

The hard work of being a soft manager

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Soft management does not mean weak management. A tentative approach to a critical decision in an unfamiliar environment is not a sign of indecision but common sense. Criticism from subordinates does not necessarily imply disrespect but may only mean they are looking at things from a different perspective.

Conversely, tough management does not necessarily mean effective management. Self-confidence can be a cover for fear or arrogance. Being resolute may actually mean being autocratic. Tough nosed may mean thick skinned.

Openness can be an effective management style as indeed intentional vulnerability.

Being a soft manager is not easy. It takes courage to be open minded, well informed and responsible and to walk straight into adversity rather than seek to avoid it. Staying open to different possibilities can lead to better decisions drawn from a wider range of choices.

Managers will find it productive to listen to objections and complaints, to understand what the subordinates are thinking and feeling and to open up to their arguments and displeasure. Vulnerability can improve the credibility of leaders.

Intelligence, energy, confidence and responsibility are widely considered necessary attributes for a leader to succeed. But candor, sensitivity and willingness to suffer the painful consequences of an unpopular decision also belong to the list.