

# How UPS has lasted for more than a century: An analysis of its style of leadership and working.

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## **Abstract**

Leaders and their style of leadership are one of the catalyzing factors for the success, endurance, and longevity of any organization. The way the leaders inspire their followers, take decisions and perform other necessary managerial functions, is what differentiates a company from its competitors and helps it in achieving its end objectives and goals and causes a company to weather through the market to last for generations to come. Companies that have survived in the market for a very long time ranging in a span of decades are companies that are doing something right and an analysis of the style of leadership of such organization can reveal the secrets of its longevity. This paper has made an attempt in understanding the leadership secrets at UPS Inc. which are responsible for the company, being in business for more than a century in the logistics, courier and shipping services industry.

**Keywords:** Leadership style analysis, collective leadership, group responsibility, ESOPs, UPS Inc.

## **1. Introduction**

The United Parcel Service, Inc. or UPS was started in the year 1907 by Mr. James. E. Casey and Mr. Claude Ryan with a capital of USD 100 in Seattle, Washington for providing an end-to-end personal messenger, parcel delivery, and other ancillary services. The retail industry was the bread-and-butter market for the American Messenger Company while the prime cut of meat for the company was the U.S. Post Office which relied on the company for its special delivery mails (Francis, A. 2023). The iconic brown liveried vehicles and trucks were introduced by the company, 9 years post its formation by a partner of the company, Mr. Charles Soderstrom whose idea was not only iconic from a marketing pov but also practical from the operations pov as the shade of brown chosen acted to hide all filth, mud and grime picked up or washed upon the trucks on the unpaved and muddy roads in the then USA. The current name of the company emerged in the year 1919 following that year, the company expanded to a larger scale of operations, increasing its reach beyond the USA in the passing days ahead (UPS History: founding, timeline, and milestones – Zippia, 2023).

As a company, UPS Inc. is still going strong today, thriving in a cutthroat market in the V.U.C.A World. It is necessary to understand how this is possible, where the secret of its success and longevity lies and it is in its unique styles of leadership. Ciulla, J. B., & Ciulla, J. B.

(2020) state that companies and organizations with a strong ethical core and a people-minded leadership mindset are the ones who last for a long period of time, as they understand what is at stake and how to achieve their goals in mind, in a way involving the people as a cohesive unit, as such companies are motivated by something more than just profit or keeping the balance sheet green as such behavior and actions generates trust within the organization for its employees, which can act as a catalyst in times of need. The style of leadership of UPS Inc. is in congruence with this, which might explain why it has lasted for a very long time, since its formation a century ago.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The roles of leaders in an organization**

For an organization to be successful, it needs to have leaders who can inspire a success creation mindset within the employees, workers and other personnel of the organization, right from the shop floor to the board room. Companies who are blessed with leaders who understand the how's, the what's and the why's of managerial decision-making are in a position to take more useful decisions as they know what is at stake, the deliverables and how they are to be delivered (Al-Hussami, M., Hammad, S., & Alsoleihat, F. 2018). Leaders who create a sense of responsibility within themselves, regarding why they are working in the organization, what is expected from them in the organization and what steps

they need to take for delivering the goods are in a position to create the same in their followers, wherein a kind of 'culture of success' is created as the followers who are inspired by the leaders, help each other to achieve the end outputs (Lo, M. C. et. al., 2010). It is to be noted that leaders are created, not born. An employee when he joins the organization is introduced to his colleagues, superiors and the equipment he is expected to work with. As he progresses forward in the organization, certain leadership tasks and other responsibilities are allotted to him, in congruence with his ability to deliver (Brown, C. et. al., 2023).

Being that in many cases, 100% clarity, transparency and data/resources about the situation wherein he is expected to lead are not disclosed, the employee is expected to fill in the gaps with his own take on the situation. A good way to enhance this is by the creation of leadership development activities that are based on the framework of developmental theories and principles and the creation of and maintenance of a conducive organizational culture that reinforces the development of leaders so that the employees who are leading will be placed in situations which can support and enhance their abilities to lead and achieve the end results (Ruvolo, C. M., Peterson, S. A., & LeBoeuf, J. N. G. 2004). It is to be noted that leaders cannot be successful all the time and there are times when they may take wrong decisions or may take right decisions but may be implemented in a wrong way or take decisions based on incomplete or non-proper analysis of data or make take decisions which cannot be implemented due to reasons which the leader may not be in control of (Edmondson, A. C., 2004). A leader who fails is expected to understand why he failed, and how he failed so that he may learn from the failure in order to avoid repeating it in the future. Leaders who learn from their mistakes are in a better position to avoid making them in the days ahead and may take better decisions in the days ahead (Burke, R. J., 2006).

Leaders who refuse to accept their responsibilities in case they may take wrong decisions leading to failure, leaders to try to hide or shift the blame or try to scapegoat or implicate a subordinate or one of their enemies are leaders who will not last long in organizations as they try doing many things other than analyzing their own failure, which will in time ultimately lead to their demise (Bauer, D. R., 1990). Organizations, wherein there is a sense of 'task management' as per Blake and Mouton's management grid are organizations where the above can be seen on a regular basis as the culture of the organization does not permit failure and thus leaders quickly learn to hide their failures and only display success stories are organizations who may not last for a long time as the rot in the system as the consequences of task management will bring the company to the ground (Douglas, T., 2002).

## 2.2. The importance of the style of leadership as a catalyst for longevity

In the V.U.C.A, the world of today, startups die fast, existing companies struggle to survive, and large organizations are brought down because of their weight, in the same way how stars end up becoming supernovas. For a company to last for several decades in such a world, there has to be a reason behind, reasons which can explain what it is doing right so that it takes the right decisions, ensuring its long-term survival and leaders play a crucial role in this, as they are the one who acts as catalysts, which ensures that the company takes the right decisions, with the right resources and at the right time (Schmenner, R. W., 1986). Leaders have to select their own styles of leadership to lead as one size fits all approach does not always work in organizations. According to Blake and Mouton's management grid, 9p9 Combinations of various ways and styles of five different kinds of management/leadership approaches exist in organizations around the world. They are - 1) The Country Club Management style wherein concern for people is highest and concern for production is the lowest. 2) Authority Compliance or Task management where concern for production is highest and is lowest for the people. 3) Improvised management where both concerns are equally low. 4) Team management where both concerns are equally high. 5) Middle-of-the-road management where concern for people and production is exactly in the middle. Leaders have to select a style of leadership using the elements from the grid which needs to be flexible, enabling them to change their style as per the changing situations (Garg, S., & Jain, S. 2013).

Research conducted to identify why only a few companies have managed to stay in business for more than a century has revealed that these companies focused on strengthening their core, enabling them to last for more than ten decades in the markets today. The leaders in such organizations cannot stick to a single style but must be flexible and more alert to any changes in the markets, the external and internal environment so that they can develop or adapt to a new style or styles of leadership of their own, in congruence with the responsibilities on hand and the deliverables to be done in the future (Graves, S. B., & Waddock, S. A. 2000).

While selecting a leadership style, the leader has to identify whether they will be in a position to change any beliefs or behaviors which can shape the organization or the society. The selected style of leadership has to gel well with the current employees and the ones in the future, wherein they will be able to develop the necessary skills for changing and adapting themselves to the changing times. The decisions made by the leader for this can ensure the identification of a proper purpose, which can justify the decisions made by the leader (Hill, A. 2018b). Leaders can ensure stability in the stewardship of

the organization by identification of employees and personnel who possess critical levels of skills, influence, information and knowledge about the organization, the business and how the company is managed. It should be the responsibility of the leader to create the ways and means necessary to keep the above personnel on board in the organization so that he can work with them to lead the company to the future and the leader has to see to it that his chosen style of leadership is enabled for the above so that the personnel identified will be able to take over from the leader, once his time runs its course in the organization (Hernandez, M. 2008).

In selecting a style, the leader should see to it that it has an element of transparency and openness to it as if he is able to show his followers and his superiors how he does the things he does, he will be in a position to inspire trust and potential future leaders as well who can emulate the way the leader manages things in the organization and the style selected by the leader should be designed in a way, wherein the leader will be able to lend a helping hand to his colleagues or his subordinates in a supportive way so that they will be able to help themselves in the future (Crumpton, M. A. 2011).

For change to happen, a sense of change, a sense of disruption, or disturbance has to be created. The leader has to verify, whether his identified style of leadership will be in a position to create the change and whether it can weather through changes that have already been created as organizations who unfreeze themselves can re-freeze themselves once they set in the systems for adapting to the changed situations through the aegis of the leaders working for managing the change. The leader has to identify outside experts and consultants for the organization, with whom he can work and handle the responsibilities at hand in congruence with his selected style of leadership, thereby enabling him to benefit from the changes or disruptions in the organizations (Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2020). For leaders to be effective at their work, the span of control should be within comfortable margins as too many people or too less people cannot be handled well by a leader in an efficient or effective way. A leader can get a good idea of how many people he can control by applying formulaic methods such as Gracunas Formula or he can rely on his own experience or from the experiences of other leaders as the style of leadership selected by him needs to be in congruence with his desire to get his subordinates to learn and develop efficient and effective working skills (Gumusluoglu, L., Karakitapoğlu-Aygün, Z., & Hirst, G. 2013).

The style of leadership should be conducive to failure on the part of his subordinates as the style selected by the leader can encourage the subordinates to learn from their failures so that they may not repeat them in the future. The Japanese philosophy of 'Kaizen' or continuous

improvement is very useful here. The leader has to select a style that can encourage the subordinates to share their success and failure stories so that each one can learn from the other by which fresh new ideas and practices can be created, deduced, or identified through the cohesion of the group. Also, employees who help each other can become employees one would like to work with and leaders who select styles of leadership, wherein this is made possible will surely be able to help their organizations to last for decades to come (Berger, A. 1997).

### **3. Research Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study encompassed a comprehensive exploration of a diverse array of scholarly sources, including published research articles, research papers, and case studies. This methodological approach was systematically orchestrated, reflecting a meticulous process of scrutiny and analysis. By meticulously surveying the extant literature within the chosen domain, the researcher sought to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter under investigation. This rigorous and scholarly inquiry facilitated the extraction of valuable insights, enabling the research endeavor to be anchored in a well-informed foundation of knowledge. Through this method, the study was poised to attain a higher level of scholarly rigor, substantiating its claims and conclusions through the integration and synthesis of a broad spectrum of relevant and authoritative scholarly works.

### **4. Leadership secrets and wise organizational practices in UPS Inc.**

#### **4.1. How teams are made in UPS Inc.**

A cursory glance at UPS Inc.'s website reveals its unique 'culture' which is expected to be followed by all the employees in the company. The organizational and leadership systems of UPS Inc. are designed to create, inspire and maintain a kind of 'group think' which has kept the company going for more than a century (UPS Inc.). The company has encouraged its employees to think company first and it expects hard work from them, for which rewards and benefits are given to the employees in proportion to their work, efforts and achievements in the company. A book written by a former UPS Inc. employee, Mr. Greg Niemann reveals that the company works as a cohesive unit, with each and every employee in the organization trained to work in congruence, with each other in their respective teams, groups, departments and verticals for a common cause. The culture of the organization encourages the employees to stay working with the company, leading to a sort of 'lifetime employment' in the company (UPS. 2023).



The secret to UPS Inc.'s success lies in the ways it builds its teams. A team can be built in many ways but these six key steps are crucial in it.

**1) Determining the purpose:** The leader has to determine the purpose, the reason why he or she is building the team as the answers got by brainstorming the various reasons can help him boil it down to its essential source and by creating the purpose in clear words in congruence with S.M.A.R.T (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound) goals, the purpose can be identified for creating the team.

**2) Assembling the team:** Once the purpose is identified, the leader should identify potential members for the team who can be expected to work with their peers in the team and for the common purpose for achieving the goals of the team. (Goodwin, G. F., Blacksmith, N., & Coats, M. R. 2018), (Higgs, M. 1996).

**3) Goal determination:** Once the members are identified and integrated into the team, the next step is to determine the goals and break the goal down into sub-parts in an exercise similar to MBO with each member being assigned a specific part for them to take responsibility for.

**4) Defining expectations:** Once the goal is determined and sub-parts are allocated, it shall be the duty of the leader to supervise the team members in order to ensure that they will work for achieving their own responsibilities in a collective way, thereby achieving the end objective of the team (Widmeyer, W. N., & Ducharme, K. 1997), (Kramer, W. S., Thayer, A. L., & Salas, E. 2013).

**5) Monitoring/Review:** The leader has to monitor the members of his team and must review their progress so that he can work with the team member for improving their performance in case they are below par, to encourage the on-par performers to display the above par performance and to encourage the above par performers to maintain their progress in the team.

**6) Allocation of rewards:** The team will be able to achieve its purpose and end objectives if each member works with their peers for achieving their goals and it shall be the responsibility of the leader to identify the star performers for rewarding their performance with rewards that can help them to motivate their current state of effort so that both the team members and the organization can benefit from their success (Stewart, G. L. 2006), (Yemm, G. 2012).

A cursory reading of the book, "Big Brown: The untold story of UPS" written by Mr. Greg Niemamm, who retired as a senior managerial position holder from UPS Inc. after 30 years of service after joining as an entry-level employee in the company is in congruence with the above and reveals how UPS Inc. manages its vast workforce in a very efficient way (Lu, A. C. J. 2008).

## 4.2. Employees are the owners in UPS Inc.

Further, the management of UPS Inc. encourages its employees to listen to their fellow employees, both below and above their position in the company. The employees are expected to be in congruence with the Code of Operations Book of the company which describes minute details regarding the actual performance of their work, that is delivering parcels, packages and other items to the customers along with other intermediate and ancillary work related to the above and other supervisory / management related work in congruence with the above (Code of Business Conduct – UPS 2023). The rules and regulations in the Code of Operations are fairly rigid and exceptions/deviations from the S. O. Ps in the book are not to be followed by the employees.

The employees have a reason to follow the rules and regulations of the company to the letter as they are in fact, the owners of the company, something that is not seen in the competitors of UPS Inc. Employees own stock in the company, which is given to them as part of the company's Employee Stock Options Plan. Three categories of stock exist. Of which the employees can acquire Class 'A' and Class 'B' shares. The promoters of the company own the 'Brown' category of shares which are not traded with the employees or the general public and form a small but significant portion of the company's ownership structure NCEO. (n.d.). 59.31% of the total ownership share of the company is owned by the employees holding the category 'A' and 'B' shares and the promoters of the company own 0.34% of the Brown shares with the remaining balance, 40.35% being traded on the stock market (Fintel Staff. 2023). Employees can gain more stock ownership of the company in proportion to their growth in the company. However, they are expected to sell back the stock they own at the time of retirement back to the company, thereby ensuring that the ownership of the company does not get transferred out of the employees' hands who as shareholders are collectively responsible for their own success/growth through ensuring the successful growth of their company. This is one unique practice that ensures the employees have a sense of responsibility and purpose towards their work, which is reflected in the quality of their performance in it.

## 4.3. Other visionary practices followed at UPS Inc.

**i. Listening to the system:** Another reason, How the company has lasted for more than a century is the dedication of the company to listening to the voices of its system. A system, is a conglomerate of various moving parts, each big and small that spin and revolve together for achieving the broader objective. A gear or cog which does not mesh well with the other gears and cogs risks stopping the system as it is dependent on the movement of the other gears and cogs in the system. The company

encourages its employees to communicate with their superiors in case something is not going well or if they observe any deviation from the standard practices at work so that the same can be immediately corrected. The efforts made by the company for the above and the benefits of this approach were revealed by the then CEO and the Chairman of the Board, Mr. David P. Abney in an interview with CNN (CNN Inc. 2017) where he revealed his efforts in listening to the voices of the system, after taking charge of the company as the CEO.

**ii. Leadership from the ground:** A leader cannot exist without people to lead and the individual's attitude, perceptions and core beliefs influence the way in which other people are made to work, made to produce results or are got to behave/perform in a certain way. A leader who does not listen to his followers cannot expect to lead as he is sure to face desertion in the days ahead. Empathy and communication skills are important for a leader as he is sure to understand the voice of his followers in order to achieve the goals and objectives (Martins. J. 2022). In UPS Inc., the leaders are the employees who have risen from the ranks of the front line employees: the delivery men, the parcel van drivers, etc. and thus they have a clear knowledge and idea of how things are at UPS Inc. and their decisions are in congruence with their perception of the system in the company (UK Essays, November 2018).

**iii. The spirit of victory:** UPS Inc. does not believe in calling employees 'failures' and the company motivates its employees using positive language. While other companies may call their poor performers negative words such as 'poor performers', 'failures' or 'losers', UPS chooses to use the word – 'least-best' which is enough to motivate the employee to ensure that they learn from their mistakes, so that it is not repeated in the future. The word 'best' in that term used by the company informs the employee that he has the potential to become the best, and he can become the best, if he tries a little harder, smarter or better next time. Bartleby Research (n.d.).

#### **4.4. An example of how UPS Inc. does things using Kurt Levin's model of change**

It is the company culture no doubt that is helping UPS serve well in the upcoming future. Their crystal-clear vision, mission and strategies are so well understood by each and every employee working in the organization that help the company to maintain impetus a remain focus centered. The efforts, hard work and changes made by UPS company can be well understood by Kurt Lewin's model which is illustrated in the form of a fictitious example given below (Levy, M. 2001).

**i. Unfreezing (first phase):** UPS Inc. has identified an e-commerce opportunity/threat for which managerial decision-making is to be made to make the most of it or to avoid it. The potential threat or opportunity is discussed

and is reduced in a written format for further decision-making, thereby creating a need for change. Before introducing the change, UPS was working on operational mode which involved very less risk with exceedingly designed and meticulous processes before the changes were introduced in the organization. With the changing environment, UPS Company comprehended that e-commerce is inclining more towards information and service and thus, it was time for the company to think in terms of how to be more competitive using infrastructure and technology. For this a need for change was realized, leading to unfreezing of the system (Levy, M. 2001).

**ii. Changing (Second Phase):** In this phase, a new vision and mission for the change are created along with the necessary strategies and tactics to visualize and achieve the change. UPS Inc. scrutinizes a number of proven and tested ways, tactics and strategies for achieving its desired objectives which were realized in the form of various training programs, workshops, quality updates, organization publications and other changes introduced to fit in the cultural and ecological changes in the system. Being that the human element was crucial, priority was given to those employees who were hard-working, taking the initiative, inventive, receptive and dedicated towards work and organization with rewards for good performance at work. The employees who were identified or who identified as least good or below were let go from the organization, in order to create a system that was more responsive to change along with the creation of a system of communication within the levels of the system and outside the system. Change-achieving strategies and tactics so identified were implemented and feedback was gained (Levy, M. 2001).

**iii. Refreezing (Third Phase):** In this phase, the organization studied the feedback got from the system is studied and analyzed. The things that went well and the things that did not go well were studied in order to learn from the successes as well as the failures. Employees who were responsible for the successes were rewarded and the changes so made, which went well were re-frozen for effective implementation in the system (Levy, M. 2001).

## **5. Result and Discussion**

There are hundreds and thousands of papers, research articles and other published literature which have studied the long-term successes of organizations across the world. The results of these researches have revealed that the secret to an organization's ability for enduring innumerable years in the market lies in the way its systems are designed, the way it manages its people and the way it rewards, recognizes success and manages below-par performance. A company working on old-fashioned processes or obsolete technology may find it very cumbersome to gain a competitive advantage or to be competitive ahead which will hamper customer

satisfaction.

By listening to the voices of the system, UPS Inc. has made entire changes in its vision, mission, and strategies which are crystal clear to every employee and to have knowledge where the company wants to see itself in the future, which can motivate them to realize the levels of performance and output, the company desires from them in order to achieve the broader and greater goals of the organization. A system, if it is designed in a good way and is maintained in a similar way with periodic maintenance, improvement, cleaning, repairing, etc. can last for a very long time and is evidenced in the form of UPS Inc. whose success today is inspiring millions of entrepreneurs, startups and other business to be where they have been in the days ahead.

## 5. Conclusion

In today's date when hundreds and thousands of new companies, startups and enterprises are created, only a handful of them are able to survive for more than a decade or so with the majority succumbing to the dust on the floor of the markets, becoming one with the other failures of the past. Amidst this graveyard, thriving like a phoenix is UPS Inc., one of the leading players in the logistics and parcel/letter delivery industry and there are indeed many reasons for its long enduring success since the close of the last century. By understanding these secrets, managers can take better decisions wherein they will be able to create systems that can endure the ravages of time and the economy in order to last for uncounted days ahead in the future.

## 6. Research & Managerial Implication

This research paper has managerial implications for policymakers, business decision-makers and other stakeholders in the industry, the general public and the government as by understanding the various secrets of leadership in UPS Inc., a sustained and long driven growth oriented organization can be created which can endure well for the years to come. An organization such as the one described here, if it is created and sets a strong example, will inspire other organizations, managers and leaders to follow in its footsteps, thereby ensuring holistic development for the entire country in the days ahead.

## 7. Scope for further research

There is scope for further research on the unique managerial and leadership ways, means and styles of UPS Inc. Research work can be initiated in the unique way of ownership of the company and whether it can be emulated in other organizations in the world with specific references to companies operating in developing countries and developed countries.

## 8. Limitations of the study

The scope of the paper is based on the information and findings in the data and is limited to the research papers, articles and other secondary sources of data studied by the author. There is the possibility that changes/developments might have taken place in real-time, by the date of publication of this research paper which may change or modify the data depicted in the paper on some basis.

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