

Personality analysis system helps employees get along

by Barbara Carnes, Ph.D.

Editors note: The names in the following article are fictitious.

"I just don't understand why Janet keeps to herself so much," said Maria, an optometric assistant at the Jones and Smith optometric practice.

"I like talking with patients and with other staff members, too, but Janet stays at her desk and works on her paperwork until she gets it just right," Maria said.

"And if we have a conflict over something in the office, I'm the one who brings it up and then we talk it over. It's frustrating, but we usually work things out. It just takes some time and flexibility," she continued.

By contrast, the three assistants at Jackson Optometric Associates often do not work things out. Their latest disagreement is over office neatness. Angela likes to keep everything tidy, and often she will keep patients waiting while she puts away instruments and products...which could wait until after the last patient has been seen.

Donna, on the other hand, thinks that the patients should be seen first, then the office can be straightened up. She is outgoing, talkative, and enthusiastic. The doctors have said they really don't care as long as the patients aren't kept waiting too long.

This conflict seems like one that easily could be resolved with understanding and flexibility. However, it has been an ongoing battle for several years, with neither person willing to compromise.

The third assistant in the practice, Jennifer, is usually easygoing, patient and spends a lot of time listening to her two co-workers. But the conflict gets her down because she's caught right in the middle.

"I just wish they would get along so things would be more peaceful around here," says Jennifer. Last

year Jennifer thought about quitting, but she decided to stay. "I really like this place. Why should I have to leave because they fight all the time?"

At Vision Professionals, another optometric practice, the staff gets along fairly well. It's the doctors who don't.

John Jamison, O.D., is the senior partner, and set in his ways. He wants to do things the way they have always been done. Several years ago, after considerable resistance, he finally agreed to computerize the accounting system.

He wants the office to be one happy family, with no conflicts, no disagreements and no change. He was upset when the receptionist, Rose, quit last year after she had a baby.

The two junior partners, Cheryl Admondson, O.D., and Ed Simpson, O.D., both like change. They want the latest equipment and want to use the most up-to-date office systems.

Cheryl and Ed like to get right to the point without "beating around the bush," while John is reluctant to say what is on his mind. Frequently one doctor or other will enlist the support and loyalty of one of the staff members, which leads to more conflict.

In otherwise effective offices, personality differences can range from a minor irritation to ongoing frustration and strife, which leads to work dissatisfaction, poor productivity and staff turnover.

The DiSC System

Large corporations, small businesses and professional practices of all sizes find that the DiSC system is a way to help them understand personality differences among employees and partners.

It also provides a framework to help increase tolerance for differences, decrease potential and actual conflict and strengthen working relationships.

First developed in the

1920s by Dr. William Martson, DiSC stands for four basic personality or behavioral styles: **dominance, influencing, steadiness** and **cautiousness**.

People use all four of these styles at one time or another, but each person uses one or sometimes two styles most often. This is their primary work behavioral style. Most people also have a secondary or back-up style.

A popular DiSC assessment (it is not called a test because there are no right or wrong answers) is **The Personal Profile System**, which was developed in the 1970s by Dr. John Geier.

This popular system is used by trainers, consultants and counselors to help people understand and appreciate their own and other people's styles. It provides a surprising amount of detail on people's goals, communication style, motivation, preferred work environment, fears and weaknesses.

People whose primary style is **dominance** tend to be results-oriented, concerned with the bottom line, make quick decisions and take risks. They tend to enjoy challenges and fear being taken advantage of. Cheryl Admondson and Ed Simpson are examples of the dominance style.

People whose primary style is **influencing** tend to be enthusiastic, people-oriented, talkative, sociable and are often somewhat disorganized. They enjoy being around people and fear not being liked. Maria and Donna are examples of this style.

People whose primary style is **steadiness** are sociable too, but they tend to be more laid back. These people are patient, listen well, work within established guidelines, appear calm and are uncomfortable with conflict and change. Jennifer, and John Jamison are examples of the steadiness style.

People whose primary style is **cautiousness** are detail-oriented, analytical, precise, often critical of

others while very sensitive to criticism of their own work. They comply with rules and procedures and are, like the steadiness, uncomfortable with changes. Janet and Angela are examples of the cautiousness style.

Are these characteristics strengths or weaknesses? They are both. When a strength is overused, it becomes a weakness. For example, the dominance style's results-oriented approach can get things accomplished especially under short deadlines. This style, however, can be demotivating to others, who may feel steamrolled.

The influencing style's sociability and talkativeness can be a strength for building trust and loyalty with patients and for attracting new patients to the practice. However, excessive talking cuts down on productivity and may turn some patients off.

The steadiness style's patience and loyalty are a strength, unless they keep the steadiness person from forging ahead and trying something new.

The cautiousness style's attention to detail and tendency to analyze can be a strength when scrutinizing the bookwork. However, painstaking analysis of too much detail will keep people from getting their other work done and needlessly delay any decisions which need to be made.

About 15 percent of people fit neatly into one of these four style descriptions. The remainder use a combination of two, or in some cases, three styles. Detailed descriptions of their style tendencies are possible through the **Personal Profile System**.

For example, someone may use both dominance and cautiousness. The Personal Profile System calls this combination the creative pattern. Key characteristics of this pattern are internal conflict between moving forward (dominance) and perfection (cautiousness), and quickness of thought and reaction time

vs. the wish to explore all possible solutions before making a decision.

People Compatibility

People with similar styles get along well together but do not necessarily make the best team. People with different styles often experience excessive conflict. The best work team or partnership is based on capitalizing on each person's strengths and compensating for weaknesses.

The **People Compatibility Chart** provides some guidance. With the possible exception of two dominance people who often experience power struggles and turf wars, people with like styles get along well with each other.

But when it comes to working together in an office, people with different styles complement each other. For example, a worker whose primary style is dominance and one whose primary style is steadiness make a good team because the dominance person is willing to take risks and come up with new ways of doing things while the steadiness person is better at day-to-day management within an established routine and at carrying out the ideas that the dominance person thinks up.

When style differences are extreme, as in the case of an influencing person and a cautious person, unproductive conflict is more likely to result. Janet and Maria and Angela and Donna are examples of this type of conflict.

Angela and Donna's more intense conflict is not caused by style difference alone, however. It is the result of each person's unwillingness to appreciate or even tolerate the other's very different style.

Partners who are successful at working with each other despite very different styles are able to recognize their differences, appreciate how each contributes to the practice and find appropriate ways for each to make the best

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use of their style.

People with very different styles need to spend more time and energy trying to understand the other's perspective, communicating with each other and making joint decisions.

How To Handle Occasional Differences

Drs. Amondson and Simpson have learned that even though their natural dominance tendency is to move forward quickly to try out new ideas, they need to slow down and spend time helping Dr. Jackson understand how the change will help their practice and how the change can be implemented.

Flexibility is the key to dealing with occasional personality differences. Most people tend to expect others to think and act as they do, yet co-workers need to recognize and appreciate each other's differences and to exercise flexibility when dealing with each other.

The **Strategies for Communicating and Influencing chart** provides suggestions for dealing with each of the styles. The key is to move out of your own preferred mode of operating, temporarily, and communicate with the other person the way they want to be communicated with.

More Serious, Often Irreconcilable Differences

When people are not flexible, when they do not attempt to adapt their communication or influencing mode to the other person or people, more serious differences can result, and a professional should be consulted. Some of the danger signs which signal a need for professional assistance are listed below.

The differences are frequent and ongoing. Frequent conflicts and disagreements are a significant energy drain, and productivity will always suffer. This also is true if employees or doctors frequently find it necessary to avoid or ignore one another.

The consequences of

these differences have major impact. Often the staff at Vision Professionals is so caught up in conflict that the work doesn't get done.

The differences are having a negative effect on the others in the office. This includes the doctors and the patients. Staff members often get caught up in differences between partners. This results in conflicting loyalties and costly loss of productivity because the staff lacks clear direction.

Professional consultation will help people determine whether their differences can be reconciled or whether it would be best for one or more of them to leave. A professional business, human relations or human-resources consultant can assess the nature of the conflict and help the people involved identify strategies for working together and making decisions more effectively. If these strategies are not used or if the differences between people are too great, it may be better for one or more individuals to leave. The consultant can then assist the people involved with this process so that it is conducted in a positive, professional manner.

Different Styles Make Better Teams

Many people find that the DiSC system helps them identify the best match for their particular office. People with all the same or similar styles are likely to get along well (with the possible exception of dominance styles), but the team will be unbalanced. For example, if many team members' preferred styles are Dominance, they are likely to want a fast-paced office environment even at the expense of patient comfort. Lots of dominance people often means "too many chiefs and no Indians." If many of the team members' styles are Influencing, they are likely to spend too much time talking - with patients and with each other - and may not attend to business as much as they should. This may result in bookwork or charts not being kept up or in consistently running

behind schedule. If many of the team members' styles are steadiness, they may get stuck in routine and not take the initiative to make needed changes. High Steadiness teams also may avoid directly dealing with conflict in the office. If many of the team members' styles are Cautiousness, they are likely to spend too much time and energy on details of their job and may avoid interacting with patients or co-workers. They also may be overly critical of each other.

By identifying the style of a person being considered to join a team, one is able to assess compatibility with other employees and to identify possible conflict points. It's not so much that you should reject people who are too much like other workers in the office of those who are too different but rather the style differences can be used as a tool to discuss possible conflict points and how they might be overcome. This increased understanding will help the relationship with the new team member(s) get started on the right foot.

If conflicts occur, the DiSC system is a way for team members to discuss differences in a positive, productive manner. They should start by identifying their styles and discuss the tendencies of their style as these relate to working in the office and doing their jobs. They also should talk about the strengths each style brings and about potential conflict areas and how these might be overcome.

By understanding and appreciating differences in personality and style and compatibility, partners are better able to develop and maintain satisfactory and productive working relationships and reduce conflict.

The Personal Profile System is a self-assessment inventory which identifies a person's primary and back-up, or secondary, style, and provides in-depth information on each of the styles. The software version of this profile provides detailed compatibility comparisons of two or more people. For more

information, please contact the author. For further reading on DiSC, the book PeopleSmart by Tony Alessandra and Michael O'Connor (Keynote Publishing Company) provides a wealth of information and examples. The six-tape audio tapeset Getting What You Need With Style has information on the four DiSC styles, and the 15-tape audio tapeset Classical Styles has detailed descriptions of style tendencies from the

Personal Profile System. Both tapesets are available from the author.

Barbara Carnes, Ph.D., is president of Carnes and Associates Inc., a human resources development consulting practice in St. Louis. She is the author of the books "Increasing Your DiscAbility" and "Making Training Stick" as well as articles and training packages on people skills in the workplace. She can be contacted at: 314/721-0933.

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