

# The Team Adaptability Advantage: How Flexible Teams Optimize Effectiveness Through Multiple Operating Modes

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**Additional articles from Alexander are located in the Reading Room on [www.mobiusleadership.com](http://www.mobiusleadership.com) under Next Practice Institute, including his and Amy's article *Understanding Team Development Practices*.**

As someone who has dedicated much of my professional life to team coaching and consulting, I frequently get asked what the word “team” really means. What exactly is it that separates a team from any other type of group?

Before I share my answer to that question, take a moment to consider what your own response might be. Do you have a clear idea of what a real team is, and do you know it when you see it? Test your intuition as you read through three different examples of group functioning — all of which occurred within the same client organization, the humanitarian department of a large international non-governmental organization (INGO). Which of these groups do you think might be a team?

## ► Group Scenario 1

*At 10am on Tuesday morning, the group leader calls a meeting for 1pm that same day. By 1:00 sharp all group members have taken their seats in the conference room and turned to face the leader, who sits at the head of the table. The meeting begins with the leader reviewing the details of a recent challenge facing the group. As she outlines a general plan*

*and set of actions for resolving this challenge, group members listen attentively and jot down notes. The group leader then confirms the roles and responsibilities of each member, all of whom agree without protest. In the final segment of the meeting, the leader holds an informal Q & A session to answer any clarifying questions. As soon as the meeting ends, group members quickly disperse and start taking action to follow through on the responsibilities they've been given.*

## ► Group Scenario 2

*When their regularly scheduled biweekly meeting rolls around, the group leader and members take their seats casually around the table. Acting as facilitator, the group leader gives each member a turn to share updates on what's happening in their area within the department and what issues they're working to resolve. Members listen patiently to one another and share their insights, ideas, and advice on the issues at hand. After the updates are complete, the leader reminds the group of two major initiatives happening in the broader organization and asks each individual what their particular area is doing with regard to those initiatives.*

► **Group Scenario 3**

Two group members schedule a meeting to work through a difficult challenge that affects the entire group and that they've been unable to resolve on their own. These individuals drive the meeting agenda, and the rest of the group — including the leader — gets to work exploring the issues, brainstorming ideas, generating solutions, and

deciding on a course of action. Throughout the meeting, the leader participates as an expert member. She has the authority to override the will of the group on certain matters, but refrains from using that authority to influence outcomes. At the end of 90 minutes, members walk away with a set of solutions and decisions made via consensus by the entire group.

**FIVE GROUP AND TEAM OPERATING MODES**

Groups of people can work together in a variety of different ways. The five basic operating modes below are characterized by differing distributions of accountabilities and responsibilities.

**Group Modes**

**Leader-Directed**

The leader exercises complete authority and interacts with each member individually, managing separate agendas. Members have minimal interactions with each other.



**Working Group**

Members work in a common direction and have some interaction to ensure their efforts are aligned and coordinated, but interaction with the leader is primary, and all authority stems from the leader.



**Team Modes**

**Leader/Member**

The designated leader operates as first among equals, with some unique leadership functions (e.g., holding final authority over certain decisions). The leader and members work collaboratively with each other as a full team and/or in smaller subgroups.



**Rotating/Shared**

Leadership functions are either shared or rotating among members.



**Self-Directed**

There is no official leader role. All team members are empowered and accountable and work collaboratively.



If you thought the final group sounded the most team-like, you're onto something. Members of that group acted as interdependent collaborators — engaging in evenly distributed communication, participative problem solving, and collective decision making. Most people recognize that type of functioning as characteristic of the way real teams behave. But that's only part of the story. *All three of those scenarios came from the very same team.*

Early in my career, I treated the concept of a team as an all-or-nothing phenomenon. I worked with client groups to identify what “typology” they belonged to — either a group type (leader-directed or working group) or a team type (leader/member, rotating/shared, or self-directed).

I still find those five classifications useful, but instead of static types I present them to clients as operating modes. In my experience, the most successful teams do not operate consistently within a single mode, but rather are able to shift fluidly across different modes in different situations. When the context they're in calls for collaborative interaction, they readily engage in teaming behavior. Yet when it serves their purpose to act more like a group than like a team, they're able to seamlessly switch gears. That's exactly what happened in the INGO team I observed:

- **Scenario 1 (Leader-directed)** took place during the early days of the team's response to a natural catastrophe in one of the countries where they delivered their programs. At that moment, there was an urgent need to move into tightly coordinated action within a very short period of time.
- **Scenario 2 (Working group)** occurred several weeks prior to the catastrophe, during one of the team's typical biweekly operational review meetings.
- **Scenario 3 (Leader/Member)** emerged several weeks after the catastrophe, in response to reports by workers on the ground — overseen by this team — that a specific transportation-related roadblock was interfering with their ability to provide humanitarian services.

For most of the teams I work with, the concept of operating modes makes intuitive sense. It can also come as a relief to realize that being an effective team doesn't mean collaborating equally on every project or making every decision by consensus. Particularly in fast-paced, ever-changing work environments, it's the ability to adapt flexibly to differing circumstances that drives consistent high performance.

Team flexibility depends in no small part on team leadership flexibility. The most adaptive and resilient team

TEAM LEADERSHIP STYLES			
Style	Communication with Members	Approach to Problems	Role in Decision Making
<b>A (Authoritative)</b>	One-way	Solves independently	Final authority on all decisions
<b>D (Directive)</b>	One-way and two-way	Instructs members on how to solve	Final authority on most decisions; may consult others
<b>F (Facilitative)</b>	Multi-directional	Guides members in solving	Drives decision process using a variety of decision modes*
<b>P (Participative)</b>	Fully embedded	Solves together with members	Participates with members using a variety of decision modes*

\*The decision modes referred to here are unanimity, consensus, democracy, authority, and authority with consultation.

leaders can shift comfortably between four different styles: authoritative, directive, facilitative, and participative.

Consider our original example. In Scenario 1, the leader (I'll call her Maria) adopted an authoritative/directive stance. Given the pressing need for her team to get organized and mobilized in a tight timeline, Maria simply told people what to do, leaving no room for negotiation. At times like this, when a team is faced with an imminent crisis, going into authoritative or directive mode may be the leader's best option for fulfilling their accountability to the organization.

The circumstances of Scenario 2 called for a more facilitative leadership style. During the operational review meeting, Maria helped to provide structure for the team — guiding members through the process of sharing information, ideas, and advice. In this context, she was expected to keep the meeting on time and on track, redirect tangential lines of discussion, and ensure full participation and engagement. She also joined with other team members in responding to requests for input and suggestions. What Maria did not do was assume ultimate responsibility for solving problems or making decisions.

In the final scenario, Maria stepped back even further, adopting a wholly participative style. To an outside observer, her involvement in the team's discussions and decision making would have looked no different from the involvement of other members. The two team members who called the meeting were fully empowered to lead the content and drive the process.

Through this brief example, you can start to get a sense of how leaders can benefit their teams — and therefore their organizations — by adapting their behavior to fit the varying demands of different situations. Of course, full-team flexibility requires individual members to adapt their behavior as well. In the case of this particular client, it was the combined adaptability of Maria plus other dedicated team members that enabled high performance across a wide variety of situations.

### Applying the principles

For many leaders, coaches, and consultants, operating modes and leadership styles provide a new and helpful lens for looking at teams. To apply these concepts to a team you work with directly — whether you lead it, participate in it, or engage with it as a client — the first step is doing some reflection:

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- Which operating mode does the team seem to use most often? (See table, page 25) In which contexts is this mode effective for meeting the team's objectives?

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- In contexts where the primary operating mode may not work well, is the team able to flexibly shift into a different mode, or does it tend to stay stuck?

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- Which leadership style does the team leader (see table, page 26) seem to use most frequently during team interactions? Does s/he stick to this one style consistently, or shift between styles as circumstances change?

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- How do the norms of the broader organization affect the use of different operating modes and leadership styles? Does the culture welcome flexibility in ways of working, or tend to value one approach over others (e.g., valuing authoritative leadership and discouraging participative leadership, or vice versa)?

The final question is whether you think this team could benefit from greater flexibility in its ways of working. If so, starting a discussion about operating modes and leadership styles could be a useful first step toward improving team resilience and overall effectiveness and performance. ■



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