

**Management & Organisational Behaviour**

**Module code: BMIH5004**

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**Submission Date: 07.02.2025**

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## Leadership Styles in Hospitality: The Role of Democratic Leadership in Team Effectiveness and Employee Morale

Leadership in the hospitality industry is widely regarded as a critical factor in influencing team effectiveness and employee morale. Over several decades, scholars have devised numerous theories to explain and analyse leadership, ranging from trait-based models to more situational and transformational approaches (Mullins, 2019). These theoretical frameworks serve as a basis for explaining how leaders can motivate employees, improve communication, and enhance overall organisational performance. The hospitality sector specifically demands leaders capable of adapting their style due to the unique interplay of customer expectations, flexible work arrangements, and multicultural teams (Boddy, 2017). The interplay between leaders and followers in hotels can directly impact service quality and guest satisfaction. Accordingly, the study of leadership styles within the hotel management context remains essential for improving both team effectiveness and employee morale.

Early leadership research often focused on trait theories, suggesting that leaders possessed certain persistent qualities such as charisma, intelligence, and confidence. While this approach led to an understanding of key attributes that leaders might exhibit, critics argued that traits alone could not account for all variations in leadership success (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2019). Behavioural theories later emerged, categorising leadership along task-oriented or relationship-oriented behaviours (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2007). This shift placed emphasis on the actions leaders displayed, indicating that leadership could be learned rather than being purely innate. Contingency theories, such as Fiedler's contingency model, suggested that leadership effectiveness depended

on situational factors, including the nature of the task, the work environment, and follower characteristics (Armstrong, 2012). These perspectives underscored that there is no singular, universally effective leadership approach.

Additional perspectives include transformational and transactional leadership theories. Transformational leadership emphasises vision, inspiration, and the cultivation of intrinsic motivation. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is structured around exchanges, using rewards and disciplinary measures to influence follower behaviour (Armstrong, 2021). These leadership approaches describe different patterns of leader-follower relationships yet have distinct analytical perspectives. Leaders who adopt transformational styles exhibit creative practises and empowerment features although transactional leaders maintain programmes that emphasise performance measurements and workplace compliance (Mullins and Dosser, 2013). Hotel leaders combine different approaches drawn from these theories to achieve coordination and navigate competitive challenges.

Among the established classifications of leadership styles—Autocratic, Democratic, and Laissez-faire—democratic leadership often stands out for its emphasis on participation, communication, and shared decision making (Arnold, 2020). In this style, leaders encourage employees to voice opinions and contribute to organisational processes. This contrasts with autocratic leadership, which involves top-down decision making and minimal employee input. Laissez-faire leadership, conversely, grants full autonomy to team members with little direct leadership intervention (Boddy, 2017). While these categories are frequently oversimplified in practice, they remain useful conceptual frameworks

for discussing the dynamics of power and authority in various organisational settings.

Focusing on democratic leadership, a prominent advantage lies in its capacity to foster a more inclusive environment. Employee morale often flourishes within democratic contexts because staff members feel respected and acknowledged (Mullins, 2023). This style can stimulate creative approaches to problem-solving, as employees pool their knowledge and discuss multiple perspectives. In a team comprising diverse personalities and cultural backgrounds, a democratic leader can provide a sense of unity and collective ownership. For instance, in a hotel setting, frontline employees typically interact with guests more frequently than managers do. When the leader encourages employees to share valuable insights gleaned directly from guest feedback, the entire establishment can refine its service standards. This participatory approach can elevate service quality and efficiency while helping team members grow more confident and satisfied with their roles (Armstrong, 2021).

However, democratic leadership has potential downsides that can impact team effectiveness if not managed appropriately. Decision-making processes tend to be more time-consuming because the leader aims to consult various stakeholders and solicit extensive feedback (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2007). In fast-paced hospitality settings—such as during peak seasons or in responding to an unexpected crisis—excessive deliberation can delay crucial decisions (Mullins, 2019). Likewise, there is a tendency for conflicts to arise if team members cannot reconcile differing viewpoints, potentially prolonging discussions without making progress. In certain crisis situations, an autocratic approach may be warranted, at least temporarily, to obtain swift resolutions.

Another criticism of democratic leadership is that junior team members may feel reluctant to voice differing opinions if they lack confidence or if cultural factors discourage open disagreement with superiors (Bloisi et al., 2007). Thus, even a theoretically inclusive approach may fail if leaders do not cultivate psychological safety among team members.

Within hotel management, the democratic style can prove advantageous in multiple facets, including daily operational decisions and strategic planning. One noted example is in scheduling staff for different shifts. Rather than unilaterally assigning shift patterns, a democratic leader might encourage employees to suggest a schedule that aligns with their personal obligations, ensuring a more cooperative and trusting atmosphere (Armstrong, 2012). Another application might be the introduction of a new menu item in a hotel restaurant. Instead of imposing management preferences, leaders might hold a brainstorming session where chefs, wait staff, and supervisors share their perspectives on cost, taste, and presentation (Robbins and Judge, 2017). Such inclusionary tactics can elevate team spirit, especially in an industry that relies heavily on interpersonal relationships and customer-facing roles. The participatory nature of democratic leadership also helps cultivate employee loyalty. When employees witness that their opinions matter, they may become more committed to the organisation's vision.

Yet, the benefits of democratic leadership are contingent upon the context. In a reputable international hotel chain, management often deals with brand-wide policy decisions that might not always be open to negotiation (Adair, 2009). In these cases, managers who generally prefer a democratic style might need to adopt more centralised methods to comply with brand directives. Similarly,

novice managers who try to apply democratic principles might struggle to reach consensus among large teams. Effective implementation of democratic leadership in the hotel industry necessitates proper communication channels, training sessions for managers to facilitate open dialogue, and a culture that trusts employees' problem-solving capabilities.

Team effectiveness can be significantly enhanced under an effective democratic leader. Studies have shown that employee participation in decision making is often linked with greater job satisfaction, which in turn boosts productivity and decreases absenteeism (Mullins and Dosser, 2013). Additionally, engaged employees can better align with organisational objectives, leading to harmonious task coordination. When a front-desk representative, housekeeping staff, and restaurant manager all understand the importance of delivering consistent service quality, a democratic environment prompts them to voice concerns and suggest improvements openly. This synergy not only improves operational efficiency but also fosters a shared sense of accountability for the guest experience. However, democratic leadership can occasionally slow processes, especially if decisive action is required to address demanding guests or urgent health and safety issues (Bloisi et al., 2007). A balanced approach to leadership style selection—allowing for democratic methods but also ensuring timely decisions—may be necessary.

Employee morale in hospitality is profoundly influenced by leadership style, given the emotional labour involved in sustaining top-notch customer service (Arnold, 2020). With democratic leadership, employees often report feeling more valued because they have a voice in matters that concern day-to-day operations. Such empowerment can alleviate some of the stress associated with

constant interaction with demanding guests. When employees perceive that they can contribute to improvements—such as recommending changes to improve check-in processes or housekeeping protocols—they may approach their roles with a higher level of enthusiasm (Armstrong, 2021). Furthermore, a democratic atmosphere can encourage peer support, as team members look to one another for ideas and build on shared solutions. This encourages social cohesion, which can act as a buffer against burnout. Conversely, if the democratic approach is poorly managed and employees see that consultations are superficial or that leaders ultimately disregard their suggestions, morale could deteriorate and cynicism might arise.

Case studies in hospitality illuminate varying outcomes of democratic leadership. For example, at the Hilton London Bankside, managers reported improved guest satisfaction scores after actively soliciting and implementing employee feedback on housekeeping quality checks (Armstrong, 2012). The inclusive policy not only enhanced cleanliness standards but also empowered staff to identify emerging issues, leading to more proactive service. Another example comes from the Porto Elounda Golf & Spa Resort in Crete, Greece, which established employee-led committees to propose guest entertainment ideas (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2007). Through open discussions, employees introduced cultural performances that resonated strongly with international visitors. This approach exemplified how democratic leadership can harness collective insight to produce meaningful reforms; however, there were instances of slower decision times in implementing these initiatives, indicating that a level of strategic direction and time-management skill is crucial during peak tourist seasons.

Democratic leadership can enhance team effectiveness by capitalising on the talents and insights of all employees. The leader's role includes moderating discussions to ensure full participation and guiding conversations to converge on practical outcomes (Boddy, 2017). When conflicts emerge, a democratic leader needs to step in to facilitate reconciliation rather than let disagreements fester. By proactively addressing disputes through open dialogue, team members can learn to collaborate more productively. This approach also fosters accountability, as decisions are made collectively. Each member feels a degree of ownership, thereby reducing the likelihood of blame-shifting in case something goes wrong.

On the other hand, democratic leadership can hinder team effectiveness if operational pressures increase to a point where rapid decisions are necessary (Mullins, 2023). If a high-end hotel is suddenly confronted with a crisis—such as a technology failure affecting reservations—the manager might need to implement a short-term autocratic method to quickly restore normal operations. While democratic processes could still be used for reflection afterward, immediate response times are critical in hotel environments where guest satisfaction directly influences reputation. Another risk is “decision paralysis,” where a manager failing to effectively drive the team toward a conclusive resolution allows endless debate (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2007). If leaders cannot offer direction or if the group lacks consensus-building skills, the democratic process may inadvertently stall progress.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of democratic leadership in the hotel industry depends heavily on the organisational culture and the leaders' aptitude for facilitation (Mullins, 2019). Hotel managers should guide discussions tactfully, summarise key points, and encourage even the most reserved employees to

contribute. Training programs can be developed to equip managers with negotiation and facilitation skills, fostering the presence of confident, inclusive leadership. In addition, hotels must establish systematic follow-ups to ensure that the outcomes of democratic decision making are implemented. If employees observe that their contributions are not taken seriously after repeated consultations, cynicism may develop, diluting trust in management (Robbins and Judge, 2017).

In conclusion, leadership in the hospitality industry reflects an integration of theoretical perspectives and practical demands, with democratic leadership offering a distinct approach that can substantially influence team effectiveness and employee morale. Unlike the clear hierarchical directives of autocratic leadership, democratic leadership promotes participation, creativity, and a sense of shared ownership. Its applicability and success hinge on factors such as organisational culture, the urgency of decisions, and the manager's facilitation skills. When implemented effectively, democratic leadership aligns employees around common goals, enriches their sense of engagement, and positively impacts service quality—an essential metric in the highly competitive hospitality marketplace. However, hotel managers must remain cognisant of its limitations, particularly regarding the potentially time-consuming processes and the risk of unresolved conflicts. A balanced approach that combines democratic ideals with timely decision making can optimise outcomes, ensuring that employees feel both valued and guided. This equilibrium, supported by solid training, clear communication channels, and consistent follow-up, can help hotels enhance guest satisfaction and foster a motivated, collaborative workforce.

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