

Changing the Workplace – One Conversation at a Time

by: Peggy Grall

We've all had the experience of walking away from a conversation and thinking, "what the heck was that about?" At the office, in the boardroom, in meetings, marriages and on teams, it doesn't take long before we realize – these people are weird! That's usually what we find ourselves thinking when we encounter someone with a very different conversational style from our own.

They just don't "get it" we say. We talk and they don't seem to be listening – or they criticize everything we say – and we're really smart! Or they barrage us with mind-numbing questions about *every little detail* until we want to run away screaming. At other times we meet someone at work or in a social situation and we just "click" with them. There seems to be instant rapport – like we've known them forever; the conversation flows like a gentle breeze between us. So, what's happening here?

Welcome to the world of conversational styles!

The need to effectively communicate with a variety of people, forces us to become savvy communicators, or run the risk of alienating clients, losing valuable staff and/or putting our own careers in jeopardy. Whether you are working in a large firm or a small practice; when you know your own communication style, and understand the styles of others, you can interact, confront, negotiate, persuade and lead others in a way that is more effective for you and them.

Most employees fall into one of four categories in regards to how they prefer to communicate. These four distinct conversation styles are: Tell, Sell, Listen and Write, with each type of communicator being unique in how he/she approaches a conversation, meeting or assignment. Although each of us have some of all the characteristics, we generally prefer one style over another and use it often enough that people think of us as being "like that."

As you read over the descriptions of each style, it will no doubt bring certain people to mind. See if you can find yourself, your staff - and the partners!

The "Tell" style is employed by those extroverts among us that love conversational intensity. Tellers are assertive self-starters, who drive the organization to results and are often seen nudging (did I say nudging – I mean pushing!) their way to the top. They love friendly competition and thrive on a challenge. Debate is their strong suit and they can often be seen poking and prodding their colleagues into thrashing out the vision or direction for a new initiative. They see themselves as purposeful and direct. Others often see them as aggressive, controlling and intolerant. These hearty folks see a conversation as a forum for them to take center stage. They love taking the lead and appreciate when their opinions are sought by others. They are direct in offering an opinion and usually welcome the opinions of others.

The staffers who prefer the "Sell" approach to conversations are the social butterflies. They love a good chat! They love people, and see selling people on their ideas as the best possible way to win buy-in. They are artful persuaders and people generally see them as friendly and positive. They are comfortable when talking and sometimes find it difficult to let others join in. At times, their superiors can see them as flighty, indiscrete and too excitable. They enjoy the buzz of a good

conversation and are usually the last ones to leave the lunch room. They have lots of ideas in meetings and can often get the group to go along with them – because they make their ideas look so darn cool!

The more serious employees are those who choose to “listen” in a conversation, meeting or at a function. They are generally more introverted and prefer to observe and take in information before making a comment or offering a suggestion. They value the status quo, the known and are less ready to jump on board with a new idea or initiative until they have heard *all the facts*. They have a genuine concern for how decisions and new processes will affect the other people in the organization and are generally seen as the peacemakers; they are the ones people turn to when they are concerned or in need of support. Because they need to have the facts before making their minds up, they need more time than the tellers and sellers to move on a project or directive. They hold back in conversations, choose their words carefully, and often will make supporting statements and ask questions rather than toss their ideas into the mix.

The “Writers” among us are the most misunderstood communicators of all. They are those cautious, precise, deliberate folks. You know the ones - they can easily play the devils advocate role on a team, in a meeting or in an organization. They need, “the facts mam – just the facts.” They are the office analyzers, and they aren’t going to throw their hat into the ring until they fully understand the ramifications - all of them - of the proposal, idea or directive. These folks can make or break a project. Their ability to see what the rest of the group misses is uncanny. They can ferret out a potential liability to a project, while the tellers and sellers are at lunch. They are often regarded as stuffy, indecisive, suspicious or cold- but look closer. They move slower because they are gathering all the relevant information as they go. They rarely miss an important detail. Firms find them invaluable when every t must be crossed and every i dotted.

So how can you possibly flex to fit each of these styles – in a way that doesn’t seem patronizing or pretentious? Here are some tips on how to engage a style different than yours.

For Tellers:

- Get to the point – details bore them
- Be brief – they have short attention spans
- Expect hard questions – don’t take it personally, he/she won’t
- Expect to be inspired – they are natural leaders and will grab your heart

For Sellers:

- Be prepared to spend some social time before getting down to business
- Get their ideas, quotes, or promises in writing – they often forget details
- Ask for a decision – sellers get caught up in the moment and can *forget to commit*
- Show your appreciation for their work or ideas publicly – they love a parade!

For Listeners:

- Take the time to form a relationship - before enacting business
- Don’t put these folks in charge of promoting an idea – use their expertise to make the project, proposal or report more accurate
- Talk about ways to minimize the risk if you want their buy-in
- Don’t make a big deal out of their help – reward them privately

For Writers:

- Establish the working relationship with written correspondence first
- Expect to be taken seriously – weigh your words
- Be prepared for meetings with him/her – they will be
- Expect criticism and skepticism from them – remember they want the hard facts, fluff is unimportant to them

Of course, all of us possess some of the characteristics in each category. Although we have all the attributes available to us, we generally prefer to use one set over another or one set for our professional lives and another for our personal lives. At home we may communicate more like a Teller, while at work we may opt for a Writers approach.

As managers, it's up to you to do the flexing. Learning to flex your natural style to your colleague's or staff gives you instant credibility in their eyes. When you talk to people in their preferred "language" they see you as someone who "gets" what they're talking about, someone who understands them and therefore can be trusted with their thoughts and ideas. When you learn how they prefer to receive information and what they need to make a decision, you can tailor your approach to their style and accelerate the buy-in process.

Next time you're preparing the agenda for an important meeting, stop and consider – who will your audience be? How do they like their information? Who will be ready to make a decision and who will need more time?

When you are interviewing for a new position, ask yourself – what type of person is this? Are they doing more talking or listening? How will their conversational style fit with the team they will be working with? To what degree will they have to persuade, confront or share ideas? When you step back and consider the conversational style of new hires as well as your existing group, you – and they, will be the big winners!

(1442 Words)

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