

# THE FLEXIBLE MANAGER

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Part of Professor Reddin's 3-D Theory of Managerial Effectiveness stresses managerial flexibility as a key managerial quality, but flexibility has its less effective side which is called style drift. In everyday language this may mean changing ones mind to keep the peace. In this article Professor Reddin differentiates and describes flexibility and drift and also unites them with the neutral concept of style flex.

The manager with high style flex has a wider range of behaviour than most managers. This high flex can be more or less effective depending upon the situation in which it is used. If his high flex is appropriate and therefore leads to increased managerial effectiveness, the term "style flexibility" is used; if the high flex is inappropriate and therefore less effective, the term "style drift" is used instead. Both of these terms can describe identical behaviour. It is the situation in which the behaviour is used, not the behaviour alone, which determines effectiveness. The four personality characteristics which underlie most high-flex behaviour are :

High ambiguity tolerance	(comfortable in unstructured situations)
Power insensitivity	(not control oriented)
Open-belief system	(few fixed ideas)
Other-directed	(interested in others)

## HIGH AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE (COMFORTABLE IN UNSTRUCTURED SITUATIONS)

The high-flex type has a high tolerance for ambiguity. He is comfortable in an unstructured situation where one or more of the past, present, or future are ill-defined. He is not too threatened by rapid, unexpected changes. He is not one for paperwork as he sees this as unnecessarily structuring a situation best kept loose. He favours short reports, loose ground rules, and open-ended planning and scheduling. It is important to him to maintain a friendly, easy atmosphere where

the "old boy" approach is used more than "standard operating procedures" Approaches that could be characterized as "right or wrong", "black or white", "go-no-go", and "win-lose" are foreign to the high-flex manager.

#### **POWER INSENSITIVITY (NOT CONTROL ORIENTED)**

Being insensitive to power often leads the high-flex manager to listen more to subordinates than to his superior. He generally favours flattening the status and power differences between levels and usually avoids displays of status symbols. He is in favour of most forms of participation. The high-flex manager is sensitive to the way things are. He sees good management as the art of the possible. He would prefer to have things develop and flow naturally rather than go one step at a time or be dramatically restructured.

#### **OPEN-BELIEF SYSTEM (FEW FIXED IDEAS)**

The high flex manager is open-minded. He is ready to see new points of view and to expose himself to influence. He could easily hold a particular view on one day and change his mind, in the light of new evidence, a day later. He is more concerned with full knowledge than in having his prior beliefs confirmed. He is less likely than others to take extreme positions for or against anything. He has a capacity to accommodate a wide range of viewpoints and does not feel he must make a successful synthesis of them.

Even when unable to accept another point of view, he will always listen to it, usually contemplate it seriously, and often live comfortably with it although it may be contradictory to his existing belief system. He is usually open to new inputs from any source. He is on a continuing search for maximum contact with his environment and is thus open to influence. This openness leads him to drop prior methods with ease. Not tending to hold extreme, fixed views, he argues less vehemently than others. He is tolerant of others holding opposite views. If he has to change his mind, he can do so easily. He is, therefore, as much interested in hearing other views as in pushing his own.

To have high flex, a manager must have few, if any, intrusive personal needs. He must not have a need to do things in one way, to have a particular relationship with others, to live according to a particular ideology, or to accomplish a particular thing.

#### **OTHER-DIRECTED (INTERESTED IN OTHERS)**

His openness to influence and his unconcern with power the high-flex type a team member. He wants to be involved in analysis, planning, and decision making with others. He seeks collaboration with his co-workers and is willing to accommodate a group view rather than maintain his own. He thus is usually more prepared to work for a consensus decision than for a vote. He looks for that creative solution or synthesis that everyone will accept. He, in fact, finds it a challenge to work for such a solution which combines all views, even though the final decision may have some ambiguous elements.

The high-flex manager tends to get involved with people as individuals, not just as subordinates or co-workers. He does not see others as bounded by their role. He is sensitive to individual differences and wants to respond to them. He sometimes finds himself involved with another manager's home problems. He does this not because he is inquisitive or has high RO but because he is interested in a variety of inputs and thus looks at the total person rather than at a human frame bounded by a job description.

Both high-and low-flex types can be seen as fair to others but for different reasons. The high-flex type is fair owing to his willingness to consider all points of view. The low-flex type is fair because he wants to treat everyone equally and because he wants to lower the ambiguity of the situation. The high-flex type is generally more concerned with fairness to the individual, the low-flex type with fairness to a particular social system as a whole. The high-flex type tends to be sensitive to the RO elements in a situation, the low-flex type to the TO elements.

### HIGH-FLEX DEMANDS

Some managerial positions make high demands on flex so that a variety of basic styles must be used to produce effectiveness.

The creative director of an advertising agency has to deal with a creative staff, the agency management, and an account executive. With a creative staff, he must provide a supportive climate; with the account executive, he must act like a salesman and push for his ideas; with the management, he is expected to take a rational, hard-headed approach with costs, profits, planning, and running a department. Small wonder that low-flex, creative directors are thought to be excitable and tend to develop ulcers rapidly.

Job characteristics which usually demand high flex include :

- High-level management
- Loose procedures
- Unstructured tasks
- Nonroutine decision making
- Rapid environmental change
- Manager without complete power
- Many interdependent co-workers

Very few jobs possess all the above-mentioned characteristics, but the following positions having one or more of them tend to make higher than average demands on flex :

- Senior manager
- Personnel manager
- Service-function coordinator
- Research administrator

Manager of staff department  
 General foreman  
 University principal

The more senior the manager, the more important high flex is likely to be. No administrative problem repeats itself in every detail. The higher the level, the more complex and diverse successive problems are likely to be. In many policy issues, the personality of the shaper has an enormous influence. It is then that flex can be of the utmost importance. The senior executive is continually encountering exceptional circumstances which fall outside established patterns of solutions. It is how he handles these situations that most determines his overall effectiveness.

The high-flex manager in a low-flex organization may not be allowed to manage effectively, and if he does, he could get fired.

Joe Stokes is a general manager of a 500-man detached plant. He is what everyone would call a "great guy" - except the president who is his immediate superior. His superior, a bureaucrat, wants Joe to pay more attention to detail, stay within his budget, make sure salesmen send in reports weekly, and stay closer to his phone. At one point, he was seriously thinking of firing Joe even though, by any standard of managerial effectiveness, Joe was an outstanding performer. He had doubled profit in three years and far outstripped head-office projections of sales and profits. He ultimately left and immediately doubled his salary.

#### STYLE FLEXIBILITY

"Style flexibility" is the term used to describe the behaviour and effectiveness of a high-flex manager in a high-flex situation.

The flexible manager is perceived as having few personal needs or biases which might lead him to interpret wrongly the real world. He is reality-oriented, and this reality guides his action. He is not led to analyze a situation in terms of how he thinks things should be. Rather he reads a situation for what it is and for what can reasonably be accomplished. He is seldom identified with lost causes but more often with objectives being achieved. The flexible manager is essentially an optimist about himself and about the situation. Often he sees things he does not care for but knows that with time and appropriate behaviour, the situation can be changed.

Because the flexible manager recognizes that he lives in a complex world, he is aware that a wide range of responses are necessary in order to be effective in it. The flexible manager is very sensitive to other people. He is not only sensitive to their differences but accepts the differences as normal, appropriate, and even necessary. He is trusted, and all believe that his proposals for change are based on improving overall effectiveness and are not intended simply to satisfy his own needs in some way.

The flexible manager spends more time in making decisions and less time in implementing them. He is concerned with method of introduction, timing, rate of introduction, and probable responses and resistances. In spending more time on deciding how to implement decisions, the implementation period is shortened considerably. Snap decisions are seldom made. The flexible manager uses team management when appropriate. This gives him an ideal opportunity to use his flexibility.

Rapid change does not make him unduly anxious. It brings temporary ambiguity which the flexible manager can tolerate easily. He is likely to be willing to experiment with changes that have only a moderate chance of success. He knows the world is complex and recognizes that any change may bring unanticipated consequences so he is prepared to test a large number of ideas.

He is willing to accept a variety of styles of management, varying degrees of participation, and an assortment of control techniques. Appropriateness is his only test.

### **MILITARY LEADERSHIP AND FLEXIBILITY**

The outsider's view of the military, especially in most British Commonwealth countries, is that the only possible style is dedicated. It is refreshing to see this advice given by a Canadian brigadier (173) to the lieutenant colonels of the Canada Defence Force.

Acceptance of the leader-follower-situation concept of leadership, and realization that the circumstances of the followers and the situation are variables, brings us to the conclusion that to achieve success the style of the leader must also be a variable. Clearly there can be no best style except in terms of the aim and the inter-action of leader, followers, and the situation.

So what style to adopt? We can consider some guidelines :

1. A leader must work through his own personality. Each, through personal characteristics, training, and experience, has an individual style, a dominant style, of leadership. Better results will accrue from following natural instincts of style than by affecting a style used successfully by a chosen hero.
2. As a leader senses shortcomings in one aspect of his leadership activities he may exaggerate other aspects in order to compensate.
3. The need for leadership to be dynamic should be interpreted as a need to active rather than static. Leadership does not have to be explosive ; one can be forceful in one's own way.
4. Any individual is capable of only limited flexibility in style—he has only a finite set of responses to deal with infinite demands and pressures. However, through techniques of leadership, the manner of performance in relation to practical details (as distinct from the general style or effect), or, if you like, through varying his behaviour he can exert varied influence within his general style.

5. By application of judgment and logic to his knowledge of himself, his subordinates, and his situation, he devises, or selects, and adopts these leadership courses of action which are most likely to achieve his goals.
6. Whereas there can be no style or technique which is universally applicable to all men in all situations, the successful leader will develop a repertoire of behaviour within his capability to apply to different situations as he recognizes the need. Changes of style to fit the challenge of the moment may take place habitually or consciously. Adjustment sub-consciously may indicate a natural or instinctive leader; adjustment consciously to meet the circumstances indicates a planned flexibility. However arrived at, adjustment is an essential ingredient of success.

In the course of a few hours, the flexible manager may have used a variety of basic styles. He adapts his style to what is then demanded. He uses participation at times, and at other times he does not.

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*Style flexibility checklist*

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Reality-oriented	Colleague orientation
Optimistic	Fair
Objective	Situationist (looks outward)
Other-directed	Adaptive
Sensitive	Open-minded
Collaborator	Socially adjusted
Tolerant	Experimental
Interdependent	Participator at times
Involved	Uses all basic styles
Team player	Practical

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### STYLE DRIFT

Style drift describes the behaviour and lack of effectiveness of a high-flex manager in a low-flex situation.

The drift manager is perceived as having no mind of his own. He is accused of immaturity, of having a fuzzy self-concept, and of not having decided what kind of manager he is. He is seen as the servant rather than the master of the situation he is in. Each small change may cause an overreaction. The drift manager is tuned in to the situation but overreacts to it. Having no identity himself, the situation and its changes influence him unduly.

The drift manager wants people to respond positively to him. He becomes so sensitive to what other people think that he reacts poorly to being rejected. All managers undergo some form of rejection at times. Usually it is of their ideas but sometimes it goes deeper. Most managers handle rejection moderately well, and after a while, their own self-esteem and identity carries them through. This is not so for the drift manager. Being sensitive to rejection gives him a reluctance to disagree with or to reject others' ideas, even if they are poor ones.

The problem compounds itself. His unwillingness to say, "No," leads him to accept projects which cannot be completed on time. The incomplete projects grow in number so that they hinder him even more.

Wishing to avoid adversity yet being unable to control his environment, leads him to commit himself to plans he cannot follow, to goals he cannot achieve, and to assume responsibilities he cannot fulfill. He then misses deadlines and acts as if promises are only talking points rather than guarantees.

The drift manager is open to exploitation by others. He is dependent and even appears helpless, at times, to do his job. He is yielding, conforming, and compliant. He is not this way because he likes people but because he wants others to like him.

Nothing ever gets pinned down for the drift manager. His subordinates know that a decision once made will be made several times again but differently—since it is influenced by the most recent minor events.

The drift manager fails to organize his situation or his response to it. He allows change to overwhelm him. Although open to it, he cannot handle it.

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*Style drift checklist*

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Uncommitted	Many promises
Procrastinator	Dependent
Disorganized	No self
"Yes" not "no"	Compliant
Indecisive	Conforming
Yielding	Unpredictable
Inconsistent	Erratic
Misses deadlines	Helpless
Avoids adversity	Too sensitive
Gives lip service	Avoids rejection

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