Dictator Versus Democracy Mode

Idea In Short

Consulting managers need both democracy mode and dictator mode. Default to democracy mode to unleash smart teams, but shift into dictator mode at project start, when people get stuck and during the final push. Know yourself, inspire trust and be stern only when necessary.

Two Ways to Get Outcomes

Increasingly, one simple but stark analogy captures the essence of team management. There are two ways to get outcomes. Democracy mode asks what you think, while dictator mode says do what I say. Both are needed, and the skill lies in knowing when to deploy each.

As a manager, the goal is to get the most out of your people. You want them focused on the goal, trusted to do the heavy lifting and genuinely owning the results. The problem occurs when that general openness, affability and penchant for humor is misinterpreted as low standards or a slack work environment. It is not. The warmth is real, but the standards remain high.

It Is Not Just a Communication Style

A direct report once claimed their non-performance was a misunderstanding. It was not. Either you are doing great work for the client, the team and the manager, or you are not. You are either earning trust or forcing the manager to manage you, which is painful for everyone.

If your manager has to tell you everything you need to do, it will be no fun and the end product will be worse. How can one person's brain exceed the creative energy, passion and hard work of an entire team? It cannot. That said, there are two ways to get results, and both have their place across the project life cycle.

Consulting Is About Leadership

One thing to love about consulting is that it is full of smart, intellectually curious, driven and creative people. The manager wants teams to understand the mission, grasp the context, develop rapport with the manager and the client, then go out and do their thing. Leaders make leaders. You want to surround yourself with people who are smarter and work harder than you. The more leaders you have on your team, the more democracy mode there is.

Democracy Mode Lets People Do Great Work

The consulting team gains more certainty over time. In the early days there is a lot of data gathering, research and thinking. Over time the team becomes more confident and their hypotheses pan out. For large parts of the project, a manager's job is to let their people do the work. Let them go. 1

Democracy mode works well. You get to know your team, learn their work ethic, observe their logical structuring and appreciate how beautiful their minds are. Why box someone in who has the capacity and willingness to rise to the occasion? The energy of a new project is something to love. People are willing to do the work, hungry for client face-time and eager to win. That is democracy done right.

Ideally, each consultant writes their own work stream plans and charter. They give the manager confidence that they know what they are doing and deserve trust. They check in from time to time but think ahead of both the manager and the client. Like Boy Scouts, they are prepared. Hire as many of these consultants as you can find.

The less the manager is involved and the better the results, it is a win-win for everyone. Consultants get exposure, experience and a sense of accomplishment. The manager gets results with less time spent and can focus on coaching people to get the extra 20 percent out of their performance. Let the consultants do the work.

Dictator Mode Is Sometimes Needed

This is where senior managers sadly earn their paycheck. This is when the project needs a strong hand. It needs structure and scope. The client does not need to see the confusion within the ranks of the consulting team. The team does not need to spin because they are

following wild leads or have not done the homework. In parenting talk, this is the tough love part. You tell them to listen because you are the parent, and it is the end of discussion.

One project was spinning badly. The senior manager, who was a bit of a jerk, did the right thing and kicked into dictator mode to make sure the project turned out well. In retrospect, you can begrudgingly admit that his dictator mode was useful. Being a parent is gross, unsightly and needed at times. 2

Projects Have Life Cycles

There are ups and downs, and each management setting has its time and place. A manager might operate in democracy mode for three reasons. First, the manager is an optimist and errs on the side of trust. Second, the manager is lazy and prefers work-stream leads to worry about the details. Third, the manager loves coaching and would rather spend time on the person than the content.

Does this always work? No. As one manager puts it, he loves 100 percent of consulting about 60 percent of the time and hates 100 percent of consulting 40 percent of the time. Consulting attracts people who like the buzz of work and the natural dopamine from achieving things.

Start of the Project Brings Some Dictator Mode

At the beginning of a project, a fair amount of unilateral decisions need to be made. What goes in the proposal? Who gets staffed on the work streams? How do you restrict or entertain different personalities, requests and variances? The manager sets the frame here.

For big consulting firms, these norms are already hard-coded. People know what professional expectations are. People know what not to wear to the client site. People know what an acceptable status report looks like. Less dictator mode is needed because the culture carries it.

When People Get Stuck, Lots of Dictator Mode

Somewhere in the middle of the project, junior consultants start to spin, get lazy or lose focus. Late on a Wednesday afternoon, if you ask them why they are doing something, they

explain it is part of the work plan or someone told them to do it. That is the wrong answer. If you do not know why and what, your how will suffer.

Several warning signs appear. If your manager is worrying about it more than you are, that is a problem. If you are not proud of the work you are doing, that is a problem. If you are scrounging for work to do, that is a problem. Each signals the need for the manager to step in with structure.

The Final Push Brings Some Dictator Mode

Every project has an oh-sheesh moment, when the team gets spooked by a vocal client or a stumble in the data. Negativity can be contagious. The most confident, almost arrogant consultant can quickly become a naysayer and a timid sheep. This is where experienced managers, who have developed rapport with the client, need to step in and start ordering people around. You have to keep people producing. 3

Key Takeaways for Managers

Nothing is better than a well-functioning team that operates 90 percent of the time in democracy mode. Consultants are smart and natural problem solvers. Know yourself, because dictator mode comes hard to a lot of people.

Inspire your people. Try to coax them into a more self-reliant, confident and accountable posture. Ask them whether they are proud of their work. Be comfortable not knowing details, and say so. Tell them it is fine as long as they are confident in the data and analysis. Be humble and admit they know the content better than you do. Ask what they think.

Be stern if necessary. Tell them plainly when they have not done the research and it shows. Roll people off the project if needed. The simple idea of democracy mode and dictator mode gives managers a vocabulary for the settings every project demands. The best managers read the moment, choose the mode and keep the team moving toward a result the client will value.

- 1Peter Drucker On Management Making It Difficult For People To Work
- 2David Maister On Professional Service Firm Management
- 3Indra Nooyi On Assuming Positive Intent

Summary

Nothing beats a well-functioning team operating in democracy mode 90 percent of the time. Managers must know themselves, inspire self-reliance, stay comfortable not knowing details and be stern when needed. Roll people off if the fit is wrong, because the right mode at the right moment defines good management.