



## Do You Train Your Executives in Counter-Factual Leadership Strategy?

*How about developing several leadership styles in your executives, not just one?*



### Iffy Leadership

Ever heard of something called counter-factual history? It refers to what might have been had certain events occurred - or didn't. As in, what would have happened if Germany had won World War 2? Or Winston Churchill had died after being hit by that car in New York in 1931?

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So now we are going to talk about counter-factual leadership. As in, what would happen if you adopted a different leadership style? Or what wouldn't happen? What leadership style would be necessary to achieve a new type of target, or how to lead in certain, new circumstances?

Sometimes leaders try out a different approach or make a decision which appears to be out of their comfort zone. The reasons could be that they are flying a kite, telegraphing a punch or throwing a feint, all good and useful leadership tactics sometimes.

But there are some occasions when a leader is doing more than this. They are actually trying out a different leadership style to see what would happen if they adopted it. It's like a reality show, or a live simulation.

A recent examples was Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke who said the Fed would taper and then didn't. Of course there a legion of similar examples.

Some people could regard these changes as flip-flops reflecting indecisiveness, negotiating tactics or even deliberate deception. But in many cases, they are reflections of counter-factual leadership technique. They are attempts at a live simulation of what would happen if the leader made a certain decision or changed their leadership style in some way. One of the advantages is that you can then see and gauge the response to your new style before actually taking what is probably going to be an irreversible step.

These types of action are legitimate and often-misunderstood counter-factual leadership approaches. Often this technique is assumed on the fly or in a complex fast-moving environment where there is no clear answer on how they should approach a problem based on their current leadership style.

Usually the leaders themselves are not aware of what they are doing and its import since they are doing it unconsciously, When they do launch with their counter-factual leadership or decision style, in their own mind it's

a concept, not necessarily a reality or a definite move. Like the concept cars you see at auto shows; they might well go into production, but then again, they might not.

## Are Companies Different?

In the private sector it's often more difficult to adopt a counter-factual leadership approach. Your clients aren't going to be too impressed if you announce a new product and then don't launch it because you don't like the reaction.

But in the private sector there are other ways of trying out a counter-factual approach. For example, getting transferred to a completely different area in your company, or to a position which requires a totally different leadership style to the one you naturally possess.

Some [M&A transaction proposals](#) might also be counter-factual leadership initiatives. The motive might be behavioral, as well as financial. They might also be driven by the deep leadership needs of the CEO or management team or to adopt another leadership style they think is badly needed to make their company successful.

*“...They are attempts at a live simulation of what would happen if the leader made a certain decision or changed their leadership style*

## When You are Born, It's Always the First Time

For every CEO there's a first time in the job. All too often it's also the last. A new leader, whether or not a CEO, usually gets on-the-job training, usually no more. So the aim is usually to get to be an effective leader based on the person's natural leadership style, whatever that might be. We usually assume that a leader has one good natural leadership style and if she can perfect it that is an appropriate target and that person will then succeed as a leader.

But there's usually no presumption that a leader will have to perfect more than one style. That a good leader might need several different leadership styles – often totally different and even possibly mutually at odds - to cope with different types of environments and situations. That's a different and much tougher situation. It's hard enough to become a good leader with one style, let alone several.

It's like speaking a foreign language. Maybe you can speak one well, but that's it. To speak several very well is a different kettle of fish. Although my European friends constantly amaze me with their multilingual capabilities, we as Americans are usually not in the same planet, linguistically speaking. We usually speak one language, English, and after that we are basically tapped out.

So the issue is this: can a leader become multi-leadership-lingual? What does it take to achieve this? Where do you start? And what is the leadership model which shows you the different leadership types categorized by impact and optimal environment so that you can try out a counter-factual leadership style?

And, furthermore, what does it require from the putative leader? In particular what requirements does it impose on the mental agility of the leader? How many leadership language-styles are optimal? When does one need to switch between them and under what conditions? How can a person simulate and practice those different leadership styles, while still remaining in their job and retaining credibility with their followers and stakeholders?

## You are Your Own Counter-Factual

There's a deep principle here. In leadership development, you are your own counter-factual. That is, you have to have or develop enough mental agility to be able to change your leadership style to match the circumstances. I am not just talking the way a leader addresses team dynamics and inter-personal style but also about how they address the type of market, company, product and so on, that is the business, not just the personality factors.

Most people don't have enough knowledge to be able to do this, but that's how you truly develop leadership bandwidth. You have to divorce the leadership style from the person.

We should be trying to develop a leadership strategy where you don't have to change the leader if you need

a different leadership style. Sure, that's a radical and maybe an idealistic prescription.

But divorcing leadership style from the person would maximize the effectiveness of using human capital. Instead of firing a leader when his style doesn't change to match the circumstances, his leadership style is able to change and the leader can stay in the position instead of being cast off like as a discarded product, our usual approach.

This doesn't just require behavioral change by a particular leader. There are other possibilities and strategies, such as choosing different partners, colleagues and team members to adjust team leadership styles to adjust to different circumstances.

*“...There's a deep principle here. In leadership development, you are your own counter-factual...”*

So it's not just an issue of individual leadership agility. It's also a question of team agility so that the collective can change its leadership style to match different conditions, not just an individual. That in turn requires a model to be able to match leadership styles to different business and management conditions.

## **The Leadership Cockpit® Approach to Counter-Factual Leadership**

So where do I find a model that shows me the different leadership styles that will cover all business and financial, as well as traditional conditions like personality and team dynamics. Below we have included a diagram of the Leadership Cockpit®, developed by Perth Leadership Institute, that does exactly that. It shows you how to map leadership style to the following factors:

- Required business outcome
- Required organizational environment e.g. after a secondment, transfer, promotion or a merger
- Type of people in the team
- Strengths and vulnerabilities of the leaders

In effect, the Leadership Cockpit® shows you 16 counter-factual leadership styles, for any leadership situation, to optimize leadership style with business outcome. You can see more about the Leadership Cockpit® [here](#) and [here](#)

The Leadership Cockpit® is used to show executives what leadership styles they need to effectively address different types of situations, environments and circumstances. In effect this is training in counter-factual leadership.

## **Are You Multi-Leadership-Lingual?**

I believe that the discipline of counter-factual leadership has actually been around for as long as humans have needed leaders. But only a few leaders ever achieve multi-leadership-linguality. Furthermore, counter-factual leadership approaches are often misinterpreted as something else, such as negotiating tactics rather than exploration and simulation of a new leadership style and space.

But I think we need to rediscover and formalize this discipline. Leadership problems aren't getting any easier and if we don't solve the problem it might doom our planet even more decisively than dysfunctional processes such as pollution or climate change. Promoting counter-factual leadership approaches is a way for companies to contribute in another significant way to solving global problems.

*“...only a few leaders ever achieve multi-leadership-linguality...”*

Here's some practical suggestions to help you do all of this. You can integrate some of them into existing executive development programs or maybe run your own counter-factual leadership program. Maybe as part of your innovation in leadership initiatives?

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## Recommendations

1. *Integrate counter-factual leadership approaches into your executive development programs.*
  2. *Assess your executives to show them their own natural leadership style*
  3. *Train them in other leadership styles*
  4. *Show them behavioral priming techniques to help them adapt to a target style.*
  5. *Demonstrate to them how to match their styles to different circumstances*
  6. *Teach them how to activate the right signaling techniques to transition to a new leadership style and role*
  7. *Use the Leadership Cockpit® assessments and approach to help you implement a counter-factual approach.*
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