STYLE · CHARACTER

Great Leaders Adapt Up, Down, and Across

Jim Petersen, PhD · September 28, 2026

Working effectively with people who lead differently than you do

One of the most common sources of frustration in organizations is not incompetence, bad intentions, or even disagreement. It is difference.

One leader wants to decide immediately; another wants time to think. One prefers a conversation; another wants information in writing. One wants the headline first and the details only when necessary; another wants to examine the assumptions before discussing the recommendation.

Those differences become especially challenging when the person who works differently is your boss.

The temptation is to conclude that the other person is too slow or too fast, too cautious or too impulsive, too detailed or not detailed enough. What looks like a problem with the person, however, may actually be a difference in leadership style. That distinction matters.

The Petersen Leadership Triangle rests on three dimensions: Character, Style, and Judgment. The broader Petersen Leadership Model builds on that foundation through Culture, Execution, and Life. Working successfully with someone whose approach differs significantly from our own lets us see all six dimensions at work.

The fundamental lesson is simple:

> *Great leaders do not treat everyone the same. They adapt without compromising the standard.*

Style: understand before you judge

Style is the most obvious dimension involved when two people approach work differently.

Some people are naturally fast and decisive. They gather enough information to move forward, make the decision, and adjust along the way. Others are more deliberate. They want time to consider alternatives, examine consequences, and become comfortable with a decision before committing.

Neither approach is automatically superior. Problems arise when we assume that our preferred pace is the correct pace. The fast decision-maker may read deliberation as indecision; the deliberate decision-maker may read speed as recklessness. Both may be wrong.

Style requires enough self-awareness to recognize our own preferences and enough awareness of others to understand theirs. The first question should not be, “Why don’t they work the way I do?” A better question is, “What does this person need from me in order to work at his or her best?”

That shift is central to leadership maturity.

Judgment: know what to adapt

Understanding someone else’s style does not mean accommodating everything. That is where **Judgment** becomes essential. A leader must distinguish between a difference in style and a difference in substance.

Suppose your supervisor takes several days to make a decision you would have made in twenty minutes. That may simply reflect processing style. Now suppose the decision involves an ethical concern, a significant risk to the organization, or an action that contradicts clearly established objectives. That is no longer merely style, and the leader must exercise judgment.

This creates an important distinction:

> *Adaptability is not the absence of conviction.*

Good leaders adapt the way they communicate without surrendering the quality of their judgment. They may change the pace, format, timing, or presentation of an idea. They should not abandon sound reasoning merely to avoid disagreement.

This is one reason Style and Judgment sit together in the Petersen Leadership Triangle. Style shapes how we lead; Judgment helps determine what we should do. Effective leadership requires both.

Character: respect the difference

Style differences can easily become personal:

“He never listens.”

“She always slows everything down.”

“He just wants to control the decision.”

“She doesn’t trust me.”

Sometimes those interpretations are accurate. Often, however, we assign motive before we understand behavior. That is a **Character** issue.

Character requires us to resist turning frustration into a verdict on another person’s intentions. A difference in working style is not necessarily a difference in respect. A supervisor who asks for more information may not distrust you. A leader who challenges your recommendation may not

dislike you. A person who needs more time may not be resisting your idea.

Strong character allows a leader to approach the relationship with curiosity before criticism. One useful question is, “Am I frustrated with the answer, or with how long it took to get the answer?” Those are very different problems.

Communication: give people what they need to decide

Different leadership styles often call for different forms of communication. A deliberate processor may benefit from written information that can be reviewed privately. A faster decision-maker may prefer a short verbal briefing with the recommendation up front.

The effective leader learns to communicate in the receiver’s language. This does not mean building an elaborate personality profile for every interaction. It means paying attention:

- What does this person consistently ask for?
- Does he want detail before the recommendation or after it?
- Does she process ideas best through discussion or through reflection?
- Does this leader want several alternatives or a single recommendation?

The practical lesson is straightforward. Do not simply communicate the way you prefer to communicate. Communicate in the way most likely to help the other person understand and decide.

One of the best questions a leader can ask is, “What information would help you make this decision?” That question turns the conversation from frustration to problem solving.

Culture: build the relationship before the pressure arrives

Relationships matter most when people work differently. If every conversation between two people happens during deadlines, disagreements, or high-pressure decisions, their style differences are magnified. Trust has to be built outside the pressure moments.

That is a **Culture** issue. Healthy cultures create opportunities for people to understand one another before conflict occurs. Leaders help build that culture by having ordinary conversations, learning how colleagues think, asking about their priorities, and developing relationships that do not depend on the decision at hand.

When trust already exists, a style difference is more likely to be read accurately. Without trust, the same behavior is read negatively:

- A delayed decision becomes “He doesn’t trust me.”
- A direct challenge becomes “She doesn’t respect me.”
- A request for more information becomes “They’re trying to kill the idea.”

Culture shapes the meaning people assign to behavior. That is why relationships matter long

before the meeting begins.

Execution: reduce friction so work can move

Leadership ultimately has to produce results. Style differences become an **Execution** problem when they repeatedly slow decisions, create unnecessary conflict, or keep people from working well together. Adaptation therefore has a practical purpose: it reduces friction.

Consider a few small adjustments:

- A fast-moving subordinate gives a careful supervisor a short written summary before asking for a decision.
- A deliberate leader learns that a highly decisive executive wants the recommendation first and the supporting analysis afterward.
- A team member stops treating questions as rejection and starts asking what additional information is needed.
- A supervisor explains that more time is needed rather than simply leaving the employee waiting.

None of these changes is dramatic. Together, they improve execution.

Great leaders understand that effectiveness is not determined simply by whether they are “right.” It is determined by whether people can work together well enough to produce the result.

Managing up is still leadership

The phrase “managing up” sometimes creates discomfort, because leadership is often imagined as something exercised downward. Leadership is not limited by the organizational chart. People lead upward, downward, and across. A subordinate can help a senior leader make a better decision. A peer can influence another peer. A team member can strengthen the performance of an entire group.

The Petersen Leadership Model, then, is not a model only for people in senior positions. It describes how anyone behaves whenever he or she has the opportunity to influence outcomes.

Managing up effectively is not manipulation. It is understanding another person’s leadership approach and using that understanding to improve communication, decisions, relationships, and results.

Applying the full Petersen Leadership Model

When someone above us works very differently from us, the complete model offers a useful sequence of questions.

Character: Who am I?

Am I responding with patience, respect, and integrity, or am I assigning negative motives simply because this person works differently?

Style: How do I lead?

What is my natural approach, and how does it differ from the other person's?

Judgment: How do I decide?

Is this a legitimate difference in style, or is there a substantive issue that should be challenged?

Culture: What do I create?

Does the way I handle this relationship build trust or create tension?

Execution: How do results happen?

What adjustments will allow us to make decisions and move forward more effectively?

Life: How do I live?

Am I developing the maturity to work successfully with people whose personalities, experiences, preferences, and approaches differ from my own?

The final question may be the most important. Leadership would be relatively easy if everyone thought, communicated, and worked exactly as we do. They don't, and they never will.

Adapt without losing yourself

Adaptability is one of the most misunderstood leadership qualities. Some people believe adapting means becoming whatever others want them to be. It does not.

Great leaders keep their values, standards, and judgment while adjusting how they interact with different people and different situations. They can work with the fast decision-maker without becoming reckless, and with the deliberate thinker without becoming passive. They can respect authority without abandoning independent judgment. They can disagree without damaging the relationship.

That is leadership maturity. The objective is not to eliminate differences; it is to keep differences from becoming dysfunction.

That brings us back to one of the fundamental ideas behind the Petersen Leadership Model:

> *Great leaders do not treat everyone the same. They adapt without compromising the standard.*

- **Style** tells us that people are different.

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Character reminds us to respect those differences.

- **Judgment** tells us when to adapt and when to stand firm.
- **Culture** determines whether those differences strengthen or weaken relationships.
- **Execution** converts understanding into results.
- **Life** reminds us that learning to lead people who are different from us is not simply a professional skill.

It is part of becoming a better leader, and perhaps a better human being.

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