Leadership That Is Both
Forceful and Enabling

Should leaders be forceful—taking charge, making their presence felt, and stepping up to tough decisions—or should they be enabling—tapping into, bringing out, and showing appreciation for the capabilities of other people? Leaders' response to this question largely determines how effective they will be.

There is a dilemma that every leader must face. On the one hand it is clear that you need to be forceful—to assert yourself by means of your own intellect, vision, skills, and drive and to push others hard to perform. Forceful leaders take charge, make their presence felt, tell people exactly what is expected of them, let nothing deter them from achieving objectives, and step up to the tough decisions.

On the other hand it is also clear that you need to be enabling—to tap into, bring out, and show appreciation for the capabilities, both obvious

by Robert E. Kaplan

and hidden, of other people. Enabling leaders involve their people and open themselves to their influence—in setting the strategic direction and in making decisions that affect the unit as a whole. And they give their subordinates plenty of latitude to do their jobs.

Each of these approaches seems almost to define leadership. Isn't forceful leadership exactly what is needed in a tough competitive environment? It is certainly wanted in organizational life. Leaders are called upon to be *forces* in a direct, personal sense. They must be strong and capable personally on a number of dimensions.

And yet isn't enabling leadership just the sort of progressive, collective

approach that has the best chance of meeting today's competitive challenge by getting the whole organization involved and committed? Enabling leadership is very much needed. Leaders are responsible for tapping into the strength and capabilities of other people.

So the question is should you be forceful or should you be enabling? In my view, how well you respond to this dilemma has a great deal to do with whether you are effective as a leader.

Despite its importance, many leaders do not face this dilemma. Their understanding of the choices is that for them there is only one choice—to be forceful. For a smaller but still significant number of others, the only choice is to be enabling. The outcome for both is the same: the habitual use of one approach seriously limits their effectiveness.

Truly effective leaders face this dilemma with a full understanding that they have a choice and with the skills to act on what they decide. And with this knowledge and ability they choose not once but again and again, employing the leadership approach that is most appropriate to their current situation.

In this article I describe two things that I think you need in order to face the dilemma: a complete picture of the choices available and an idea about how to overcome any prejudicial attitudes and to develop the skills to follow up on your choice. With these, you can achieve the versatility to be both forceful *and* enabling.

A NEW VIEW

It isn't easy to gain a complete picture of the choices involved in the forceful versus enabling dilemma. There is an ingrained tradition among both practitioners and students of management of taking a partial view. This tradition needs to be replaced with a new perspective.

Rejecting the Extremes

In my work with executives at CCL and, subsequently, in my consulting practice, I have found that when leaders make the distinction between being forceful and enabling, there is a strong tendency for them to place one approach at a disadvantage. This tendency has a long history. Let me give two examples.

Consider Theory X and Theory Y, conceptualized by Douglas McGregor in his 1960 book *The Human Side of Enterprise.* This dichotomy has captured the imaginations of academics and practicing managers alike and has had great staying power in the field. What McGregor did brilliantly in formulating these two views was to expose the thinking behind heavy-handed leadership.

Theory X is a set of assumptions about human nature that holds that the average person doesn't like to work and avoids responsibility and therefore must be directed and even coerced into getting work done. If one adheres to this view, forceful leadership is required.

Theory Y, in contrast, assumes that the average person is perfectly willing to work hard and take responsibility if the work is at all interesting and if he or she is treated as an adult and not a child.

McGregor presented a carefully reasoned polemic against over-control. He has much company today in people who look askance at what they regard as the traditional command-and-control approach to leadership and who believe that subordinates need to be empowered.

There are both practitioners and theorists, however, who have serious misgivings about empowerment and the accompanying de-emphasis of the power of the person in charge. In his 1989 book *The Managerial Mystique: Restoring Leadership in Business,* Abraham Zaleznik argued that strong, charismatic leadership is critical to organizational effectiveness, and contended that "personal influence is leadership," as long as it is not self-serving.

These two authors are representative of what amounts to two camps of thinking about leadership: those who have no faith in an empowering, people-oriented leadership and those who have no use for control-oriented leadership. Each camp tends to discredit and dismiss the other.

Each critique has more than a grain of truth in it. On the one hand people are quite right in pointing out that very tight control over job design and subordinates can lead to dissatisfied employees who act in ways that seem to justify tight, if not tighter, control. On the other hand critics of empowerment are also right in attacking power sharing and giving high consideration to people when leaders simultaneously abdicate the unpleasant parts of the job or fall into unfocused, undisciplined execution.

However, although each camp has some truth on its side, each presents only part of the picture. Each equates the other with its excesses and misses the value of the opposing approach when it is applied appropriately.

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Recognizing Opposing Virtues

For leaders to envision the complete picture, I have found that it is helpful for them to think of forceful and enabling as opposing virtues. Even though these approaches are opposites, they are not necessarily incompatible, contradictory, or mutually exclusive. In fact, they are best understood as complementary—as distinctly different but absolutely necessary to each other. *Complementary* means "to fill or complete." With each completing the other, forceful and enabling make up a whole.

Talking and listening, for example, are two very different functions yet are incomplete without each other. If you do all the talking, you can't be effective; if you do a great job of listening but fail to make your own views known, you won't get the job done.

We could argue endlessly about whether talking or listening is more important to leadership. We could discredit talking by citing examples of leaders who utterly dominate meetings; we could discredit listening by citing examples of leaders who are painfully slow to articulate their views. Granted, there are times when one is more important, but the either-or tension between the two is best resolved by understanding them as complements.

So it is with forceful and enabling leadership. Both, as their names make clear, can be positive.

Seeing Both Virtues and Vices

Seeing forceful and enabling as complementary, you can now see the whole picture: the virtues and vices of both sides.

Getting involved personally versus granting autonomy. It is clearly important that you as a leader assert yourself on certain high-priority issues and get directly involved in resolving those issues. You must be capable of taking full control and leading personally.

It is also important that you empower subordinates, make it possible for them to lead, and give them the autonomy they want and need to do their jobs.

Although leading personally and getting involved is a virtue, it is also true that doing that to an extreme, taking over completely and depriving subordinates of autonomy, is a vice.

Conversely, although affording subordinates sufficient latitude is a virtue, it is also true that overdoing that, giving people too much autonomy, is a vice.
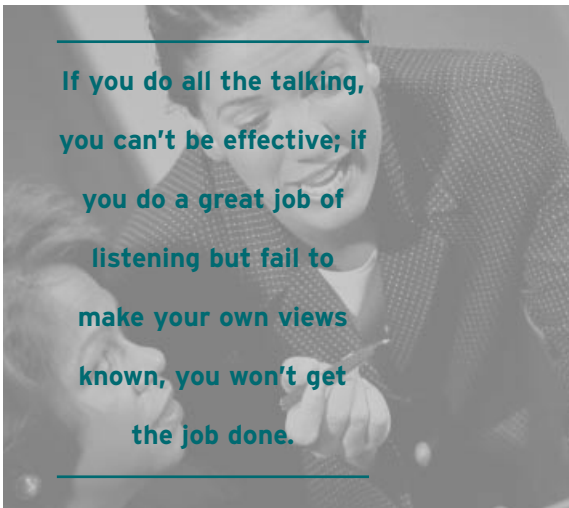
Making difficult calls versus being sensitive to people's needs. Another familiar pairing—which Morgan McCall, Michael Lombardo, and Ann Morrison identified in their 1988 book *The Lessons of Experience* as a tension needing management—is the need to be tough versus the necessity to be compassionate. On the one hand, as a leader you are called upon to make difficult calls—for example, killing a long-term project that is unlikely to pay off. Making difficult calls, calls that hurt people, requires a resolve. On the other hand you need to be compassionate, meaning you must be responsive to the plight of individuals—to a crisis in a subordinate's life or to the stresses and strains that occur on the job.

Although making essential difficult calls, even when they have an adverse effect on people, is a virtue, taking that to an extreme, becoming callous and insensitive to people's needs, is a vice. In the same way, compassion becomes a vice when it takes precedence over the work.

Having a can-do attitude versus accepting limits. There is no doubt that an intense can-do attitude is indispensable if leaders are to inspire others to high performance. The risk is that this attitude may be pushed to the point where you perpetually demand too much, push others too hard, and run the risk of burnout. You need to be realistic about the limits on human performance and endurance so that the organization can preserve its most precious asset, its capability.

Yet the leader who understands the limits runs the risk of settling for too little. Leaders who are admirably attentive to their subordinates' need for balance in their lives

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and who are careful about not intruding on family time sometimes unduly limit the accomplishments of their organizations.

A certain modesty in senior leaders is disarming, especially when it is accompanied by high achievement. Yet, when taken too far, that otherwise desirable quality becomes self-doubt that can have a depressive effect on others.

There are of course a number of other behaviors you will be able to think of that can be displayed as either forceful or enabling leadership, but these examples make the point that seeing the two approaches as complementary makes it possible to understand the choice between them more specifically.

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The specifics are important because it is the set of circumstances or the particular challenge facing the executive that determines which leadership approach is called for. Organizational type and stage of organizational development may dictate which of the two leadership approaches is predominantly needed. Turnaround situations, for instance, put a premium on forceful leadership because various tough actions are required to kick start a reversal in the organization's fortunes. Likewise, different subordinates require different leadership. Consistent with Paul

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Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard's theory of situational leadership, inexperienced, dependent, or less motivated people need more direction and guidance, and experienced self-starters respond better to enabling leadership.

CHOICE PROBLEMS

With a complete picture of the choices of forceful and enabling leadership, you have real options—you can in fact fully appreciate the dilemma. But you may have problems following through on some choices because, in my experience:

- Leaders who excel at taking charge tend not to do as well at letting go, and vice versa.
- Leaders with a proven ability to be tough—in turnaround situations, for example—often lack sensitivity, and those who have ample people sensitivity tend to have trouble being tough—in removing poor performers, for example.
- Leaders who possess a well-developed critical faculty are not usually known for praising people, and those who are more appreciative and positively reinforcing may have a hard time criticizing a subordinate's performance directly.
- Leaders with a strong can-do attitude can be blind to the toll that this takes on the people they work with, and leaders who are very understanding of the work-life pressures on colleagues can lose sight of the importance of performance standards.
- Leaders who are very confident often take too much personal credit for what the organization accomplishes, and leaders who are extremely modest underrate their own contributions.

In habitually choosing to be only forceful or only enabling, many leaders have overdeveloped one and underdeveloped the other. Thus, in order to gain balance and versatility, the underdeveloped side must be emphasized, and the overdeveloped side must be deemphasized.

USING ALL THE CLUBS

To develop the ability to be either forceful or enabling as appropriate, you must contend with your underlying attitudes toward skills you lack. You are unlikely to develop skills that you do not value. You may actually be opposed *on principle* to managerial practice that emphasizes being forceful or enabling.

I once coached an executive whom a co-worker described this way: "He has no sand trap skills, doesn't like using the putter. He prefers the driver. If you have nine clubs in the bag, he has not perfected using the nine clubs and may actually look upon using all of them as a breach of his integrity." In this executive's mind, not being direct and forceful compromises his principles and is an example of being political in the bad sense of the term.

When leaders who overdo forceful and underdo enabling think about becoming more enabling, what do they worry about? Becoming weak. Similarly, when leaders who overdo enabling and underdo forceful contemplate a more forceful approach, what are they afraid of? Becoming loud and aggressive. It's as if they see the excesses but not the virtues.

To develop, you must do more than accept your underdeveloped side. You must also take some emphasis off the approach you currently favor. Some may worry that a reduced emphasis will sacrifice a leader's strength. But that is exactly the point here: the strong attachment to the current way of operating gets in the way of development.

Thus, you must not only increase the value you place on the neglected side, you must decrease somewhat the value placed on the favored side. Performance problems stem as much from an overemphasis and overinvestment as they do from an underemphasis and underinvestment.

There are several obstacles to making this change, however. First, it is not easy to diminish an attachment, often a very emotional attachment, to a preferred approach.

Second, leaders find it hard to reduce their ongoing heavy investment in the side that is already strong, I believe, for fear of not being strong enough in that respect. It is seen as so vitally important, of

such a high value, that the leader feels he or she can never have enough of it. Put another way, it is an ideal state, a state of perfection, that by definition can never be attained. Therefore the leader is always worried about coming up short of the ideal.

A related obstacle is leaders' worry that their intensity level will be harmed. Even as this intensity takes its toll, leaders often count on it to make them effective in the face of stiff challenges.

And yet another obstacle that makes this change difficult is that the people who work with and have a stake in a leader's effectiveness may also fear that moderating a strength may cause it to be lost.

I believe, based on my work with leaders, that moderating a strength that has been taken to an extreme does not cancel it out. Just the opposite—it enhances it. Think of young pitchers in baseball. Often they have to learn that they throw a better fastball when they relax a little rather than throwing as hard as they can.

LOSING POWER

Forceful leaders place great faith in their own powers—their ideas, decisions, vision, convictions, focus, and drive. When in doubt, they fall back on their own resources. As a result, they tend to have trouble listening, turning subordinates loose, resisting the temptation to take over when problems arise, and taking the time to develop subordinates' capabilities. The force they exert can shut people down and turn them off. One way or another, overly forceful leaders are at risk of losing the potential contributions of others. In relying so heavily on what *they* do, they do not enable others enough. In fact, they tend to disable others.

If you are an exclusively forceful leader, your primary task is develop-
ing trust—confidence and faith in others and their capacity to contribute. You must place enough trust in other people's skills and commitment to do two things: first, accept their attempts to influence you; second, turn over responsibility to them without yanking it back when a problem arises.

Enabling leaders, because they place great faith in others, sometimes disable themselves. To be more of a force, they need to develop faith in themselves. If you are an exclusively enabling leader, your primary task is to develop more presence, to make sure that you make a personal contribution. That means that in some situations when you feel strongly, you should take a position based on your understanding of a problem.
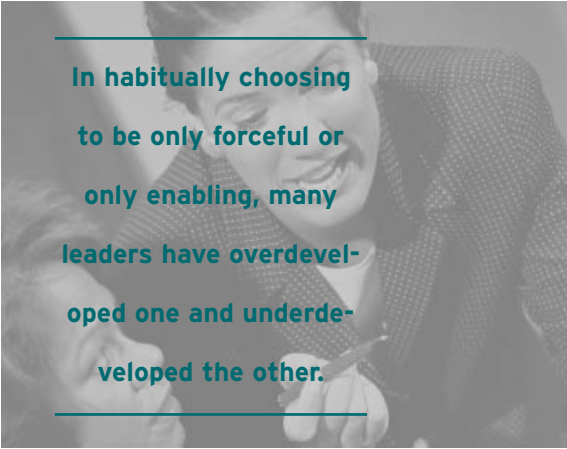
VERSATILITY IS KEY

Because the demands inherent in leadership require a range of different behaviors, the dilemma of whether to be forceful or enabling must be resolved again and again according to your current circumstances. To do this, you must develop to some degree the ability to be both forceful and enabling. Effectiveness, then, is a matter of *versatility*.

Versatility is not a new idea (it would be hard to find a leader who doesn't think it is desirable), but it has been a generally unexploited one in the field of leadership. If you do focus on it, however, adopting it as your guiding idea, you will open up possibilities for development.

I emphasize in closing that versatility is not homogenization. One leader I worked with expressed a concern that "the flaw in the 360-degree feedback is the idea of the Renaissance man—that you can do everything. My view is that you need to leverage unique strengths, rather than ask people to pull back from their strengths and suddenly get
bland. I'd rather have somebody bipolar than bland, in the middle."

Other leaders I have known have raised similar concerns about themselves or their peers being, in their words "homogenized," "normalized," "neutered." The overall concern is that if leaders who strongly favor the forceful approach were to change, especially in response to feedback from other people in the organization, they might bow to social pressure and

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conform to prevailing norms, thereby losing their distinctive power and leadership ability.

What I am recommending, however, does not cost the leader the strength he or she has. That ability remains available when the need arises. A strong, centrist, dominant leader doesn't give up the capacity to take over; he or she just employs it more selectively. An outspoken leader is no less capable of speaking out once he or she learns to listen better or ceases to be so compelled to voice objections if a principle is apparently violated. Versatility isn't forever hugging the middle of a continuum from forceful to enabling. It is the flexibility to roam freely along the continuum from one end to the other. It is the reduction of constraints, and this should appeal to all leaders. ✎

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