Clinical Supervision: Leadership Styles

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Purpose The purpose of this course is to explain the different styles of leadership and to outline the advantages and disadvantages of each style.

Goal Upon completion of this course, the healthcare provider should be able to:

- Describe the autocratic leader, including at least 4 advantages and disadvantages.
- Describe the bureaucratic leader, including at least 4 advantages and disadvantages.
- Describe the charismatic leader, including at least 3 advantages and disadvantages.
- Describe the democratic leader, including at least 2 advantages and disadvantages.
- Describe the participatory leader, including at least 3 advantages and disadvantages.
- Describe the laissez-faire leader, including at least 2 advantages and disadvantages.

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Introduction

Most licensed healthcare providers must take a leadership role as part of their professional duties, but many have little or no managerial training and are unaware of the different styles of leadership and the implications of each style.

However, the ability to be a good leader is critically important to the person's effectiveness and advancement in the healthcare career.

The first step in leadership is for the individual to understand the options for leadership and to determine the type of leader s/he is or aspires to be. In many cases, the institution determines the focus of leadership, and the healthcare provider should be aware of this focus before accepting a position. While there are many leadership styles, six stand out as commonly employed in healthcare.

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Autocratic leader

The autocratic leader makes as many decisions independently as possible and maintains control of the decision-making processes. This leader also tends to retain responsibility and limit delegation and consultation with others.

Advantages

This is an older form of leadership, often considered outdated, but this style remains common because there are advantages:

- **Less stress:** While the autocratic leader may have stress related to responsibility, the leader does not have the stress of his or her fate being in the hands of others.

- **Increased efficiency**: The leader's oversight, presence, and expectations often result in people working to capacity—at least while the leader is present.

- **Rapid decision-making**: The leader does not need to have meetings or make compromises to reach a decision, so the leader can respond quickly to changes or needs.

- **Faster problem-solving:** The leader who is heavily invested in all aspects of work can often spot problems quickly and come up with solutions.

- **Less oversight:** Because this leader makes decisions independently without consultation of staff, there is often less interaction and oversight into the manner in which the leader works or makes decisions.

Disadvantages

The autocratic leader strictly enforces his/her rules, but staff members often feel left out of process and feel their ideas are not expected or appreciated. Because of this, staff may not be supportive, and there are several disadvantages:

- **Negative work environment:** The autocratic leader is often viewed with resentment because staff members feel they are not valued or appreciated. This can lead to lack of support and efforts to undermine the leader. People simply don't like to be ordered around—regardless of the skills or abilities of the leader.

- **Impaired staff development:** Staff members are not able to gain experience and skills they need in order to advance or assume leadership responsibilities.

- **Unbalanced workload:** The leader's workload may become unmanageable because of the person's inability or unwillingness to delegate. In the long run, this can result in increased stress, decreased efficiency, and burnout.

- **Dependency:** When the leader makes all decisions, the staff may become very dependent on the leader, expecting more and more with less and less personal investment.

- **Less feedback:** Staff members often feel intimidated and afraid to point out problems, especially since they had no involvement in decisions about the process, so problems may go unreported and unaddressed.

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Autocratic leaders are especially effective in crisis situations when time is a critical element or in complex short-term projects. They are also effective in working environments with a rapid turnover of employees because the strict centralized control results in less time required for staff leadership development and training. However, the leadership style may, in fact, contribute to rapid turnover.

Some autocratic leaders are very effective because they have a clear vision and effective decision-making skills, but in many cases, people who are unsure of their abilities and lack leadership skills retreat into autocratic leadership because they simply don't know what else to do and believe that this type of leadership exemplifies *good* leadership by showing they are in charge.

Bureaucratic leader

Bureaucracy takes time to develop, so the bureaucratic leader is most often found in a large established institution in which top down decision-making has become the norm. Leaders are chosen because of their ability to follow organizational rules exactly, so they, in turn, expect others to do the same.

Advantages

The bureaucratic leader is often quite business-like, focused on the job at hand, and ultimately signs off on all final decisions, so this authority gives the leader a certain degree of respect. There are advantages to bureaucratic leadership:

- **Clear structure:** The lines of authority are clearly delineated, and people know what is expected of them within this structure.
- **Increased safety:** Because staff members follow rules, there is less danger of injury, so safety is often improved.
- **Improved quality:** When procedures are followed consistently, such as conducting time outs and checklists prior to surgery, quality of care often improves. Human error is reduced.
- **Management control:** When staff members know that their evaluations, promotions, salaries, and job security are tied to their exact following of established rules, they are less likely to deviate, so management can retain tight control.

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Disadvantages

The advantages to bureaucratic leadership seem very positive; however, there are serious disadvantages that should not be overlooked:

- **Negative work environment** The bureaucratic leadership model would be ideal for a workforce of robots, but people are not robots and often feel constrained by the need to constantly follow rules and frequently feel the work is unrewarding.

- **Lack of creativity:** Staff members are rewarded for following rules, not for questioning them or trying to arrive at better solutions. People who are creative often simply go elsewhere to work or learn quickly to keep ideas to themselves. Established procedures are often kept in place even though better procedures are used elsewhere.

- **Poor communication:** The bureaucratic leader often refers to rules, regulations, and policies when dealing with problems, suggesting people "follow the process" rather than trying to resolve issues. Problems for which the rules are not clear are typically "sent upward."

- **Misconceptions regarding power:** When position equals power, people often seek these positions because they want power over others, and leaders may develop inflated ideas of their own importance, expressed through arrogant behavior and increased "politics" as people attempt to curry favor.

- **Inflated staff:** Bureaucratic leadership rarely results in a small efficient staff, as bureaucracy seems to lend itself to bloated staffing and waste.

This type of leadership is most effective in dangerous work environments where adherence to rules and protocol is essential for safety, but it is not conducive to problem-solving in the medical environment in which change is almost constant.

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Charismatic leader

The charismatic leader is often described as a "born leader," but, in fact, some people simply cultivate the skills needed by observing others and studying people.

Charismatic leaders use their own personal charisma to influence people, often amassing "followers" who support them, often without question. They are usually persuasive speakers and use and understand the importance of body language as part of communication.

Advantages

The advantages to charismatic leadership are fairly clear:

- **Respect and power:** Staff members look up to the leader and show respect for the person's authority and accept and support the leader's decisions.
- **Creative solutions:** The charismatic leader is often visionary, and it's this quality that attracts others. The leader is able to see a creative solution—or at least a different solution--to problems and communicate the solution to others. Staff members may feel part of creative solutions even though they are merely supporting them.
- **Change:** Charismatic leaders often emerge because they promote change in an environment in which people feel frustration with the status quo. Staff members may feel empowered by being part of a "movement" toward change and are willing to support the leader in making changes.

Disadvantages

A good charismatic leader can be extremely effective and bring about needed changes, but this type of leadership also has disadvantages:

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- **Staff division:** The one certain thing about a charismatic leader is that where there are followers, there are also detractors—often vehement. The leader's vision—however noteworthy—may be derailed by conflict, with staff members taking sides and progress halted in the process.

- **Self-limiting leadership:** In a model that depends on one person, if that person leaves or falters, the entire system supporting the leader can fall apart.

- **Ineffective solutions:** Just because a leader is charismatic, it does not follow that a new or creative solution to a problem is the BEST solution. When the decision-making process is guided and controlled by one person, that person must be infallible, but that is rarely the case. Leaders can be quite narcissistic, looking out for what is best for them rather than for the organization.

A charismatic leader may be a motivating force, but because this type of leader engages "followers," the leader may relate to one group rather than the organization as a whole, limiting overall effectiveness.

Democratic leader

The democratic leader shares responsibility with staff members, often presenting a problem and asking staff to help arrive at a solution although the leader usually retains control over the final decision based on this input. This leader consults with others for all major decisions and delegates, allowing staff members control over their assigned duties.

Advantages

There are many advantages to democratic leadership:

- **Positive work environment:** Staff members often feel more appreciated and invested in the work because they feel a measure of control. There is often less discord between staff and the leader, resulting in less conflict. People tend to be more open in expressing feelings and concerns, so there is less "talking behind the back" of the leader, and people are more invested in supporting decisions they have had a part in making.

- **Better decision-making:** Because decision-making is shared, both negative and positive aspects of a decision are usually

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discussed, so problems that may be overlooked by one person making decisions may be identified early.

- **Creative solutions:** Staff members who are actively engaged in decision-making may arrive at more creative solutions to problems.

- **Decreased turnover:** Staff members who feel valued are less likely to leave a position. Retaining staff is an important cost effective factor as training new staff is costly.

Disadvantages

While democratic leadership, in theory, sounds ideal, democracy in any form is messy—just look at Congress! There are fewer disadvantages to democratic leadership than to some other forms of leadership, but the disadvantages can be formidable:

- **Time consuming:** Arriving at decisions by a democratic process requires meetings and sometimes extended periods of time to reach consensus. A decision that one person could make in minutes may require hours, days, or even weeks of discussion.

- **Inefficient:** If meetings are held during working hours, this cuts into patient-contact time. If meetings are held outside of working hours, participants must be paid for their time. Delayed decision making may negatively impact outcomes.

This type of leadership may delay decision-making, but staff and teams are often more committed to the solutions because of their input. Because all staff members are allowed input in decision-making, the reasons for the final decision must be clearly outlined or those whose ideas were overlooked may feel disenfranchised because they have come to expect their ideas to be included in the final decision. Democratic leaders are especially effective when the focus is on training staff and developing leadership qualities in others.

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Participatory leader

The participatory leader develops and presents a potential decision and then makes the final decision based on input from staff members.

This is similar to democratic leadership although the process is generally in reverse because the democratic leader reaches a decision after input, and the participatory leader makes a decision before input and then may implement, abandon, or modify the decision. The team rather than the leader guides the final decision.

Advantages

There are a number of advantages to participatory leadership:

- **Employee motivation:** Staff members are motivated to participate because they can see that their input influences decisions. Decisions are often accepted better by staff members, who feel their expertise and ideas are valued.
- **Better decision-making:** Discussion usually elicits both positive and negative aspects of a decision that may be overlooked if authority is in the hands of only the leader or a small number of people.
- **Promotion of teamwork:** Since this is essentially a team approach to problem-solving and decision-making in which the leader becomes part of the decision team, this style of leadership promotes team work and strengthens existing teams.

Disadvantages

As with all types of leadership, this collaborative approach has some disadvantages:

- **Time consuming:** Decisions often cannot be made quickly because of the need to reach consensus or to effect a

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compromise. Multiple team meetings may be needed to evaluate a decision and determine whether it is acceptable. If not, further discussion is needed to determine alternate solutions.

- **Lack of satisfaction:** In order to reach a decision, compromises are often reached that may not be completely satisfactory to the leader or to staff members.

- **Decentralized control:** A participatory leader must be comfortable providing guidance and facilitating decisions rather than simply making them, and this requires considerable skill in communication on the part of the leader, who may be in a position to see the "big picture" better than other staff members.

Participatory leadership is most effective in an environment that stresses the importance of teamwork. This leadership style encourages active collaboration.

The **consultative leader** is a modification of the participatory leader except that the consultative leader invites input but does not necessarily change decisions based on that input. Thus, the leader may present a proposed change and elicit questions and responses in order to promote acceptance of the change rather than to modify the change. With this type of leadership, the leader clearly retains more control over final decisions although processes may be similar.

Laissez-faire leader

The laissez-faire or "free rein" leader exerts little direct control over the decision-making process but allows staff members/teams to make decisions independently with little interference.

This leadership style is similar to participatory in some ways in that decisions are often left to team members, but the laissez-faire leader does not participate as an active team member and often provides little guidance and leaves the team members to sort out issues on their own. Ideally the leader should be available for consultation and feedback.

Advantages

There are limited advantages to this type of leadership approach:

- **Less oversight:** Staff members are free to explore and arrive at decisions without interference from leaders. This can be a highly motivating situation for skilled and intelligent staff members.

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- **Creative solutions:** Given free rein, staff members may arise at very creative solutions to problems, assuming they have adequate resources.

Disadvantages

Unfortunately, the disadvantages to laissez-faire leadership generally outweigh the advantages:

- **Ineffective decision-making**: While allowing people the freedom to make their own decisions sounds ideal, the result of functioning without a leader is often that nothing is achieved. People talk in circles and cannot come to agreement, especially if they lack the knowledge and skills necessary to make effective decisions.

- **Negative work environment:** This form of leadership can result in bullying of some staff members by others. Different groups may arrive at different solutions with little attempt to coordinate. Staff members may feel forced to make decisions, essentially "doing the leader's job."

- **Less feedback:** Members often receive little or no feedback from the leader, so they may feel insecure or unappreciated.

Laissez-faire leadership may be effective if staff members are highly skilled and motivated; however, in many cases, laissez-faire leadership results from poor management skills. The leader cedes authority because it's easier to let others make the decisions. Most studies of leadership show that this form of leadership is the least successful.

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Conclusion

These leadership styles are not mutually exclusive as most good leaders use a mix of styles. For example, a leader may take an autocratic approach to implementing some changes, such as requiring compliance with handwashing protocols, while taking a democratic or participatory approach to other decisions, such as developing methods to decrease surgical site infections.

Different leaders may approach the same leadership style from a slightly different perspective as well, so just because leaders follow the same style, this doesn't mean their leadership styles mirror each other.

However, inexperienced leaders may exhibit such a confusion of styles—giving orders one day, asking for input another, having team meetings, and then ignoring input— that staff members are constantly on edge and don't know what to expect from the leader and don't clearly understand their own roles in decision-making and problem-solving.

In general, consistency in leadership—regardless of the style of leadership—is preferable to inconsistency.

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