191018ForbesOnLeadershipDemocraticAuthoritarianLaissezFaire

David Carlin, ‘Democratic, Authoritarian, Laissez-Faire: What Type Of Leader Are You?’ *Forbes* (October 18, 2019)

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https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidcarlin/2019/10/18/democratic-authoritarian-laissez-faire-what-type-of-leader-are-you/#62277ff12a6b

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In the 1930s, Kurt Lewin, the father of Social Psychology, produced groundbreaking work identifying [three types of leaders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Lewin#Leadership_climates): laissez-faire, authoritarian, and democratic. Since then, Lewin’s framework has influenced many subsequent perspectives on leadership. Learn what type of leader you are and understand the strengths and weakness of each style.

**Laissez-faire leadership**

Laissez-faire leadership allows group members total freedom. Laissez-faire leaders do not participate in the decision-making process, and rarely offer opinions. This style can work well if the group is highly motivated and competent. However, laissez-faire leadership has many drawbacks. Without the leader’s input, the group can sink into conflict as members jockey over roles and responsibilities. In addition, deliberations may continue for far too long. Finally, by not weighing in on the process, the leader forfeits control of the final product. In Lewin’s study, the children under laissez-faire leadership were the least productive and the most argumentative.

James Buchanan’s presidency offers a historical example of the weaknesses of laissez-faire leadership. As slavery threatened to tear America apart, the nation needed leadership from the White House. James Buchanan failed to offer it. As the South prepared to secede, Buchanan told Congress that while he believed secession was illegal, the Federal Government had no power to stop it. His position managed to alienate Northerners and Southerners alike. Chaos reigned in his cabinet. Some secretaries resigned because Buchanan failed to prevent secession, others resigned because failed to adequately support the South. His Secretary of War, a Southerner, took matters into his own hands, deliberately sending U.S. military supplies to locations where the South could easily capture them. This action emboldened the Confederacy and weakened the Union Army when war broke out. Many historians rate Buchanan as [one of America’s worst presidents](https://www.history.com/news/why-is-james-buchanan-considered-one-of-americas-worst-presidents) for his unwillingness to confront the secession crisis.

**Authoritarian leadership**

Authoritarian leadership means that the leader has full power. Authoritarian leaders tell groups what to do and expect group members to execute. Under time pressure, this style may work well, allowing the leader to make a quick decision and providing the group with direct instructions. An authoritarian leader who presents a clear vision can motivate a divided group. However, authoritarian leaders are more likely to disregard the good ideas of others. The style can also inspire resentment and stress. In Lewin’s study, the children under authoritarian leadership were productive but not very creative.

President Lyndon Johnson provides an example of effective authoritarian leadership. In Congress, Johnson was known for his aggressive style and his remarkable ability to get legislation passed. When one senator quipped, “Rome wasn’t built in a day, another responded, “Lyndon Johnson wasn’t the foreman on that job.” As President, Johnson sought aimed to remake American society. His sweeping vision included civil rights, voting rights, and Medicare. To achieve his goals, Johnson would [cajole, threaten, charm, and browbeat](https://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/09/opinion/remembering-the-johnson-treatment.html) opponents into submission. In hindsight, it almost appears that Johnson’s sheer force of will drove his landmark bills through Congress.

While authoritarian leaders may be exceptionally productive, some may also cause major harm. The Kim family of North Korea is an extreme case of authoritarian leadership. In North Korea, senior advisers are terrified of Kim-Jong Un with good reason. Instead of honest advice, these men offer useless flattery instead. Unchecked, an authoritarian leader can prove disastrous.

## **Democratic leadership**

Democratic leadership balances decision-making responsibility between the group and the leader. Democratic leaders actively participate in discussions, but also make sure to listen to the views of others. This style often leads to positive, inclusive, and collaborative work environments. Furthermore, a good democratic leader can bring out the group’s creativity. Under this style, the leader still retains final responsibility for the group’s decision. In Lewin’s study, the children under democratic leadership made the highest quality contributions.

General Dwight Eisenhower and Nelson Mandela are examples of successful democratic leaders. During WWII, Ike was appointed Supreme Allied Commander. While that title might seem to imply unlimited authority, he worked extremely hard to hold together [a diverse coalition](https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/eisenhower-takes-command). Powerful Allied politicians often had conflicting goals and strong ideas about military plans. Ike made these men feel heard even when their views were unrealistic. Ike also preferred discussing issues with his staff rather than simply barking orders. Never afraid to take blame, he once said, “leadership consists of nothing but taking responsibility for everything that goes wrong and giving your subordinates credit for everything that goes well.”

Mandela displayed a democratic leadership style during his long fight for equality. As a leader of the African National Congress (ANC) he believed that people of all colors and political affiliations could contribute to the movement. After nearly three decades in prison, Mandela was released, and the ANC won South Africa’s first free election. When he became president, Mandela could have sought revenge on his former oppressors. Instead, in an exceptional [act of forgiveness and reconciliation](https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2013/12/09/the-power-to-pardon), he included them in his government. His decision greatly accelerated the national healing process in South Africa.

Depending on the situation, each style can have pros and cons. What is your leadership style? What about your boss? Your colleagues? Understanding each will make you a more effective manager and teammate.