Leading vs. Managing: Finding the Right Approach in Agile

Understanding Management, Leadership, and the Power of Servant Leadership

In any team, people guide work and influence others. But *how* they do it matters, especially in Agile environments. Let's explore three key approaches: Management, Leadership, and Servant Leadership.
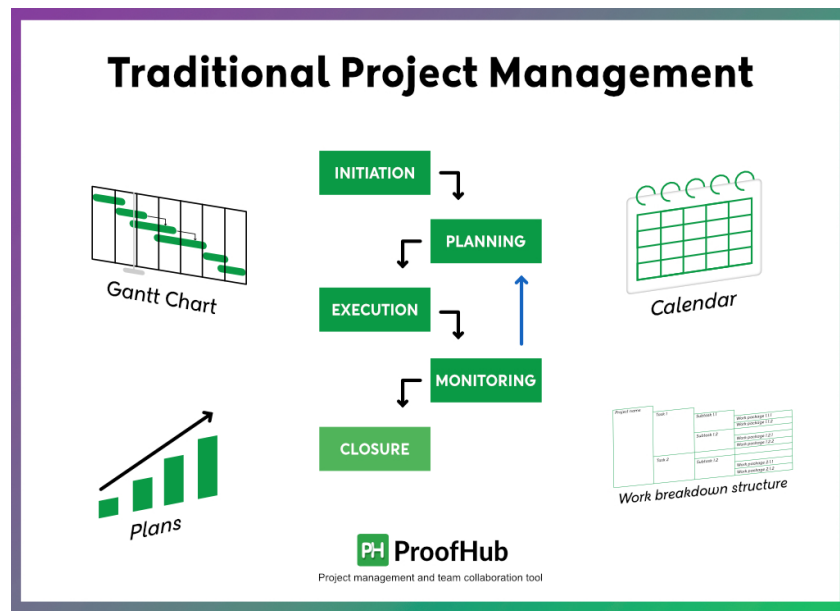

Traditional Management

Figure 1 - Traditional Management

Focusing on Order & Control

- **Core Idea:** Ensures tasks are done efficiently and processes are followed correctly. Focus on stability and predictability.
- **Primary Focus:**
  - Tasks, Processes, Resources
  - Planning & Budgeting
  - Organizing & Staffing
  - Controlling & Problem-Solving

- **Approach to People:**
  - o Directs and assigns work.
  - o Monitors performance against plans.
  - o Sees people often as resources to execute tasks.
- **Source of Authority:** Primarily Position / Formal Role.
- **Key Verbs:** Plan, Organize, Staff, Control, Assign, Monitor, Measure.
- **Goal:** Achieve predictable results, maintain stability, "Do things right."
- **Think:** The **Director** orchestrating the play according to the script.
- **Agile Context:** While some management functions are needed, a purely directive style can hinder Agile teams' self-organization and adaptability.

General Leadership:

Indeed[1] https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/10-common-leadership-styles

Figure 2 – Leadership Styles

Focusing on Vision & Influence

- **Core Idea:** Inspires and motivates people to achieve a shared vision. Focuses on change, direction, and inspiring action.

- **Primary Focus:**
  - Vision, Strategy, Direction
  - Aligning People
  - Motivating & Inspiring
  - Navigating Change
- **Approach to People:**
  - Inspires commitment and shared purpose.
  - Empowers and trusts (to varying degrees).
  - Sees people as followers or collaborators towards a vision.
- **Source of Authority:** Primarily Influence / Vision / Personal Charisma.
- **Key Verbs:** Envision, Align, Inspire, Motivate, Influence, Coach, Mentor.
- **Goal:** Create change, move towards a vision, "Do the right things."
- **Think:** The **Navigator** charting the course and inspiring the crew.
- **Agile Context:** Essential for setting product vision (like a Product Owner) and inspiring teams but doesn't fully capture the Agile emphasis on team empowerment.
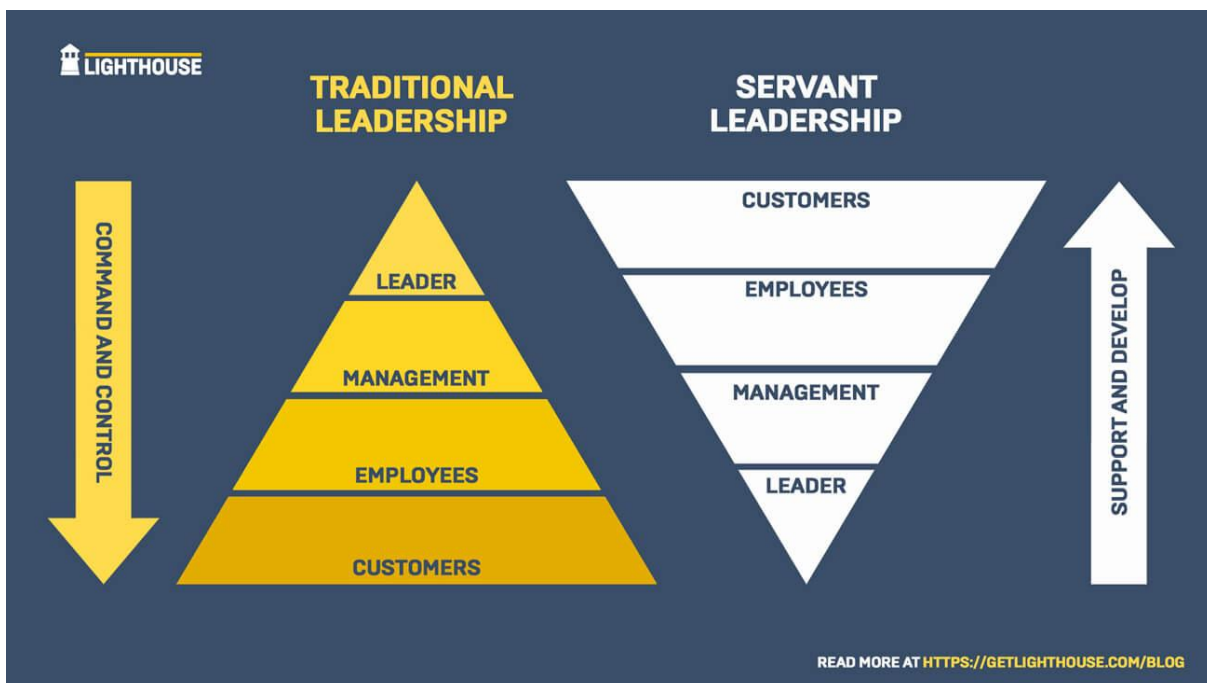
Servant Leadership:

Figure 3 – Servant Leadership Comparison

Focusing on People & Empowerment

- **Core Idea:** Prioritizes the growth and well-being of people and the communities they belong to. Puts the needs of others first to help them perform as highly as possible. *A specific type of leadership.*

- **Primary Focus:**
  - Serving the Team's Needs
  - Removing Impediments / Obstacles
  - Listening & Empathizing
  - Developing & Growing Others
  - Fostering Collaboration & Community

- **Approach to People:**
  - Listens actively and seeks to understand needs.
  - Empowers the team to make decisions and self-organize.
  - Protects the team from distractions and roadblocks.
  - Focuses on team member growth and well-being.

- **Source of Authority:** Primarily Trust / Service / Demonstrated Commitment to the Team.

- **Key Verbs:** Listen, Empathize, Support, Enable, Remove Obstacles, Shield, Coach, Develop, Empower.

- **Goal:** Empower the team to achieve *their* best, foster growth, build a high-performing, self-sufficient team.

- **Think:** The **Gardener/Coach/Facilitator** creating the environment for the team to thrive.

- **Agile Context: Crucial for Agile!** This is the primary style expected of Scrum Masters and Agile Coaches. It enables the self-organization, collaboration, and continuous improvement central to Agile principles.

Key Takeaways:

- **Not Mutually Exclusive:** Individuals can exhibit traits from all three areas. Effective leaders often blend management skills (organization) with leadership vision and a servant approach.

- **Agile Values Servant Leadership:** Agile thrives when leaders focus on enabling and empowering teams rather than directing and controlling them.

- **Focus Shift:** Management focuses on *how* (process), Leadership focuses on *what* & *why* (vision), Servant Leadership focuses on *who* (people) and removing barriers *so they* can determine the best *how*.

- **Insight:** Understanding these differences helps you identify effective leadership styles in Agile and cultivate your own approach to supporting Agile teams.

(Attribution): RMC Learning Solutions - Agile Concepts