

Written Transcript:

The S Style

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Alright, the next style I want to talk about is the S style. And really what we're doing here is we're popping open the hood, taking a look at the engine, digging beneath the surface, getting a sense of what makes these people tick. And I want to use the same framework that I've been using for the other styles. And that is this idea that we all have this very fundamental drive to be seen as valuable, to feel that we are useful, worthwhile people. And very early on in life we make decisions about what makes a person valuable. And I guess more to the point, what's going to make me valuable. The trick is, though, we all make different assumptions about what's going to make us valuable.

And so, for the S style, one of the really prominent assumptions that I see again and again and again is this idea that I'm valuable if I help people. I'm valuable if I'm useful to other people. And very much in step with this is one of the first things that people notice about someone who is high in the S style is that they tend to be very, very accommodating. They're very quick to adjust to other people's needs, they show a great deal of empathy for other people, they let them know that they're there to help, have a lot of difficulty saying no, and they tend to be pretty good listeners. They're oftentimes a lot more likely to listen than they are to speak.

When I've talked to people with the S style and kind of dug a little beneath the surface, one of the things that I've found is that they oftentimes assume that others really don't have a lot of interest in their experiences and ideas. And so they probe others for what others are thinking, but kind of minimize the importance of their ideas and minimize

how interested other people are. And so they're often hesitant or tentative when they're speaking, which in a lot of cases can actually cause people to be less interested. They're not sensing their passion.

Another thing I've found in conversations with people with the S style, digging beneath the surface, is that they really have a fear of boring people. There's an insecurity around that issue of being tedious to other people.

We also find that people with the S style are really likely to give other people the benefit of the doubt. They put the behavior of other people in the best possible light. They give the most favorable interpretation in terms of the other person's intentions. And they're inclined to think, in some respects, that the other person really does fundamentally have more rights than they do. They really have a minimal sense of their own rights, as opposed to let's say the D style, which we talked about, which often has a very elevated sense of their own rights.

But the person with the S style, they trust people. When someone makes an excuse, they tend to believe what they're told. They're very, very patient with other people's mistakes, very supportive of their friends. They won't point out flaws if they see them. But truthfully, it's not even just that they don't want to point out the flaws, they're really less likely to see the flaws. If someone has a different style than them, they're inclined to consider that maybe their own ideas need to be reconsidered rather than the other person's ideas, again, much in contrast to the D style. So, they're quick to see another person's point of view. And as many of you have probably seen a number of times, they're a lot more suggestible by the same token, more likely to be taken advantage of, because they're inclined to think that other people's intentions are good, assuming that other people wouldn't lie, or bend the truth.

For a lot of people with the S style they'd much rather take the risk of being manipulated or being taken in or deceived than to doubt someone who is sincere. And really the pride system that keeps a lot of people guarded against looking foolish or being taken in or being manipulated, really isn't as pronounced for the S style. That's not as dangerous as potentially sending someone the signals that you don't trust them.

And similarly they tend to be very forgiving. They trust that other people's intentions are good, you know, one reason they're forgiving. But the second reason is they're really anxious to repair, really eager to repair the relationship.

Now we talked about at the beginning that one of the fundamental assumptions is that I'm valuable if I help people, if I'm useful to other people. And so there is this sense of almost earning affection, which we talked about the fact that they're good listeners, and they are good listeners because they're genuinely interested in other people's lives, but beneath the surface there really is a secondary motivation when listening, which is to earn the affection of the other person, the belief that they'll be more likeable if they make the other person feel good about themselves, if they make the other person feel heard, if they ask the other person questions and seem interested in their life. Alright, now this isn't all disingenuous, there really is a sincere part to this, but there also is a part that's motivated by self-interest, a need to feel more valuable in this respect, and on the reverse side not to bore the other person with their own stuff.

And because the person with the S style really, for the most part doesn't base their self-esteem on achievement or accomplishment nearly as much as other people, they're a lot less likely to be ambitious, and they're oftentimes a lot less likely to seek out leadership positions. In fact, they oftentimes have a really unspoken, but fundamental discomfort being in charge of other people. And when I've really dug deep and talked to some people with this S style, not in all but in some cases there's almost this unspoken equating of being in command of other people versus doing harm with other people.

And so we have some folks who take to leadership like a fish takes to water, but for a lot of people with the S style, they're really monitoring themselves on this humility front. Right, is that, one should always keep themselves in check, and they don't want to be caught in a position where they're being haughty, particularly where they're being seen as being haughty. Who do you think you are to be in charge of me? And so they'll look for ways to give away their power. You know, they'll monitor their words to make sure they're not coming across as a dictator.

It's a really core conflict with their belief that you really shouldn't be caught promoting yourself as something special. You need to keep yourself in check. And really, when you build yourself up, when you put yourself in charge of other people, you really risk the humiliation of someone looking at you, eyes asquint and saying, "You don't really belong up there. You're a phony. You've been found out." And so it's better to just keep yourself in check than have someone else do it for you. It's better to take yourself off the pedestal than to have other people realize that you don't really belong in charge; you don't really know what you're doing.

In a related phenomenon, a really interesting cognitive perspective that I've noticed talking to a number of S people, is that they're much more likely to see themselves as the object in someone else's mind rather than the primary doer. And, let me give you a, at the risk of taking too much of a tangent, let me tell a little story here just to communicate what I'm talking about.

And this is an essay that I read, I don't know, must have been twenty years ago now. And it's written by a guy and he's recalling an incident in his teen years. So he's got a buddy, one of his best friend, whose, he wants to take this girl out. And the problem is that the buddy can't take the girl out unless he finds a date for the girl's friend. So he kind of coaxes his friend into taking a hit and going out with them, you know, on a blind date with the two of them, basically being a wingman. So the writer is going on and on

talking about what a burden this is going to be, just he's expecting to have a miserable time. He could be out playing basketball and he's being set up with this girl who he's sure is going to be really unattractive. And so finally he comes and the girl shows up and she's just stunning, she's gorgeous, and the guy couldn't be more happy. He's thrilled.

So they talk for a little bit and finally they go out and the girl seems a little bit shy, but you know, he's like, I'll warm her up. And, you know, they're on the subway, riding into the city, and he's trying to get the conversation going, and the girl's not much of a conversationalist. He tries the old yawn with the putting the arm around her, and she doesn't really take to it, right, she moves away. He tries a couple of other things, and there's this moment of clarity that he has when he realizes, I'm the blind date. He's actually able to see himself through this girl's eyes.

And so this is what I'm talking about here. He sees himself as the object in her eyes, as opposed to what he was seeing before as he's the actor, he's the main character. Instead of her being the blind date, he's the blind date, he's the unwanted one, he's the one that's going to fade off into obscurity as soon as she goes off and keeps living her life.

And so when I've talked to a number of people with the S style, they're much more likely than others to see themselves as the object in another person's eyes. And so they're doing what they can to keep those other people happy, minimizing their own rights, minimizing their own needs to serve the purpose of the primary actor in that situation. This is, for example, the opposite of the D, the person with the D style who is much more likely to objectify other people, seeing them as instruments of his or her success, of his or her goals. The S on the other hand, the person with the S style, is much more likely to see themselves as the object, to want to stay out of other people's way, not be a nuisance. And I'll get into talking about this more, expanding on this as we get into the S style.

But, there certainly is a positive aspect to this. There's a natural attentiveness to other people's needs that they've honed throughout their lives. And so, whereas someone else, when they've gotten feedback that they've been callous or they've hurt someone's feelings, really needs to have a focused effort on what's the other person thinking, what's the other person feeling. The person with the S style throughout their entire lives has just trained themselves to think in that way. And so it comes very naturally and very smoothly to that person with a naturally empathic sense of what's going on with another person.

Alright, so we've talked about this assumption that I'm valuable if I help people or if I'm useful to people. There's a second assumption that I want to talk about right here, and it's this idea that I'm valuable if I don't let other people down. And you can almost kind of flip it on its head and say, I lack value, I'm a bad person, if I let other people down, if I upset other people. Alright so, I'm valuable if I don't upset people, I'm valuable if I don't rock the boat.

And one of the first things that comes across when you meet someone with the S style is their very gentle nature, high desire for stability among these folks. And if there was a single best determiner of S's behavior, for my money, it's a drive for harmony, harmony both in terms of their relationships and in terms of the tasks that they're doing. Chaos is bad. Really, I need to have things stable.

Consequently, they tend to be really careful. They minimize their chances for mistakes. They minimize setting unrealistic expectations in other people's minds. They don't like to have unclear expectations put on them. They're not easily excited. They tend to describe themselves as very calm, like I said gentle. Cognitively speaking, they're much more likely to see the potential downside of a failure than the benefits of success, particularly when it comes to taking a risk of some sorts.

They like to have, and it's oftentimes an unrealistic level of information before making a decision or before speaking out in a meeting. Oftentimes people with the S style are very quiet in meetings, right, they're gathering their thoughts, they're gathering their thoughts. And someone let's say with the D or the i style whose willing to just speak out with their opinion, is more willing to be wrong or more confident that they're going to be right. The S is kind of processing all of these different options, gathering more and more information, not feeling comfortable speaking out until they've really put a nail in things.

And in the end, they're a lot more willing and likely to stick with the status quo because they know exactly what they're going to get. If they put their effort in, they know what the output is going to be. And they're usually persistent and conscientious enough to put in that effort. And so they have a very predictable outcome on the other side.

And so it's this need for harmony that many times leads to these routines and really well-established patterns that we see. They like having a steady rhythm which they can maintain tirelessly over an extended period of time. They can turn out remarkably consistent progress day after day after day, and a lot less likely to get bored with the routine than a lot of the other styles.

They may not show a lot of urgency from internal sources, again, unlike the D who has this constant drive—I need to be getting stuff done, I need, you know, their value is based on getting stuff done, on accomplishing. Their value isn't nearly based as much on accomplishing. There's not that sense of urgency in their mind. They certainly do respond to pressure from other sources because they have that drive. What does make them valuable, they feel, is meeting other people's expectations and demands, and so they meet that level of urgency. But it's not nearly as much from internal sources. By a similar token, they're very unlikely to pressure other people.

And so, with their fondness for harmony, they're not really likely to be scanning the environment, looking for new opportunities. They're much more likely to see the benefits, see the beauty of what they have in front of them. Oftentimes they're cited as disliking change. And that's not necessarily true of every person with the S style, but it's certainly a common pattern. They're content to work with an existing structure, get attached to the routine or the procedure or a certain piece of equipment. And if they're asked to give these things up, let's say they're subtly pressured to give these things up, they'll passively resist and if the pressure gets to the point where it's obvious that they're being pushed to give them up, they'll do so, but they'll internally kind of silently suffer a feeling of chaos or emotional confusion; a feeling that they've really been uprooted until they've been able to sort things out. They want to work with known quantities. They've got well-developed coping mechanisms for problems when they're working with known quantities, and not so much when they're working in the unknown areas.

Another area that's tied in with this belief that I don't want to upset people or I don't want to rock the boat, is they show a really strong respect for authority. And they not only respect the authority, they don't even consider the idea of questioning. You know this idea that, they must know best, underestimating their own judgment. And if someone, particularly a person in authority, shows strong self-assurance and confidence and projects that, the person with the S style is inclined to believe in them because the S really doesn't show this level of confidence unless they're absolutely certain. So there's this unconscious projection that, well they must be absolutely certain.

And if we really want to theorize, you know get into psychoanalytical thinking on this, is that we can talk about some of the externalization that's going on here. Is that I have a strong need for stability and I don't have the confidence or self-assurance for myself to do it, but I can externalize or project that on the world, project that on the authorities

and have that sense of security or stability from them by assuming, by projecting on them a level of certainty that, in a lot of cases, is unrealistic but it's comforting to have.

Also tied in with this drive for harmony is a really, really strong avoidance of conflict, avoiding argumentative people. And when someone with the S style is forced to work with them, they're likely to cave in, but oftentimes in the future will go out of their way to avoid working with that person, or just pacify that person. They'll get nervous when they have to approach that person with a question. They just find it very stressful to work with these people, and can be very sensitive to criticism, can be very quick to internalize those criticisms and perhaps become even more hesitant in their opinions that can make them even more frustrating to work with for people who are very driven and want quick answers.

You often see people with the S style in group situations when there's a light tension will try to play the peacemaker role, but when things get more heated, are a lot more likely to shut down, just kind of try to wait things out, hope that people will settle things or at least wait things out so they can get out of there as quickly as possible.

And when working with the S people, oftentimes I've found that they don't realize how much of their energy is going in to trying to understand another person's perspective and cater to that other person and really all of the energy that goes in to filtering what's coming out of their mouth. You know, if someone else was going to come in blind and start to do that, you know, put all that energy in, they would be exhausted. But just because they've been doing that their whole life and it feels natural, they don't realize how inefficient it can be or on the other hand, how efficient it could be to just speak your mind, to blurt out what's in your head. It really just doesn't seem like an option to them to do that. They're so used to protecting other people's feelings and looking out for what other people are doing. And so, when they're talking to other people, they're used to running through a variety of different ways of phrasing them either to get

through or protect the other person's feelings. So it comes across as very hesitant or very unsure. And particularly for people who are very decisive, cut and dry, tell it like it is type folks, this indecisiveness can be really frustrating when they feel like they can't get a straight opinion on a person or the other person isn't making their preferences entirely clear.

I've talked in a number of situations when people have an S manager. They get frustrated because the person fails to manage up. You know, they want to everyone below them, you know, their subordinates to be happy, but they're also not comfortable pushing for the resources they need or to stick up for the team's rights. In general, they have a lot of difficulty seeing themselves and imagining themselves as powerful.

Now something really, and I'm going to take a little sidetrack and talk about the idea of power here, because this is very relevant so the S style, and as well everything on the flip side, to the D style as well. But, when we perceive ourselves as powerful, and psychologists talk about us activating what's called the behavioral approach system. Where, in other words, we become very active, right, behavioral approach, we tend to take steps, we tend to approach the problem. Versus someone who perceives themselves as not being powerful, is talked about as activating what's called the behavioral inhibition system, which focuses on pain avoidance. Right, so I'm not powerful enough to approach the problem, but really what I can do is avoid pain. And so we focus on punishments rather than rewards as opposed to the powerful person who is focused on rewards rather than punishment.

And so research shows that, for people who show themselves as, who see themselves as high in power, are a lot more likely to act than deliberate and vice versa. So the S who sees themselves as lacking in power is a lot more likely to spend time deliberating. The D and the i who sees themselves as high in power is much more likely to just jump in and act. The person who sees themselves as low in power is a lot less likely to delegate, to

ask for favors. They see themselves as having more constraints in the situation. And when they look out at other people, they're more likely to see them as obstacles to their goals, as opposed to someone who perceives themselves to be powerful. That person looks out at other people and sees them as instruments towards their goals. And this ability to see yourself as powerful and the tendency to see yourself as powerful has a lot of implications for how we approach our interactions with other people.

Research shows again and again that people who see themselves as powerful are a lot more likely to exploit and to objectify other people. And it makes a lot of sense. When we think of ourselves as powerful, we don't really need to attend to the needs of other people as we do when we're in a less powerful situation. Think of yourself working with your boss. You probably spend a lot more time trying to sort out what's her mood, what is she thinking of me than she does of you. When we're in the position of power, we're a lot less attentive to the internal experiences and needs of other people. On the other hand, the people without the power are a lot more motivated to understand the causal relationships in their environment. Research shows that subordinates put a lot more energy into reading interpersonal cues from their supervisors than vice versa. And power also reduces perspective taking. If you see yourself as powerful, you're a lot less likely to put the effort into seeing things from the other person's point of view.

There's a really clever experiment that was done. Researchers took a group of people and they randomly split them in half and half of the people were primed to think of themselves as more powerful. And then half of the people were primed to think of themselves as less powerful. And then in a seemingly unrelated exercise, and I believe they thought they were going to be playing a game, they were asked to put the letter E on their forehead and do it in the mirror. And the people who were in the high power condition were thinking of themselves and were thinking of themselves as powerful, were a lot less likely to think of the other person's perspective. So what do they do? They put the E on backwards, how it looked to them in the mirror. People who were

primed to think of themselves as less powerful, were actually more likely to write the E backwards in their own mind so that other people would be able to read it straightforward.

So, obviously this is a downside of power, the inability to take the perspective of another person. But as we all know, there are some distinct advantages of perceiving oneself as powerful. And one of the things that comes clear in the research is this ability to really act with certainty that a lot of people with the S style have difficulty doing because they're over-processing the information.

Alright, so calling back to the big picture, there's one final area that I want to talk about, in terms of this idea that I'm valuable if I help people. I'm valuable if I don't let other people down. But there's also the sense that I'm valuable if people accept me. And so people with the S style oftentimes don't really need a lot of attention. They're okay working in the background, unlike the person with the i style who really needs to feel special, to feel valuable. The person with the S style is really just shooting for acceptance. They don't need to be adored or admired. They really just want to fit in. They don't need the limelight. They're comfortable working in a supporting role. And if we were talking to a psychoanalyst, they may even speculate that a lot of people, certainly not all, but a number of people with the S style have a need to show deference to other people. They have similarly a need to make themselves small, and so oftentimes will attach themselves to a stronger person and have a need to praise that other person, to build that person up, to follow their rules, and provide a vicarious sense of confidence through that other person, all the while minimizing their sense of self.

Now, whether or not you buy in to that, it's hard to argue with the observation that people with the S style have a really pronounced sense of modesty about them. They don't self-promote very well. For that reason, their contributions oftentimes fly under the radar. Now, they do really, really appreciate recognition, but at the same time, get

embarrassed about it, and have this assumption that if I'm given a compliment, I need to play it down. I need to push down the value of the compliment, say it was no big deal or the idea was just common sense. Even though they do take pride in that compliment.

But this modesty does diminish their social presence. And so, in future interactions, it makes it more difficult for people to respect their opinions, respect their ideas, respect their voice. They have a diminished sense of their own rights as we talked about before. And other people pick up on that. They really don't want to impose. They'll go out of their way to avoid asking for a favor. And to make their mark, they're oftentimes fighting against this internal drive to make themselves inconspicuous. And so, other people are dismissing their input because they don't present their ideas with that much force.

So if they're working in a very hard-charging environment, a lot of the people that I've talked to really are self-conscious about the idea that they're seen as timid. It's really an area of insecurity for them. By the same token, though, they really dislike having to fight to have their ideas heard. And so, if they're looking for the lesser of two evils, the lesser of two evils is to be seen as passive rather than putting forth the energy, putting forth the gusto to put up the fight. They're much more inclined toward that peaceful environment and usually describe themselves as pretty moderate, tend to choose pretty middle of the road approaches, sort of non-committal, right, use words like peaceful or calm or serene to describe themselves. And this again is respecting or reflecting that desire for stability.

And even though sometimes in the DiSC model, when you see the DiSC model described, people with the i and S styles are described as affiliative or people-focused, they actually tend to describe themselves as very private. And in fact, when we had people take the Myers-Briggs, 75% of people with the S style came up as introverts. And when we talk to them, they like to have the security of their own world, and oftentimes

have to muster up a little energy to let other people into that world. And so, I would say that they probably have a stronger need for intimacy than they do for affiliation, preferring the smaller group of friends and reluctant to share personal information with someone until they know them really well.

Therefore, when this person matures and they begin to value themselves on who they are inherently, they have an intrinsic sense of worth rather than on their ability to help people or be accepted, what's left is a confident person who has developed these skills to empathize with others and to take the perspective of other people and balance those things with their own needs. And as we're learning more and more, that's an incredibly useful skill.