



## 17 Democratic Leadership Examples & Characteristics

By Dave Cornell (PhD) and Peer Reviewed by Chris Drew (PhD) / October 23, 2022



A [democratic leadership style](#) is characterized by including employees in the decision-making process. The opinions of all members of the organization are respected and valued, and so their input on a wide range of issues is welcomed and encouraged.

The fundamental idea is that great ideas can come from anyone, at any time.



Therefore, each individual should be encouraged to make suggestions and express their opinions. Everyone is focused on achieving the company's goals and solving problems collectively.

Naturally, the first example of democratic leadership that comes to mind first is in reference to political systems. Nearly half of the world's population live in a country with some version of democracy. In the business world, examples include Google and Coca-Cola.

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## Definition Of Democratic Leadership

**A democratic leadership style is based on the concept of inclusion. Every member of the organization is considered a valuable member of the team and is involved in the decision-making process.**

Some of the best decisions made by a company have come from employees at lower levels of the organizational chart.

Creating an organizational culture based on democratic leadership produces many positive outcomes. In addition to employees generating innovative solutions and multiple routes to solving problems, many employees develop a [strong sense of loyalty](#) to the company.

Because they feel that their opinions are valued and respected, there is less turnover and absenteeism, which are usually indicators of low morale and dissatisfaction.



## Real-Life Democratic Leadership Examples

1. **Worker Cooperatives** – Worker cooperatives are run by workers, where the leader is voted into power by the workers, and they collectively make decisions on a committee.
2. **Google** – Employees are encouraged to participate in meetings as much as possible because the top executives understand that a great idea can come from anywhere.
3. **Tim Cook (CEO of Apple)** – Known for surrounding himself with people who disagree and challenge him.
4. **Muhtar Kent (CEO of Coca-Cola)** – Known for distributing power across various committees and regional groups.
5. **Dwight D. Eisenhower** – Famous for relying heavily on experts to help him to make decisions and influence how the US government should be run.
6. **Alfie Kohn** – This progressive educator argues for democratic leadership by teachers and parents, which he says empowers children to think for themselves and make decisions for the collective good.
7. **4H Club** – A club for youths, the leaders of the organization don't intervene in grassroots decisions by the various clubs around America.
8. **Nelson Mandela** – Leader of the ANC in South Africa, Mandela tried to build a coalition of people across all racial groups that was truly

democratic rather than colonialist.



## **Democratic Leadership Characteristics**

### **9. Participatory Meetings**

**We can find many examples of a democratic leadership philosophy in a company's policies and practices. The weekly meeting would be the first place to look.**

The way the meeting is conducted by the manager will indicate if the leadership style is democratic or autocratic. If the manager solicits the opinions of the staff and encourages them to express their views, then they probably have a democratic philosophy.

Another indication is in how much they speak. If they dominate the meeting with instructions and directives, informing the staff of exactly how their duties are to be carried out, then this is an indicator of an autocratic style.

Not only can we determine a manager's philosophy by how much they speak, but also by their tone. If they use a tone of voice that is respectful and polite, then it means that they value their staff and see them as worthwhile members of the team.

### **10. A Collaborative Workplace Environment**

**Democratic organizations are designed to encourage collaboration and discussion so new ideas can thrive.**



Google may be the most well-known company that practices a democratic leadership style. Employees are encouraged to participate in meetings as much as possible because the top executives understand that a great idea can come from anywhere.

In fact, just taking a look at photos from the headquarters and you can see that the company puts a lot of effort into creating an environment that fosters participation and creativity. We have all seen the foosball tables and meeting pods. Google puts a great deal of emphasis in creating an intellectually stimulating environment that nurtures collaboration.

Respecting the ability of its employees by encouraging them to be creative has led to something called an Innovation Review Committee. Usually headed by one of the top executives, this committee is where employees can take their ideas and make sure that someone at the top hears them.

## **11. Surrounding Yourself With People Who Disagree**

**A democratic leader likes people who disagree with them and challenge their views. Tim Cook, for example, hires people who challenge and inspire him.**

Tim Cook became CEO of Apple in 2011. He has surrounded himself with executives that are experienced and insightful. His demeanor is warm and friendly, and this helps create an atmosphere which is empowering and motivating. Executives and employees feel comfortable making decisions, taking risks, and do not feel shackled by a fear of failure.

His approach can be seen in how Apple recruits. As quoted in Strategy Watch:



*“You look for people who appreciate different points of view. People who care enough that they have an idea at 11 at night and they want to call and talk to you about it. Because they’re so excited about it, they want to push the idea further. And that they believe that somebody can help them push the idea another step instead of them doing everything themselves.”*

Apple continues to be a leading performer in the tech sector since Cook has taken the helm.

## **12. Allocation And Distribution Of Power**

Unlike [autocratic leaders](#), democratic leaders aim to empower the people around them so that power isn’t all concentrated in the leader. For example, as businesses grow, the leader will need to start hiring people to make autonomous decisions.

In smaller companies, the person at the very top is likely to make all decisions. Mostly likely the company was founded by the owner after many years of hard work and struggles.



However, as a company grows, everything becomes more complex. This is also true of budgets and KPIs. Therefore, it is wise for the owner, or president, to seek the advice of others.

By consulting a team of experienced professionals, the founder can have greater confidence in those decisions. Goals can be more realistic and action plans more feasible.

If the company keeps growing, then there will come a time when key decisions are allocated to different departments, each with its own head and structure. This is the nature of business growth. It is much wiser for the founder to gradually “let go” of control and rely on the expertise of others.

### **13. Regionalized Power Structures**

**Similarly, power may be distributed by a democratic leader based upon the regions in which people operate. This can empower different regions to make decisions based on the needs of the people who live in that region. Muhtar Kent, CEO of Coca-Cola, does this well.**

Muhtar Kent became CEO of Coca-Cola in 2008. The company has a management structure which is based on regional responsibilities, with the board of directors overseeing regional and divisional leaders.

By having top execs serve on multiple committees, it ensures that decision-making is distributed across several members, so that no one individual accumulates too much control. This demonstrates confidence in members of the team, which is a key feature of a democratic leadership style.

More specific examples of Kent's democratic leadership style can be seen in his interviews. For example, in one piece from Fortune, Kent states that:



*“Every moment of every day is an opportunity to start or strengthen a relationship, and those relationships, if cultivated, can lead to incredible opportunities for everyone involved.”*

These words show the value that Kent places on individuals in the company and his respect for their abilities and aspirations.

#### **14. Embracing A Process Improvement Approach**

**The process improvement approach is a component of Total Quality Management (TQM). It emphasizes that everything in an organization is a process that consists of inputs, processing and outputs.**

This means that every step of any process will include identifying each step, analyzing it, and making adjustments that will ultimately lead to an improved process. The improvement does not have to be monumental. Even slight adjustments can produce significant improvements over the long-term.

In order to achieve process improvement however, it requires the input of people involved in that process. For upper management, this means listening to the opinions of people not in upper management.

So, listening to the line employees in a manufacturing plant is common practice.



The people in direct contact and daily experience in a process can often provide very valuable suggestions.

Without a democratic leadership style however, their suggestions will never be heard.

## 15. Listening To Experts

**Democratic leaders are happy to include experts into a discussion and rely upon them when making decisions. Dwight Eisenhower is a prime example of this type of democratic leader.**

Eisenhower was the 34<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, from 1953-1961.

Eisenhower first became famous for his leadership during WWII. Hence, you would expect his leadership style to be very autocratic.

Perhaps it was while he was in the military, but it changed significantly when he became president of the US. He typified the democratic leadership style by relying heavily on experts to guide his decision-making.

In exhibiting another key characteristic of the democratic leadership style, he was quick to accept responsibility for failure but credit others for success, as can be seen in this famous quote:

*“Leadership consists of nothing but taking responsibility for everything that goes wrong and giving your*

*subordinates credit for everything that goes well.”*



## **16. An Open Door Policy**

**When a manager, department head, or executive has an Open Door policy, it means that all employees have access. Anyone can approach and express an opinion, make a suggestion, or even complain.**

This is a practice that is a clear example of a democratic leadership style. When even low-level staff can bend the ear of a top executive it will lead to many positive outcomes for the entire organization.

First and foremost, it creates a feeling among the staff that they are important; their opinions are valued and respected.

In addition, executives spend a great deal of their time meeting with other executives. After several years, they can completely lose an understanding of the basic processes that are so vital to the success of the company.

By interacting with and listening to those at all levels of the organization, top executives can gain tremendously valuable insights into how the company operates.

## **17. Decision-Making By Consensus**

**Making a decision by consensus means that everyone agrees to that decision.**



After discussion of the various pros and cons of several projects, the committee or board take a vote. A simple majority will not suffice. Absolutely everyone has to say yes. In effect, each person has veto power.

Finalizing a decision that has been agreed to by all members of the team is not an easy accomplishment. It can lead to protracted discussions and a final decision that is agreed to by everyone, but fully supported by just a few.

It is an example of democratic leadership that is rare because of how difficult it is to accomplish. More than likely, the CEO or president of a company will try to obtain consensus for big decisions, but if that fails, they will have to make the final call.

## Conclusion

The democratic leadership style exists in some of the largest corporations in the world, including Coca-Cola, Apple, and Google. Each of these companies has a quite different business model and operate in completely different industries, but yet, have a similar leadership philosophy.

Being a democratic leader means respecting the views of your employees. It means soliciting their opinions regarding issues great and small. It means acknowledging that the people at the top of the organizational chart don't have all the answers. Great ideas can come from any level.

Manifestations of the democratic leadership style come in the form of process improvement procedures, Open Door policies, and seeking the input of staff when it comes to the budget and setting KPIs.

Next read about [examples of leadership](#) and consider exploring the [servant leadership model](#) which has several parallels with the democratic leadership style.



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