

# Ambidextrous leaders: switching between two types of behaviour seamlessly

*Connson Locke presents two dichotomies in leaders' behaviour: acting as influencers versus facilitators, and telling someone what to do versus asking for their views. By analogy with ambidexterity (the ability to work with both hands equally well), she says leaders must develop skills on both sides of each dichotomy, and they sometimes need to step outside of their comfort zones to do that.*

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A critical skill of leadership is using the most appropriate behaviours to achieve your goals in a given situation. Presenting to a board of directors requires a different approach from collaborating with a colleague or coaching a team member. It can be overwhelming, however, to consider the endless combinations of possible behaviours and situations.

Instead, breaking down key behaviours into simple dichotomies can help you be more effective as a leader; for example, **telling** someone what to do vs. **asking** for their views. Ambidextrous leaders can switch between two types of behaviours skilfully and seamlessly – similar to ambidextrous people who use their right and left hands equally well. Below I present two dichotomies of leadership behaviour. As you read them, notice if you have a preference for one or the other; most people have a comfort zone of behaviours that they use more easily and often. Being an ambidextrous leader means stepping outside of your comfort zone to develop skills on both sides of the dichotomy.

## Telling vs. asking

Growing up as the oldest child in my family, I was often the one my siblings and friends turned to for advice and direction. I became accustomed to figuring things out by myself and telling people what to do. In the workplace, however, this decisiveness did not always serve me well. My colleagues didn't always agree that my way was the best way, and I had to learn to be open to other approaches.

Learning to ask for others' views, especially when the best way to do something was clear to me, felt like a right-handed person learning to write with the left hand: uncomfortable at first, and the results could be messy. There were times when I started implementing my plan prematurely because I assumed others would agree, only to find out belatedly that they didn't. Or other times when I asked others for their views, but only for the less important aspects of the plan, and they noticed and resented it.

Most importantly, I discovered that telling vs. asking was not as simple as the difference between using statements versus questions. Some statements ("Tell me how you would do this") could open up the conversation and elicit others' views. On the other hand, some questions ("Don't you think we should do it this way?") could shut down the discussion. Ultimately, becoming ambidextrous required me to cultivate a mindset of curiosity and openness to other approaches.

## Influencing vs. facilitating

Definitions of leadership usually focus on the leader as influencer – the person who drives change and convinces others to go along with those changes. Such definitions are incomplete because they assume the leader knows exactly what needs to be done and how to do it. While this is sometimes true, leadership also involves situations in which the leader has limited information or blind spots, and those situations require a different set of skills: the ability to orchestrate or facilitate the search for a solution.

If you have ever taken a presentation skills course or taken part in a debate class, then you have worked on your influencing skills. You would have developed your ability to understand the audience, gather relevant evidence, craft logical arguments, and present them with clarity, confidence, and conviction.

Facilitation skills, on the other hand, are rarely taught in the classroom, perhaps because they are more difficult to practice. Facilitating involves managing a group conversation, from knowing who to invite and setting a clear agenda to structuring the conversation and directing it toward a resolution. If you use influencing skills in this situation, you might alienate the group as they may feel you are dominating the conversation. Instead, you must develop the ability to listen carefully and know when to intervene, to keep the conversation on track while also acknowledging each person's contribution, and to stay neutral so the group trusts you do not have a hidden agenda.

### How to become ambidextrous

Think about these dichotomies and consider your strengths and weaknesses. Be honest with yourself about which side of each dichotomy is stronger for you and find opportunities to practice the weaker set of skills. To practice influencing skills, find opportunities to present, especially presentations where the goal is to persuade the audience of something. To practice facilitation skills, find opportunities to chair meetings, especially meetings where the group must develop a solution or reach consensus.

In addition to practicing, be sure to also get feedback. Sometimes feedback can be as simple as watching a recording of your presentation or of the meeting that you chaired. You could also tell a trusted colleague that you would like their feedback afterwards and then follow up with them after the presentation or meeting. Finally, you could look for structured learning opportunities such as hiring a coach or taking a course.

Leadership is challenging but it doesn't have to be complicated. Boiling it down to simple dichotomies can help you identify the skills you need to develop. The challenge then becomes pushing yourself to practice behaviours that might not come naturally, becoming truly ambidextrous, and knowing when to call on the different sets of skills.



#### Notes:

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