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by Stephen J. Sauer

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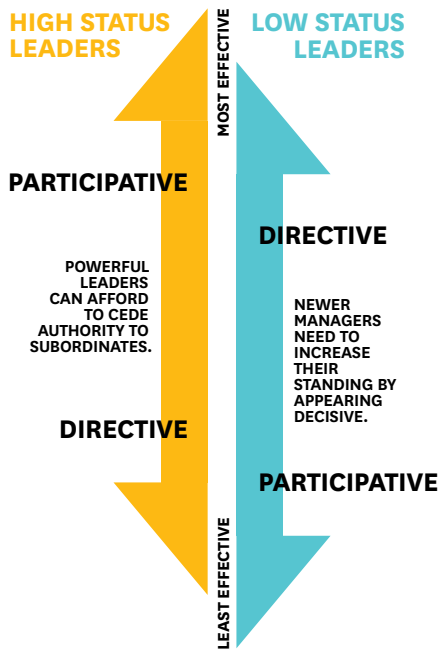
Why Bossy Is Better for Rookie Managers

Nobody likes to be bossed around. Numerous studies, including my own, have shown that a collaborative management style is usually best.

But there’s an important exception. New leaders who are perceived as having low status—because of their age, education, experience, or other factors—face different rules. They get better ratings and results from their teams when they take charge, set the course, and tell subordinates what to do. For those bosses, it pays to be bossy.

WHICH LEADERSHIP STYLE IS BEST?

It depends on your status.



This conclusion is based on two experiments. In the first, 68 current and former business school students watched video clips of people portraying team leaders and rated their effectiveness on a scale from one to seven. An inexperienced leader who was just 32 years old and had graduated from a second-tier school got an average rating of 4.25 when he told team members what to do, compared with only 3.55 when he solicited their opinions.

In the second experiment, 216 people, most of them undergraduates, were placed on four-person teams working on a complex computer-based task and were instructed to solve problems with the fewest possible clicks of the mouse. Team leaders played either high- or low-status roles and used either directive or participative styles. Low-status leaders who took a directive approach received higher ratings from their teams in terms of both confidence and effectiveness (their scores on these measures averaged 4.76 and 4.52, respectively) than low-status leaders who took a participative approach (their scores averaged 4.01 and 4.19). And teams with low-status directive leaders performed better (108 clicks to solve a problem) than those with low-status participative leaders (126 clicks).


If these results seem counterintuitive, imagine this: You’re on an experienced team that gets an unfamiliar leader. You look for clues about his status—How old is he? How does he dress? Where did he train?—and form an assessment accord-

ingly. If he seems to be a lightweight, you’ll probably resist his attempts to influence you. And if he asks for your input, chances are even greater that you’ll view him as lacking in competence. But if he’s directive and assertive, you’ll take that as confidence, and you’ll come to see him as more able than you first thought. His perceived capabilities will rise.

It should come as no surprise that the leaders who were viewed as the most confident and effective—and whose teams performed the best—were the high-status participative leaders. That finding is in line with everything we’ve heard for decades about collaborative management. As long as a leader is viewed as experienced and knowledgeable, team members prefer and perform better under a participative style. High-status leaders who give orders are viewed as less confident and less effective, and the performance of their teams suffers.

New managers should gauge team members’ perceptions. If you sense that you’re viewed as experienced and competent, it’s best to give subordinates a say. But if you sense that you’re seen as a low-status boss, you’re better off setting the agenda, establishing a clear direction, and putting people to work on what *you* think needs to be done. Only after your status has risen should you introduce a more collaborative style. ♣

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 **Stephen J. Sauer** is an assistant professor of organizational studies at Clarkson University.