



The Difference Between Theory X and Theory Y Management Styles

It is sometimes surprising that managers and supervisors (especially new ones) think the terms management and leadership are interchangeable. Knowledgeable bosses know that they are not the same thing.

There are times within the world of work wherein bosses need to manage the workflow, communicate new policies, and deliver new work assignments. In these situations, it is appropriate for the manager to be more concerned about the work flow than the employees. Employees understand this distinction and, in fact, they rely on the boss to make the decisions needed to keep the work flowing. They understand these management behaviors and recognize that there isn't a lot of room for dialogue. Directives from their manager are a regular, necessary part of what to expect at work.

In his recent book, *The Journey to Supervisory Success*, Learning Dynamics President Jim DeMaio effectively illustrates the different approaches to management in his chapter *Utilizing Theory Y, not Theory X*. He cites the work of Douglas McGregor as the creator of two approaches to management.

Theory X is thought of as “command and control” and, in the right setting, at right time, like those cited above, that philosophy of tasks over employees is effective.

The problem arises when that style is the only one the manager uses. McGregor says that Theory X managers believe that employees

must be watched carefully to ensure that they are working effectively. In today's world, that approach, as the solitary style, will alienate employees.

We suggest to clients that they try to recognize those situations wherein the focus is on the employee. The logic works like “take care of your people and they'll take care of the work.” In a work environment, a leader will realize that the people closest to a problem are likely the best ones to solve it. McGregor would call that pure Theory Y.

There are times when an employee needs to be told what to do. In his book, Jim DeMaio cites those situations that are caused by problem employees. An Employee Improvement Plan (EIP) is a great example of an appropriate management solution. The employee is given a very clear and detailed set of corrective steps which the employee will need to accomplish to stay employed. So, the content of an EIP is closely aligned with a Theory X philosophy. The content is appropriately directive and not negotiable.

But the way the EIP is delivered, how it is explained, and how the supervisor supports and partners with the employee is very much a Theory Y approach. In fact, that relationship will be as much a cause of success for the employee as the clarity of the EIP. The combination of both styles is what works in this situation.

Consider the situation at work by imagining that
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you are a new employee, and it is your first day on the job. What do you need today? What do you hope will happen today? Odds are that you seek a directive boss or a connection with another source to tell you what to do. You are not alienated by this directive approach. On the contrary, you welcome the direction and the tasks shared with you today. You need a Theory X manager, at least for today.

Now imagine that you've been on the job for a few weeks and are finally developing an understanding of the way things work. You seldom talk with the manager any more, but you feel confident that you can do the job you were hired for. Today, you seek out the boss to tell him that one of the pieces of equipment you need is out

of service. Instead of telling you what to do, your boss asks you what you think should be done. Together, you solve the problem and you get back to work. That's a Theory Y manager in action.

So, the answer to the difference between management and leadership is clearly evident in the differences between McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y.

Jim DeMaio tells us:

"While there is nothing inherently good or bad about a direct style of management, taken to an extreme, a direct style will often mimic a Theory X style."

