

LEADERSHIP TIPS

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STYLES Winter '04

by Dr. Marilyn Manning

Would your staff say that you are easy to work with? Would they call you picky, overly analytical? Do they accuse you of dropping the ball on occasion? Or, might they label you “bossy”?

By the time we have been promoted several times as a manager, our leadership style has probably become rather consistent and fixed. After all, our style has worked so far and if people didn't like it, wouldn't they have said something? Most of us assume if we keep getting promoted, we must be doing something right. Not necessarily so.

As a certified management consultant, specializing in executive and team coaching, I am constantly amazed at how little useful feedback leaders receive about their styles. Most of us have attended workshops and communications training where we checked some little boxes to “discover” our management style. If we were candid, the information may have been accurate. But, did we really take the results to heart? Did we ask others, am I seeing myself clearly? Did we truly take a hard look at our areas of weakness and set concrete, measurable goals to modify some of our non-productive behaviors?

It is never too late to modify your style to be even more effective. Situations, assignments and, therefore, styles change. I recommend that all leaders do a style tune-up.

There are many style assessments in the marketplace. Often called typologies, they categorize us into basic types and can be misused as labeling. But, if they are administered by a trained professional and used cautiously, they are extremely useful and expedient. Most assessments have four general style categories:

the Driver, the Expressive, the Diplomat, and the Analyzer.

The Driver

The Driver likes working independently and is good at exercising control. He or she is a confident decision maker and risk taker. They like to be right, and to win. They see problems as challenges and are comfortable with change, particularly when it leads to increased personal power and prestige. They help a team stay focused and get things done quickly.

The Influencer

The Influencer likes teamwork and interaction. He or she may often act as the visionary, painting the big picture for the group. They can charm, cajole, convince, and influence others. Their enthusiasm can provide a team with an invaluable source of vitality and drive. Highly verbal and intuitive, they are not strong on details. Despite their social skills, they prefer a degree of autonomy, especially freedom from tight supervision or deadlines.

The Steady Diplomat

The Steady Diplomat likes to work with others to get the job done, but often prefers to lead from a quiet, calm, collaborative position. He or she is very loyal and committed to the team and the company. This style prefers and supports traditional views, but nonetheless brings a healthy sense of realism to any group. This person's sense of caution and balance can help keep the group from making risky decisions.

The Conscientious Analyzer

The Conscientious Analyzer is a perfectionist and the one who will guarantee accuracy and high-quality standards. He or she is predominantly a rational thinker. They are most comfortable with a step-by-step, problem-solving approach. They are generally very committed to any task undertaken and conscientious about carrying our assignments that involve



quality detail work.

Research shows that all four of the styles make equally effective leaders. But all four are not effective in every situation. For example, I recently profiled an executive team in a software company. Fifteen of them were strong, off-the-chart Drivers. The CFO was an Analyzer. On of the goals we discussed in the quarterly retreat I facilitated was “customer service.” Their current customers rated them very low in service. When asked which style of personality they planned to hire to work in customer support, they all chimed in: “Drivers: they get the job done quickly.” A big “oops” came out when they realized that the three other styles are much more patient and suited to interface with customers. As a result, they changed their hiring and screening process to identify more customer-oriented candidates.

Company cultures change and may demand that we adjust and even change our styles. One executive I was coaching was told flat out that if he didn't change from a Driver style to a more collaborative style, he would lose his job. By using the “Style Tune-up,” we were able to identify areas to improve and accelerate his behavioral changes. He was successful in not only modifying his style, but also got a promotion. He confessed to me later, “If I can modify my behaviors, anyone can. But, you have to know that in my heart, I still prefer to be bossy, dominating and right. I just learned how to act differently and more

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appropriately.”

As effective leaders, we not only have to take stock of our own styles and how to improve, but we have to coach others to do the same. To get the most out of our staff, we need to learn to motivate them according to their style needs. Have your team go through a style tune-up on a regular basis. Use the goals they set as part of their performance evaluations. Successful change demands lots of positive reinforcement.

Are we born with our style or do we learn it? Does nationality impact styles? Does gender? Does your job alter your style? I believe all of the above play into the picture. Obviously, none of us fits neatly into just one of four categories. We do, however, have predominant styles that influence our choices and values. The more we know about styles, the more we can capitalize on the diversity.

After assessing and coaching thousands of managers in the United States my research shows that the majority of the American workforce has the “Diplomat” style (more than 60 percent), with approximately 13-15 percent equally divided among the other three orientations. My research in South Africa, Europe and Malaysia yielded different results. Through profiling close to 2,000 managers in those three locations, I found that the majority have

the “Analyzer” style (more than 50 percent), with the other three equally divided.

Research in a wide variety of industries shows that certain industries and professions attract distinct styles. For example, engineers (often Analyticals) vs. counselors (usually Diplomats) vs. police officers (the Drivers) vs. sales people (the Influencers). Of course, there are exceptions, but you will see job related trends. There are definitely style similarities within different cultures, be they organizational or geographical.

So, can we be everything to everybody? No, but we can learn to know our styles intimately. Knowing and modifying our weaknesses helps remove our blind spots.

Self-awareness leads to greater personal power. Learning to lead as a facilitator and situational manager can build better teams. Balancing the personalities of people who have to work together is a key step in team success. From my experience in organizational development work, the most productive and cohesive teams are composed of members representing all four styles. Each brings richness to the table. When any style is missing from a team, creativity and critical thinking can be limited. As leaders, we need to learn to appreciate and work with all of the styles, reward them appropriately, and coach them to continually strive for their fullest potential.

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