

Are you a leader or a manager?



The title of this article sounds like a trick question – it would seem the answer should be “leader”. But have you ever thought about what a manager does? Managers set up the systems that allow the organisation to run smoothly and efficiently. They ensure budgets are followed, timelines are met, and employees are trained and engaged. Without managers, an organisation could not function properly. Of course there are bureaucratic and obstructive managers, just as there are abusive and destructive leaders, but in most organisations they are in the minority. Managers, therefore, are just as valuable to organisations as leaders are.

How then do you choose? The good news is: you do not have to choose. As [Kotter](#) (1990) proposed, we should not think of leaders and managers as two different sets of people. Rather, they are two sets of skills that the same person can (and should) possess.

Leadership skills are needed when you start something new; management skills are needed to turn the initiative into reality. Leaders set a new direction and develop new strategies. They create a vision and communicate it in a clear and engaging way in order to bring everyone on the journey with them. They scan the horizon to forecast threats or opportunities and adjust the strategy accordingly. In fact, being “forward-looking” is one of the top two characteristics that employees most admire and desire in a leader, second only to being honest ([Kouzes & Posner, 2007](#)).

While leaders create the vision, managers implement the vision. They set the budget and timeline, develop the processes and systems, and create the work plan. They ensure team members have the resources and training required to be successful. They monitor progress and adjust the work plan to stay aligned with the vision.

Leadership skills and management skills are deeply intertwined, and a successful leader-manager should be ‘ambidextrous’, switching back and forth as the situation requires. Indeed, flexibility is essential in many leadership situations, as I found in [my own research](#). I was studying the confident nonverbal demeanour that leaders are taught to use (e.g., upright posture, direct eye contact, confident tone of voice). While one would think that looking confident is always beneficial, this is not the case. When eliciting information from a junior member of the team, appearing confident can stifle team members’ contributions. In such a situation, it is more important to appear open rather than confident ([Locke & Anderson, 2015](#)).

Thus, in order to be effective, leaders need a broad set of skills, including management skills, and the ability to judge which skills are required in a given situation. So if anyone asks if you are a leader or manager, you should proudly reply that you are both. But you will not be an effective leader-manager until you know when to use each set of skills.

**Notes:**

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