

LEADERSHIP

The 4 Types of Leadership

by Carsten Lund Pedersen and Thomas Ritter

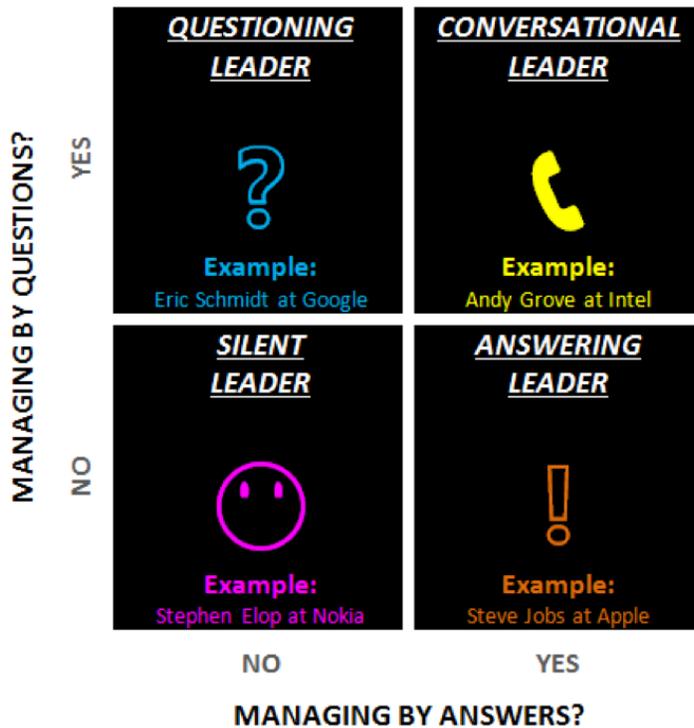


How you communicate determines how you lead.

✔ **INSIGHT** | NOTE 26 Jan 2021

Most employees have encountered both great and bad leaders over the course of their careers, and they can therefore easily recognize the characteristics of both. However, surprisingly **few leaders** pay attention to their **own leadership style**, which can result in lost opportunities to critically reflect on the benefits and disadvantages of their **approaches to communication, management, and leadership**.

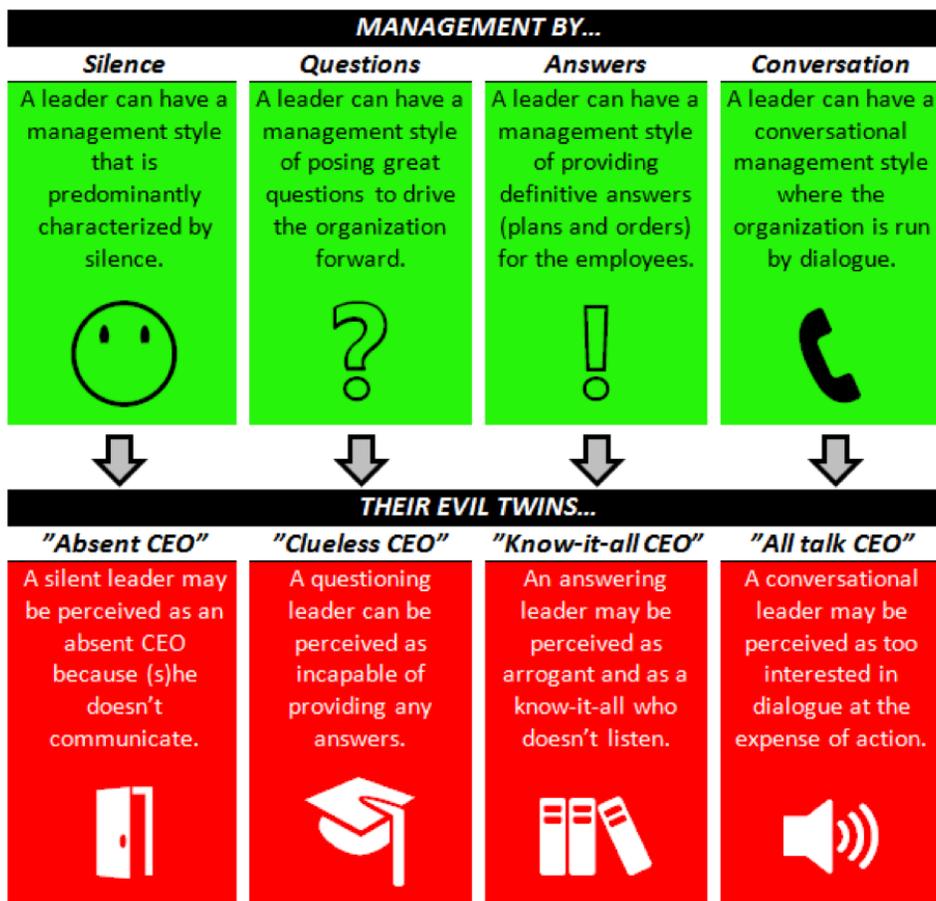
Based on countless interactions with executives over the years, we have developed a matrix of different types of leadership that managers can use to better understand themselves (see the figure below). The matrix has two dimensions, which are based on two questions. First, do you predominantly manage by posing questions to your employees? Second, do you predominantly manage by providing answers to your employees?



The matrix points to four different kinds of leadership: silent leaders, questioning leaders, answering leaders, and conversational leaders. It is important that leaders identify their own type and critically reflect upon its implications. In the following, we explain and exemplify each of the leadership types with real-world cases.

The Four Types of Leaders

Each of the four types of leaders identified in the matrix has its own distinctive strengths and weaknesses. As shown in the figure below, the four types of leaders have “evil twins”—negative traits that employees may use to label their leaders.



Silent leader (potentially an “absent CEO”)

The silent leader neither asks many questions nor provides many answers, resulting in a form of introverted leadership. **Research** shows that silent leaders may have several **benefits**, such as an ability to **think through** problems and to **lead covertly** behind the scenes. However, as they have an introverted communication style and actively avoid the spotlight, these leaders can sometimes be perceived as absent. If this happens, the leader will find it difficult to motivate followers.

An example of a silent leader is Stephen Elop, the former CEO of Nokia. Elop was hired in 2010 to **lead the company out** of its troubles. However, he not only failed to ask the right questions but he also struggled to provide valid answers. At a 2013 press conference, Elop’s inability to pose and answer questions became clear when he **ended his speech** by saying: “*We didn’t do anything wrong, but somehow, we lost.*” A talent for formulating the right questions and providing valid answers to those questions would have helped Elop develop a better interpretation of the situation and assisted him in identifying relevant solution options.

Questioning leader (potentially a “clueless CEO”)

The questioning leader poses many great questions to the organization, but he or she does not provide many answers. This results in a form of curiosity-driven leadership. **Research** shows that questions can have a catalytic quality that can fuel an organizational **culture of curiosity**, which, in turn, is vital for an organization’s performance. However, as the leader poses many questions but provides few answers, he or she may be perceived as clueless. As such, the leader may become obsolete for a curious organization.

An example of a questioning leader is Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google. Schmidt **argued to Time** Magazine that: *“We run the company by questions, not by answers. So in the strategy process we’ve so far formulated 30 questions that we have to answer. I’ll give you an example: we have a lot of cash. What should we do with the cash?”* This curiosity-driven management style is a pillar in Schmidt’s guide for **managing “geeks.”** Moreover, it is a sign of a **hunger for knowledge** combined with **intellectual humility**.

Answering leader (potentially a “know-it-all CEO”)

The answering leader does not pose many questions to the organization. Instead, he or she provides many answers, resulting in a form of directive leadership. **Research** indicates that answers (in the form of visions) can be essential in establishing an organization’s direction and focus. However, as the leader provides answers but is not interested in posing questions, he or she may be perceived as a “know-it-all” who is solely interested in employee conformity. If this happens, it may damage the desire among gifted, curious, and creative employees to follow the CEO’s lead.

An example of an answering leader is the late Steve Jobs, the former CEO of Apple. Jobs was famous for providing his employees with definitive answers in the form of bold visions. In fact, he is known for creating a **“reality distortion field”**—he provided answers that were easily believed by his followers due to a mixture of personal **charisma, bravado, and marketing**. Hence, Jobs provided answers but left little room to ask questions.

Conversational leader (potentially an “all-talk CEO”)

A conversational leader both poses many questions and provides relevant answers, resulting in an interactive form of leadership. **Research** shows that **managerial**

interaction in which questions are posed and answers are provided may have a variety of performance benefits for organizations. For instance, Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind argue that **leadership is a conversation**. However, a leader who is very engaged in ongoing organizational discussions may risk being perceived as “all-talk, no action.” If this happens, the leader may automatically find him- or herself disconnected from employees who are less willing to participate in conversations.

An example of a conversational leader is the late Andy Grove, the former CEO of Intel. In the face of severe strategic inflection points, Grove transformed Intel through interactive strategic leadership that was characterized by the right amount of intense **internal strategic debate**. In other words, Grove was skilled at continuously posing important strategic questions to the organization, listening to responses, assessing the information, and finally providing an appropriate strategic answer given the situation.

What should you do?

How a leader communicates determines how that leader leads. Therefore, leaders must pay attention to their communication patterns, as those patterns determine the quality of their leadership. More specifically, we suggest that leaders remember the following guidelines:

Know which type of leadership you rely on the most. First, you will need to position yourself in the leadership matrix. You can ideally do this for yourself *and* ask your employees to do so in the form of **360-degree feedback**. If there is a disconnect in perceptions, you will already have a basis for reflective discussions with your team.

Know your “evil twin.” After you know what your leadership type is, it will be necessary to assess that type’s negative traits. What is the probability that you will be perceived as your “evil twin”? Can you do anything to preempt such a perception?

Assess your leadership type's fit with the task, team, and timing. Recognizing your leadership type and its negative traits are only the first steps. You must also assess your type's fit with the task, the team, and the organization's timing. In other words, does your type fit with the task that the organization is facing? Does your type fit with the team of employees you are leading? Will your leadership style be appropriate for the organization at this time?

Leadership requires **followership**. Therefore, you need to communicate with your followers in an appropriate way. Only by understanding your own communicative management style and its related weaknesses can you hope to fully exploit the potential of your personal strengths.



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