STRAIGHT TALK® LESSON 3:
FILTERS AND FRAMES

Two concepts help us interpret the different styles of communicating. One relates to what people pay attention to. The second relates to how people respond.

Filters

The first is called "filtering." Filtering yields those things to which we pay attention. This invisible and largely unconscious process is always at work. To a large degree, we are our filters, and they are us.

To visualize how this works, imagine a large lake. A stream flows from it to a clear pool many miles away. This system is analogous to the areas of your brain that process sensory inputs. The lake is filled with the stimuli you receive at a given moment. The river contains the filters, many thousands of them. The clear pool is your attention - what you're actually aware of at a particular moment.

Now imagine walking along a crowded street. Thousands of stimuli assault you each millisecond, but you're aware of only a few. What's going on?

Your filters are sorting and eliminating most of what you unconsciously perceive. One set of filters eliminates the male adults passing you on the street. A second set removes all sounds -- except for a baby crying. A third set eliminates all smells. Yet another reduces your visual field to the sidewalk in front of you. Finally, after hundreds of filters have been passed, you're left with the thing that actually catches your conscious attention: a woman pushing a baby stroller.

All this is in a nanosecond.

Now if you could somehow remove all of these filters and view the world in an unfiltered way, the result would be a mind-boggling gush of data. Nothing would make sense. Our filters literally bring order to the chaos. We are a process of elimination -- in this case, elimination of data.

Interestingly, we routinely make the assumption that we all see things the same way. We assume that the "facts" we see are the same as the "facts" that other people see. We assume we have the ability to interpret for others what they see, because we are viewing the same pool of data. In fact, the filtering process guarantees just the opposite. It guarantees that we each respond in different ways, even if we're in the same room listening to the same conversation.

Our differences aren't a result of pigheadedness or stupidity. They are a result of the way we communicate.

Frames

The second key to understanding different styles of communicating is how we frame incoming data. To visualize how this works, cup your fist into a narrow tube and hold it up to your eye. Now look at something in the room so that you cannot see it in its entirety, but only a detail. How confidently can you describe what it is? How much additional data would you need to complete the picture?

Now open your fist so that you can see the entire scene. Clearly, the larger the frame, the more confident our interpretation. The more we see, the more we feel empowered to speak out about it.

The way we frame a situation constricts and dilates in the same way. It depends on our level of experience with the situation, our state of mind, and the role we are asked to play. As the situation varies, our frame shifts.

Our filters and frames are connected in a dynamic way. The filtering system determines which data we see; framing determines our response to those data. A small frame means we're going to hesitate, to ask questions, to inquire for more data. A big frame means we're going to draw conclusions. The size of our frame determines whether we tend to assert ourselves in a given situation or gather more information. In other words, it dictates our levels of assertiveness and inquiry.

The combined workings of these filters and frames - both of which occur within our subconscious - help us define the four basic styles of communicating. Some people set their filters so that more attention is placed on facts; some set them to allow more feelings to come through. Some people set their frames so that their responses are more assertive; some set their frames so that they respond with questions.

Using filters and frames, you can distill the four basic communication styles down to the following terms:

Directors: Filter for facts and respond assertively.
Expressers: Filter for feelings and respond assertively.
Thinkers: Filter for facts and respond by probing.
Harmonizers: Filter for feelings and respond by probing.

This is not to say that the only thing that distinguishes Directors from Expressers is that one filters for facts and the other for feelings. The behaviors of each communication style are more complex and varied than that. But certain behaviors are "markers" for each style, and these markers can help us identify a person's style. A market is simply a specific behavior we look for in another person - and in ourselves.

For example, one marker would be sensitity to people's feelings. That's a clue that the person filters are set for feelings. A second marker is how often someone cites specific facts. A third marker is one's level of assertiveness. And a fourth marker is the extent to which one probes and inquires for more information. Each marker is a clue to help you determine a person's style. Understanding these markers is the first step to interpreting the styles of people around you.

EXERCISE 2: CONFIRM YOUR COLLEAGUES' STYLES

Let's practice identifying the various styles. Refer back to the exercise where you guessed the styles of your immediate work group. Let's see if those same guesses stand up when you factor in the information we've learned in this section.

For example, if you identified someone as an Expresser, ask yourself: Does this person typically filter for feelings more than facts? Is he or she more likely to respond by being assertive? If so, then you've confirmed your earlier choice.

For each set of initials in the exercise at the end of Lesson 1, determine whether you still agree with your choice, based on your new understanding of filters and frames. Use the four squares in this exercise to change your assessments.

Asserting

Director Talks in action verbs. Cares about bottom line. Always on the go. Speaks crisply. Talks about goals. May seem insensitive.	**Expresser** Speaks rapidly. Uses animated gestures. Entertaining. Thinks out loud. Talks about ideas. May be imprecise.
Thinker Talks about details. Inquiring. Often makes lists. Speaks carefully. Wants things done "right." May procrastinate.	**Harmonizer** Talks about people. Sensitive to others. Avoids conflict. Dedicated and loyal. Speaks softly. May overcommit

Facts

Feeling

Probing