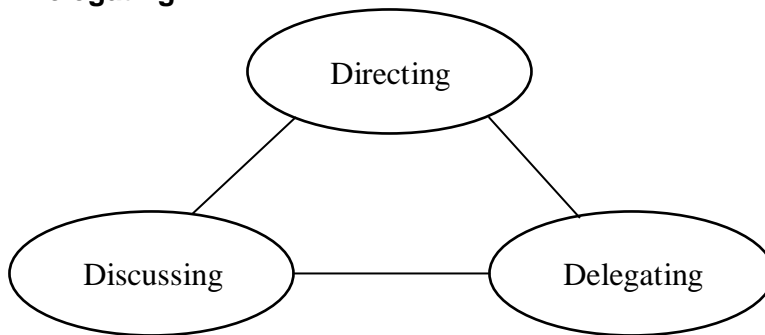


Management Styles—Directing, Discussing, & Delegating

By Paul B. Thornton

I believe there are three basic management styles

- **Directing**
- **Discussing**
- **Delegating.**



Each style is unique in terms of how managers interact with their employees.

The Directing Style—The manager tells the employee or a group of employees the following:

- What to do
- How it's to be done
- When to have it completed by

The manager assigns roles and responsibilities, sets standards, and defines expectations. The directing style is appropriate when employees lack experience and don't know what to do. It's also appropriate when there is a mandate from senior management that describes *what* must be done and *how* it must be done. The directing style is also appropriate in emergency situations.

An example of the directing style might be the last time you went for a blood test. The lab technician told you to roll up your sleeve and extend your arm. You were shown how to squeeze your hand during the sampling and when to do it. After the blood was drawn, you received specific instructions about holding the cotton swab over the area.

How managers deliver the directions and instructions is important. Eric Berne's book, *Games People Play* helps explain the tone and delivery some managers use. Berne described the three parts that exist in each of us—the parent, the child, and the adult.

- The child part in us is uninhibited, creative, curious, and impulsive, as well as the one who reacts by whining, rebelling, or acting stubborn.

- The parent in us wants control, order, and stability. The parent can be nurturing and supportive as well as judgmental and controlling. The parent is always right and doesn't have to explain or justify his/her actions.
- The adult part of us is our mature, rational, problem-solving side. The adult is calm, realistic, logical, and rational but may lack in spontaneity and feelings.

According to Berne, the mature person has a balance of each of the three parts. But some managers take on the role of parent, forcing employees to assume the role of child. The unspoken message from the parent-manager to the subordinate-child is "I'm superior. Do what your told and don't ask any questions." This causes some managers to come across as being condescending and arrogant.

A healthier relationship between manager and employee is an adult to adult relationship. Employees want to be treated like an adult. When managers operate from this framework, they are respectful and treat employees as equals.

Bottom line—You need to organize your thoughts before you begin to direct others. Start with the big picture, and then discuss the details and due dates. If possible, show employees the desired output. Take the mystery and any guess work out of what you want. Provide written instructions if the directions are complex or lengthy. Sometimes it's necessary to make sure the employee fully understands the directions. Ask the employee to explain in his own words what you want done.

The Discussing Style—In some situations managing is more about asking the right questions than telling employees what to do. Using the discussing style managers ask focused questions to solicit ideas and opinions. They ask questions like the following:

- What's our goal? What's the problem? What are our options? What's our plan?
- How should we proceed?
- When does it need to be done by?
- Who should do it?
- Why are we doing this?

Good questions get people talking and focus their thinking. The discussing style is appropriate when there are opportunities to influence goals, plans and assignments. It is effective when employees have ideas and confidence to speak up. Employee involvement increases their commitment to making it happen.

Managers need to ask genuine questions. Genuine questions come from curiosity and the manager's desire to learn. "What do you think we should do?" Some managers ask rhetorical questions. They use questions to state their view. "Don't you think it would be a good idea if we..."

Watch one or more of the following talk shows:

- * **Larry King Live**
- * **Hannity and Colmes**
- * **Charlie Rose**
- * **Dr Phil**

Note the types of questions they ask and to what extent do they ask genuine or rhetorical questions.

Don't ask questions from the parent-child mindset. Some managers ask questions more as a test to see if the employee can come up with the right answer. Finally don't ask questions in a way that resemble an interrogation. "Where were you on Sept.8 between the hours of 8:00 and 10:00 pm?" Interrogations put the employees on the defensive. The best discussions happen when people are open and relaxed.

In group settings, managers should not allow one or two people to dominate the discussion. Ask questions and get everyone involved. One approach is to begin meetings by saying, "I want to start by giving each of you two minutes to discuss your views on this topic." Managers should withhold their opinion until all employees have had a chance to comment.

Bottom line—when you use the discussing style you need to be open, curious, and interested in learning what each of your employees thinks. Probe and dig. Ask follow-up questions as needed. Observe body language. The non-verbal messages provide important information. Eventually get specific about assignments work and due dates.

Delegating Style—When using the delegating style, managers direct or discuss *what* needs to be accomplished and *when* it must be completed. However the *how-to-do-it* part of the equation is left up to the employee. It is expected that the employee will take action and make decisions. Employees are given power and authority to make it happen. Managers need to get feedback at appropriate intervals to insure appropriate progress is being made.

An example of the delegating style is when a teacher says to her students, "Your assignment is to research and write a 3-to-5 page, type written paper on—'What are the ingredients of the most effective teams?' Your papers are due October 15." The teacher explains what must be done. How to get it done is left up to each student.

The delegating style is appropriate when employees have the experience, skills, and motivation to get the job done. Experienced employees want freedom to take action and solve problems on their own.

Certainly there are times when managers delegate tasks that are outside an employee's comfort zone. Ineffective managers communicate doubt and questions about the person's abilities to get the job done. "I'm taking a big risk giving you this project." Effective managers do the opposite. They build confidence. "I'm confident you're going to hit a homerun on this project."

Bottom line--**Delegate tasks that challenge employees but don't overwhelm them. Don't over-delegate to the same one or two "star" performers. When delegating a long-term project, establish specific follow up dates. It is useful for you to frequently ask yourself: Am I doing something I could easily delegate to someone else?**

Summary

Each style is unique in terms of how managers interact with their employees. In essence managers can

- * Direct—Tell employees what to do
- * Discuss—Ask questions and listen
- * Delegate—Let employees figure it out on their own

Like a good doctor, managers must diagnose the situation before deciding what management style to use. Using the appropriate management style provides employees with the direction, involvement, support or freedom they need to be successful. As employees gain experience, skills and confidence managers need to move from directing to discussing to delegating.

About the author:

Paul B. Thornton is a speaker and author. His latest books, *The Big Three Management Styles* (Multi-Media Publications) and *The Best Leadership Advice I Ever Got* (CornerStone Leadership Institute) are available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and [bn.com](https://www.bn.com). His e-mail address is PTHornton@stcc.edu

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