



Assess Your Work Style for Better Communication

Do you know how you – and each of your colleagues – like to work? Such knowledge is crucial in forging productive relationships.

By Sabrina Nawaz

When we travel to a different country, many of us spend time learning ways to communicate and connect with the people there. Likewise, if you're a leader, it's helpful to spend time connecting and creating a common language with your team. When employees know how you like to work, they're able to produce results faster. And when you know their work preferences, you can save time, communicate more seamlessly, and avoid bad feelings.

Consider this example. Sveta, a technical leader, liked to solve complex problems. She had a keen attention to detail and placed a high value on being efficient. Therefore, when she began leading a new team, she was direct and blunt with her team members.

Unfortunately, her style had a negative impact. Because she focused on problems and didn't recognize people's good work, they thought they were failing. They were confused and unclear about expectations. Morale plummeted.

Sveta realized she needed to connect with and empower her team more. At the next meeting, she handed out a chart of behaviors specific to her style, detailing what her actions meant and how her team could best work with her (see the chart on the top of page 17).

After discussing her chart with her colleagues, Sveta asked them to create their own. Then they shared the results with one another, asking and answering questions whenever something wasn't clear.

This exercise created greater clarity all around and led to a much better working relationship. Sveta was able to delegate

A Work-Style Chart. In this example, a leader provided this table to her team so they could understand her communication style and expectations. Having everyone complete similar tables will make communication much smoother and more productive.

My Work Style	How to Respond to My Style
I try to understand something deeply by asking a lot of probing questions.	Engage and debate with me to formulate the best solution.
I raise tough issues up front and directly.	If you feel my response is blunt, realize that it's about the issue, not about you personally.
I joke with people I know well.	Let me know if my joking with you or someone else makes you uncomfortable or feels inappropriate in any way.
I tend to look first for the problems to fix.	This doesn't mean I don't appreciate the good work you do. If you think I'm unhappy with your work, ask me about it.
I take an optimistic view.	Don't just tell me why something won't work; also share ideas for how it might.
I try to communicate regularly and transparently.	Give me the pulse of the team, and share my messages to you with your team members.
I can appear grouchy because I often have a serious expression on my face or provide terse responses.	If I seem grumpy in a conversation or meeting with you, don't assume the problem is you; discuss it with me.
I'm not a morning person.	Avoid scheduling meetings where I have to make a big decision before 10 a.m.

items more effectively, and other members of the team found they got things done faster with fewer misunderstandings.

As a leader, you can recreate this exercise with your own team. Consider these questions when creating your own work-style table and encourage others to do the same:

What are some misperceptions people have had about you? Perhaps no one has mentioned these things directly, but friends or family have jokingly commented about them. (No one told Sveta she could seem angry and intimidating, but her friends often called her “Grouchy.”)


What do you care most about in terms of how work is done? For instance, think about how you like materials to be prepared for a broad audience.

How do you tend to communicate? Some people are direct, like Sveta, but others take a more indirect approach. Consider where you fall on the spectrum. If you tend to be indirect, advise others to repeat what you say in their own words so you can verify you've made your point clearly.

What are your hot-button issues and pet peeves? Maybe you want to know ahead of time if someone is about to miss a deadline, or you don't like people interrupting you when you're talking in a meeting.

What are some quirks about you? For example, Sveta isn't a morning person so asked people to defer critical meetings till after 10 a.m.

As a result of this exercise, you may need to make some adaptations to your work style. If your team indicates that they find positive feedback motivating, but that's something

you give sparingly, you'll likely want to take more time to praise and commend people, even if it feels strange at first. Discussing preferences and work styles will give you and your team a starting point to understand one another, work more productively together, reduce misunderstandings, and increase the speed at which you get work done. 

Sabina Nawaz (sabinanawaz.com) is a global CEO coach, leadership keynote speaker, and writer working in over 26 countries. She has spoken at hundreds of seminars, events, and conferences and writes for HBR.org, from which this article is adapted.

More Strategies for Better Communication

Take a look at these articles (NonprofitWorld.org) to increase your understanding of others, forge relationships, and boost communication:

What's Your Color? (Vol. 34, No. 4)

How to Fix Communication Breakdowns (Vol. 29, No. 1)

Beware of These Three Personality Pitfalls (Vol. 31, No. 4)

Increase Work-Group Productivity with Concrecent Conversation (Vol. 26, No. 3)

What Makes a Great Team? (Vol. 32, No. 6)

Inner Leadership: Mental Strategies for Nonprofit Staff Members (Vol. 18, No. 3)