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.

**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.)
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.

Read more on **Motivating people** or related topics **Leadership styles** and **Employee performance management**

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