



Magazine Article / Leadership Styles

How to Develop Your Leadership Style

Concrete advice for a squishy challenge *by Suzanne J. Peterson, Robin Abramson, and R.K. Stutman*

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Julia Marie Werner

Few things are more frustrating for talented professionals than hitting a ceiling in their careers because they lack the appropriate leadership style. A boss senses that something is missing in a person's tool kit but can't put a finger on exactly what it is or how the person can improve. The boss says something like "You're lacking important intangibles" or "You need more gravitas" but fails to provide specific advice or tools for improving.

It is equally frustrating to watch people with mediocre technical skills move up the ladder quickly because they have an exceptional leadership style. Bosses defend such promotions by emphasizing the employees' soft skills, calling them "poised," "confident," and "dynamic."

The truth is that these things matter: A great leadership style can make people appear more competent than they truly are, and a poor style can drag down a superior skill set. So how can aspiring executives improve their leadership style?

First, it's important to understand that style is distinct from personality. The latter is immutable; it's who you are on the inside. Style is best described by what you do, how often, and when. More than 30 years ago, the sociolinguist Howard Giles and colleagues first identified a set of behaviors, or social markers, that we all use to express ourselves and by which we evaluate others. These markers are a language we learn in childhood, as we begin to see that people behave differently depending on whether they hold status or not. Older siblings may bark at you for the remote control, for example, but behave obsequiously to parents when they want to borrow the car. Social markers can be expressed through language, nonverbal communication (such as body language), or context setting (sitting at the head of the table, for instance). Your choice of markers determines how others view you.

Through our own academic research and a combined 30 years of proprietary research, including engagements with more than 12,000 leaders in our executive coaching practice, we have identified the markers most commonly used in the workplace to express status. Together, they make up leadership style.

A Guide to Leadership Markers

The signals used to communicate status fall into two categories.

	Powerful	Attractive
Status Markers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More formal • Nondeferential address • Detached responses • Expanded personal space • Interruptions and talk-overs • Abrupt topic shifts • Directive gestures (<i>finger-pointing, head-shaking</i>) • Less polite • Little to no note-taking • Inattentiveness (<i>ignoring others, wandering eyes</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More informal • Deferential address • Empathetic responses • Respectful of others' personal space • Respectful conversational turns • Gradual topic shifts • Acceptance gestures (<i>head-nodding, shoulder-dropping</i>) • More polite • Extensive note-taking • Attentiveness (<i>engaging with all senses, especially eyes</i>)
Nonverbal Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backward leans • Physical distance • Eye contact when speaking • Averted gaze when listening • Tendency to stare • Serious expressions • Controlled movements • Talking while moving away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forward leans • Physical closeness • Eye contact when listening • Averted gaze when speaking • Tendency to break eye contact • Happy expressions • Natural movements • Body square while talking

	Powerful	Attractive
Verbal Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer speech duration • Faster speech rate • Louder volume • More direct • Declarative statements • Fewer nonfluencies (<i>um, well, you know</i>) • Intense words • Technical jargon • Careful pronunciation • Fewer hedges and qualifiers (<i>I guess</i>) • Exclusive language (<i>I, me, my</i>) • More humor/sarcasm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorter speech duration • Slower speech rate • Softer volume • More indirect • Questions • More nonfluencies and pauses • Everyday words • Personal idioms • Relaxed pronunciation • More hedges and qualifiers • Inclusive language (<i>we, ours</i>) • Less humor/sarcasm



The signals we send to others about our status—or lack thereof—fall into two categories: power and attractiveness. Neither set of markers is inherently good or bad. Powerful markers are associated with expressions of confidence, competence, charisma, and influence but also arrogance, abrasiveness, and intimidation. Examples include interrupting others and grabbing a pen off someone’s desk without permission. Attractiveness markers are related to expressions of agreeableness, approachability, likability but also diffidence, lack of confidence, and submissiveness. Examples include holding the door for someone and favoring questions over statements. People with powerful styles often view more-attractive colleagues as weak. People with attractive styles tend to view powerful colleagues as rude.

The more consistently we express ourselves using the same markers, the more distinctive our style becomes. When a colleague gives the impression of being arrogant, for example, it’s most likely because he uses a small set of powerful behaviors consistently. Or when a

manager offers an appraisal such as “Kristin simply does not have a seat at the table with her peers,” that usually means she uses too many attractiveness markers—perhaps she never states her views publicly, or she speaks so softly that people ask her to repeat what she said. Change the frequency or mix of these markers, and others’ impressions also change.

Leadership Presence

We all have a particular set of markers that we default to in neutral situations or when the social context is unclear. This can be called our natural style. We behave more powerfully relative to our natural style when we feel we have the status (for example, we are the more senior, educated, experienced, technical, or connected person in a workplace interaction). We behave more attractively relative to our natural style when we are the more junior or less-experienced person.

Most people’s natural style falls into one of five categories along a spectrum: powerful, lean powerful, blended, lean attractive, and attractive. Few people favor the extremes, instead leaning to one side or the other. A truly blended style is rare and involves an equal use of both power and attractiveness markers. A blended style can be best summed up as having “presence.” Leaders who are praised for their polish and gravitas have a deft ability to adopt the right markers to suit the situation.



While on a photo shoot in Spain, Julia Marie Werner found a homeless dog looking for food and brought him back home with her to Hamburg. Noticing how he resembled a brave lion, she crafted a mane and documented him conquering his new adopted city.

Our research on blended leadership styles is similar in concept to that of social psychologist Amy Cuddy on warmth and competence. But whereas Cuddy and colleagues generally advise leaders to first project warmth to gain trust and then display their competence to gain credibility, we believe that power and attractiveness should be dynamic. Some situations will call for a leader to exhibit powerful markers from the outset; some will call for a more attractive approach throughout. Leaders often need to tweak their style multiple times in a day—sometimes in the course of a single situation. In one meeting, a leader may need to gain the respect of her peers by projecting subject matter expertise and strong advocacy. But in the next meeting, she may want to be seen as a collaborative partner and will choose to lean attractive by listening attentively and asking more questions.

Cuddy and others instruct leaders to focus on how they *feel* (feeling strong will help you project strength, and feeling warm will help you project warmth). Our work with executives focuses on their *actions* and *behaviors*. Power and attractiveness are determined by what you display toward others, regardless of how you feel on the inside. For instance, you may be very nervous going into a large presentation, but by consciously favoring power markers, you can project confidence, and your audience will be none the wiser.

In our work, we have observed thousands of leaders who have successfully experimented with markers, created a blended style, and reaped professional rewards as a result. Some developed a blended style early in their work lives; those leaders are the “naturals.” But others struggled to move up the ladder and learned to modify their behavior—often through painful trial and error. The learning curve can be steep, but we believe that any leader can achieve a blended style by following several steps.

Know thyself. To balance powerful and attractive markers, you must first diagnose where you fall on the leadership style spectrum. Often, executives can read between the lines when they receive feedback from managers, peers, romantic partners, or even their own children. Comments such as “You’re too nice” and “You need to speak up” might suggest a tendency toward attractive markers. Comments such as “You’re intimidating” or “You don’t listen to me” might suggest an overly powerful style. There’s no shortage of people around you who can provide helpful insight; just ask them.

If you’re unsure where you fall on the spectrum, keep a list of markers in front of you during various interactions and check off the ones you use. Which column ends up with more check marks? As more meetings move

online because of the pandemic, it is an ideal time to try recording video meetings and assessing your behavior after the fact.

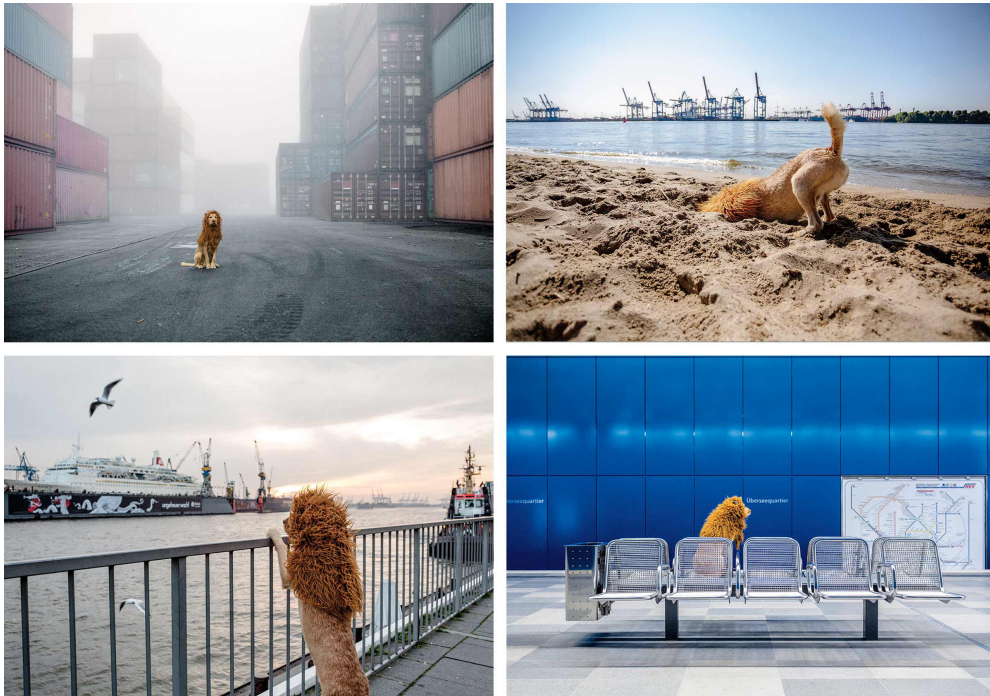
Experiment with various markers. Once you have a sense of where you fall on the spectrum, begin to experiment with markers to try to move toward a more-blended style. As a start, pick one verbal and one nonverbal marker and find a way to use both during an interaction. This may feel foreign at first; rehearsing with a friend, mentor, or coach can help make the new behaviors more familiar.

As you become more adept, add to your repertoire. We suggest a “pick and mix” approach—taking a selection of powerful and attractive markers and experimenting with them. Consider in advance how you want to be seen in a given situation and then choose markers that reinforce that style. If you want to be seen as a trusted adviser, lean attractive. If you want to be seen as a respected adversary, use mostly powerful markers. But don’t go overboard: One or two markers in each category should be sufficient to establish or alter others’ impression of you.

As you experiment, some markers will be easy to adopt, but others may feel contrived—and that’s OK. Emulating the style of others or flexing your own in new ways to create a broader range for yourself does not make you inauthentic; it means you’re growing as a leader. Successful leaders are true to who they are while continually making small adjustments in how they carry themselves, how they communicate, and how they interact depending on the circumstances.

Consider football coach Vince Lombardi, who led the Green Bay Packers to five world championships and remains an enduring symbol of leadership. After struggling early in his career as he transitioned from college football to the NFL, he quickly learned that he had to adjust his

leadership style. What worked with his college players was not effective with the pros. In his first job as the offensive coach for the New York Giants, his style, which fell on the extreme end of powerful, antagonized and alienated his more-seasoned players.



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According to *When Pride Still Mattered*, by David Maraniss, Lombardi was seen as loud and arrogant. The players referred to him as “Little General” and “Little Mussolini.” But then something unexpected happened: Lombardi adjusted. “He began roaming the hall of the Willamette dorm at night, visiting with the...players,” Maraniss writes. “He acknowledged that he had much to learn and sought their advice, help, and loyalty....He tried to become one of the guys, not the authoritarian boss but the smarter older brother; they called him Vince or Vinnie, not Coach or Mr. Lombardi. He drank beers with them, laughed loudly at their jokes, told them how much he wanted them to succeed.”

An executive we worked with—we'll call him Martin—had a similar problem. He grew tired of the constant feedback that he was intimidating, domineering, and coercive. Our observations revealed that Martin, like many other people we've studied, exhibited a much more powerful style in professional settings than he did in other social contexts.

To help him soften his style, we asked him to adopt four specific markers of attractiveness. First, we pointed out how often he interrupted and talked over others, especially in group situations, and asked him to reduce those interjections. That took some time, but eventually he learned to wait for others to finish before commenting. Second, we asked him to accompany his opinions with questions more often. That was also a difficult adjustment because he maintained a strong preference for declarative statements. Third, we asked him to incorporate “partnership language” by using fewer “I” references and more “we” and “our” references. That was easier for Martin; he deeply valued inclusive language and had not noticed his overuse of self-referential (“I,” “me”) and possessive (“my team”) expressions. Last, we asked him to demonstrate empathetic listening by slowing down and restating what he had heard from others. The unintended consequence was that he also made more eye contact when he listened—another attractive marker.

Martin was highly committed to changing his style, and it worked. After six months, colleagues noticed a favorable difference. By moving from a powerful style to one that leaned powerful instead, Martin began to earn more-favorable evaluations.

The Culture Effect

The interpretation of style markers can vary significantly by culture, context, and industry. A behavior that is considered a power marker in one situation may be considered attractive in another. For example:

Eye contact. In the United States, making eye contact with managers senior to you is often seen as a marker of confidence. The same behavior in Brazil is seen as appropriately deferential (and not making eye contact is considered rude). In Japan, it is viewed as insubordinate and disrespectful. In all three contexts eye contact is a key marker of status, yet it is interpreted differently in each.

Attire. How one dresses is a universal marker of status and influence. In some African countries wearing tribal dress is a power marker for both men and women. In the United States, people's attire is judged according to the norms of the business. A tech founder entering a meeting with investment bankers (most likely all wearing suits) in a T-shirt and jeans is displaying a power marker. An applicant for a low-level service position who arrives in a suit is displaying an attractive marker by showing an eagerness to impress.

Note-taking. In the United States, note-taking in meetings with senior leaders or clients can be perceived as too deferential. In contrast, in South Korea, *not* taking notes when speaking with senior leaders may be construed as disrespectful, suggesting that you do not think what they're saying is important or worth remembering.

Seating. In Western cultures, sitting at the head of the table for a conference or a meal is considered a power move. The same holds true in Japan, but with additional intricacies. As a rule, the area of a room closest to the entrance is where the *shimoza*, or "bottom seat," is located. The area closest to the *tokonoma* (a formal alcove for calligraphy or flowers) is the *kamiza*, or "highest seat." In the absence of a formal tokonoma, a window—or simply the seat farthest from the entrance—signifies the highest position. The guest of honor sits in the kamiza, and the host and other guests seat themselves on downward, toward the shimoza.

Read the room. One question we often get from executives is how to know when to lean powerful and when to lean attractive. Gaining an ability to “read the room” is part of fine-tuning your leadership style. Although you may have an idea of how you want to be perceived when entering a situation, your plan may need to change once you’re actually there. Generally speaking, you should assess the markers you’re receiving from others before deciding on your own approach. More often than not, if you’re receiving power markers from someone, you will want to match them to garner respect. Similarly, if you’re reading attractive markers from others, you’ll want to lean attractive so as not to seem overbearing.



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Executives make a common mistake by using power markers with subordinates and attractive markers with higher-ups. The opposite approach is often more effective. Using power markers with juniors—such as ignoring them, abruptly changing topics, or talking too much in

their presence—can make you less effective. In contrast, using too many attractive markers—phrasing statements as questions, speaking more slowly, and using nonfluencies (such as “um” and “you know”)—can lead executives to conclude that you’re not their peer. Overemphasizing attractive markers when communicating upward to show respect is particularly likely to backfire in U.S.-based companies. To solve this problem, lean powerful with more-senior people, and lean attractive when talking to more-junior people.

A Blended Style Matters More for Minorities and Women

Our research and coaching are complicated by the fact that leadership style cannot be fully divorced from unconscious biases and discrimination. Leadership is a normative construct; when asked to “draw a leader,” people (regardless of their gender) tend to draw a man. Research shows that women face a competency-likability trade-off: The more they demonstrate proficiency, the more likely their peers are to find their style off-putting. Minorities and LGBTQ executives who look or act in a manner that doesn’t conform to an organization’s dominant culture may also be penalized by colleagues who characterize them (perhaps unconsciously) as “not like us.”

Decoding Feedback

To determine where your natural style falls on the leadership spectrum, be open to the feedback you hear from managers, coworkers, friends, and family members, and identify common themes.

Comment Given	Problem	Sample Advice
“You’re not senior enough”	Too attractive	Use declarative statements
“You’re intimidating”	Too powerful	Speak less, listen more
“You don’t have enough gravitas”	Too attractive	Dress more formally for the context

"Your team is afraid of you"	Too powerful	Use more questions, fewer statements
"You're boring"	Too attractive	Use more-intense words
"You're overbearing"	Too powerful	Shift topics more gradually
"You're too nice"	Too attractive	Minimize deferential address



Despite the fact that the hallmarks of leadership style are similar around the world, people of diverse groups are often judged differently even when they display identical style markers. When a woman disagrees with her colleagues, for example, she may be labeled “abrasive” or “aggressive,” while her male colleague is seen as “candid” or “direct.” We certainly don’t advise women and minorities not to get angry, disagree, or promote their accomplishments. Rather, we advise them to carefully select markers that will help them develop a blended style. The right assortment can allow you to show loyalty to the group you want to lead while still maintaining your uniqueness. Certain minority leaders will want to adopt more power markers; others will need more attractive markers. But again, don’t go overboard. Altering your style to conform in a way that hides your diverse traits, or overplaying your differences in a way that distracts from your leadership, can backfire. Women must walk a narrow tightrope: They must have the courage to interrupt, use fewer nonfluencies, and use more-intense words while blending in more relational and empathetic responses, statements as questions, and happy expressions. Male leaders who are perceived as outliers in a group also have a small margin for error. We wish this weren’t the case—but as long as unconscious bias and discrimination exist, minorities and women will need to put extra effort into developing a blended leadership style.

The late U.S. Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg used a blended style to her advantage. She was known for her ability to “disagree agreeably”—which helped her create unlikely friendships with more-conservative judges and foster loyal followership beyond the Court. No pushover, she picked her battles wisely and used attractive markers when necessary. As she wrote about her style, “reacting in anger or annoyance will not advance one’s ability to persuade.”

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In our research and consulting, we have seen that style is a significant differentiating factor in the reputation and career success of leaders. The good news is that style isn’t like personality—it can be intentionally altered. Dynamically integrating a broader range of powerful and attractive markers in everyday interactions can make a big difference in how we are perceived. The result is a true blended style that enables leaders to become powerful enough to be heard and attractive enough to be followed.

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