

COMMUNICATION TYPE INTERACTIONS

Details vs. Big Picture

Remember that a detail-oriented person not only won't, but *can't*, take your ideas or suggestions seriously unless you provide the details they need to feel comfortable.

On the other hand, if you give a big-picture person too many details, they'll get bored and impatient.

Reassure the detail-oriented person that you're going to give them all the information they need, and ask them what additional facts or figures they want from you.

Give the big-picture person the high-level overview; scale it higher (fewer details) or lower (more details) depending upon where you believe they fall on the continuum.

And then be sure to ask if they want more information!

EXAMPLE

Dorothy Details needs to present her ideas about a better way of tracking sales to Bob B. Picture.

Dorothy Details: Hi, Bob – do you have a minute? I want to share the results of the project you assigned me for improving our sales tracking.

Bob B. Picture: Sure, Dorothy, what have you got?

Dorothy: Well, the main problem right now is that the different regional areas are reporting the numbers in slightly different ways, which means someone has to consolidate all the data so it's consistent. Right now, the East Coast region aggregates their numbers quarterly by actual payment date; Midwest aggregates on a monthly basis by sales date, but then reports quarterly; and the West Coast tracks by sales date on a quarterly basis. Plus, they all send their reports in according to different due dates!

I contacted each area's manager to understand why they operate the way they do, and they all just told me that this is the way it's always been done. They didn't even realize that other areas were reporting differently.

Bob: *yawns* Okay, Dorothy, but what are we going to do about it?

Dorothy: I think we need to understand the reasons why each area is operating differently, so we can decide on the best option going forward.

Bob: *irritated and bored* Tell you what, Dorothy, let's just make a decision on the right approach, okay? Ask Sam Sales what he wants, and let's just go forward. There's no need for all the details about how we used to do it or any detective work on why. The goal is to create consistency going forward, with less work to figure out what our sales numbers actually are, okay?

Written vs. Spoken

If you personally are solidly in one camp or the other, being flexible here will be a challenge – but it's a challenge worth meeting, because you'll find that being aware of this particular style preference will make a significant difference in how your communication is received.

Take time before reaching out to someone to remind yourself of their preferences *and* remind yourself of your own. And then, especially if your topic is important, *follow their preferences*.

Write an email if they're written-word people, and meet face-to-face, or at least on the phone, with the spoken-word person.

They may not be consciously aware of your efforts, but they'll be more comfortable and therefore better able to understand and respond to you.

EXAMPLE

Scott Spoken needs to discuss a meeting agenda with William Written.

Scott Spoken: Hi, Will! Hope you had a great weekend – did you catch the game Sunday? Quite a dramatic finish, eh?

William Written: Uh, yeah, I guess it was. I was at a wedding Sunday, so I didn't see that much of the game.

Scott: Oh, too bad – well, hope you had fun at the wedding. Listen, I wanted to go over the agenda items with you for the Board meeting next week. I think we have some sensitive items that need to be scheduled in the proper order, if you know what I mean, and I'd like to talk it through with you.

William: Yes – I agree. But I really need to see what you're suggesting. Can you write up a draft with your suggestions and send it to me, and then I'll turn Track Changes on and make my notes and send it back, okay?

Scott (irritated by William's resistance): Well, sure, but if we could just take two minutes to rough this out, that would save a lot of time!

Informal vs. Formal

Some people are just fine with casual encounters near the coffee machine or unstructured ad-hoc meetings. Others become irritated and frustrated when their train of thought or concentrated effort is broken.

Similarly, whether they're detail-oriented or big-picture, some people hear and understand best through a structured presentation of ideas, while others prefer the give-and-take of an interactive discussion.

If you tune your communication to the appropriate informal-to-formal preference of your audience, you'll find that they're more receptive, understand you more accurately, and will usually respond more openly.

EXAMPLE

Inge Informal has questions about a project she's working on for Frank Formal.

Inge Informal: Frank, so glad I ran into you – I was hoping I'd catch you this morning! I have some questions about that feasibility study. For instance, who's the final report for? I get that the stakeholders include our executive leadership as well as the marketing team, but is there anyone else who will be involved?

Frank Formal: What? Sorry, I'm really not prepared to talk about this now. Check my calendar, please, and schedule time to meet. And please be sure to send me your questions ahead of time so I have a chance to review them.

Inge: It'll only take a minute to go over this –

Frank (interrupts): Inge, I'm in the middle of something now. Please just schedule a meeting, okay?

Just the Facts vs. Small Talk

This style is both easy to identify, and easy to adapt to.

As a just-the-facts person, try to view small talk as a doorway through which you need to go before your small-talk conversation partner can see and hear you. They really do need that transition phase to feel comfortable and to prepare themselves to listen and respond to what you have to say. Your challenge is to refrain from rushing – and also from feeling frustrated or irritated!

As a small-talk person, realize that some people truly do feel uncomfortable with what they view as inconsequential chit-chat. Don't feel hurt by their desire to cut to the chase; instead, jump directly into your topic. The opening exchange of pleasantries that feels so important to you will only get in the way of your desire to communicate effectively.

EXAMPLE

Susan S. Talk needs a decision from Jeremiah T. Facts.

Susan S. Talk: Jerry, hey, how are you? I heard you had a great save at the company volleyball game last weekend – congratulations!

Jeremiah T. Facts: What? Yes, I guess so. What do you need, Sue?

Susan: Well, I heard it was a great game – I wish I could have been there, but my cousin was visiting from out of town, and we ended up going to the new James Bond movie – have you seen it yet?

Jeremiah: Um, no, I haven't. Sue, is there something you wanted, or what?

Susan (in a hurt tone): Oh, well, sorry to bother you! I just needed you to sign off on this project milestone, if that's not too much trouble!

Competitive vs. Collaborative

This is probably the most challenging of all the style types to manage, because it's the most difficult to adapt within.

If you're naturally competitive, you value hierarchy, you struggle to adopt others' ideas – especially if they challenge yours! – and you tend to present your ideas and opinions as hard facts. Whether you're talking with another competitive type or someone more on the collaborative scale, you'll need to be consciously aware of how they're reacting, and tune your delivery accordingly. That way, you won't fall into an "I'm right – no, I'm right" discussion with a fellow competitive, and you'll avoid pushing away the more collaborative type. You'll also want to be aware of any impulse to view your more collaborative colleagues as insufficiently passionate about their ideas; they're just as committed as you are, but they show it differently.

On the other hand, if you're naturally collaborative, you're likely to feel stepped on by the competitive person, and may have a hard time believing that they value your ideas and input. Remind yourself that their approach isn't personal; it's not about you or what they think of you, it's just how they are. Don't expect a competitive type to change their mind quickly or admit they might have been wrong; instead, give them the information you want them to understand without challenging them and allow them time to absorb and integrate your ideas and thoughts.

EXAMPLE

Chuck Collaborative wants to present his ideas to improve the rollout of a technology project to the remote offices to Cora Competitive.

Chuck Collaborative: Cora, I saw your project plan for the tech rollout, and I had a couple of suggestions I'd like to run past you, based on my experience with this type of rollout at my previous employer.

Cora Competitive: Chuck, that project plan has been approved and is under way. What are you saying is wrong with it?

Chuck: I don't think anything's *wrong*, exactly, but I think the timeline could be a little bit aggressive. In my experience, and I double-checked this with some other folks on the team, it takes longer than one might think for people to get used to new technology and actually start using it to the fullest.

Cora (clearly annoyed): I can't agree with that, Chuck, especially when we're starting the rollout on Monday. No, we're just going to go ahead with this as it stands.

But what about groups?!

This is all very well when you're talking to one person at a time, but what about groups? What happens when you're in a meeting, whether you're making a formal presentation or simply offering your ideas as part of a discussion? Obviously you'll be talking with people who fall in all different places on the style ranges, including those whose styles you haven't had the opportunity to observe!

The single most important style spectrum in a group setting is *details versus big picture*.

Whether you're making a presentation or offering ideas as part of a discussion, begin by explaining that you're offering a *big-picture* view first, and then you'll cover the details.

This is obviously the logical approach (details don't make sense without the overview), *and* it will satisfy everyone, no matter where they fall on the scale. Detail-oriented people are accustomed to waiting more-or-less patiently for the details they need, especially if they feel comfortable (because you've said so) that those details will be forthcoming. However, big-picture people will quickly tune out if you give them too many fine points up front.

The second most important style to be aware of in a group setting is *competitive versus collaborative*.

As noted above, communicating with people who are high on the competitive scale is often challenging – especially if you also fall on that side of the spectrum. The pointers outlined in the competitive-versus-collaborative section apply equally to group settings; you'll do well to learn and practice them for all situations.

In conclusion

In the beginning, you'll probably feel a bit awkward as you observe, make notes, and pause to consider your best approach in each situation. With practice over time, however, this will become second nature – and you'll be well on your way to being a truly compelling communicator!