

2.8 Understanding Communication Styles for Effective Collaboration



There are several tools available that help you better understand yourself and those you work with. Although there are many personality tests, such as Meyer Briggs, DISCs, etc., there was one communication-style test that made a huge impact on Vita's life. It all started at a leadership offsite and since it was so impactful, Vita would often share the story at many training sessions she would facilitate in the future.

"Ok, let's continue..." said the consultant from the stage, "...there are four flip charts, one in each corner of this conference room. There are about 120 of you, so this should be fun. Those who could relate to the category of a 'driver,' please go to the front left corner; 'amiabes,' please go to the back right corner; 'expressives,' back left; and 'analytical' to my right in the front, please."

It was interesting for Vita to observe how some people knew exactly where they belonged and some stood still, having a hard time deciding which corner of the conference room they should go to. She knew right away she wasn't analytical, because looking at excel spreadsheets with a ton of data never excited her. She had no patience for it, although she learned to appreciate data and metrics when someone else did all the analysis and just presented a summary. She also didn't think she was a driver because according to the high-level description they all looked at earlier, drivers preferred to "tell" people what to do rather than seek consensus and "ask" whenever possible. This preference to keep peace and in part to avoid conflict applied to the amiable social style, which did describe Vita very accurately.

Resolving Conflict

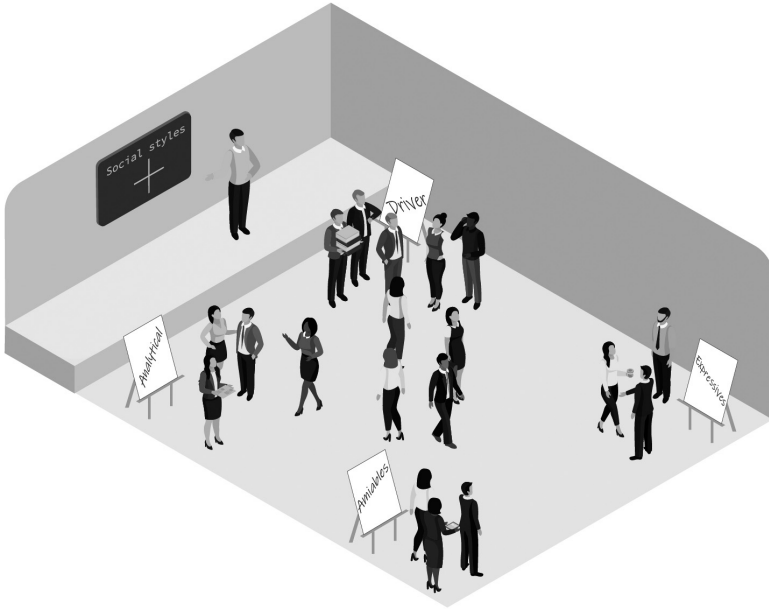


Illustration 2.8 Social Styles

Seeing people's hesitation, the consultant asked if there were any questions.

"Yes!" Vita raised her hand. She was given a microphone and she clarified. "What if you relate to some of the characteristics of one style and some from another?"

"Ah, yes, you want to pick and choose, like from a Chinese buffet," the consultant smiled. "Think of one as primary and the other secondary. For the sake of this exercise, go to the corner where most of the characteristics apply. Any other questions?"

A few more questions were answered and within five minutes everyone spread out into the four corners of the conference room. Vita, along with a small crowd of her co-workers, joined the amiables corner. There were a few people in the expressives corner, a few in the analytics and the rest, majority of the crowd, was in the drivers corner.

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“Now,” said the consultant. “Look across, at the opposite corner. Ever had a conflict of any sort with anyone in the corner opposite yours?”

The room erupted with laughter. Vita rarely had a conflict with anyone but when she looked at the people who stood across from the amiable corner where she was, she saw her current boss, along with a few others who she definitely had tough conversations with before. They were all in the driver corner.

“Here is what I would like you all to do next,” the consultant said. “Each group will come up with three things that the group across from them does that drives them absolutely nuts. They will also come up with three things that the same group does that helps them get a job done. So, amiables, you will write about drivers. Drivers will write about amiables. Expressives will write about analytical folks and analytical about expressives. Any questions before we begin? Oh, and pick one person in each group to write it down on a flip chart and decide who will be the spokesperson.”

Everyone got to work. When the time was up and people were getting ready to share, it was eye-opening for Vita. Her boss at the time often came across as someone who didn’t care much about people and only cared about the delivery of things. She, on the other hand, cared so much about people and feelings, that perhaps her decision-making was at a much slower pace than the boss expected, which caused them to have heated discussions at times.

This leadership offsite, along with many others Vita was lucky to attend over the years, was extremely educational. This particular one, where she learned different social styles and the fact that one isn’t better than the other, led her to pay a lot more attention to the different styles. The key was to understand your own default and be able to shift from one to the other, depending on the situation. After she experimented with running a similar type of a session with different teams, she learned just how unexplored this topic was among the engineering teams and leaders.

Resolving Conflict

She observed many conflicts over the years and noticed that a majority of their root causes, besides organizational misalignment or conflicting priorities, were due to different personalities, communication styles, different ways to consume information and a lack of understanding each other. She would eventually co-create a leadership program and include social styles exercise as the very first module.

Vita eventually came across the book, *Personality Isn't Permanent, Break Free from Self-Limiting Beliefs and Rewrite Your Story*, by Benjamin P. Hardy, which focuses on the fact that you are not doomed if you were born one way or another. None of these tests meant you couldn't learn and grow. She not only enjoyed the story and the read, but she would also end up recommending this book to anyone who would listen!