

# Using DISC Styles to Build Teams That Work

By Tony Alessandra, PhD

"Round up the usual suspects," the gendarme ordered in the famous line from the movie "*Casablanca*." And frequently that's how executives think when they create teams, committees, or task forces. The boss says or thinks something like: "Let's appoint anyone who might know something about this issue." Or even more likely: "Grab anybody who's got a stake in this thing."

Organizations, of course, love such groups because when they work, they can improve coordination, help employees feel more involved, and maybe even spur innovation. But when they flop--or, more commonly, just lapse into mediocrity--they can drain an organization of its vitality and leave a legacy of posturing, power struggles, and misunderstandings.

## *Designing a Group*

We naively assume any group can automatically be a team. But, actually, one of the biggest single reasons that teams misfire is that personality differences are ignored. In short, who's selected for the team *will* very likely affect the outcome. So, for best results, we can't just order an off-the-rack model—we've got to design one that'll best do the job.

If, when you create a team, you employ knowledge of the four behavioral styles, you greatly improve its chances for success. You need to take into account that there are natural allies and

antagonists among the styles and also that each style functions best at a different phase in the life cycle of a team.

For example, Interactive Styles often see Cautious Styles as overly-analytical fuss-budgers. Dominance Styles might sooner die than turn into dull plodders like the Steadiness Styles. Cautious Styles, while often drawn to Steadiness Styles, have difficulty understanding the Interactive Style's lack of focus or the Dominance Style's impatience. And Steadiness Styles only wish everyone was as amiable as they.

So while the potential for conflict is always there, it needn't become the reality. In creating a team, think about whom you are putting on it and monitor how they function during the group's evolution. That way you'll not only make the best possible use of the strengths of each team member, you can help create a whole that's much larger than the sum of the parts.

## **THE NATURAL CYCLE OF GROUPS**

Work groups typically follow a cycle, just like the organizations which spawn them. They face predictable obstacles, rise to the occasion or fail, and as a result, either evolve or deteriorate. At every stage in that cycle, each of the various behavioral styles can be a help or a hindrance.

### **Phase One: Finding Focus**

Any new group, at first, gropes to find its focus. Members of the group ask, or at least think: Is this going to be worth the effort? Is this going to be a useful team that can get things done? Or is it just another group holding yet more meetings aimed at producing another report that nobody reads?

In addition, each member at this point is seeking to define his or her role. They silently ask: "Do I fit in here, or am I an outsider?" "Am I going to be an important member of this group with real input, or am I just here for appearances?" "Is this going to waste my time?"

CAUTIOUS STYLES and DOMINANCE STYLES can be especially helpful during this first phase. They are both skilled at getting to the heart of matters, though in different ways.

If the challenges the group faces are intellectually complex, the CAUTIOUS STYLE will be in his element. Because they're so good at reasoned analysis on tasks, CAUTIOUS STYLES can help clarify the mission and give the team focus.

Similarly, if the main hurdle the group faces is more of a conflict—say, a history of discord among members and/or a split over its goals—a DOMINANCE STYLE likely will shine. In fact, the group may be yearning for just a strong leader who can tell the warring members to quit butting heads and either commit, or leave. That's a situation ready-made for the DOMINANCE STYLE.

In either case, the CAUTIOUS STYLE or DOMINANCE STYLE may be able to get the group to psychologically buy into the idea of moving forward together, to convince the team that there's a "plan" and progress will be possible.

## **Phase Two: Facing the Realities**

While a tough-minded CAUTIOUS STYLE or DOMINANCE STYLE may get the group going, this stormy second stage often cries out for the buoyant optimism of the INTERACTIVE STYLES. Their friendly, informal brand of leadership can send out a strong, clear signal that this group *can* work together and make things better for everybody.

A people-oriented approach is needed at this stage because not just the team's internal dynamics but also external issues must be addressed here. It's at this point that reality often intrudes. The group may begin to see how difficult its task really is, how little time and resources are available, and how members may need to settle for a half a loaf rather than a stunning breakthrough.

All these factors can breed frustration, confusion, and disillusionment. This is when it'll be decided if the group tackles the real issues in meaningful ways, or gets mired in its own internal power struggle. That's why INTERACTIVE STYLES, who are good at smoothing over rough edges and encouraging all to share their thoughts and feelings, can be a key here.

Many groups, of course, never transcend this them-versus-us mindset. They continue to silently debate: "Who's the 'top dog?'" "Who stands to gain the most and who'll likely come up the loser?" Such a team isn't likely to accomplish much. Instead, members will continuously collide with one another, limiting themselves as a team and as individuals.

But if the INTERACTIVE STYLE, with his or her upbeat attitude and people skills, can get the members to quit keeping score, they may yet learn to work together. If the INTERACTIVE STYLE can convince them that who's in charge is less important than who has what know-how and attitudes, the group will have entered the next phase.

### **Phase Three: Coming Together**

Cooperation and collaboration become increasingly apparent, and it's now that STEADINESS STYLES can give the group a boost. Because they are especially good at coalescing differing views, the STEADINESS STYLES help meld individual differences into group progress.

By opening their hearts and heads to one another, the STEADINESS STYLES, or others with STEADINESS STYLE-like behavior, can blend the discordant elements into more of a single melody. The team begins to narrow the gap between what it earlier said it wanted to do and what it's actually doing. There's been a shift of identity, and it's become a true team because members who previously thought in terms of "me," begin thinking "we."

#### **Phase Four: Reaching for Stardom**

The final stage is more the exception than the rule. But, when reached, it means a team really is performing at its best and highest use, that it's functioning as a whole, not just as a collection of individuals.

Its members enjoy being part of the team and express that fact. They've learned how to work together. Morale is high. The group continually produces quality and quantity output and is effectively self-managing.

In the previous three stages, DOMINANCE STYLE-type behavior might have been called for on key decisions. But at this stage, a hands-on, controlling style isn't needed. In fact, once a group has this momentum, such a strong-handed style can be counterproductive and could even torpedo the group's progress. Instead, the team's decisions flow naturally from its deliberations.

Differences among its members become a source of strength, not dispute.

#### **DIFFERENCES, NOT DEFICIENCIES**

Love'em or hate'em, work groups are here to stay. (Some estimates are that as much as 50% to 80% of a manager's time, for example, is spent with groups.) But while they can be high-performance vehicles, they can also be high-maintenance, especially in the early stages. Both the

team's creator and its members need to carefully watch the process. Only a team that fully understands and savors its members' styles is likely to be genuinely productive.

If members were chosen carefully and if they practice adaptability, the advantages of stylistic diversity can quickly outweigh the group's liabilities. Remember: We're talking about personality *differences* here, not *deficiencies*.

So, in the final analysis, working with groups all comes down to suspending judgment, empathizing, and trying to play to people's strengths. The result, despite our differences, can be a wonderful synergy.