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The importance of interpersonal style

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"Being aware of how you function on a team is an important factor in how your team functions" (Skillpath, 2008)"

In this article we examine interpersonal style and how awareness of your style (and that of your colleagues') can help you improve your effectiveness.

We consider:
- What is interpersonal style?
- Why is understanding style important?
- How can you leverage it?

What is interpersonal style?

Interpersonal style can be defined as how we interact with other people.

Our style and behavior is impacted by our personalities, our values and the environment we live and work in, and the styles of those we interact with.

What we term interpersonal "style" has historically been referred to as temperament. The Greek physician Hippocrates (370 BC) identified four temperaments: *sanguine* (sociable and pleasure-seeking), *choleric* (ambitious and leader-like), *melancholic* (analytical and thoughtful), and *phlegmatic* (relaxed and quiet), which he incorporated into his medical theories.

In Carl Jung's seminal work, Psychological Types (1923), he observed that people seemed either more oriented to the external world of people and experiences (extraverted), or to their internal worlds of thoughts, ideas, and memories (introverted). He also noticed two kinds of cognitive processes - perception (sensing and intuition) and judgment (thinking and feeling), which later (1940s) formed the basis of the Myers-Briggs Type instrument.

In William Moulton Marston's "Emotions of Normal People" (1928), he categorized behavior into four types (dominance, influence, steadiness and conscientiousness) and theorized that effective people, though having a predominant type, would behave in a manner consistent with the demands and expectations of the environment. His research formed the theoretical basis for the DiSC® personality assessment instrument.

Regardless of the approach used (to categorize style), the greater our awareness of our style and that of others, the more effective we can be.

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Why is understanding style important?

A number of practical benefits result from understanding interpersonal style.

First, understanding your style and that of others will help you communicate more effectively. An ability to adapt your style and communicate in your counterpart's preferred "listening" style is a key success factor in getting the best out of them.

Second, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of your behavioral style helps you to determine how you can make the most effective contribution with your team. Are you: A strong decision-maker? A go-getter? Good in a crisis? An effective planner? A critical thinker? A relationship builder? Good at involving others?

Third, being aware of your team members' styles (and associated strengths) will help you make conscious choices on team member selection when building "task teams" to meet a specific goal.

For example, does your initiative require people who are strongly goal and task orientated and/or or good at process or building relationships? Depending on your priorities, you can build the necessary strengths and diversity into your team. You may have team members who do not exhibit a distinct style. These individuals often prove to be valuable team players, serving in a number of roles or providing balance to a team with a predominant style.

How can you leverage it?

Each style brings distinct strengths (and weaknesses).

With respect to maximizing your interpersonal style, we turn to the contributions of Jim Temme and Tony Alessandra.

In Temme's book, Team Power – *How to build and grow successful teams*, he breaks interpersonal style into 4 types, each of which has different strengths:

- **Accommodating** ("Get along") types are good listeners and focus on team harmony and steadiness, seeking to creating a climate of trust
- **Enthusiastic** ("Get attention") types are creative, good brain-stormers and encourage team innovation
- **Meditative** ("Get it right") types are strong on critical thinking, accuracy and details and will encourage the team to solve problems through effective analysis
- **Targeted** ("Get it done") types are excellent in crisis, are focused on goals and results and will encourage the team to get the job done

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Team members with a common orientation (e.g. people or goal) will "more naturally" get along, but this does not mean they are more effective together. If too many team members have a similar style, it can lead to "group think" whereas a team comprised of different styles is likely to offer a greater diversity of ideas, opinions, and approaches – and hence creativity.

Effective leaders, get the best out of people by modifying their approach ("style – flexing") according to the situation and recognizing and utilizing the strengths of team members. They are adept at building teams that bring the right mix of capabilities and approaches to achieve a specific objective.

Each team member will have communication preferences (preferred "listening" styles) that, according to Tony Alessandra, are critical to understand and apply.

Alessandra's "Platinum Rule" is that if you want to get the best out of people "Treat them the way they want to be treated." (Alessandra and O'Connor, 1996) i.e. communicate with them in *their* preferred style.

Tips on how to communicate effectively with each of the 4 styles are provided in Table 1. Developing an awareness of your communication style and evaluating its effect on others is a helpful first step.

Accommodating Type ("Get along")	Enthusiastic Type ("Get attention")
• Say it with warmth and sincerity • Interested in hearing (and sharing) what you your ideas and feelings • Prefer informal and non-threatening discussions • Prefer step-by-step discussions and to understand impact on relationships • Typically more comfortable making decisions based on conferring with others	• Say it with feeling • Interested in hearing about goals, ideas and concepts • Prefer lively, entertaining discussions. Are less time conscious • Prefer overviews (not the point-by-point details) and stories • Like to discuss options and innovative solutions. Like to be recognized
Meditative Type ("Get it right")	**Targeted Type** (Get it done")
• Say it with facts • Interested in hearing about the analysis, research, process and tasks • Prefer more formal, thorough and accurate discussions • Prefer that you are thoughtful and come prepared with relevant data • Can be slow to make decisions.	• Say it concisely • Interested in hearing about results and the bottom line • Prefer brief discussions and expedience • Like you to be organized and get to the point; be time-sensitive • Like to make decisions, work quickly and be in control

Table 1. How to communicate with different behavioral styles (References Temme and Alessandra).

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Summary:

Awareness of your interpersonal style, including its strength and weaknesses, is an important step in determining how you can best contribute with you team.

Communicating with colleagues in *their* preferred style will help you get the best out of them. A given situation will require you to refine your approach to meet the objective while leveraging your collective strengths and listening styles.

Effective leaders get the best out of people by "style-flexing" and by leveraging the strengths of team members in addition to their own. They are adept at building diverse teams comprising the right mix of capabilities and approaches.

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