

# Gaining A Better Understanding Of the Partners You Manage

by Patrick J. McKenna

Think back to the last practice group meeting that you attended. Monday in the boardroom for lunch and about 12:10 p.m. before all of the partners grabbed their sandwich and got settled. Remember how each of the partners started into that meeting?

There is usually a Dorothy, who wants to know precisely how long this month's meeting is going to last, because she has some important client matters that need her immediate attention, and after all, why do we really need all of these sit-down meetings ?

Meanwhile, someone we will call Anthony is quizzing everyone on how their week-end was and what each of them was up to.

Now Amy is studying the agenda and wondering aloud why certain back-up written reports could not have been sent around on Friday so she could of at least had the week-end to study them.

Then there is an Elliott . . . he wants to relate to everyone the story about how he aptly handled the important client matter last week, that was preoccupying his every waking hour.

If this sounds at all vaguely familiar, our little scenario usually ends with you as the practice group leader. You're sitting at one end of the table, trying to figure out if this collection of partners is like every other practice group in your firm and how you are ever going to magnetize this particular room full of compasses, such that they are not all pointing in different directions.

To date, we are just beginning to evidence a bit more being written about the importance of managing and coaching professionals. Some of it may lead practice leaders to assume that there is a one-size-fits-all methodology for coaching; when indeed as this example is intended to suggest, professionals can be very different from one another.

These partners, most of whom are critically important to the overall success of your practice group, think, communicate, decide, and behave differently. In fact, if we look closely enough, we might also find that they use their time differently, handle emotions differently, and deal with conflict and stress differently. Not necessarily worse, or any better than you might - - just differently.

Not accounting for these differences can cause a practice leader to rub partners the wrong way, miscommunicate, and consequently experience great difficulty in establishing rapport and trust.

## **BLENDING DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES**

Fortunately, your partners behavior is not nearly as random as it often may appear. Psychologists have found that we are much more predictable, even in our apparent differences, than most of us would ever want to admit.

One of the more interesting studies on the general predictability of human behavior comes from a phenomenal text entitled *Influence*, wherein social psychologist Dr. Robert Cialdini documents numerous ways in which our behavior becomes habitual - - without us ever really thinking about it. As one example, Cialdini reports on a university colleague who tried a little experiment. He sent Christmas cards to a sample of absolute strangers. Although he expected some reactions, the response he received amazed him. Cards addressed back to him came pouring in from people whom he had never met nor heard of him. These people received his holiday greeting and automatically, without thinking, sent one in return. This Cialdini called the rule of reciprocation – we behave out of an obligation to the future repayment of some favor, gift, invitation, or the like.

For an even more practical application of this same example, think back to a time when you may have asked either one of your partners or one of your clients for a small favor. After having delivered on that request for you, the chances are very high that you now felt indebted. In fact, according to Cialdini's studies, that same client or partner could come back and ask you for a favor that was even greater in magnitude than the one you'd received and you will, in all likelihood, feel overwhelming compelled to deliver in order to clear your debt.

So what is the relevance of all of this – simple. While each of your partners may behave very differently from one other, those same partners are suprizingly predictable, if, and only if, you take some time to understand them, where they are coming from (their particular style) and then are prepared to adapt your style to compliment theirs.

I'm not suggesting that you will be able to fortell your partner's every move. Nor am I presumptuous enough to assert that you will know for sure how a particular partner may react. When you are dealing with intelligent adults, there are no certainties, but there are probabilities.

Have you ever noticed how one of your partners whom you would consider to be an accomplished "rainmaker" behaves when first meeting with a prospective client? That individual will immediately modify his or her behavior patterns to reflect that which they observe coming from the particular prospect. If this prospect appears friendly, is comfortable with small talk, appears unconcerned about time, and uses their hands to make gestures while they are communicating, you are likely to see that rainmaker doing exactly the same thing – even when and especially when, that is not their normal style of

behaving. That is a part of what makes them so accomplished as rainmakers. They instinctively recognize that people like people who are like them!

The very same principles apply, whenever you seek to develop any productive relationship. It follows then that we need to learn a bit more about how and why people, (especially those partners we want to manage and coach) behave the way that they do.

At the very least, you can manage your end of it. You can choose to treat your partner from his or her perspective, the way that individual wants to be treated, by modifying your own behavior (like the accomplished rainmaker) or you can choose to meet only your needs - - facing consequences such as dissatisfaction, frustration, confusion, and distress.

### **GUIDELINES TO UNDERSTANDING YOUR PARTNERS BEHAVIOR.**

When you next meet with one of your partners, really observe that individual's style by virtue of their physical and verbal behaviors. Notice how they talk – is their voice monotone or inflected? Do they walk ramrod straight or do they saunter along casually? Are their movements fast or slow? Do they seem to carry a hard-drive worth of facts in their heads or do you wonder from their dramatic actions, if they should have been on Broadway? All these little things tell you something about what to expect from them.

Psychologists have come up with a variety of concepts to help us explain and understand behavior. Unfortunately, they haven't always arrived at the same conclusions, but they have been able to agree that there are two primary dimensions to human behavior, both of which are observable and measurable as you may closely watch and listen to your partners. In the 1960's, Dr. David Merrill discovered that two clusters of behavior – “assertiveness” and “responsiveness” – are extremely helpful in determining how individuals are likely to behave. (Since the 1960's many of the leading accounting and consulting firms have taught Dr. Merrill's techniques for enhancing interpersonal skills in order to improve the client relations and practice management capabilities of their professionals.)

In its most practical form, an individual's level of **assertiveness** (not aggressiveness, which is very different) is the degree to which that individual is seen by others as being forceful or directive. Quite simply, across a broad continuum, there are those at one end who “tell” and those at the other end who “ask.”

Your more assertive “tell” partners will often speak louder, more rapidly, and more often. They will exert pressure for a decision, for taking action, and are pointed in expressing opinions, making requests, and giving directions. They are slightly more risk-oriented and often more confrontational. You will observe your more assertive partner feel no hesitation in interrupting and attempting to take control in the midst of some discussion amongst the members of the practice group.

Meanwhile, those of your partners who are less assertive (absolutely no value judgement implied) will tend to ask questions, are more submissive in their expressions and posture, speak more softly, have less intense eye contact, and want to study a situation before making any decision. These partners may be seen to ask a good number of questions either to gauge how others view the situation or to collect as much information as is available.

Assertiveness isn't a trait or quality. We are not judging any behavior as more or less desirable. It is merely an effective way to observe and describe how you perceive a partner's behavior – or, for that matter, how they may perceive yours.

Think about each of the partners in your practice group. Can you determine at which end of this assertiveness continuum each specific partner might easily fit? You may even want to take out a piece of paper and mark “ask” on the left side with “tell” on the right. Now underneath each, list the names of partners that you can easily observe falling into either of those two camps.

By way of another example, we have seen very accomplished rainmakers at both ends of this assertiveness continuum. The less assertive practitioner will quietly and calmly probe their client, by asking question after question, until finally the client perks up and says, “you know what I think we had better do . . . ,” to which this practitioner responds, “Oh, good idea, let us get started on that for you straight away!” Alternatively, the more assertive rainmaker is often perceived in their telling mode, “George, you had better start thinking about what you are going to do with respect to . . . , come on into my office and let's set out a plan for how we get things started.” And for some of us, who observe this more assertive behavior, we sit bewildered at how these professionals manage to get away with it!

The point is simply that there are different styles each of which can be equally effective. And even more to this previous point, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that our clients have different styles that require complimentary approaches. Imagine this more assertive practitioner trying this same approach with the less assertive client. It may not be such a pleasant dialogue.

The other way to measure behavior is by observing **responsiveness**. With responsiveness, you are looking for how your partner expresses themselves and how they react. There are those of your partners who are more reserved, who “control” their emotions; and those who “emote” or seem to “let it all hang out.” There are times when they might choose to mute their expression of feelings, but their most natural style around you and others in the practice group is generally more emotionally demonstrative.

The sort of behavior you will see and hear when you are with a more responsive partner (one who emotes) is an individual who appears friendly, is facially expressive (smiles, nods, frowns), and uses hand gestures freely. This individual will easily engage in small talk, share personal feelings, recite anecdotes and stories, and is less structured in their concern for time.

Alternatively, your more reserved and less responsive partners will often appear poker-faced such that you are never quite sure whether they are in agreement with what you, or others in the group, might be saying. You will find these partners vigilant, preoccupied, wanting to get the job done with a deliberate systematic approach that is always needing facts and details with limited time “to visit.” As the practice leader you may think that these partners simply lack feelings. However, these partners may experience strong feelings. They are just less likely to display them.

Again, you might want to think about the partners in your practice group and on a separate sheet of paper mark “control” on the top and “emote” on the bottom. Can you now determine which of your partners are just naturally more controlled and which express themselves more openly? And, where do you fit?

Dr. Merrill (and others subsequent research) tells us that we can be highly successful at our profession, irrespective of wherever we may happen to be on these two important dimensions of assertiveness and responsiveness. Interestingly however, the behavioral habit patterns related to these two dimensions are deeply ingrained by the time we reach adulthood. What this means is that, for example, while it is possible to increase or decrease one’s assertiveness or emotional expressiveness given a particular situation or circumstance, we can only maintain that increase or decrease for a relatively short period of time.

Take a situation where you, as the practice leader, are someone who is most comfortable when you are highly focused on the task at hand and feeling a strong need to get at the facts so that you can help the group make a timely decision. You are speaking with a partner who is inclined to want to take the time to explore “the big picture” and discuss the future ramifications of what each decision alternate might portend. You now have an internal (that sense of great impatience that you are probably feeling) and potentially external conflict.

You can choose to plow forward such that both of you are likely to become polarized and highly irritated. Or you can choose to understand that this partner is simply flexing their natural style and you need to attempt an accommodation. To accommodate your partner will require that you modify your style. To modify your style is not natural, not easy, and will evoke some level of short-term stress. Your level of stress is dependant upon how well you understand these principles of different styles and for how long a period you have to modify your style in order to accomplish the results you want to achieve.

## **THE KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING YOUR PARTNER’S STYLE**

Now that you have examined the assertiveness and responsiveness continuums, if we put the two together, it will give you an idea of what a particular partner is like, where that partner may be coming from, their expectations, and how you need to work with them.

Based on what we have learned from this exploration of the two continuums, it can be said that each of us has a dominant style. In other words, you and each of your partners, prefer to relate and work in ways characteristic of one of four specific styles. The following Grid gives us a frame of reference.

## STYLES GRID

	<b>Ask</b>	<b>Tell</b>
<b>Control</b>	<p><b>ANALYTICAL</b></p> <p>Less Assertive And Less Responsive</p>	<p><b>DRIVER</b></p> <p>More Assertive And Less Responsive</p>
<b>Emote</b>	<p><b>AMIABLE</b></p> <p>Less Assertive And More Responsive</p>	<p><b>EXPRESSIVE</b></p> <p>More Assertive And More Responsive</p>

To communicate easily about these four different styles, it helps to give each a name. Now, there are a couple of problems associated to doing that. Firstly, our professional tendency is to be highly skeptical of anything that smacks of touchy-feely. Second, we all

have a natural resistance to anything that suggests putting people in “boxes”. And finally, by naming those boxes, we may focus only on what the particular label might imply, and not the full spectrum of behaviors that characterize that style.

But, let’s see if we can suspend our skepticism for just a bit to see if this Styles Grid might really offer some important insights for you on how you can better work with and coach your fellow partners.

(The Drivers among you are thinking, can we just get to the point. The Analyticals are not quite sure if there is yet enough solid data to support this model. The Amiables are completely repulsed by the whole idea of boxes and wondering why we just can’t accept people at face value. While the Expressives are thinking, so some of the leading accounting and consulting firms are using this model . . . Can you give us some specific names?)

### **Your “Driver” Partners**

In the upper right quadrant, we have those of your partners who are perceived as being control-responsive and tell-assertive. This partner is most comfortable when he or she is in control of themselves, the work environment, and their client transactions. These partners want quick action, tangible results, and pride themselves on their bottom-line orientation. They speak in forceful tones and are far more comfortable with verbal, rather than written communications.

Decisiveness is a salient characteristic of these partners. They perk up when competing and appear to thrive within a pressure-cooker schedule. This partner will squeeze you into their calendar and let you know that their time is limited. This partner may give in to impatience and rely on educated guesses or hunches rather than facts. You can expect them to be more likely to change their mind such that others are surprised by the abrupt changes in thinking and the sudden shifts of direction. In this partner’s mind, the situation has changed and so too must the response.

It is not unusual for this partner to call you and without saying hello, launch directly into the conversation. This individual quite naturally wants to direct any conversation toward important tasks and goals; “I think we will implement this tomorrow” or “I think this discussion is over.” Combine their no-frills conversational style with rapid delivery, a leaning-in posture, forceful gestures, and eye contact that may seem piercing and you have a partner that is likely to intimidate the less assertive members of the practice group.

Your Driver partner can accomplish a tremendous amount in a short time. However, if others feel bull-dozed or depersonalized, there is a danger that the progress will be more illusory than real. Others lack of buy-in or outright resistance may delay or even sabotage the outcome. When you observe the forceful nature of this partner you may be tempted to assume a lack of caring about people. This partner may have a sincere concern for others but just does not talk about it, nor does their body language reveal the depth of

concern. This partner is a doer and their feelings are channeled into the language of action.

### **Your Analytical Partners**

In the upper left of the matrix, we have those partners for whom details and facts are the most persuasive. They are obsessed with getting information. These partners crave data – the more the better, such that they often agonize over decisions, wanting to be certain of making the right choice.

This partner is known for being well organized, can usually be found in their office, and the door is probably closed. Their offices may display a functional décor with charts, graphs, credentials, and firm related pictures, but everything is orderly and in its appropriate place.

Perceived as an individual of few words, this partner tends to ask pertinent questions, rather than make statements. This partner tends to be formal and proper, always likes to know where he or she is going, prefers written communications, may proceed carefully when taking the next step, and enjoys working with complex situations. They are often seen to place a higher priority on the task to be accomplished, than on the relationship. They strive for accuracy and expect it in others. They have perfectionist tendencies, set high standards, are often hard on themselves, but willing to do the time-consuming work needed to achieve or exceed those standards.

These are not contact people, preferring to work alone rather than with others. They also prefer formal, businesslike relationships; and may not volunteer much about their personal lives. Despite their solitary nature, they surprize you by being loyal when the going gets rough.

They favor brief, to-the-point telephone calls, are inclined to speak in structured, careful speech patterns, almost weighing their words as they say them. Your Analytical partners will typically retain their ground in stressful situations when they can maintain their position with concrete facts or reverse-control questions. This partner will try to avoid the emotionality related to conflict. When others get carried away by emotion, this partner will retreat into his or her head and become emotionally detached, assuming a rational approach will cool an overheated situation. It often has the opposite effect.

### **Your Amiable Partners**

The quadrant on the lower left describes those partners who are ask-assertive and emote-responsive. This partner's behavior may suggest little desire to impose their actions and ideas on the group, preferring instead to reserving opinions. These partners project sensitivity to other's feelings, exhibit great patience, and believe it important that they take time to establish relationships.

To a greater degree than others, they are team players enhanced by their generosity with their time, eager to ask questions they hope will get to the core of the matter, and use relationships to achieve results. This partner is skilled at encouraging others to expand on their ideas, good at seeing value in other's contributions and genuinely more interested in hearing your concerns than expressing their own.

When you enter this partner's office you are likely to see group photos, an abundance of family pictures and mementos, and even conservatively framed personal slogans. This partner will favor arranging their office seating such that they can sit side-by-side with you in a congenial, cooperative manner. They walk casually, acknowledging others and sometimes get side tracked in the hallways by chance encounters. This partner will express a sincere interest in the point-by-point description of what you did yesterday or the sequential pattern of how to complete a certain transaction. They like to approach their client work in a methodical and sequential in-out order. They are not enamored with goal setting or planning.

This partner prefers more personal interactions, rather than communicating by telephone or memos. They typically express themselves tentatively, defer to the proven way things have always been done, often defer decisions, and feel more comfort making decisions by conferring with others, rather than by themselves. In conversation, this partner will reveal personal things about themselves that may have you thinking you know them better than others. Often, however, they are surprisingly guarded. They do not communicate many of the thoughts and feelings that are important to them. This partner will withhold feelings of anger and critical judgement of others. Your Amiable partners can seem calm on the outside while a storm rages within.

### **Your “Expressive” Partners**

Finally, the lower right quadrant belongs to your Expressive partners. These partners are not hesitant about making their presence or feelings known and are generally seen to be very enthusiastic. They are often perceived to be highly intuitive and can be highly persuasive when they combine their personal power with emotional display.

You know when you have entered the working area of these people. This partner may strew paperwork across their desks – or even trail it along the floor. They react to visual stimuli, so they like to have everything where they can see it. Consequently their desks are often cluttered. You may see notes posted and taped all over with little apparent thought, but they are apt to tell you that they are organized within their disorganization.

This partner has a naturally preference for talking, often tending to “think out loud,” skipping from topic-to-topic in a way that defies logic,. They are often seen to monopolize discussions and when they talk their whole body joins in. Their varied, emotional vocal inflections and their colorful choice of words may tend toward exaggeration. The telephone can be a favorite toy that enables them to prolong conversations (often with personal stories and anecdotes) and recharge themselves. This partner is the most outgoing, flamboyant, tending toward the dramatic, and enjoys the

spotlight - they like glitter, glamour, flash, and excitement. They bristle with energy and are always on the go, enjoy being where the action is, and hate being confined to their desks all day. They prefer to work with others, are great at networking with innumerable contacts who can help them achieve their goals.

In group meetings these partners will continually shift about in their chairs; and if bored, will engage in a side conversation. They will look for ways to make the group's work more enjoyable. They tend to be highly creative, visionary, and relish examining the "big-picture" rather than getting mired in the details. They push others to look beyond the merely mundane and practical.

When you and the others are hard at work with the nitty-gritty of building the castles that your Expressive partner has dreamed up and sold you on, you may find that this partner is not working along with you – he or she is off dreaming of other castles. These partners are impulsive and have a tendency to act first and think later. Their mantra is: "First I dive into the pool and then I look to see if there is any water in it." This impulsiveness can often create problems for them and for others. They prefer to work according to opportunity rather than according to plan. Few are good at time management. And while they are usually good motivators when emotionally high, more than any other style they can often find themselves in the pits.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

When presenting a general description of each of these styles, I am speaking in broad tendencies. None of your partners will be completely true to style. The average partner will have most of the characteristics described, but not all of them. So when working with any particular partner, you need to be alert to the characteristics of their style and also looking for behaviors that may be exceptions to the rule.

Don't allow your initial perceptions to be cast in stone. Continue to absorb new information about this individual's assertiveness and responsiveness. Check your hypothesis against specific clues about the style you think this partner exudes. Then test your hypothesis in action. You can do that by reflecting the same characteristics as you believe are characteristic of your partner's style. If by doing that, you find it makes it easier for your partner to relate to you, you have probably made an accurate assessment of your partner's style.

Most professionals who are introduced to this concept for working with people find that it helps them better understand important dynamics of most of their relationships. Keep in mind the central point to all of this: No one style is better nor worse than any other style - just different. It is in understanding these differences that will help you get results as the practice group leader.