COMMUNICATION STYLES

We have all met someone with whom we just could not communicate - a person who, for some reason, seems to bristle upon our approach, leaving communication as we know it completely out of the question. In many modern organisations, people work in open plan environments and your ability to understand the chemistry at work in relationships with your colleagues will allow you to make the slight change of approach that might be necessary for good communication.

Since the days of Hippocrates, great thinkers have analysed the forces at work in human interaction and have come up with one common thread: communication behaviour follows four specific patterns. Hippocrates called these “the four temperaments”, and Carl Jung described them as “Intuitor, Thinker, Feeler, and Sensor”. Today, management consultants and industrial psychologists describe the different behaviour styles with unique names, but with almost uniform descriptions. This document follows the writings of Dr. Tony Alessandra (www.alessandra.com) and maps communication styles against four quadrants.
Four Basic Behaviour Styles

Making good career progress - whether in the front line or the boardroom - demands that you understand the differences in these four styles and the way communication works between them. Whether you are negotiating with your boss for a raise in pay, or still trying to figure out your spouse of 10 years, it can be helpful to determine which basic style that person uses so that you can ‘fine tune’ your intended communication.

The vertical scale designates the degree to which a person's relationships are Open or Reserved. The horizontal scale designates that person's level of Directness. It is important to understand how these scales work and what they mean in order to determine your own and your colleagues' particular behavioural styles. Obviously, it is entirely possible to adjust your communications to fall into any category you want. This paper, however, should help you understand where your natural and most comfortable style lies.

Open or Reserved?

An open person is one who readily expresses emotions, thoughts, and feelings without holding back in any way. Generally, you can easily spot open people in the lab or in a social situation. In fact, they are so easy to understand that, to a more reserved person, it can come as quite a shock. These are folks who will tell you some of their most private feelings and experiences just a few minutes into a conversation. Open people want to be comfortable before getting down to business; they are willing to reach out and touch. They use lots of eye contact and expression to communicate. Establishing good interpersonal relationships is a high priority for them.

A reserved person takes a while to get to know. Unlike the openly expressive person described above, these individuals tend to hold back on disclosing anything that might give clues to their inner nature. They seem to be most comfortable when keeping a certain distance in their interpersonal relationships. When looking for clues about the reserved person, watch how much further away they stand when talking to you, or when you shake hands for the first time. Everyone falls somewhere on the scale between open and reserved. Decide where you fit on this scale and place a mark at that point.

Direct or Indirect?

The second scale we’ll look at indicates how people relate to the circumstances in which they find themselves, and whether they are likely to forge ahead or seek security. The person who falls at the indirect end of this scale is slow-paced and security conscious. For example, indirect persons are unlikely to take the social initiative to introduce themselves at a party. They are less confronting and likely to prefer a conversation with a good friend in a quiet corner of the party. An indirect tends to be very deliberate - may even be mis-diagnosed as a ‘plodder’. But those same people are generally able to provide very accurate, carefully thought-out results. In general, their craving for security makes risk-taking too much like rocking the boat for indirect types. They are usually the last ones to engage in any kind of work politics or to seek out competition.

The person at the direct end of this horizontal scale is fast-paced and assertive. These are the people who have been called ‘Type A’. Their indirect colleagues often perceive them as competitive and controlling. In a business or scientific meeting, this person will make emphatic points and speak about problems in black and white terms - probably also speaking a bit louder than the others in the meeting. They are sometimes quite argumentative, and typically maintain their position in an argument far longer than most people would. These are the scientists who are not afraid to take risks, but who may also get into scientific difficulty by being inflexible about others' opinions of the results. Place yourself along this horizontal scale in the area of ‘directness’.

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Take a look at where your marks are on the two scales, and draw a line between them; you will find that the line passes through one of the quadrants that describe four behavioural style categories: the Relator, the Socialiser, the Thinker and the Director. The quadrant that your line passes through is the category into which you fall. The people you work with, however, may see you a little differently than you see yourself.

Let's take a look at some of the specific characteristics of each style and determine what type of communication would work best for each. Remember, good communication is not something you do to someone. Rather, it is an interactive process; it requires commitment from both parties. If you start out directing your communication in a style that the other person can relate to, however, then the entire process is facilitated.

The Relator (also called the Interpersonal style)

The line for Relators passes through the quadrant dominated by a slower pace (Indirect) and a relationships-oriented approach (Open). The Relator employee or manager is exceptionally easy to work with, a person who is quite good at co-operating with others. You can spot a Relator by the presence of personal items: photos, plants, and objects that create an informal atmosphere. As a project manager, however, a Relator is likely to strive for a happy team rather than a task-oriented group. Working for a manager who seems more concerned about the feelings of the people involved than the degree of organisation in the department can be really frustrating for the team member who likes to have his or her tasks laid out in a perfectly organised fashion.

When communicating with Relators, remember to slow your pace to match theirs. It's also useful to keep bringing the conversation back to how your issue will affect the personal inter-relationships of other employees. The last thing you want to do with a Relator is come off pushy or aggressive.

The Socialiser (also called the Affective style)

The connecting line for Socialisers passes through the quadrant that indicates both a desire to build relationships (Open) and a fast-paced, aggressive approach (Direct). Socialisers are fun and always a bit playful. Their general interests run toward interacting with others rather than playing the loner. They will avoid accepting or starting on a task if they see it as boring or if by chance they end up being alone. A Socialiser is usually quite talkative, but works well with others - and quite quickly, although he or she may shift from one activity to another more often than the manager prefers.

To communicate with a Socialiser, remember their need for personal prestige and for acceptance. These folks tend to make decisions in an almost spontaneous fashion, with what they and others feel is ‘intuition’. 
The Thinker (also called the Cognitive style)

A line that crosses the quadrant dominated by a slower pace (Indirect) and a closed, personal style (Reserved) indicates a Thinker. Thinkers see themselves as efficient and place a high value on thoroughness and precision. Their work space is neat and structured. These employees have a thoroughly analytical approach to their work and they prefer to solve problems at a slow, cautious pace. They are typically computer-oriented and enjoy getting the data into shape on their terminals, which managers sometimes see as excessive reliance on the computer, making them ‘slow at the switch’ in making decisions.

Communication with the Thinker should take place at their slower pace, with a good deal of emphasis on showing proof. Approaching this person with ideas for changes in his or her department or project should be accompanied with facts and data about how the change would move the project along to the next step.

The Director (also called the Behavioural style)

The quadrant dominated by a fast pace (Direct) and by a nonexistent attitude about relationships (Reserved) is for Directors, who are often best known for their aggressive, competitive natures. The Director prefers to have the corner office. He or she is the person in an organisation who can be depended on to get results, but may be criticised for having too little concern about the effect of those results on the feelings of others. Directors are very independent. As project leaders they shape the environment around their project to best suit their needs, aggressively pushing team members forward with an approach that announces, "If you can’t stand the pressure, get out of my way."

Communicating with Directors is best done at their quick pace, with an emphasis on getting right to the point. Always see things from their viewpoint, avoid chitchat and show how your ideas will move the project toward the Director’s goals.

Fine-Tuning Your Communications

To sum up, most communication experts will tell you that it is important to fine-tune your approach to the behavioural style of the person you are talking with. The ‘Golden Rule’ is not necessarily the best approach to effective communication. If we treat everyone else as we would like to be treated, we may be effective only with others who share our behavioural style. That can mean a success rate, at best, of 25%. Making a few minor adjustments in your own style to suit each specific situation can dramatically improve your odds for getting your message through. Whether you are at the bench or in management, you will find that sharpening your communication skills can dramatically broaden and brighten your biotechnology career prospects.