CHARACTER · STYLE · JUDGMENT

The Art of Leadership Flexibility

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Great leaders adapt their style without compromising their character

The leadership challenge

> *Character determines what a leader will never compromise. Judgment determines what the situation requires. Style determines how the leader responds.*

Character provides consistency. Judgment enables adaptability. Style expresses both through behavior that others can observe.

One persistent misconception about leadership is that successful leaders possess a particular style that explains their effectiveness. We describe leaders as decisive, collaborative, visionary, supportive, demanding, or developmental, as though one characteristic is sufficient. Yet a style that works well in one situation can be ineffective in another. A leader who acts decisively in a crisis may need to invite participation when experienced professionals possess essential information. A leader skilled at maintaining relationships may need to confront poor performance directly.

My foundation as a leader was established during my service in the Navy's submarine force. Most of my subsequent opportunities to lead people, however, came through decades in business, higher education, and professional coaching. Across those settings, one lesson has endured: effective leadership requires consistency in Character and flexibility in behavior. The challenge is not to discover one ideal Style, but to exercise the Judgment to know when and how to adapt.

What this paper adds to the existing literature

Daniel Goleman (2000) described six leadership styles: coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting, and coaching. He connected their effectiveness to emotional intelligence, organizational climate, and the ability to change approaches as circumstances demand. Hersey and Blanchard (1969) earlier advanced the principle that leadership behavior should respond to the needs of followers and situations. Flexibility itself, therefore, is not a new idea.

The contribution developed here is a practical explanation of how a leader can adapt without becoming inconsistent. The Petersen Leadership Model identifies seven related dimensions: Character, Style, Judgment, Culture, Execution, Life, and Legacy (Petersen, 2026). Its order is developmental rather than a rigid sequence of actions. Style includes the leader's available

behavioral repertoire; Judgment chooses how to use that repertoire in a particular moment, within the ethical boundaries established by Character.

Emotional intelligence helps leaders recognize and manage their own emotions, understand others, and sustain relationships (Goleman, 1995). Judgment uses those insights alongside mission, risk, urgency, capability, resources, and consequences. Emotional intelligence informs a decision; Judgment weighs the full situation to select an appropriate response. They are complementary, not competing capacities.

Temperament also matters. Some leaders naturally favor decisive direction; others prefer consensus or personal support. Those preferences belong primarily to Style, because they describe what comes easily.

Character concerns the principles and commitments the leader will uphold. A preference should not become an excuse: “That is just how I lead” is not a defense when the situation needs something different.

Six leadership approaches: strengths and risks

The following descriptions adapt Goleman’s framework for positive leadership development. In particular, Directive is used here to describe firm, clear, respectful direction, not as a synonym for Goleman’s more coercive demand for immediate compliance. Visionary corresponds broadly to his authoritative style. The labels are not personality types or fixed identities.

Directive: clarity when clarity matters

Directive leadership establishes expectations, roles, priorities, and immediate action. It is especially appropriate when safety is at risk, time is short, or people need clear guidance. Used indiscriminately, however, it can create a Culture of compliance instead of initiative and leave capable people dependent on the leader. Judgment test: Does the situation require direction, or do I simply prefer control?

Democratic: strength through participation

Democratic leadership invites ideas, informed disagreement, and participation in consequential decisions. It improves the use of expertise and often increases ownership. Its limitation is urgency: prolonged consultation can delay necessary action, and participation should inform rather than replace decision-making. Judgment test: Will additional voices improve this decision, and do we have time to hear them?

Visionary: direction connected to purpose

Visionary leadership connects today’s work to a meaningful destination. It is useful in uncertainty, transition, and transformation. Yet inspiration without credible priorities or disciplined Execution can remain wishful thinking. A visionary leader who dictates every detail may also slip into unhelpful directive behavior.

Judgment test: Have I defined a clear destination while leaving room for others to help reach it?

Affiliative: trust and belonging

Affiliative leadership repairs relationships, builds belonging, and restores confidence after conflict or disappointment. It becomes less effective when the desire for harmony prevents necessary feedback or accountability. Caring for people sometimes requires challenging them. Judgment test: Am I preserving trust, or avoiding an uncomfortable conversation?

Pacesetting: modeling high standards

Pacesetting leadership sets demanding expectations and demonstrates disciplined performance. With capable, motivated, and adequately resourced people, it can accelerate results. Without regard for differing capability or workload, it can produce exhaustion, silence, and dependence. Those costs reach into Life, including the leader's own sustainability. Judgment test: Is this pace reasonable and sustainable for these people and resources?

Coaching: developing future capability

Coaching leadership strengthens others' ability to think, decide, and act. It relies on listening, questions, feedback, and appropriate space to learn. It contributes directly to Legacy when people become more capable after the leader moves on. Yet in an immediate crisis, development may need to wait until urgent responsibilities are met. Judgment test: Is there time for this person to discover an answer, or must I provide direction now?

The leadership paradox: strength without discernment

The behavior that contributes to success in one setting can become a liability in another. Decisiveness may become overcontrol; collaboration may become indecision; vision may lose touch with practical priorities; affiliation may become avoidance; pacesetting may become unsustainable pressure; coaching may postpone urgent intervention. The problem is not that these styles lack value. It is that the leader has not recognized when circumstances call for a different response.

> *A leadership strength becomes a liability when the leader cannot recognize the circumstances in which it should be moderated.*

The goal is not to suppress natural strengths. It is to develop the Judgment to apply them deliberately and within the limits of Character.

The Five Judgment Questions

Before choosing a leadership approach, I find it useful to ask five questions. These are a practical decision check within the Judgment dimension, not a separate leadership model.

1.

What is at stake? Is this a safety matter, performance gap, developmental opportunity, relationship issue, or strategic decision?

2. How much time do we have? Does urgency require immediate direction, or can participation improve the outcome?
3. What are these people capable of, and how committed are they to this task? What balance of direction, support, autonomy, or coaching is appropriate?
4. What condition is the team in? Do trust, morale, and communication enable collaboration, or must relationships be repaired first?
5. What must this moment accomplish? Immediate performance, understanding, long-term capability, cultural improvement, or organizational change?

The third question builds on the capability-and-commitment logic associated with Situational Leadership II (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 2013). The others extend attention to risk, time, group conditions, and purpose. Taken together, the questions interrupt habit. They remind leaders to choose an approach because it serves the circumstances, not simply because it is comfortable.

From personal effort to shared ownership

Early in my career at a financial services company, I became manager of a district that ranked last among the districts in our region. I believed improvement would require commitment, and I wanted my advisors to know that I was willing to do the work myself. I introduced weekly training sessions that I personally prepared and taught. Each session required hours of preparation because I wanted the content to be worthwhile and my effort to set an example.

The response surprised me. Advisors repeatedly arrived late. I eventually asked one of them why this was happening. He told me directly that the sessions were boring and were not motivating the advisors. Rather than defend the hours I was putting into them, I asked what he thought we should do. His suggestion was simple: let the advisors lead the weekly training themselves.

I accepted the suggestion and turned responsibility for the sessions over to the advisors. On-time attendance improved, feedback on the training became excellent, and the change freed substantial preparation time for me to devote to other responsibilities. I cannot attribute a change in the district's overall ranking to that one decision. The observable results were improved punctuality, stronger training feedback, and greater ownership of the process.

I had begun with a pacesetting instinct: show commitment by preparing intensely and personally doing the work. The intention was sound, but my behavior had not generated the involvement I hoped for. Listening to an advisor brought more democratic participation into the decision; delegating the training created room for others to lead. My Character and standards had not changed. What changed was my willingness to treat an uncomfortable answer as information rather than criticism; that was the Judgment the moment required, and it meant

overriding my own natural Style.

Had I asked the Five Judgment Questions at the start, the answers were already there. The third question would have revealed experienced advisors who needed ownership, not another presentation from their manager. The fourth would have revealed a team whose engagement mattered more than my example. The fifth would have reminded me that the moment called for commitment, not simply better content.

> *A leader's willingness to work hard does not automatically inspire others. Sometimes the better decision is to give people ownership of the work.*

This was a small management decision with a large lesson. It reminded me that leadership is not measured solely by the effort the leader expends. It is also reflected in the commitment, initiative, and capability the leader helps other people develop.

The seven dimensions operate together

The first three dimensions describe the choices made in a leadership moment; the remaining four reveal what those choices produce across time.

Culture is formed by patterns people repeatedly experience, not by the Style a leader claims to possess. Execution must be assessed by more than a short-term result; high output gained through exhaustion or constant dependence can undermine future performance. Life asks whether expectations remain sustainable for the people doing the work and for the leader. Legacy asks what capabilities, trust, and institutional strength endure when the leader is no longer in the room.

The district-training decision shows these connections on a small scale. It changed how the training was conducted and improved attendance and feedback; that is Execution. Advisors taking responsibility for their own development was an early sign of the ownership on which Culture, and eventually Legacy, depend.

Complementary tools, distinct purposes

The Petersen Leadership Model need not displace established development tools. Everything DiSC helps leaders understand behavioral preferences; SLII focuses attention on the direction and support a person needs for a particular task; Goleman's styles describe approaches and their effects on organizational climate. The Petersen Leadership Model connects these insights to principled choices and to their consequences for Culture, Execution, Life, and Legacy.

A leader might learn through DiSC that taking charge feels natural, see through SLII that a competent person needs greater autonomy, and apply the Five Judgment Questions before changing approach. The tools answer different questions; they are most useful when their differences are respected.

Developing leadership flexibility

Leadership flexibility can be improved through reflection and deliberate practice. After an important interaction, ask what the circumstances required, what you chose to do, how people responded, and whether another approach might have served them better. Invite candid feedback from those who experienced the behavior, especially when your own effort and intentions felt unquestionably right.

Practice an approach that does not come naturally. A directive leader can invite experienced people to propose alternatives. An affiliative leader can address a performance gap while maintaining respect. A pacesetting leader can agree on outcomes without prescribing every step. A coaching leader can recognize when it is time to give a direct answer. Explain the reason for a shift when people might otherwise mistake adaptation for inconsistency. The situation may require a different approach; the leader's values and standards have not changed. Consistency lies in the standard and the purpose, not in identical behavior.

Conclusion: flexibility as a leadership discipline

There is no universally effective leadership style. Goleman helped make clear that strong leaders draw on several approaches. The Petersen Leadership Model contributes a broader account of what remains constant while those approaches change: Character establishes boundaries; Judgment evaluates the situation; Style makes the response visible. Culture, Execution, Life, and Legacy reveal the effects of those choices over time.

The goal is not to become a different person in different circumstances. It is to become a more capable leader across them, helping people achieve meaningful outcomes while growing their judgment and independence. Great leaders adapt their Style without compromising their Character, their values, or their standards.

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