THORNTON'S "3D's" OF MANAGEMENT STYLES

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Abstract

Managers have a wide array of choices with respect to management styles and Thornton's 3Ds of Management Styles attempts to simplify the matter by identifying three basic styles: directing ("tell employees what to do"), discussing "ask questions and listen") and delegating ("let employees figure it out their own way"). Each of these styles has its advantages and disadvantages depending on the situation and the choice determines how managers go about other activities such as communication, goal-setting, decision-making, performance monitoring and establishing rewards systems.

Thornton argued that there are three basic management styles—directing ("tell employees what to do"), discussing ("ask questions and listen") and delegating ("let employees figure it out on their own")—and that the characteristics of each of these styles can be explained using dimensions such as communication strategies, goal-setting and decision-making procedures, performance monitoring procedures and the methods used for rewarding and recognizing the work of subordinates.[2] Thornton counseled that managers should be adept at each of the styles and must be able to "diagnose the situation before deciding what management style to use".[3] He also observed that management style is an evolutionary process and that as employees gain experience, skills and confidence the manager should become more comfortable with granting employees more freedom and transitioning his or her preferred management style from directing to discussing and, finally, to delegating.[4]

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[1] The material in this report will appear in *Organizational Management and Administration: A Guide for Managers and Professionals* by Dr. Alan S. Gutterman and is presented with permission of Thomson Reuters/West. Copyright 2012 Thomson Reuters/West. For more information or to order call 1-800-762-5272. Dr. Gutterman is the Director of the Center for Management of Emerging Companies [www.managingemergingcompanies.org].

[2] The discussion in this section is adapted from "Management Styles: International Management Styles", http://www.amasuweb.com/files/ob.ppt [accessed January 10, 2012]. For further details, see P. Thornton, The Big 3 Management Styles (Oshawa, Ontario: Multi-Media Publications, 2008). Thornton has also written about leadership styles and skills and promoted the idea that leaders should provide challenge, coaching and confidence to their followers in order to provide the highest value to their organizations. See, e.g., P. Thornton, Be the Leader, Make the Difference (2nd Ed.) (Santa Ana, CA: Griffin Publishing Group, 2001).

[3] See P. Thornton, "Management Styles: Directing, Discussion and Delegating", http://pbthornton.com/articles/The%20Big%20Three%20Management%20Styles.pdf [accessed January 12, 2012]

[4] Id.

The “directing” style places major control squarely in the hands of the manager, who assumes full responsibility for assigning duties and roles among subordinates, setting standards and defining goals and expectations. This style is appropriate when specific orders need to be given in order to complete specific and well-defined tasks. When the directing style is used communication generally takes the form of specific directions from management, short term goals are set by management with little or no input from subordinates, formal control systems are used to monitor performance and rewards are distributed based on how well subordinates follow and carry out the orders issued by management.

A manager using the “discussing” style makes an effort to discuss relevant issues with subordinates and creates an environment in which communication flows more smoothly and both managers and employees feel free and empowered to present ideas, ask questions, provide feedback and coaching and challenge assumptions. Managers using this style have developed the capacity to listen to the concerns of their followers and facilitate meetings at which issues relating to work activities are discussed and debated. The discussing style gets people involved in the process of setting goals and making decisions and builds greater commitment among subordinates with respect to the goals of the units because they had a hand in setting them. Performance is monitored by managers and subordinates and the criteria for rewards and recognition is expanded to include the quality of contributions made to discussions, social skills and openness in sharing information and opinions with the group.

Finally, the delegating style features a high level of autonomy for subordinates as managers set general expectations yet transfer substantial responsibility for the details of meeting those expectations to subordinates. Not surprisingly, it is recommended that this approach be limited to situations where the subordinates have a substantial amount of training and experience and thus are capable to acting without much direct supervision. Communication within groups using the delegating style varies depending on the situation and can either “one way” or “two way”. Goals may be set by the manager alone or by the manager in collaboration with representatives from the subordinate group; however, regardless of how goals are established the hallmark of this type of style is the subordinates are given the independence and autonomy to decide on their own about the best way to pursue and achieve those goals. Since managers are not involved in the details of the design of specific tasks and activities they do require continuous and timely feedback on performance to ensure that satisfactory progress is being made toward completion of the agreed goals. Rewards and recognition when the delegating style is used are based on efficiency and the ability of subordinates to perform well when asked to work autonomously.