How to Choose a Leadership Pattern

The second of my three small/short books on leadership is How to Choose a Leadership Pattern by Robert Tannenbaum and Warren H Smith and published by Harvard Business Press. This book is part of the Harvard Business Review Class series.

Tannenbaum and Smith set the tone of this book by briefly exploring some of the history of leadership styles. From the authoritative style of years ago to the newer democrats style which seeks staff involvement for decisions.

The authors describe leadership as a continuum starting with “boss centered” behavior and ending with “subordinate centered” behavior.

Boss Centered --------------------------------------------------------------- Subordinate Centered

The types of behavior that run along the continuum are:

1. Leader makes decision and announces it
2. Leader “sells” decision
3. Leader presents ideas and invites questions
4. Leader presents tentative decision subject to change
5. Leader presents problem, gets suggestions, and makes decision
6. Leader defends limits, asks group to make decision
7. Leader permits subordinates to function within limits, defended by their superior

As you can see from the above list, the continuum runs from the (1) leader having full responsibility to (7) the responsibility for decision-making placed in the hands of the staff. One point to remember or consider is that there is usually someone holding the leader responsible for the quality of the decision no matter who made it. Which style do you prefer?

There are a number of factors that affect a leader’s decision on how to lead:

- his/her own value system
- his/her own confidence in the subordinates
- his/her own leadership inclinations
- his/her feelings of security in an uncertain situation
The leader must also consider the subordinate’s level of readiness to take up the challenge:

- does he/she have a high need for independence
- is he/she willing to take responsibility
- is he/she interested in the problem
- is he/she supportive of the organizational goals
- is he/she experienced and knowledgeable enough to deal with the problems

Successful leaders are insightful, flexible, and are keenly aware of the factors or forces which are most relevant to their own behavior at any given time. They also understand their subordinates well enough to give responsibility to the people who are best suited to the tasks required of them.

*Book Summary by Dr. Ralph Klicker, CCF Certified Coach Practitioner & Founder/President of the Thanos Institute*