

Authoritarian, Democratic & Laissez-Faire Leadership

(Research Starters)

This article introduces authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles. These three styles of leadership comprise the classical styles of leadership seen in traditional groups and organizations. The sociology of authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership is explored in four parts: an overview of the basic principles of the authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles; a discussion of the sociology of group and organizational leadership; a review of the ways in which social scientists apply authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire theories of leadership to research setting and questions; and an exploration of the issues associated with choosing a particular leadership style. Understanding the role that authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles play in groups is vital background for all those interested in the sociology of social interaction in groups and organizations.

Keywords Authoritarian Leadership; Democratic Leadership; Followers; Groups; Laissez-Faire Leadership; Organizations

Social Interaction in Groups

Overview

Social scientists classify distinct types or styles of leadership. Different leadership styles or behaviors have different effects on the dynamics of groups and organizations. There are three classical leadership styles or behaviors: Authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership. These three leadership styles vary in multiple ways including the functions of leadership, the roles of followers, the settings most appropriate for each leadership style, and the leadership styles' relationship to authority and control. For instance, authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership vary in the degree of control that they give their followers. Authoritarian leaders give their followers little to no control of their environment. Democratic leaders give their followers partial control over their tasks and decision-making process. Laissez-faire leaders give their followers almost total control over their environments.

Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) was the pioneering social psychologist credited with defining and differentiating between the three classical leadership styles or behaviors. Lewin, considered by many to be the founder of social psychology, made significant contributions to leadership studies, organizational theory, and management theory. Based on extensive leadership and group dynamics experiments, Lewin developed the concept of leadership climates. Lewin characterized leadership climates as authoritarian, democratic, or laissez-faire (Lewin et al, 1939). Critics of Lewin argue that he never developed his classical leadership model beyond a rough conceptual sketch.

This article introduces authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles. These three styles of leadership comprise the classical styles of leadership seen in traditional groups and organizations. The sociology of authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire leadership is explored in four parts:

- An overview of the basic principles of the authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles;
- A discussion of the sociology of group and organizational leadership;
- A review of the ways in which social scientists apply authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire theories of leadership to research setting and questions; and
- An exploration of the issues associated with choosing a particular leadership style.

Understanding the role that authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles play in groups is vital background for all those interested in the sociology of social interaction in groups and organizations.

Leadership Types: Authoritarian, Democratic,

Kurt Lewin's three leadership styles or behaviors, described below, influence the leader-follower relationship, group success, group risk-taking, group problem-solving strategies, group morale, and group relations.

Authoritarian Leadership

Authoritarian leaders, also referred to as autocratic leaders, are characterized as domineering. Authoritarian leaders make policies and decide appropriate division of labor from afar. They tend to be distant and aloof from their group. Authoritarian leadership is gained through punishment, threat, demands, orders, rules, and regulations. The functions of authoritarian leadership include unilateral rule-making, task-assignment, and problem solving while the roles of authoritarian followers include adhering to the leader's instructions without question or comment. Authoritarian leadership is appropriate in settings with a constant stream of new employees, limited decision-making time or resources, and the need for large-scale coordination with other groups and organizations. Authoritarian leadership is not suited to environments in which members desire to share their opinions and participate in decision-making processes. Critics of authoritarian leadership argue that the leadership style leads to high member dissatisfaction, turn-over, and absenteeism (Gastil, 1994).

Democratic Leadership

Democratic leaders are characterized by collective decision-making, camaraderie, active member or follower involvement, fair praise, and restrained criticism; they facilitate collective decision-making. Democratic leaders offer their followers choices and support. Democratic leadership, also referred to as participative leadership, reflects democratic principles and processes including inclusiveness, self-determination, and equal participation. That said, democratic leaders should not be confused with those who hold elected positions of power. Democratic leaders often lack formal position and power. For example, Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), an Indian peace activist and leader, was a democratic leader who lacked a formal position of power.

Democratic leadership gains its authority through accountability, active participation, cooperation, and delegation of tasks and responsibilities. The functions of democratic leadership include distributing responsibility within the group or organization, empowering members, and facilitating group deliberations. The roles of democratic followers include willingness to take personal responsibility for the group or organization, willingness to be held accountable for their actions and decisions, willingness to maintain their group's autonomy and freedom, willingness to take on the role of leader as needed or appropriate, and willingness to work with their leaders. Democratic leadership is appropriate in particular settings such as an international association, a democratic nation, a worker-owner corporation, a public university, a close-knit neighborhood, or a cooperative social group or organization. Democratic leadership is not useful or required in groups and organizations with clearly defined and unchanging guidelines, roles, and practices.

Ultimately, the role of a democratic leader is ideally shared in a group or organization. Democratic leadership is distributed and changing. Within a democratic leadership climate or environment, there will be multiple leaders and every member will be a leader at some point during their membership in the group (Gastil, 1994).

Laissez-Faire Leadership

Laissez-faire leaders are characterized as uninvolved with their followers and members; in fact, laissez-faire leadership is an absence of leadership style. Leaders of this style make no policies or group-related decisions. Instead, group members are responsible for all goals, decisions, and problem solving. Laissez-faire leaders have very little to no authority within their group organization. The functions of laissez-faire leadership include trusting their members or followers to make appropriate decisions and bringing in highly trained and reliable members into the group or organization. The roles of laissez-faire followers include self-monitoring, problem solving, and producing successful end products. Laissez-faire leaders are most successful in environments with highly trained and self-directed followers. Laissez-faire leadership is appropriate in particular settings such as science laboratories or established companies with long-term employees. Laissez-faire leadership is not suited to environments in which the members require feedback, direction, oversight, flexibility, or praise (Gastil, 1994).

Bass's Transformational, Transactional,

In contemporary sociological thought and practice, laissez-faire leadership is one part of the model of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership that was developed by Bernard M. Bass (1925–2007) in 1985. Bass based his model on the work of social scientist James MacGregor Burns (b. 1918) who originated the concepts of transactional and transforming leadership in the 1970s. Burns argued that every leadership process may be classified as transactional, transforming, or laissez-faire leadership. In Bass's model, transactional leadership refers to a leadership style in which the leader exchanges rewards in exchange for subordinate effort. Transformational leadership refers to a leadership style in which the leader encourages his or her subordinates to achieve increasingly higher levels of performance for the sake of the organization....

(The entire section is 4101 words.)