leaders can't rely on one style, they must identify which approach will work best in any given situation – all while staying true to themselves.



BY REBECCA HOUGHTON

When I first stepped into a leadership role, back in my 20s, I was determined to adapt my style to best suit those I led. In fact, my company had trained us how to do it, so I was engaged, on board and equipped for it. When my first leadership 360 came around, I recall rubbing my hands in glee, so sure that I had nailed 'one size does not fit all' leadership. Well, it was a disaster. The worst results I've ever had in anything (including chemistry, which was pretty bad).

It was a complete leadership fail. They absolutely hated it, and felt that because I treated everyone differently I was inconsistent, and even untrustworthy. Devastating.

So in my next leadership gig, I took the opposite tack – this is me, take it or leave it. That didn't work either. I could feel the friction right away.

Fast forward 20 years and we are in a workplace dominated by Millennial preferences, and on top of that we are in a post-pandemic world where personal values have never played a stronger role

in the workplace. This means leaders need to get this right more than ever.

What is the right approach?

There is no one answer to the question of how to manage. If there were, leadership experts from me to Marshall Goldsmith would be out of work. But surely, I hear you ask, there is a rule of thumb, or a general principle that you can follow that is one-size-fits-all?

If I were to call out one specific thing, it would be judgement. Leaders who have great judgement can both be their authentic selves and adapt to those around them, all without any dissonance because they've judged it right.

How do you do that?

I like to think of it as style and substance.

Psychologist Kurt Lewin branded three leadership styles in 1939, adding a fourth later on – autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, and transformational.

Autocratic leaders often have attractive qualities, such as decisiveness, self-confidence, and a steadfast eye

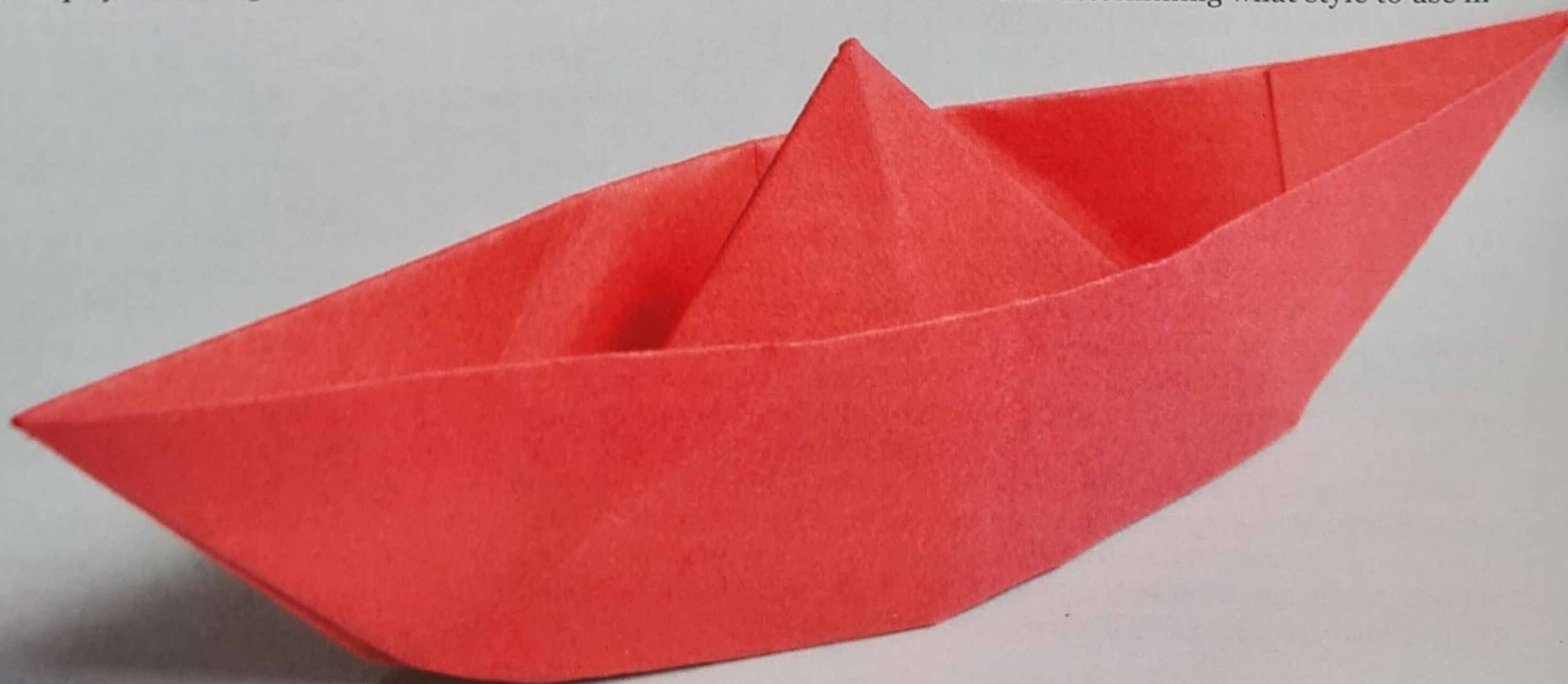
on the prize. But used in the wrong situation, those traits can come across as micro-managing and disempowering.

Democratic leaders enjoy having others participate in the decision-making process, which boosts creativity and morale. They tend to be strong communicators and easily approachable. However, if they overdo this, they can slow down or dumb down decisions, and be seen as overly consultative.

Laissez-faire leaders are great delegators, running faster-paced functions and empowering their teams. But if your team is not skilled or not clear on purpose, then this style will overwhelm them and result in paralysis or costly mistakes.

Finally, transformational leadership is based on absolute clarity to vision and goals, and two-way communication to ensure the commitment remains high. However, it can also result in burnout, as this relentless future-focus can be unrealistic.

So we have to use our judgement when determining what style to use in



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what situation. And underneath that style, we have to be true to our own values and boundaries.

That's where the substance comes in. You need to know your values and boundaries as a person and as a leader. And many leaders don't know this, they've never been helped to explore it.

Focusing on style before I had a handle on substance was the mistake I made 20 years ago. In today's workplace, that mistake would have been even more costly. ■



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