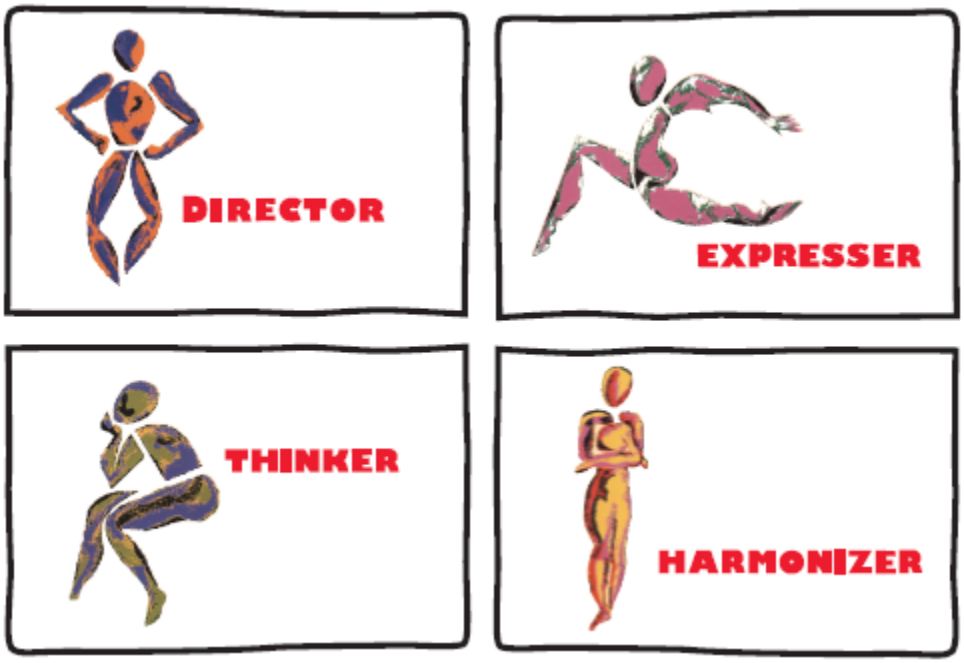
How to Identify Communication Styles

Research shows us people have four different styles of communicating. We call these: **Director, Expresser, Thinker and Harmonizer**. Each style has its own way of seeing the world. Each favors a certain way of listening, responding, making decisions, and solving problems.



Most people use two styles more frequently than the others; this blend determines how you communicate.

It's especially important to understand your **primary communication style**, since this is the one you use most often. No style is better than the others, but it may be to your advantage to play up one over another, depending on the situation.

Key characteristics of each **primary communication style** are shown in the chart.

Director	Expresser
• Goal oriented • Tells it like it is • Makes decisions quickly • Always on the go • Speaks crisply • May be insensitive, intimidating	• People oriented • Animated, easily excited • Makes expressive gestures • Entertaining • Thinks out loud • Speaks rapidly • May be imprecise
Thinker	**Harmonizer**
• Task oriented • Makes lists • Does things "by the book" • Speaks deliberately • Believes there's a right way and a wrong way • May procrastinate	• Relationship oriented • Sensitive to others • Dedicated, loyal • Speaks softly • Avoids conflict • May over-commit

Because people have different styles, chances are that within any team or work group there will be **conflicting approaches**. Before team members can work together effectively, they need to be aware of these potential conflicts. They need to master certain tools to minimize these conflicts.

Here are some Straight Talk tools you can read more about at CommunicationStyles.org:

1. The Matrix of Communication Styles
2. The Four Types of Intent
3. The Circle of Assumptions

Exercise: Identify a Colleague's Primary Communication Style

The chart below will help you sort through another person's style. Circle each behavior that applies, then total the number of squares you circled in each column. The two columns that get the highest scores will tell you that person's preferred styles of communicating.

Speech	Opinionated	Questioning	"right" "wrong"	"good" "bad"
Body language	Fast moving, dynamic	Poised	Tentative, cautious	Relaxed
Eye contact	Direct	Indirect	Distant	Inviting
Response to crisis	Risk taking	Risk averse	Analytical	Empathetic
Total				
	Assertive	**Probing**	**Factual**	**Feeling**

Once you've circled two styles at the bottom of the chart, use the next chart to determine a person's primary style.

If a person is:		**His or her style is:**
Assertive and factual	→	Director
Assertive and feeling	→	Expresser
Probing and factual	→	Thinker
Probing and feeling	→	Harmonizer

3 Steps to Identify Communication Styles

When meeting someone for the first time, there are three things to do:

1. **Ask Questions**
2. **Observe Reactions**
3. **Listen Actively**

My goal is to size someone up within five minutes. Ask a question like: “What do you do to stay current with trends in your business?” Or: “What kind of person is successful in your field?”

Then watch for clues.

- An **asserter** will instantly give you a response, and typically won’t ask whether you agree.
- An **inquirer**, on the other hand, will say what he or she thinks, and then ask a genuine question: “That’s just my sense of it. What’s your opinion?”
- A person who focuses on **feelings** will talk about the quality of the people he or she works with and their ability to meet whatever challenges lie ahead.
- A more **fact-oriented** person will talk about studies or numbers or industry trends.

You can’t rely on just one question. You’ve got to ask two or three to be sure. Weigh the number of times the person talks about feelings. Weigh the balance of inquiry and assertion.

Here are some questions that work well:

- How do you spend your free time, when you have some?
- What do you like to read?
- What did you study in school?

Watch how people interact with you. Do they engage in small talk? Or do they cut to the chase? Do they tell stories? Do they break an issue down into its constituent parts? Do they ask questions? Each of these is a trademark of a particular style.

Practice Observing

In assessing a person's style, **observe the role** that person is playing. A manager may feel she has to be assertive. It's her job. But is she assertive by nature, or just playing the part? The balance of inquiry and assertion will tell you. The same thing is true of someone in a subordinate role. Is he probing by nature or because it's required of him? There's no simple key that will yield the correct answer every time. You simply have to practice observing.

Another trick is learning to recognize the **assertive questioner**. Some people temper their nature by disguising statements as questions. I recall a CEO who never asked: *"When would your schedule permit?"* She said: *"Could you be here next week?"* She laid out her desire very clearly – but tried to soften it by asking a question. You'll also learn to recognize the opposite: the **passive asserter**. *"We've got a really good team here, and it's taken a long time to build it. It's very important here at XYZ Corp. that we have a good team."* On its own, that statement means relatively little. Certainly no one's going to challenge it. It is utterly safe and benign. It is a passive assertion.

Asserters like to run the show; probers defer to others and ask questions. Asserters leap to conclusions and take risks; probers look for confirmation and safety in numbers. Be attuned to the situation. An asserter may appear passive at first. But put him or her in a situation that requires someone to take charge, and a different style may emerge.

Observe where people invest their attention.

Do they talk about their family, or about their new car? If they tend to say things are "good" or "bad," that's the mark of the feeler. If their judgments are cast more in the words "right" and "wrong," that's a sign of a factual style. Again, you have to be careful not to be tricked by the situation. A person you know from church may have an entirely different style at work.

Conclusion

By tuning yourself to identify and understand each style, you'll quickly learn to appreciate some of the subtleties in people's communications – the hidden levels of meaning behind what they say, the types of things they pay attention to. This, in turn, will lead to more satisfying and more successful interactions. More important, as you begin to appreciate how people see things in four very different ways, you begin to appreciate how around us revolve four different worlds – the worlds of the **Director, Expresser, Thinker and Harmonizer.**