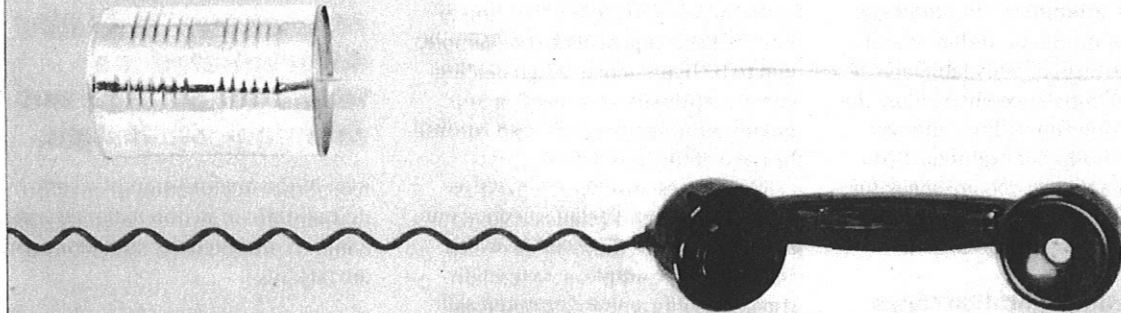## FUNDAMENTALS //

Let's Be Clear:
How to Manage Communication Styles

With all the talk about diversity and the ever-so-popular "four generations in the workplace," it's time for training professionals to not only focus their efforts on employees' physical differences, but on their communication styles as well.

By Jada Edmondson

There are four basic communication styles: expressive, systematic, sympathetic, and direct. Our communication styles affect how others' react to and perceive us. Knowing your communication style and knowing how to manage others' communication styles can reduce conflict, increase productivity, and improve teamwork in the workplace.

Generally, diversity training and seminars about generational differences seek to increase cultural awareness, reduce conflict, and promote teamwork. Being aware of cultural and generational differences can improve employee productivity, enhance the work environment, and contribute toward greater understanding of one another. Knowing how to adapt their communication styles to complement someone else's style will enable employees to sustain productivity and create a harmonious work environment.

Furthermore, recognizing your communication style can help you to understand how your actions are perceived by others. Centuries ago, the Greek physician Hippocrates studied people's personality types. Instead of using basic terms that today's researchers associate with certain personality types, Hippocrates determined one to be sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, or choleric. Although he believed that certain body fluids such as blood, phlegm, bile, and black bile determined one's temperament, he was on to something.

Conflicting situations are bound to occur in the workplace, but unlike Hippocrates, we can take an active approach by being aware of others' communication styles and then adapting our style to find that balance.

There are typically four basic communication styles. Today, researchers use the terms expressive, systematic, sympathetic, and direct. Modern researchers have also differentiated the terms personality and communication style. In fact, communication styles are probably more determined by our needs at a given moment than by our personalities, which tend to be constant traits.

For example, someone who is generally a nice person could be having a bad day. Or, a generally positive co-worker could be experiencing symptoms of depression following the loss of a loved one. Temporary occurrences like these don't

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reflect our personalities but can affect how we communicate with one another.

We can avoid conflict and misunderstandings by paying close attention to how those around us communicate. Communication can be verbal or nonverbal, in the form of body language. If you sense an imbalance, then adjust the way you're communicating either verbally or physically. For example, if you sense that the person you are speaking to is nervous because you're standing over him, then try sitting down.

The basic communication styles

Here is a list of the four basic communication styles and an explanation of how certain types are perceived. You may want to take an assessment to learn your general style. Following the assessment, take into consideration that no one style is better than another. You may also discover that your style is a mix of all four styles.

1| **Expressives** tend to have high energy, speak quickly, and focus on the big picture. They generally find conflict or differences in opinion invigorating. Others can perceive expressives as overly cheerful, vain, or unpredictable.

2| **Systematics** focus on the facts and details, and not the big picture. They're generally not comfortable with conflict. Others can perceive systematics as unemotional or nonchalant.

3| **Sympathetics** like to focus on people and relationships. They are good listeners and generally concerned with everyone's needs. Sympathetics typically don't like conflict. Others can perceive sympathetics as soft-hearted or overly helpful. They can also appear to be procrastinators when distracted.

4| **Directs** generally keep conversation brief and are often involved in many things at once. They tend to see the big picture and are more focused on the outcome than on smaller tasks. Directs can appear self-confident, intimidating, and opinionated.

Communication styles in the workplace

Discovering your communication style is the first step. Now you need to learn how to adjust your style according to the situation. Expressives, for example, tend to be hyperactive. When dealing with an expressive, it's necessary to remain calm, speak slowly, and control the pace of the interaction.

Systematics are characterized as orderly, but careful when carrying out tasks. Sometimes they can be overly cautious. For example, a systematic who is learning a new computer skill may be hesitant to touch his keyboard out of fear that he will break something. When dealing with systematics, be patient, be their guide, and give them confidence to complete tasks.

Sympathetics are nurturing and born socializers. However, they may spend too much time socializing instead of focusing on more important matters. When you encounter sympathetics, share their concern and be supportive, but inform them that you must stay on task and that you've got work to do.

Lastly, directs are generally pressed for time. They're usually not concerned with the details but just want to know the facts, and they want to know them in a hurry. Because they usually run from meeting to meeting, they are sometimes seen as lacking emotion. Don't take this perceived lack of emotion personally. In the presence of a direct, be direct but detailed, and politely speak up if you feel that her demands are unreasonable. It's better to let directs know up front if you'll not be able to meet their request, than for them to find out later.

Experienced training professionals know all too well how their communication styles affect learning, and that the interactions that take place during training can have an effect on desired outcomes. When it comes to training, practicing good communication techniques is a must, and knowing your communication style certainly helps. Training professionals can teach their good communication practices to the

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rest of the organization in an effort to maintain or restore balance where conflict, productivity, and teamwork are lacking.

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Inclusive Leadership Matters to Performance

As HR people we have all had the disappointment of watching a "team of stars", who can't seem to come together and exploit their range of talent and skills. We shake our heads and question why? Asking how can it be that such an exceptional group of individuals just can't yield the results? Why hasn't the amazing diversity in the team been harnessed to produce exceptional performance?

Leaders have a crucial role to play in harnessing individual's talent, to develop and nurture it, and drive the performance of their team towards common goals. But this is not an easy task.

We have all read the growing body of research highlighting that diverse teams are more engaged, more innovative, have greater creativity, enhanced problem solving ability and use talent better. So, how can leaders best access the diversity within their team and reap these rewards?

It's important to recognise that it's not just about diversity, it's about inclusion. Research shows that the struggle to build diversity is dramatically enhanced by having leaders who are inclusive. Inclusive leadership is about getting the best from your people. It's about valuing the range of perspectives and being fully responsible for your behaviour as a leader. Inclusive leaders build a culture that attracts, retains and grows diverse talent by making people feel like they are contributing and valued.

When we step back and look at human happiness, positive psychology has found that sustainable happiness at work comes from having a sense of purpose. This includes being part of a "hive" of contribution as the father of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, calls it. Inclusive cultures can provide this sense of purpose and belonging. Generations X and beyond tend to seek and be driven by this and future workplaces will need to cater to it. For organisations to stay relevant inclusiveness may well be vital.

to play in increasing awareness of their thoughts, feelings, behaviors and actions. Unfortunately our natural tendencies often undermine our ability to be inclusive. We all use automatic cognitive shortcuts to cope with the myriad of information we are constantly presented with by the world around us. But sometimes these shortcuts are unhelpful and can have a negative impact on our decisions and judgments of others. This is called unconscious bias. Cognitive short-cuts and unconscious biases are adaptive and one of the reasons we still exist. To survive as a species we have relied on being able to make quick assessments of others and trust those most like ourselves. But today, these biases and shortcuts can inhibit team cohesion, performance, creativity and the power of diverse decision-making. Building awareness of our thoughts, feelings and actions enables us to be mindful of our behavior, biases, and our impact on others.
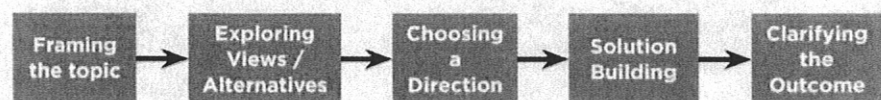
Inclusive Leadership Skills

The second step is for leaders to build inclusion skills. Have you ever experienced this situation? You are in a group where everyone is coming from different perspectives. It's interesting. It's stimulating. It really makes you step back and widen your thinking. But at some point you start to
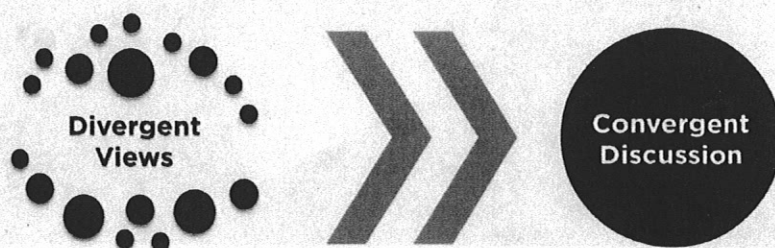
question, "how is all this going to be drawn together into some pragmatic actions? Where is the consensus here?" These moments are the frustrating space of diversity friction. We have many views and now seem to be going in circles. Everyone starts getting slightly frustrated. The time pressure comes on. The outcomes may be deferred until the next meeting, or perhaps you end up pushing through a suboptimal outcome that leaves a number in the group disenfranchised or uncommitted to the outcome.

We call this the Diversity Challenge, as shown in model 1. Inclusive leaders are able to facilitate an exploring of the range of views in the room, the trade offs, the implications and where ideas might combine. Ultimately they are able to help the group move from the point of a wide divergence of views to a place of convergence and an outcome that utilises all views and generates strong commitment to the way forward.

Inclusive leaders also need to be skilled in developing relationships outside their natural group and breaking down barriers to contribution. Even as HR leaders we tend to form in-groups within our teams: we naturally like and gravitate towards people similar to ourselves. The downside of in-groups is that they are exclusionary, reduce diversity of thought and promote

Framing the topic → Exploring Views / Alternatives → Choosing a Direction → Solution Building → Clarifying the Outcome

Diversity Friction

Divergent Views ≫ Convergent Discussion

groupthink and less innovative solutions. It also means those less like us may feel on the "out", become disengaged, unmotivated and more likely to leave the organisation.

Diversity and inclusion are complex topics but if you break them down there are pragmatic steps you can take to increase the inclusiveness of your leaders and the culture in your organisation. Increasing leaders awareness of their own biases and building inclusion skills are great first steps. An added benefit is that it's easier to get the buy in from the broader business when you are talking about building the skills of all leaders rather than "diversity programmes", which can paradoxically leave the majority feeling excluded **HR**

HOW INCLUSIVE IS YOUR LEADERSHIP AS AN HR LEADER?

1. Are you aware of your biases and how your actions impact others in your team?

2. Do you experience diversity friction often? If not, why not? How can you bring in more diverse thinking to your team?

3. Do you draw diverse perspectives from those around you when making a decision?

4. Are there people who you avoid as they think completely differently to you? If so, how could you leverage their perspective?