



## A CRITIQUE OF PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP

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**ABSTRACT** Participative leadership implies shared authority and accountability. It has gained tremendous currency in recent years as a result of changing workplace dynamics. These days the subordinates or followers themselves are quite competent –capable and willing to work independently. Thus, participative leadership helps in optimizing their talents and hidden potentials. Knowledge workers in contemporary organizations seek their role in the decision-making process, job autonomy and minimal interference in their work. In return, they are ready to take ownership of results/outcomes. Participative leadership model takes care of the aspirations of new-age employees while providing assurance to seasoned leaders about the bottom lines. This paper provides a critique of participative leadership that may be exciting for the practising managers as well as researchers.

**KEYWORDS** : Participative Leadership, Delegation, Empowerment, Workplace Democracy

**INTRODUCTION**

Participative leadership is an inimitable management paradigm that hinges on shared authority and accountability. The concept of participative leadership revolves around workplace democracy that ensures voice and choice to the employees in work processes as well as decision-making. It has become a talking point today primarily because of psychedelic workplace dynamics thanks to globalization, liberalization and generational shift. Participative leadership matches the expectations, aspirations and competencies of the young employees. It also ensures holistic utilization of the potentials of millennials who constitute significant part of the staff in contemporary organizations. Considering the fast changing technological landscape, it is worthwhile to empower the young employees to take charge and allow them to contribute their mite in accomplishing mission and strategic objectives of the organizations.

A participative leader is 'an extroverted, sensitive leader who openly shares decisions and authority with subordinates' (Greiner, 1973). Participative leadership involves the use of various decision procedures that allow followers or team members some influence over the decisions of the leaders (Yukl & Uppal, 2017). Koopman and Wierdsma (1998) also define participative leadership as joint decision making or at least shared influence in decision making by a superior and his/her employees. Bass and Bass (2008) observe that while different forms of participative leadership exist, the one commonality is that this approach typically focuses on involving followers actively in decision processes.

However, there is absolute diversity of thought on the methods of participative leadership. Some of the scholars have focused on team decision making, others have placed emphasis on joint goal setting and still others have suggested listening skills for two way communication as defining features of participative leadership model (Greiner, 1973). Although primarily a relationship oriented behaviour, participative leadership also has implications for task objectives and implementing change (Yukl & Uppal, 2017). In fact participation is perceived as being related to more effective performance by the followers/subordinates (Greiner, 1973). On the other hand, there is always a risk that 'subordinates can misread an orthodox participative leader as being more concerned for their psyches than for the fruits of their labour' (Greiner, 1973).

The most common techniques used by leaders to foster participation include getting groups of people together for meetings to brainstorm or discuss issues and questioning themselves and others while being open to being challenged (Arnold & Loghlin, 2013). Participation is manifested in terms of the following characteristics of the leaders (Greiner, 1973):

- Give subordinates a share in decision making
- Keeps subordinates informed of the true situation, good or bad, under all circumstances
- Stay aware of the state of the organization's morale and does everything possible to make it high
- Be easily approachable
- Counsel, train, and develop subordinates
- Show thoughtfulness and consideration of others

- Exhibit openness to changes in doing things
- Be willing to support subordinates even when they make mistakes
- Appreciate when a subordinate does a good job

Participative leadership is critical for organizational effectiveness as it helps in augmenting quality of decisions, enhances acceptance of the decisions by followers/subordinates, increases sense of procedural justice among the employees and strengthens their decision making competencies. This is why organizations across the world are now promoting participative leadership as managerial norms. In fact, range in decision making process by involving the subordinates augments the organization's breadth of outlook, cognitive resources, and overall problem solving capabilities (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990, Jackson, 1992)

**From Control and Command to Facilitate and Empower**

Participative leadership model provided an impetus to significant shift in leadership behaviour from use of authority by manager (autocratic) to area of freedom for subordinates (information sharing, consultation and joint decision making) which is painstakingly captured by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) in the proverbial Continuum of Leadership Behaviour (Figure 1). However, before plunging in the area of freedom for the subordinates, the leader needs to check following essential conditions as suggested by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973):

- If the subordinates have relatively high needs for independence (people differ greatly in the amount of direction that they desire)
- If the subordinates have a readiness to assume responsibility for decision making (some see additional responsibility as a tribute to their ability, others see it as 'passing the buck')
- If they have a relatively high tolerance for ambiguity (some employees prefer to have clear-cut directives given to them, others prefer a wider area of freedom)
- If they are interested in the problem and feel that it is important
- If they understand and identify with the goals of the organization
- If they have the necessary knowledge and experience to deal with the problem
- If they have learned to expect to share in decision making (persons who have come to expect strong leadership and are then suddenly confronted with the request to share more fully in decision making are often upset by this new experience. On the other hand, persons who have enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom resent bosses who begin to make all decisions themselves.)

Interestingly, any attempt at unleashing participative leadership model at the workplace may rebound if the staffs are not prepared or proficient. It is imperative that prior to turning decision making responsibility over to the employees, the bosses must examine how efficiently their team members work together as a unit as well as level of group variables such as cohesiveness, tolerance, mutual acceptance and unity of purpose (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1973).

A normative decision model suggested by Vroom and Yetton (1973) might be useful while unbundling participative leadership:

- Autocratic Decision I: Manager solves the problem or makes the decision himself/herself, using information available to him/her at

the time.

- Autocratic Decision II: Manager obtains necessary information from his/her subordinates and then decides the solution to the problem himself/herself. He/she may or may not tell the subordinates about the problem while seeking information. Role played by the subordinates limited to providing information rather than generating or evaluating alternatives solutions.
- Consultation I: Manager shares the problem with relevant subordinates individually, getting their ideas and suggestions without bringing them together as a group. Then he/she makes a decision which may or may not reflect influence of the subordinates.
- Consultation II: Manager shares the problem the problem with his/her subordinates in a group, obtaining their collective ideas and suggestions. Then he/she makes a decision which may or may not reflect influence of the subordinates.
- Group Decision: Manager shares the problem with his/her subordinates as group. He/she generates and evaluates alternative solution along with the subordinates and tries to arrive at a consensus on the solution. He/she does not influence the group to adopt his/her preferred solution and is willing to accept and implement any solution that has the support of the whole group.

Nevertheless, normative decision model should be carefully used so that decision procedures are appropriate for given scenarios. Vroom and Yetton (1973) have proposed seven decision rules which must be followed in case any leader is using normative decision model propounded by them:

- When the decision is important and subordinates possess relevant information lacked by the manager, an autocratic decision is not suitable because an important decision would be made without all the relevant and available inputs.
- When decision quality is important and subordinates do not share the leader's concern for task goals, a group decision is not apt as these procedures would give too much influence over an important decision to obstinate or even antagonistic people.
- When decision quality is important, the decision problem is unstructured and leader does not possess the necessary information and expertise to make a good decision, consultation and group decision procedures are the best alternatives.
- When decision acceptance is important and subordinates are unlikely to accept an autocratic decision, it is better to go for consultation or group decision procedures.
- When decision acceptance is important and subordinates are likely to disagree among themselves about the best solution to an important problem, autocratic decision or consultation is not a right choice as they do not provide the opportunity to resolve differences through discussions and negotiation among the subordinates and between the subordinates and the leader.
- When decision quality is not important but acceptance is important and unlikely to result from an autocratic decision, the best option is to go for group decision procedure so as to maximise acceptance without diluting quality.
- When decision acceptance is important and improbable to result from an autocratic decision, and subordinates share the leader's task objectives, best course of action would be to apply group decision procedure.

Executives enthusiastic about participative leadership should be discerning in applying normative decision model as well as rules for decision procedure as envisaged by Vroom and Yetton (1973) so that they are able to accomplish organizational outcomes in most effective manner. Not only they should have an eye on the group dynamics and level of readiness of the subordinates for relevant decision procedures but also an enthusiastic outlook to nurture the group members in terms of ability development, positive thinking, emotional labour and camaraderie. Today manager has to take up an active role as a facilitator of appropriate ecosystem within the work organizations instead of merely giving orders and taking reports. According to Yukl and Uppal (2017), managers also need to encourage participation of subordinates by way of encouraging them express their concerns, listen to dissenting views without getting defensive, looking for ways to build on ideas and suggestions, and showing gratitude for their preoccupation.

## CONCLUSION

Participative leadership is an expedient paradigm when the team members are highly capable, devoted, involved and proficient vis-à-

vis working freely in an abstruse setting time and again as a matter of usual practice. Its attainment depends on the knacks of both the managers and his/her subordinates. However, the initiative for democratising the workplace and unfolding subordinate-centred leadership rests with the leader. He/she has first to change the typical managerial mindset dominated by control and command and be ready to let go of his/her insecurities while passing on the authority to take charge to his/her staff. Sooner it happens, better for the organizations. Participative leadership increases the self-esteem of the employees, enhances their commitment, augments their level of engagement and positively rouses their overall experience at the workplace.

Cultivating the staff is one of the most perplexing tasks of the participative leader. If the aides are brought to the area of freedom without appropriate training, the results could be devastating for the organizations. Hence due care and attention must be paid to followership development by investing in professional self-development of each of the employees across the organization. This will help in building a culture of participative management in the entire organization. Besides the training and development intervention, the organization needs to make it rewarding for countless and consistent results.

Most importantly, the organizations must take a conscious call regarding adoption of participative leadership and prepare their leadership team for the major paradigm shift. Letting go of power and authority may not be easier for some of the executives. Hence it is all the more essential to educate the senior executives who would be responsible for applying the principles of participative leadership and empowering their team members. No attempt at launching participative leadership across the organization would succeed without a whole hearted buy-in on the matter by the senior executives. The shift from control and command to facilitate and empower model may provide great results if both the bosses and their subordinates are on the same page.

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