

The Role of Attention

To become proficient in identifying other people's styles, you need to understand the role of attention in how communication styles work.

Straight Talk®



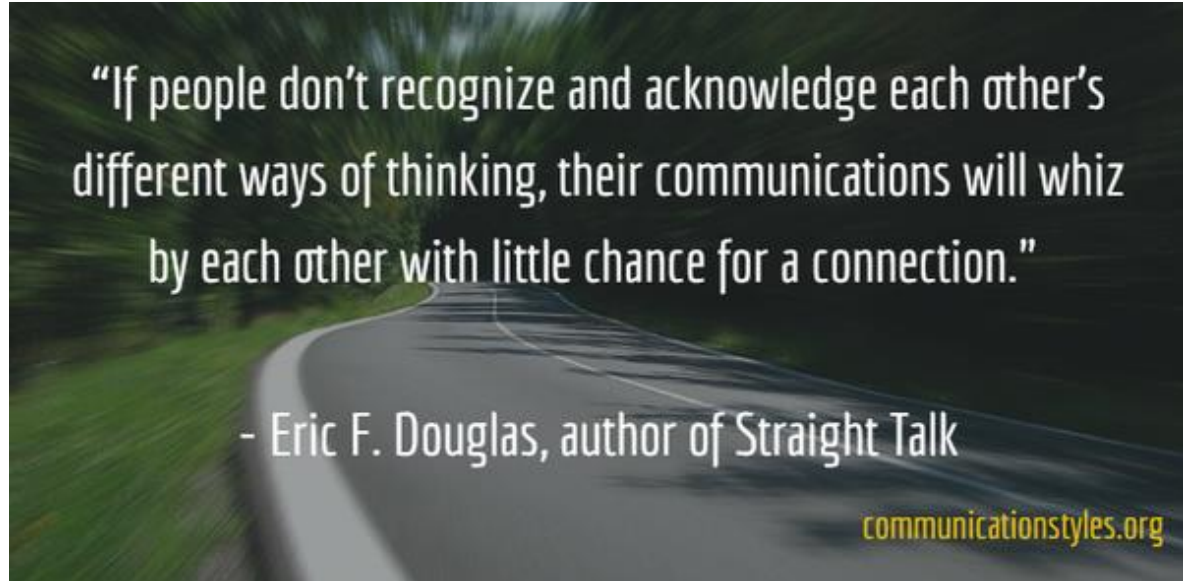
Of the nearly infinite things we could be aware of at any one time we focus on only a few. At the center of this selection process sits our attention. It is the roving lens of the mind, constantly scouring the environment and choosing in a nanosecond which things to concentrate on.

For example, when you walk down the street, do you pay attention to the buildings or focus on people's faces? In a restaurant, do you get engrossed in the menu or observe the people in the room? In a meeting, do you pay attention to people's remarks or think about what you're going to say?

Key takeaway: Attentions differ, which dramatically alters the way people see and respond to the exact same situation.

This is an important point. Because if one person pays attention to people and another to buildings, or if one person focuses on tasks while another focuses on feelings, their conversations have the potential to misfire. Although they're sitting in the same room or discussing the same topic, they'll interpret what they're hearing in radically different ways and draw very different conclusions. **If they don't recognize and acknowledge their different ways of thinking, communications will whiz by each other with little chance for a connection.**

In our work with organizations, we've studied these [different styles](#). We know, for example, that some people approach a decision wanting to get as much [data](#) as possible. Others make decisions [swiftly](#). Still others want to generate as many [ideas](#) as possible. In case after case, we have found that people can communicate far more effectively once they understand their different styles.



Filters and Frames

WHAT PEOPLE PAY ATTENTION TO AND HOW THEY RESPOND

Two concepts help us interpret the different styles. One relates to **what people pay attention to**. The second relates to **how people respond**. The first is called “filtering.” Filtering yields those things to which we pay attention. This invisible and largely unconscious process is always at work. We are our filters, and they are us.



How Filtering Works



To visualize how this works, imagine a large lake. A river flows from it into a second, smaller lake, some distance away. This system is analogous to your brain. The first lake is filled with the stimuli you receive at any one moment. The river contains your filters, many hundreds of them. The second lake is your attention – what you’re actually aware of at a particular moment.

Now if you could somehow remove all of these filters and view the world in an unfiltered way, the difference would be 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.

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 using the same pool of data. **In fact, the filtering system 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.

Key takeaway: Our differences aren’t a result of pig-headedness or stupidity. They are a result of the way we communicate.

Framing



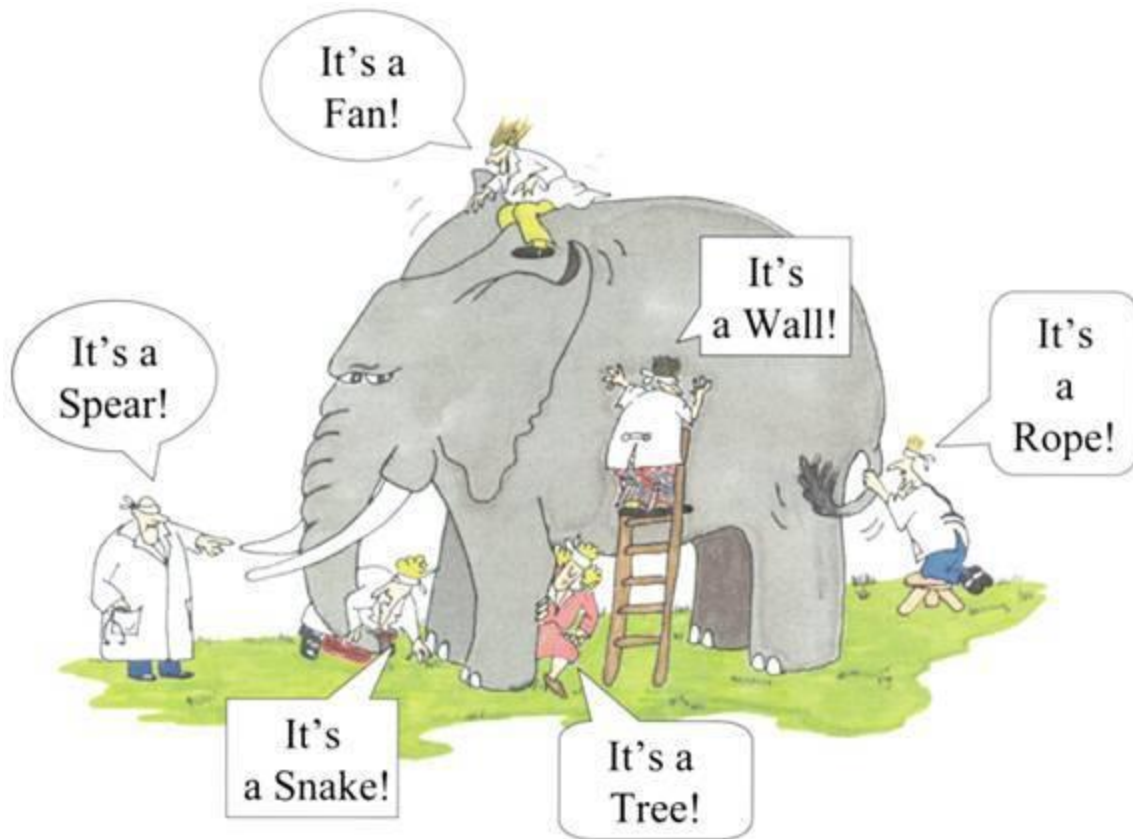
The second key to understanding this process is **how we frame this incoming data.** To show you how it works, cup your fist into a narrow tube and hold it up to your eye. Now look at something in the room so that you cannot see it in its entirety, but only a detail. How confidently can you describe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

Now open your fist so that you 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 dilates and constricts in the same way. It depends upon our level of experience with it, our state of mind, and the role we are asked to play. As the situation varies, our frame will shift.

Our filters and frames are connected in a dynamic way. The filtering system determines which data we see; framing determines our response to that 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.

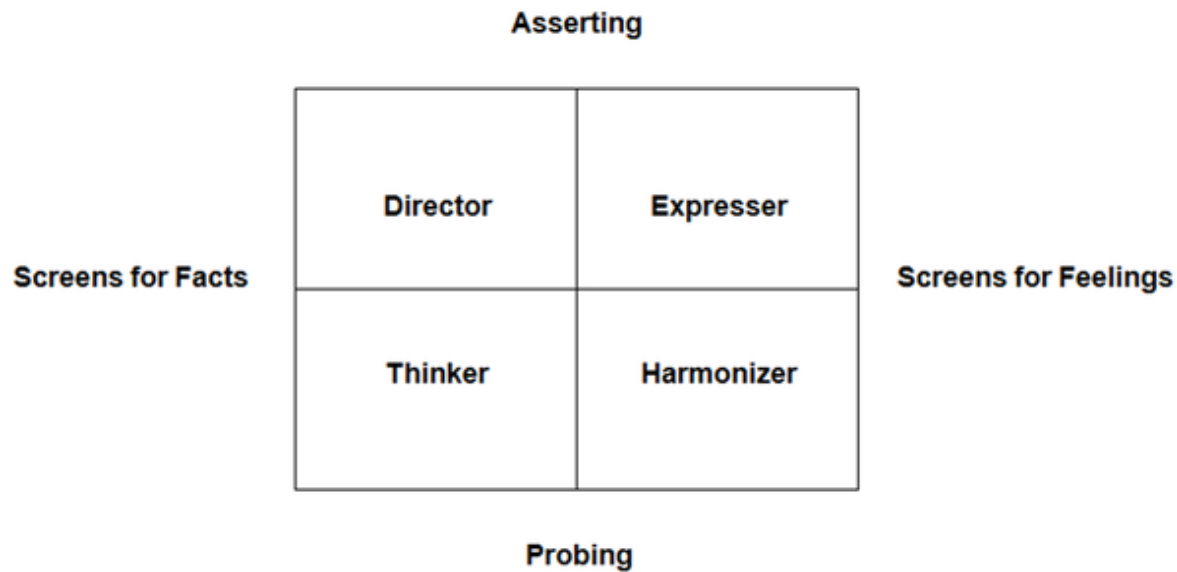
Key takeaway: The size of our frame determines whether we tend to assert ourselves in a given situation, or gather more information. It dictates our level of assertiveness and our level of inquiry.



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 their 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 marker is simply a specific behavior we look for in another person – and in ourselves.

For example, one marker would be sensitivity to people’s feelings. That’s a clue that the person’s filters are set for feelings. A second marker might be how often someone cites specific facts. Each marker is a clue to help you determine a person’s style.

The chart above helps you sort this out. It links the four marker behaviors to the four basic styles. By studying the chart, you can see how the various combinations of filters and frames are linked to the four basic communication styles.

Key takeaway: Understanding these markers is the first step to interpreting the styles of people around you.

Communication Tools and Resources

- Download our Straight Talk PDF on [The Four Leadership Styles](#)
- Consider Straight Talk [Leadership Coaching](#) for leaders and managers
- Check out our [Straight Talk Communication Workshop](#) for teams

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