Essay 1: Thinking Styles in a Team

The best teams are made of people who each approach the world differently. A team of people exactly like me would fail. We would all be old, white men with a strong penchant for deductive thinking. We would all carry our hammers in our belts, and we would pound all our problems with the same hammer. We would be good with hammers, but few problems are solved with only a hammer.

There is also the danger that the reason the team is all, for example, old, white men is that the leader chose people who looked like him, who thought like him, and who all seemed likely to agree with him. The only problems a team like that can solve are those that the leader has already solved (or thinks he has). The team is only there to cheerlead for him and cover up his failures.

Racial and gender diversity signals that the team has been chosen with some lack of prejudice against people of differing races and genders. In general, a team that is diversified along racial and gender lines is more likely to contain a good diversity of thinking styles and group process roles. Nevertheless, such a team may still have too little diversity of thinking styles and be intolerant of some necessary group facilitation roles. The best reason, however, to include people who are not all, for example, old, white men is not to insure multiple thinking styles but to promote the radical criticism of a world largely created by the dominant. As examples, why do presidents and vice presidents make so much more than contract guards and custodians? Why do so many of our students leave with neither learning nor skills? As an old, white man, however, I'm not very good at radical criticism. I will talk instead about thinking styles. This is an essay on how you, once you have removed your cultural blinders and can see value in people different than you, can work within a top functioning team.

In a good team people find their thinking style strengths. People try out new styles without pressure or shame. They understand when certain styles are most needed in a project. They value each person for her or his style.

Thinking styles and how each contributes to a team.

Divergent. Divergent thinkers have a million ideas. They are very useful at the start of a project when the problem has not been well defined. Also, they are useful at the point when solution ideas are needed. The group process trick of listing things without criticism, just having members of the group throw out ideas, called brainstorming, is an attempt at making all group members into divergent thinkers at a critical point in a project.

Convergent. Convergent thinkers, on the other hand, push toward a close. They are great after the problem has been well defined and a solution chosen. They push toward the finish line. Unfortunately, they are terrible at the start of a project and intolerant of divergent thinkers. "We all know what the problem is, and what the solution has to be," they say with a sneer. "Let's stop wasting time and get on with it." Yes, divergent thinkers can be a problem when the team is trying to push to the finish. After a problem definition has been agreed upon and a solution selected, it's usually not helpful for someone to throw out new problem definitions and bring up rejected solutions. Smart teams give names to these tendencies and asks the

holders to honor the other camp, if not to try and reverse roles: ask divergent thinkers to think convergently and convergent thinkers to try divergence, at the appropriate times.

Moving from divergent thinking to convergent thinking may happen when people have run out of ideas. The divergent thinker should then be reminded that the shift has occurred. Nevertheless, the team may find that no idea works. In that case, the divergent thinker should be released from their temporary vow of silence.

I, for example, am a convergent thinker. So, when I have a challenge, I tend to grab the first solution that comes to mind and press it into service, usually resulting in failure (and good ole foundry language injunctions). When I have a computer problem, I think I know the solution. I try it: no go! Then I call my wife. She's a good divergent thinker: a techie and an artist (great combination!). She sits down and starts trying random things. Quite quickly she hits upon a solution. Her random access beats my efficiently programmed error routine every time.

Inductive. Inductive thinkers look at the data and come up with a theory to test against the data. They are "big picture" thinkers. They are always peering at trends and signals from the market. They are strategic thinkers. They resemble divergent thinkers but are more data oriented. Their ideas are not random, but informed. They do not throw out pre-formed theories. They see the trees and think about the forest.

Deductive. Deductive thinkers tend to be convergent as well. They take theories and apply them. Engineers tend to be deductive. Their problems are well defined and the proper steps to a solution are known, although they may be complex. Some people can do both. They move between induction and deduction.

Like the divide between divergent and convergent, these skills can be learned with practice, although a great deductive thinker may only learn to be a fair inductive thinker. A deductive mind gets moving toward solutions too fast and much data may be ignored.

Deductive thinking is over-rewarded in this culture. A good team must seek great inductive thinkers. The best inductive thinkers with whom I have worked have not come out of the white, male culture. It is not always the ascendant culture that develops a skill at knowing which way the wind is blowing.

Analyzing. Analyzing an idea means taking it apart. A team needs someone who can unpack a complex idea into smaller pieces that can be worked on individually. A good team has someone who will say, "I think that's a great problem statement, but I'd like us to separate symptoms from causes from harms." Solution statements need to be broken down into tasks, responsibilities, and timelines.

Teams can get bogged down when ideas are too large to handle, understand, and push forward. An analyzer recognizes the block and offers a way of breaking down the idea so that the team can take the next steps.

Synthesizing. A synthesizer pulls together ideas that sound different but can all be put together. "I think Mary, Tom, and Sue are all pointing at the same problem…" Perhaps analyzing and synthesizing are not so much thinking styles as a sensitivity to the group's process. When progress on a topic has slowed, sometimes the group needs an idea pulled apart and sometimes it needs a set of ideas to be gathered together. I have a hunch that deductive

thinkers tend to be faster at pulling ideas apart than they are at synthesizing ideas. Whereas inductive thinkers tend to gather disparate ideas under the same theoretical construct a bit more readily.

Nevertheless, anyone in a group can do either, if they are primed to watch for the opportunity and have a ready label for the act they are about to perform.

Rational. I feel I must discuss the thinking/feeling dichotomy, not because one is better than the other or that a team should have both, but because both can be pushed too far. Rational thinking is useful when the data is limited and can be processed in a stepwise manner and falls along a single dimension. Rational thought, however, has not easily solved multi-dimensional problems, nor multiple value system problems. In most situations, we must examine all the information, all the opinions, all the outcomes, and do what *feels* right.

Emotive. Feeling our way, however, is fraught with challenges. Our feelings are often colored by hidden prejudices, cultural blindness, and early childhood training irrelevant to the problem. A good team member must accept the feelings of the rest of the team but must not be blind to the limitations of those feelings. Good team members value the approaches of the others but will not ignore the limitations. Outcomes that can all be valued along a single parameter, like dollars, can be rationally evaluated and the best course of action found, even under uncertainty. Outcomes whose values differ among a population do not have rational solutions. You will find it challenging, for example, to compare outcomes evaluated by different individuals along the dimensions of pride and dollar loss. Then, how we feel about those outcomes becomes important.

A good team member will help a team value both methodologies and those who advocate them. A good team learns to listen to the two approaches and move toward the most appropriate in the situation.

Vague, but early. I'm a vague, but early guy. I'm not afraid to say what I'm thinking. I need the group to help me articulate or give up a thought. I can't always find the words. I grab a hunch and need to be told, "No, that doesn't sound right." Insulting me with "Dickmeyer, that's just fuzzy thinking," is not a good idea. I stop participating in the group, feeling wronged.

Precise, but late. Other people try to get just the right wording for an idea. They work on it and work on it. Sometimes the group has gone on to another topic. Tolerate them! When they finally come out with it, their wording may be an improvement. Perhaps it won't be, but that's their style. If the wording still isn't right, they should volunteer for a subgroup to work on it.

I've listed ten different thinking styles. Distributing ten styles among an eight-person team means that two people must practice two styles. The best teams allow members to rotate among styles, practicing and coaching each other as they try out unfamiliar ways of dealing with the process of the team.

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