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# How to understand differences between individuals

collaboration   trust   respect   innovation   courage   compassion

# How to understand differences between individuals

## What is it?

Understanding how individuals in your team react to different situations can help you communicate more effectively with them. If you try to communicate on their wavelength, the chances of your message being heard and understood are greatly increased.

There are a number of tools which can help you find a way of communicating with an individual in the style that best suits them. This makes it more likely that they will understand and support any changes you want to make.

Detailed below is the Merrill and Reid tool, which is an assessment process undertaken by individuals but can be usefully interpreted within teams.

Other tools that help give an insight into people's styles and preferences include Myers Briggs Type Indicator, Strengths Development Inventory and Belbin and Honey and Mumford Learning Styles. Adopting the model already used by your organisation is a helpful approach as you will be using a common language to discuss each others' preferences.

Several of these tools are best administered by accredited facilitators; the outline below gives you an insight into what is possible.

## When to use it

If people are unhappy with their situation, they may resist the changes aimed at making improvement. You can use this approach when you need to anticipate an individual's likely reaction so that you are better able to communicate with them. This improves the probability of a successful change project.

## How to use it

Consider the individuals you will be working with. Try to understand how they may react, how best to communicate with them and how to work in ways that best suit them as individuals. Remember to see the person, not a name badge, role or title.

### 1. Identifying personal styles

Identifying personal styles is the key to understanding others. People tend to relate to the world around them in a variety of ways. Merrill and Reid describe four different styles: analyst, amiable, expressive and driver.

**Figure 1: Personal Styles and Effective Performance**

| Analyst | Amiable | Expressive | Driver |
|---|---|---|---|
| Analytical | Patient | Verbal | Action-orientated |
| Controlled | Loyal | Motivating | Decisive |
| Orderly | Sympathetic | Enthusiastic | Problem solver |
| Precise | Team person | Gregarious | Direct |
| Disciplined | Relaxed | Convincing | Assertive |
| Deliberate | Mature | Impulsive | Demanding |
| Cautious | Supportive | Generous | Risk taker |
| Diplomatic | Stable | Influential | Forceful |
| Accurate | Considerate | Charming | Competitive |
| Conscientious | Empathetic | Confident | Independent |
| Fact finder | Persevering | Inspiring | Determined |
| Systematic | Trusting | Dramatic | Results-orientated |
| Logical | Congenial | Optimistic | |
| Conventional | | Animated | |

(Source: Merrill, D.W. and Reid, R.H. (1999) Personal Styles and Effective Performance: Make Your Style Work for You, London: CRC Press

While an individual may dip in and out of all four approaches, most of us tend to favour one approach more than the other three. We tend to have a predominant style and a least used style.

The predominant approach can be described by:

- what the individual finds of interest
- what the individual feels is important
- their behaviour or actions.

**2. Matching wavelengths**

Once you know which style a person favours, you can modify how you communicate with them. This greatly improves the chance of your message being heard and understood, so try changing your wavelength, communications and behaviour to fit the other person. Remember that people will not always rigidly conform to these descriptions of personal style. However, the more a person follows a pattern, the more likely adopting a communication style appropriate to that pattern will influence them.

- Analysts like data (the facts and figures).
- Amiables consider feelings and the people side of change.
- Expressives like the big picture, the vision.
- Drivers like action and results.

## Examples

This model was introduced to a group of improvement leaders. One project manager had no difficulty in recognising her style as a driver. She also recognised the style of someone she was having difficulty with as an analyst. When she returned to work, she changed the way she dealt with this person, giving them more written facts and figures and time to think through the information. She reported back a few weeks later that the 'difficult' person was totally on board with the improvements and now a real supporter.

## TIPS

**Exploring individual preferences can sometimes be challenging for individuals so this type of exercise is more effective when managed by a trained facilitator.**

## What next?

If you are still having difficulty communicating successfully, think about what the receiver views as important, what some of their interests are and how they tend to behave. With this picture in mind, you can then adapt your message to fit the receiver's preferred type of delivery.

## Other useful tools and techniques that may help you

- **Gaining insights from/working with health service users**

## Additional resources

Belbin, RM (2010) *Team Roles at Work*. East Sussex: Routledge

Furnham, A (2008) *Personality and Intelligence at Work: Exploring and Explaining Individual Differences at Work*. East Sussex: Routledge