To Get Results, the Best Leaders Both Push and Pull Their Teams

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Motivating people
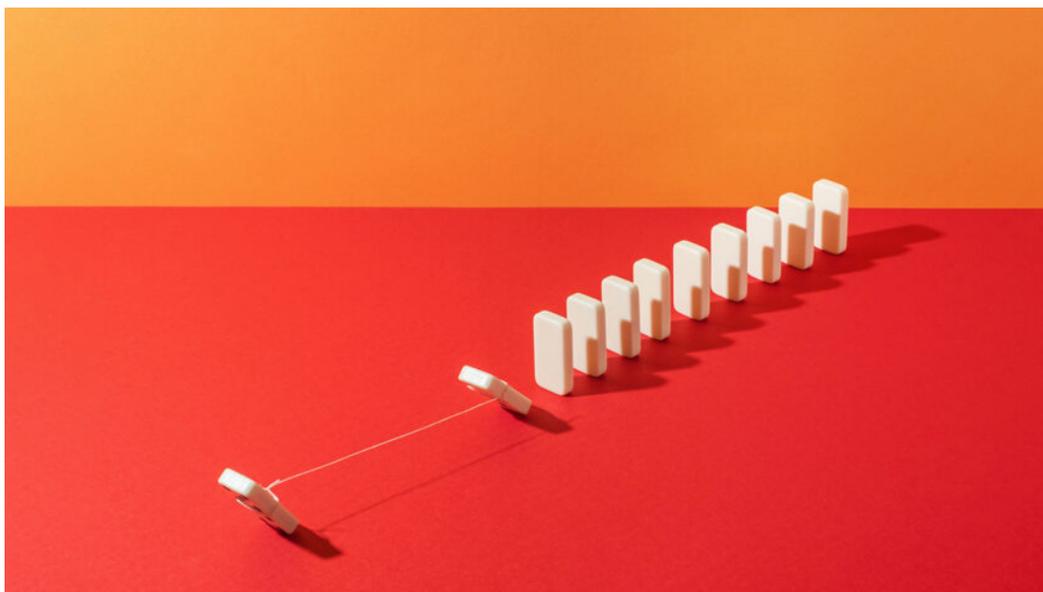
by

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Summary.
Over the past year, there has been a call for leaders to be less demanding and more empathetic toward individual employees. To get results, managers needed to rely on "pull" — giving employees a say in how they carry a task out and using inspiration and motivation to get them going. But an analysis of thousands of 360-degree assessments showed that the most effective leaders also know how to "push" — drive for results by telling people what to do and holding them accountable. The takeaway? Your efforts to increase empathy shouldn't

diminish your ability to, on occasion, push when needed. The data shows that it can be a strong force that builds confidence among employees. The key is to know when to use which approach, depending on the task, the timing, and the people.

When you see a task that needs to be accomplished by your team, do you "push" them to get it done or do you "pull" them in, giving them a say in how they carry it out and using inspiration and motivation to get them going? These are two very different approaches to reach a goal, and the latter is often the best one, but knowing how to combine these two paths is an important skill for managers and leaders.

Take this example from a client of ours. There had been an ongoing discussion about the company's policies around the environment and sustainability. The CEO had allowed debate and encouraged everyone to weigh in. The CEO strongly supported the need for change but allowed time for ample discussion (using the pull approach). However, two members of the executive team were naysayers and dragged their feet on enacting any of the proposed initiatives. After two months of inaction, the CEO announced to the team that the company was going to implement two initiatives and stated that everyone needed to get on board (moving to the push approach). One of the executives balked at this and made clear he wouldn't support the initiatives. The CEO terminated him by the end of the week (using the ultimate push approach).

Leaders who are willing to try hard with pulling but ultimately resort to a strong push provide a good example of the power of the combination of these two approaches. Pushing too hard can erode satisfaction but, at times, is needed, especially when pulling just doesn't work.

In our research, my colleague Jack Zenger and I identified two leadership behaviors directed at the same end goal but utilizing opposite approaches. We call one behavior "driving for results" (push), and the other "inspiring and motivating others" (pull). Let me define what I mean.

Defining Pushing and Pulling

When a leader identifies a goal that they want to accomplish**,** there are two distinct paths to get there.

Pushing involves giving direction, telling people what to do, establishing a deadline, and generally holding others accountable. It is on the "authoritarian" end of the leadership style spectrum.

Pulling, on the other hand, involves describing to a direct report a needed task, explaining the underlying reason for it, seeing what ideas they might have on how to best accomplish it, and asking if they are willing to take it on. The leader can further enhance the pull by

describing what this project might do for the employee's development. Ideally, the leader's energy and enthusiasm for the goal are contagious.

Gathering data from over 100,000 leaders through our 360-degree assessments, we measured both push and pull and found that 76% of the leaders were rated by their peers as more competent at pushing than pulling. Only 22% of the leaders were rated as better at pulling, and a mere 2% were rated as equal on both skills.

We also asked the people rating those leaders (over 1.6 million people) which skill was more important for a leader to do well to be successful in their current job. Pulling (inspiring others) was rated as the most important, while pushing (driving for results) was rated as fifth most important.

Understanding What People Want and Need

While our data is clear that most leaders could benefit from improving their ability to pull or inspire others, our research revealed that leaders who were effective at both pushing and pulling were ultimately the most effective.

We gathered 360-degree assessment data on 3,875 leaders in the pandemic. In this analysis, we did the following:
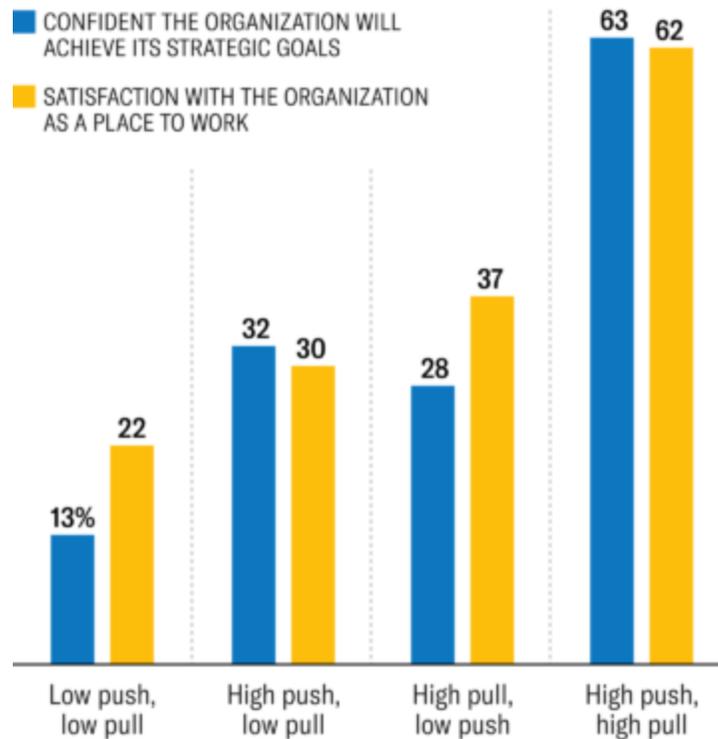
- The direct reports rated the leader's effectiveness on both pushing (driving for results) and pulling (inspiring and motivating others).
- The direct reports were also asked to rate their confidence that the organization would achieve its strategic goals and their satisfaction with their organization as a place to work.
- We ranked leaders' data on pushing and pulling into quartiles and identified those who were low (bottom quartile) and high (top quartile).

The results are captured in the chart below. When both push and pull are in the bottom quartile, both confidence and satisfaction of direct reports are low. When push is high and pull is low, both confidence and satisfaction increase. When pull is high, satisfaction increases to a level substantially above confidence. When both are high, then you see the most significant increase. (Note: High confidence and satisfaction were measured by the percentage of people who marked 5 on a 5-point scale. This is a very high bar for satisfaction.)

Impact of Push- and Pull-Leadership Approaches on Confidence and Satisfaction

Combining both tactics results in the highest levels of engagement.

Percent of direct reports who reported high confidence and high satisfaction

- CONFIDENT THE ORGANIZATION WILL ACHIEVE ITS STRATEGIC GOALS
- SATISFACTION WITH THE ORGANIZATION AS A PLACE TO WORK

	Confident	Satisfaction
Low push, low pull	13%	22
High push, low pull	32	30
High pull, low push	28	37
High push, high pull	63	62

Source: Zenger Folkman, 2021   ⛉ HBR

Bringing Push and Pull Together

As many leaders across the globe grapple with retention and how to prevent their employees from joining the Great Resignation, they're asking themselves hard questions. How do you motivate people to stay? How do you encourage them to increase their efforts? What is it they really want and need from their work environments?

Over the past few years, there has been a call for leaders to be less demanding and more empathetic toward individual employees. More pull, less push seemed to be what's needed to retain talented employees. While I agree with this sentiment, this data also offers a clear warning. Your efforts to increase empathy shouldn't diminish your ability to, on occasion, push when needed. As our data shows that it can be a strong force that builds confidence.

In fact, your influence as a leader comes from your ability to know when to use which approach, depending on the task, the timing, and the people. So next time you're trying to accomplish a significant goal, consider whether your team really needs a good push, a big pull, or perhaps both.

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> Joseph Folkman is the president of Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy. He is a coauthor of the October 2011 HBR article "Making Yourself Indispensable" and the book *The New Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders* (McGraw Hill, 2019). Connect with Joe at twitter.com/joefolkman.

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