

LEADERSHIP

The 4 Leadership Styles, and How to Identify Yours

by Bill Taylor

AUGUST 03, 2016



We all want to be part of a great success story. To run, start, or play a senior role in a company that wins big or changes the course of its industry. To launch a brand that dazzles customers and dominates its markets. To be the kind of executive or entrepreneur who creates jobs, generates wealth, and builds an organization bursting with energy and creativity.

Which means that all of us, no matter where we are in our career, have to wrestle with the big questions of leadership: What is our personal definition of success? What does it mean to make a difference and have an impact? What is the best way to rally colleagues to our cause, to handle problems and obstacles that inevitably arise, to revise plans in the face of setbacks or to stand pat no

matter the odds? How much do we rely on our own ideas and experiences, and how widely do we seek the advice and support of those around us? If we hope to succeed, we need to understand how we lead.

Over the last three decades — first as a young editor at *Harvard Business Review*, then as cofounder of *Fast Company* magazine, now as a book author — I’ve spent time with truly remarkable leaders in a vast range of fields. All of them have achieved tremendous success and impact, and none of them has done it in precisely the same way. But I’ve been able to identify four styles that capture their different approaches to the whys and hows of leadership, and I’ve come up with a [set of 16 questions](#) to help you figure out which style suits you best. There are no right answers to these questions, of course, no one way to lead. But each of us has to figure out which style of leadership fits who we are and what we are trying to achieve.

What are those four styles of leadership?

The Classic Entrepreneur. As legendary investor John Doerr likes to say, classic entrepreneurs do “more than anyone thinks possible with less than anyone thinks possible.” Leadership is about the thrill of competition and the quest for success. No-nonsense variables, such as costs, quality, profit margins, and savvy deals, are the metrics that matter. Sure, these leaders care about the values their company stands for, but it’s the dollars-and-cents value proposition that matters most. They love to build killer products and butt-kicking companies. They are, in Doerr’s words, and he doesn’t mean this critically, “opportunistic” — they revel in “the pitch” and “the deal.” When faced with decisions about launching a new product, or dealing with a disgruntled customer, or selling the company to an eager suitor, they focus on tough-minded calculations and no-nonsense financial returns.

The Modern Missionary. These leaders aim for more than mere business success; they aspire to success and significance. Winning is less about beating the competition than it is about building something original and meaningful. Success is less about making money than it is about making a difference and having an impact. Sure, economic value is important, but human values are what drive their passion to succeed. So these leaders may take risks that classic entrepreneurs won’t, even if the short-term returns aren’t obvious, or they may turn down deals that others might accept, because the financial payoffs aren’t as important as the broader impact they hope to make. These leaders don’t just want to run companies; they aim to turn their companies into a cause.

The Problem Solver. They worry less about dramatic impact than about concrete results. They believe in the power of expertise and the value of experience. Disruptive technologies and blank-sheet-of-paper business models may be reshaping markets and industries, but past success is a good predictor of future impact. So as they rise through the ranks or lead organizations they’ve built, problem solvers are the first to confront difficulties and identify new opportunities. Yes, they rely on the advice of colleagues, but ultimately they fall back on everything they’ve learned and seen to guide the organization into the future. These top-down, take-charge, the-buck-stops-here executives

may be the most recognizable sorts of leaders, in terms of the image we carry around of what it takes to get things done.

The Solution Finder. This style is about incremental results and concrete solutions, but these leaders believe that the most powerful contributions often come from the most unexpected places — the hidden genius of their colleagues, the collective genius that surrounds their organization. They are committed to making sure that what they know doesn't limit what they can imagine. They're ultimately responsible for business results, but they believe that achieving those results is everybody's business. These modest, humble, self-effacing leaders don't make headlines, but that doesn't mean they're not ambitious. They believe that humility in the service of ambition is the right mindset to do big things in a world of huge unknowns.

Why is it important to gain clarity about the leadership style that fits each of us best? Because the more we understand about ourselves — what we truly care about, how we make decisions, why we do what we do — the more effective we will be at marshaling the support of others for what we hope to achieve. In a time of wrenching disruptions and exhilarating advances, of unrelenting turmoil and unlimited promise, there have never been more roads to success — or more opportunities to fail.

Author's note: I've created a [16-question quiz](#) on my website to help you figure out your style. It's free, but you do have to enter your email address to get your results.

William C. Taylor is cofounder of *Fast Company* magazine. His new book, [Simply Brilliant: How Great Organizations Do Ordinary Things in Extraordinary Ways](#), will be published on September 20, 2016. Learn more at williamctaylor.com.

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