

Navigating Different Leadership Styles

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Early-career professionals often discover that technical skills alone are insufficient to thrive in collaborative environments. Success also depends on the ability to navigate varied leadership styles. Leaders differ not only in how much direction they provide but also in how they prefer to receive information. For example, some like to focus on fine details, while others focus on broad outcomes and implications.

Here's what you can do to recognize and adapt to different leadership styles:

Communication is central.

- Leadership is fundamentally about how information flows.
- Effective contributors learn to observe how leaders conduct meetings, respond to challenges, and provide feedback.
- They then adjust their communication style accordingly, whether that means offering concise updates, presenting solutions rather than problems, or documenting work for later review.
- This approach is compatible for professionals in either industry or academia — group meetings are common in both, and careful observation can shed light on the most effective communication strategies in any team.

Adaptability is essential.

- Leadership takes both positional and non-positional forms.
- Some leaders hold authority by title, like a supervisor or team lead in industry, while others lead through expertise or influence without formal roles, for example, someone leading an effort in a volunteer committee of their peers.
- In either case, aligning your work with a leader's goals and performance metrics demonstrates organizational awareness, increases efficiency, and builds trust.

Context matters.

- Industry culture, generational expectations, and cultural backgrounds all shape leadership behaviors.
- Fast-paced sectors often demand rapid decision-making, while academic or government settings may move more deliberately.
- Similarly, remote and hybrid work environments create new challenges, from diminished non-verbal cues to uncertainty about communication etiquette.
- Awareness of these factors helps professionals interpret leadership dynamics more effectively.

Effective working relationships are bidirectional.

- Maximizing the impact of any working relationship requires buy-in from both sides to communicate effectively, adapt readily, and understand the broader context.
- If you find yourself struggling with a leadership style, the simplest approach is often to have an open, honest, and respectful conversation about the challenges you are facing, and to explore together how to move forward in order to find a common working style that works for everyone.
- Ultimately, a good leader should be willing to adapt to their team, just as the team adapts to them.

Practical strategies to foster success:

- Proactively clarify expectations and adapt to preferred communication styles.
- Document progress and follow through consistently.
- Respect differing perspectives, framing contributions in terms that align with leaders' priorities.
- Demonstrate initiative and ownership, which make collaboration more effective and build professional credibility.

No leadership style is flawless. Some leaders struggle with delegation, others with setting direction or balancing input. By approaching these dynamics with awareness and adaptability, early-career professionals can contribute more effectively and, in the process, refine their own emerging leadership styles.

