

## What is the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Leadership Continuum?

Psychologists Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt developed their continuum model of leadership in a paper published in the [Harvard Business Review](#) in 1958. The model depicts a range of possible management strategies ranging from top-down dictatorial management on one side, to fully collaborative, team-based working on the other.



### Who were Tannenbaum and Schmidt?

Robert Tannenbaum was Professor at the UCLA Anderson School of Management, and an organisational psychologist. His writing partner Warren H. Schmidt, a Doctor of Psychology, who also taught at UCLA, was an ordained Lutheran minister in a previous career.

In an interesting piece of trivia, Warren Schmidt is the name of Jack Nicholson's character in the film *About Schmidt*. In 1969 he wrote an Op Ed piece for the LA Times, "Is it Always Right to be Right?", which was adapted into a short film the following year, winning Schmidt an Oscar for Best Short Animated Film.

### What is the Continuum and What Does it Describe?

The Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum of Leadership actually depicts seven different styles of management differentiated by the degree of control exerted by the manager over their team. It can also be read as a continuum of team autonomy, with more collaborative approaches on the right-hand side, and individual role-based work, with tasks set by managers, on the left.

Let's break down the seven leadership modes which the continuum contains, and the relative advantages and disadvantages of each leadership style.

## The Seven Components of the Tannenbaum Schmidt Leadership Continuum

### 1: Telling

At the control extreme, the leader simply tells his or her underlings what to do. This mode is most commonly found in the military, in which authority is absolute because it may be necessary to make soldiers do things which human nature would ordinarily rebel against (such as killing another human being). It is also found in political dictatorships, organised crime, and is often parodied in popular culture (think of Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*).

In theory, if a leader is capable of endlessly exercising good judgement, this mode could be profitable for an organisation in the short term, but it rarely proves popular with employees who relish the chance to exercise their own judgement and autonomy. It is a rare and unpopular mode of leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and may well be relegated to the history books.

### 2: Selling

Selling is still mainly a top-down approach, but it requires the leader to sell their concepts to their employees, or at least their top managers. It requires powers of persuasion and charisma in addition to raw authority. Tannenbaum and Schmidt captured this approach with the quotation: “once I have decided on a course of action, I do my best to sell my ideas to my employees.”

By explaining the process behind decision making, a leader adopting this approach aims to persuade subordinates that their decisions are valid, evidence-based, and not merely capricious or idiosyncratic. This may be especially important when these ideas are innovative or disruptive. Steve Jobs is a good example of a leader who often used this mode (alongside more collaborative approaches). Jobs told [Fortune](#) magazine, “my job is not to be easy on people. My job is to make them better.” Jobs’ approach wasn’t always popular, but he did at least attempt to sell his innovations to his team, while making his authority clear.

When this approach works, middle-managers extend the process, selling the top-down decisions to their own team members, so that each employee “owns” the decisions made by the leader. Many franchise businesses necessarily operate this way, since each branch must exemplify the same principles, practices, approach, and service model.

### 3: Suggesting

In this mode, a leader offers a range of options to their employees, and then allows consensus to form around the best course of action. Such an approach necessarily limits the scope of decision-making, while allowing teams a greater degree of choice. It’s often an approach which can be used within a research and development setting, whereby several options are market tested before the most successful is adopted.

Working by suggestion also requires powers of persuasion, since leaders need to protect the corral of ideas they have shortlisted from the incursion of irrelevant alternatives. It can prove a politically sensible approach when bringing ideas to a board of directors, for instance, since it demonstrates that the leader possesses a helpful balance of authority and flexibility.

Suggesting can work both ways of course. Leaders would do well to encourage suggestions at key points from trusted employees. A 2017 Leadership IQ study, reported in [Forbes](#) revealed that only 47% of leaders always or frequently invited suggestions, with the majority rarely or never doing so.

This is a mistake, since even if most employee suggestions are unhelpful or unworkable, the act of inviting suggestion enhances engagement and loyalty. The same study found that in companies whose leaders encourage suggestions, 62% of employees would recommend their employer as a great place to work.

#### 4: Consulting

Consultation is one of the most common modes of leadership, lying right in the middle of Tannenbaum and Schmidt's continuum. This method involves the leader having a pool of executives whose opinions they trust, and to whom they can turn for advice, ideas, and courses of action. Contrasting with suggestion, this is not an occasional act, but more of a standard operating procedure. A business with this type of leadership fully entrenched will make very few entirely top-down decisions.

Consultation is a great way for leaders to counter their own intrinsic bias. Bias has been reported as among the most important considerations that employees apply when thinking about their leaders. Leadership experts Juliet Bourke and Andrea Titus analysed the 360-degree Inclusive Leadership Assessments of over 400 leaders, made by more than 4000 of their employees.

They [report in HBR](#) that "a leader's awareness of personal and organizational biases is the number one factor that raters care most about." Consultation guards against such biases, throwing up opinions which might never have occurred to the leader.

#### 5: Joining

In this mode, a leader joins a decision-making group and oversees the process, while trying not to dominate excessively. For obvious reasons, this can be a delicate balancing act. Nevertheless, it's probably the most common leadership mode undertaken by middle managers when holding meetings, for instance. There will necessarily be a degree of decision-making delegation, with the leader agreeing to abide by choices made by the team, within set parameters.

If this mode is to work, it's vital the leader's role, limits and degree of authority are delineated from the start. Ideally, at the very first session in such a collaborative approach, the leader will set forth the limits of their authority within the group setting. This commitment should be explicitly recorded in the minutes, so that there can be no ambiguity.

Coaches and mentors follow this approach as standard practice. They are there to bring out the best in their mentees, rather than dictate what should be done. In a work context, a leader performing this role should bear in mind that they may be shaping a future leader. While they may want to instil their own values, they are helping to build an employee who will be able to take on more and more autonomy in future, and who may forge their own path.

## 6: Delegating

When a leader has a high degree of confidence in their team members, they may begin to delegate more and more decision-making responsibility. However, with the power to decide comes the need to be accountable for those decisions. When leaders delegate fully, they remain liable for that act of delegation, and by extension for the decisions made by their underlings.

For this reason, many leaders "fall on their sword" when catastrophic decisions are made by employees under them, to whom they have delegated responsibility. Following public scandals, you'll often see high-profile resignations in senior management positions. On a more positive note, praise for good decision-making by departmental heads or project leads is an important aspect of delegation and good delegation always reflects well upon a company's leadership. If blame is a transitive property, so is praise.

Delegation allows a leader to draw upon talent and abilities which they may not personally possess. It requires trust, good judgement, and humility, since by delegating, the leader is admitting that some decisions are better taken by specialists, rather than second-guessed by senior management. Delegation requires leaders to get to know the respective strengths and weaknesses of their managers. In effect the need to delegate will tend to promote leaders who are "people people".

## 7: Abdication

While this type of leadership might not seem like leadership at all, sometimes it's vital to know when to step down, move on, or try something new. There is both a positive and pejorative connotation to this style of leadership. Let's take the downside first.

When a leader abdicates responsibility and lets their employees run the company, with them as mere figurehead, then they quickly lose respect, both within the company and with

business rivals. This can seriously damage a brand's standing, and even undermine the market valuation of a company.

However, when a successful company divests itself of a particular product line, brand, or division for monetary gain, or to better focus on core service offering, this can be both lucrative and transformative. By definition, leadership will change to, at most, an arms-length model, with the newly created entity will no longer fall under the aegis of the company's founder or CEO.

Think of Richard Branson [selling Virgin Records](#) in 1992 in order to save his airline, or any tech start-up founder formulating an exit strategy. This can be the best kind of leadership – creating a lucrative, flourishing business, then moving on to pastures new, leaving it in capable hands. Moving on can be painful, as in Richard Branson's case, but is sometimes necessary and an example of good leadership.

#### A Theoretical Model

It's important to note that the continuum is designed to incorporate the whole theoretical spectrum of decision-making behaviour, from total top-down control to complete abdication of responsibility. In reality, of course, very few effective leaders inhabit the extremes to the left and right of this model. In fact, both extremes can be considered pathological in their most negative readings.

#### Advantages and Disadvantages of the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Model

The Continuum is useful and enlightening but can also give a somewhat skewed picture of what constitutes great leadership, if interpreted incorrectly. Let's look at the pros and cons of Tannenbaum and Schmidt's Continuum of Leadership Behaviour.

#### Advantages of a Continuum Approach

- The model captures the interrelation between managerial authority and team autonomy, and the various points at which a balance can be struck.
- This approach includes both viable and non-viable modes of management, something that many models neglect.
- The continuum identifies modes which work within specific industries or sectors, where other modes would be less appropriate.
- The Tannenbaum and Schmidt model captures historical approaches which have fallen out of favour (dictatorship), as well throwing a spotlight on forms of leadership which are experiencing a surge in popularity (collaboration).

## Disadvantages of a Continuum Approach

- The continuum may give the erroneous impression that leaders follow a single style which sits somewhere on this continuum. In reality, leaders may adopt different styles at different times.
- The Tannenbaum and Schmidt model doesn't identify that certain departments within the same company may operate under different styles of leadership. Finance is unlikely to adopt the same approach as Research and Development, for instance.
- The model doesn't recognize that at times of emergency, a company may adopt a style of leadership out of keeping with the norm (temporarily becoming more top-down to survive a hostile takeover attempt, for instance).
- The continuum focuses largely on the decision-making aspect of leadership. It is less interested in the importance of inspiration and mentorship, for instance.
- Lastly, the model doesn't make the plasticity of approaches explicit. A leader may have a range of decisions to make, some of which can be fully delegated, whereas others cannot. The continuum can perhaps best be seen as the complete set of possible approaches to corporate decision-making.

## The Pressures of Leadership under the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum

In addition to their continuum, Tannenbaum and Schmidt identify three sources of pressure which shape which style of leadership is adopted:

- 1: **Situational Pressures:** environment, competitors, economy, politics, society, and more.
- 2: **Psychological Pressures:** self-doubt, inability to lose control, uncertainty.
- 3: **Pressures from Below:** subordinates pushing for decisions, expressing disagreement or doubt.

Let's examine these pressures in a little more detail.

### Situational Pressure

This may be the single largest source of pressure. Where a company sits within its market is vital. Political, societal, and economic pressure can be huge. To take a current example, imagine the pressure [Spotify's](#) CEO Daniel EK is under at present for continuing to host and defend the podcaster Joe Rogan, under accusations of his promoting misinformation and hate speech.

But situational pressure doesn't have to be so newsworthy. It can be the pressure of increased competition, technological arms races, the possibility of a takeover, a dip in market valuation, the need to diversify, or many other market-specific factors.

Corporate ethos can be a kind of situational pressure too. A co-operative may not be able to adopt a top-down approach to decision-making if, within its corporate charter, this is ruled out. On the other hand, a financial institution may be bound by rigid regulations and the need to follow high standards of data security and hygiene, which may preclude a collaborative approach to decision making, favouring a more rule-bound system.

### Psychological Pressure

One aspect of inner pressure can be situational too – a CEO undergoing a messy divorce may find themselves better served by increased delegation, since they temporarily lack the headspace for complete focus on top-down decision making.

It can also be an intrinsic quality of the type of person heading up a company, department, or team. Some leaders are simply better delegators than others, having a high degree of trust and an ability to inspire hard work. Other leaders inspire by example, by being brilliant innovators or disruptors -- “visionaries”, in other words. For this latter type of leader, the pressure may simply be to keep coming up with new ideas.

The impact a decision may have will also affect the manner in which a leader selects what decision should be taken. Leaders may feel the pressure of being ultimately responsible for the consequences of the actions of their employees. They may feel pressure from other stakeholder groups too, including clients, boards of directors, investors, and shareholders.

### Subordinate Pressure

Pressure can manifest through subordinates wanting to have more of a say in decision-making than is wise or possible. Where tasks have been delegated, pressure can come from an unwillingness among team-members to take responsibility for their decisions. It can also issue from subordinates who are unable or unwilling to enact decisions handed down to them.

All of these pressures can make a leader doubt their abilities, or the style of leadership they have adopted. It can be difficult to know whether to proceed in the face of team opposition or recalibrate and bow to pressure from peers or underlings.

Leaders generally develop a kind of intuition or inner voice which tells them when they are on the right track, even in the face of naysaying from below. In her book [Forged in Crisis](#), business historian Nancy Koehn talks about five leaders who followed their own conviction in the face of great opposition, both from colleagues and environmental or political opposition.

She gives the example of the polar explorer Shackleton waiting for the Antarctic ice to thaw, explaining “he knew how to manage his worst enemies, the naysayers. He couldn’t fire the

people who doubted him and spread pessimism and negativity because they were all on the ice together, but he kept the naysayers close, so he himself could contain them.”

In this way, Shackleton was exhibiting both selling and consulting behaviours, in Tannenbaum and Schmidt terms, being just as dictatorial as he needed to be, whilst consulting with his crew regarding their fears and wellbeing.

### How the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Leadership Continuum Remains Useful

Given its focus on decision-making, the continuum can be a useful model at the expansion stages of a start-up, when the CEO and founders are concretizing the corporate ethos and expanding their team. It can be vital to agree early on whether the company will have a cooperative, collaborative, or top-down decision-making structure. When constructing a mission statement, founders should include a statement of their beliefs about how decisions should be taken, and who will be held accountable.

The continuum can also be useful analytic tool, a way of identifying common features of companies in particular industries or sectors. By comparing a company’s attitude to decision-making to the norm within an industry, it’s easier to determine whether the business in question is an outlier or disruptor. The continuum approach can also be used to characterise the variety of contrasting decision-making strategies within different departments in the same organisation.

Finally, as a teaching aid, the Continuum continues to be a useful way of illustrating the complexity of decision-making in a corporate setting as well as the pressures that leaders face when deciding how fully to engage their subordinates in the process.

While there may be other models which capture more complete pictures of leadership, as a composite portrait of all the different styles of decision-making, the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Leadership Continuum remains an important tool.



