

The Platinum Rule for Team Building

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

How much work time do *you* spend in meetings with at least two other people? If you're like many of us, you've got planning meetings, staff meetings, project meetings, budget meetings...the list seems nearly endless. No wonder one office joker described meetings as "the practical alternative to work."

Organizations love such groups--call them teams, committees, task forces, boards, panels, whatever. And why shouldn't they? 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 deteriorate into mediocrity--they can drain an organization of its vitality and leave a legacy of frustration. Posturing, power struggles, and misunderstandings are so rife that you've probably more than once wondered if more wouldn't get done if your group never met again.

Spotty Track Record

One of the reasons for the spotty track record of work groups is that we're generally naive about them. Too often, we assume a group can automatically be a team. We act as if we can just order a good one from Purchasing, and so we opt for an off-the-rack model instead of designing a group that'll best do the job.

"Round up the usual suspects," the gendarme ordered in the famous line from the movie "*Casablanca*." And frequently that's what bosses seem to be thinking when they originate committees or task forces.

But, in truth, making those choices is not as simple as it sounds. And whom you choose *will* very likely affect the outcome. The key is to analyze the objective before you recruit a group and then create a team that best matches the desired results.

One of the biggest single reasons that teams misfire is that personality differences are ignored. That can be the fault of the group's creator, the team members themselves, or both. In either event, that's where **The Platinum Rule** comes in. As we've learned, all people are not created equal--at least, not so far as their behavior patterns are concerned.

Knowing and taking into account those differences is what can help make the best possible use of the strengths of each team member. DIRECTORS can do some things a whole lot better than SOCIALIZERS. A THINKER might easily

handle something that would drive a RELATER nuts. Let's look at each style in more depth.

Directors

Two governing needs drives directors: to control and achieve. Directors are goal-oriented go-getters who are most comfortable when they are in charge of people and situations. They want to accomplish many things—now—so they focus on no-nonsense approaches to bottom-line results.

Directors seek expedience and are not afraid to bend the rules. They figure it is easier to beg forgiveness than to ask permission. Directors accept challenges, take authority, and plunge head first into solving problems. They are fast-paced, task-oriented, and work quickly and impressively by themselves, which means they become annoyed with delays.

Directors are driven and dominating, which can make them stubborn, impatient, and insensitive to others. Directors are so focused that they forget to take the time to smell the roses.

Socializers

Socializers are friendly, enthusiastic "party-animals" who like to be where the action is. They thrive on the admiration, acknowledgment, and compliments that come with being in the limelight.

The Socializer's primary strengths are enthusiasm, charm, persuasiveness, and warmth. They are idea-people and dreamers who excel at getting others excited about their vision. They are eternal optimists with an abundance of charisma. These qualities help them influence people and build alliances to accomplish their goals.

Socializers do have their weaknesses: impatience, an aversion to being alone, and a short attention span. Socializers are risk-takers who base many of their decisions on intuition, which is not inherently bad. Socializers are not inclined to verify information; they are more likely to assume someone else will do it.

Thinkers

Thinkers are analytical, persistent, systematic people who enjoy problem solving. Thinkers are detail-oriented, which makes them more concerned with content than style. Thinkers are task-oriented people who enjoy perfecting processes and working toward tangible results. They're always in control of their emotions and may become uncomfortable around people who very out-going, e.g., Socializers.

Thinkers have high expectations of themselves and others, which can make them over-critical. Their tendency toward perfectionism—taken to an extreme—can cause “paralysis by over-analysis.” Thinkers are slow and deliberate decision-makers. They do research, make comparisons, determine risks, calculate margins of error, and then take action. Thinkers become irritated by surprises and glitches, hence their cautious decision-making. Thinkers are also skeptical, so they like to see promises in writing.

Relaters

Relaters are warm and nurturing individuals. They are the most people-oriented of the four styles. Relaters are excellent listeners, devoted friends, and loyal employees. Their relaxed disposition makes them approachable and warm. They develop strong networks of people who are willing to be mutually supportive and reliable. Relaters are excellent team players.

Relaters are risk-averse. In fact, Relaters may tolerate unpleasant environments rather than risk change. They like the status quo and become distressed when disruptions are severe. When faced with change, they think it through, plan, and accept it into their world. Relaters—more than the other types—strive to maintain personal composure, stability, and balance. In the office, Relaters are courteous, friendly, and willing to share responsibilities. They are good planners, persistent workers, and good with follow-through. Relaters go along with other seven when they do not agree because they do not want to rock the boat.

Relaters are slow decision-makers for several reasons: 1) their need for security; 2) their need to avoid risk; and 3) their desire to include others in the decision-making process.

How the Four Styles Act in Groups

The four styles each bring different perspectives to a group. And different ways of doing things, too. First, let's take a look at some of the basic characteristics of the four styles in group situations: how they communicate, influence, involve others, and make decisions.

Communicating

Each communicates in ways so different that it's no wonder misunderstandings occur. DIRECTORS, for example, tend to communicate with short, task-oriented comments, particularly at the start of a meeting when they like to assume control and set the meeting in motion. More than the other styles,

they're concerned about having a clear agenda and setting the tone. They like to keep the discussion on track and on time.

SOCIALIZERS, by contrast, communicate more frequently and more evenly throughout a meeting. Their comments are more likely to include jokes and to cover a range of topics so wide that the SOCIALIZERS may appear to be hopping all over the place.

RELATERS seem generally interested in discussions throughout the whole meeting. They may ask many questions, trying to understand others' points of view or what follow-through will be expected. They naturally act as synthesizers, go-betweens, or translators, by saying things like, "Now, if I understand what Jane and Tom meant, it's that the next step is to...."

On the other hand, THINKERS usually just quietly observe until they fully grasp an issue and have figured out in some detail what they want to say and if they'll feel comfortable saying it. They often begin by asking a few, well-chosen questions. Then, if the climate seems receptive, they'll build up to a longer statement on what they believe is the answer.

Using Influence

The different styles also try to sway, or influence, the group in different ways. This can become critical because every group at an early stage wrestles with the issue of who's going to wield power.

DIRECTORS like to influence others by structuring agendas, tasks, and assignments and, if relevant, use their formal position as leverage

SOCIALIZERS are more inclined to use flattery or compliments to win over the group and get its members to feel good as a team. They'll often use humor to defuse tension or conflict. They try to avoid a hard line that will lose them acceptance or recognition by the group.

RELATERS, whether they're anointed leaders or not, often take on the role of keeping the process moving along. They'll elaborate on what others say and encourage everyone to have their say. They seek to exert influence indirectly by keeping things mellow and moving.

Information and logic are the tools of the THINKERS. They like to furnish information that, directly or indirectly, suggests their expertise and experience. They're the most likely to focus on the "rightness," or logic, of a solution, rather than spend a lot of time debating who's personally helped or hindered by it.

Involving Others

Working in a group, by definition, means involving others. But the four styles vary in why and how enthusiastically they embrace others.

Generally, groups put together by DIRECTORS will be smaller and have shorter meetings than those set up by people with other styles. Often, the DIRECTOR will want the group to make some key decisions on key issues, and then delegate the rest of the work to individuals or subcommittees.

SOCIALIZERS are more inclined to favor groups for groups' sake. They like others to be involved in the give-and-take. Not everyone who's put on a committee by a SOCIALIZER will have a logical role there but, in the SOCIALIZER's mind, that person is further seasoning for the soup, if not necessarily a main ingredient.

RELATERS also are innately attracted to groups. However, instead of using meetings for presentation of reports, they prefer to work toward consensus as they collect information from many sources.

THINKERS, too, involve others in groups to get information from a wide variety of sources. However, the THINKERS are just less comfortable operating in groups. So they prefer to have much of the group work done behind the scenes by sub-groups or individuals. The THINKER especially likes to be the only one who knows how all the parts of the group's task puzzle fit together.

Decision-making

Lastly, the four styles differ in their approach to group work because they tend to make decisions differently.

In a meeting run by DIRECTORS, decisions are more likely to be made unilaterally by the DIRECTOR, or he or she will call for a vote. DIRECTORS like voting because it's clean, quick and decisive. It keeps debating to a minimum. Also, it's harder to argue that a vote is unfair. And closure is clearly attained. *Next topic!*

A problem with voting--though the DIRECTORS rarely see it as a problem--is that there are winners and losers. SOCIALIZERS, being more people-oriented, try to work out compromises that reduce resentment and maybe even fudge over differences. SOCIALIZERS want to downplay group divisions. So they're not big on voting.

RELATERS also prefer decisions by consensus. They'd like to see the vast majority of the group be on the bus. So actions tend to be worked and reworked until almost all are in agreement.

THINKERS crave "rational" decisions. Optimally, the decision won't be made as much as it will be dictated by the facts and logic of the situation, including the key players required to make it work. THINKERS like to list pros and cons of issues--sometimes even weighing the options numerically--to reach the "correct" decision. The process, they believe, will make obvious the best course of action.

Love'em or hate'em, work groups are here to stay. But while they can be high-performance vehicles, they're can also be high-maintenance, especially in the early stages. Only a team that fully understands and savors its members' styles is likely to be genuinely productive.

If the teams are assigned tasks that fit their particular styles--and if members practice The Platinum Rule--the advantages of stylistic diversity can quickly outweigh the group's liabilities. The result, despite our differences, can be a wonderful synergy.

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