

Leading Others by Understanding Yourself

by

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True or false: Everyone is just like me.

If you are both observant and honest, you will conclude that the above statement is false. How about the following two statements?

True or false: I tend to lead and communicate with others as if they are just like me.

True or false: I am often surprised when others do not respond to my leadership and do not seem to connect with my attempts to communicate.

Again, if we are honest with ourselves, most of us would answer true and true. But if we agree that the original statement is false, then why would we lead and communicate with others as if they are just like us and become surprised when our leadership and communications fall short? Perhaps the answer is found in the BLM syndrome—the “Be Like Me” syndrome that plagues leaders in every type of organization. Often, we are not even aware that this syndrome is afflicting us, but we see the unfortunate results—conflict, miscommunication, misunderstanding, substandard performance, and dysfunctional teams. And the solution is not to try harder to mold those we lead into our own image. As David Keirse, an authority on temperament theory and author of the best selling book *Please Understand Me II*, asserts:

People are different from each other, and no amount of getting after them is going to change them. Nor is there any reason to change them, because the differences are probably good.ⁱ

So, what is the antidote for the BLM syndrome and what are the keys to increasing our leadership effectiveness? First, we must understand ourselves and lead from our strengths. Then, we must understand the diversity found in those we lead and use this diversity to maximize teamwork, accomplish organizational goals, and develop individuals. One of the ways we can develop this understanding is by gaining an appreciation of the four temperaments that have historically described the differences among people. In this article, I will: (1) introduce temperament theory, (2) describe the four temperaments, and (3) show how we can use knowledge of these temperaments to lead more effectively.

Temperament Theory

Temperament is a pattern of needs, values, talents, and behaviors that influence how we interact, communicate, think, react, teach, learn, create, contribute, and yes—how we lead. According to temperament theory, temperament is inborn, remains constant throughout our lifetime, and influences our growth and development. At the same time, we are free to “try on” aspects of other temperaments and will certainly develop skills beyond our natural inclinations. Our default setting, however, will always be our innate temperament pattern.

The concept of four distinct behavioral patterns goes back to the 5th century B.C. when Hippocrates identified four temperaments based on the balance between the bodies’ fluids. In 190 A.D., a Roman physician, Galen, built on Hippocrates’ ideas and named the four temperaments: sanguine, melancholic, phlegmatic, and choleric.

Throughout history, this notion of human beings being segmented into four groupings finds common ground. During the Middle Ages, a Viennese physician and chemist by the name of Phillipus Paracelsus described four natures influenced by four different spirits—salamanders, gnomes, sylphs, and nymphs. In the 20th century, German psychologist Ernst Kretschmer called the four patterns hypomanic, depressive, anaesthetic, and hyperaesthetic, while another German psychologist, Edward Spranger called the patterns aesthetic, economic, theoretic, and religious.

Modern psychologist David Keirsey noted the universal themes found among these students of human behavior and established the present-day temperament terminology of **Artisan**, **Guardian**, **Rational**, and **Idealist** (terms actually used by Plato when he wrote *The Republic*).

The Four Temperaments

Each of the four temperaments is driven by a different set of core needs and demonstrates a unique set of talents. Table 1, found at the end of this section, summarizes these core needs and talents. The following brief descriptions provide a word picture of each temperament type. You should read the descriptions with an eye on identifying your own temperament type.

The Artisan

Artisans, about 35-40% of the general population, are present oriented. They are tuned to the external world, constantly scanning for opportunities and immediate problems that need to be solved. They will tackle these problems with enthusiasm, optimism, flexibility, and confidence in their instincts. Artisans’ most significant need is to act on their impulses and make an impact on others through the use of tools—whether the tools are literal tools or the tools of speech, movement, stories, comedy, or music.

Artisans learn by doing and enjoy hands-on educational approaches, use concrete language, and become frustrated by what they determine are unnecessary rituals, procedures, regulations, and restrictions. They are resourceful, spontaneous, and most often, generous. An Artisan's motto might be *carpe diem*—seize the moment.

Some famous Artisans include General George Patton, Theodore Roosevelt, Ernest Hemingway, and Cher.

The Guardian

Guardians, also about 35-40 % of the general population, use the past to gain perspective on the present. They are sensible, down-to-earth, steady and conscientious, and organized. Guardians value loyalty, discipline, and teamwork and have an innate ability to organize, schedule, supervise, and structure activities and groups. Guardians need to belong to a group and be given duties and responsibilities that help serve and protect those around them.

Guardians learn by following a well-established routine, receiving clear and precise instructions, and using repetitive drills to master a subject. They use concrete language and become frustrated with a lack of respect for authority, disregard for established rules and procedures, and personal abandonment. They cherish a sense of community, appreciate traditions, and tend to become the gatekeepers for their community. A Guardian's motto might be *semper fidelis*—always faithful.

Some famous Guardians include General Omar Bradley, George Washington, Nancy Reagan, and Clark Kent in *Superman*.

The Rational

Rationals, about 10-15 % of the general population, see the “big picture” and spend time in the abstract world of ideas and concepts. They develop strategies and analyze theoretical, physical, and organizational systems, uncover flaws in those systems, and design improvements. They value intelligence, logic, and independence. Rationals seek knowledge and competence in all their undertakings and want to be in control of themselves and their circumstances.

Rationals learn by independent study, Socratic questioning, and tackling complex projects. They tend to use scholarly language and become frustrated by powerlessness, logical inconsistency and incompetency in themselves or others. Rationals have an insatiable appetite to understand how the world works. A Rational's motto might be *cogito, ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am.

Some famous Rationals include General Dwight Eisenhower, Thomas Jefferson, Marie Curie, and Stephen Spielberg.

The Idealist

Idealists, also about 10-15 % of the population, are oriented towards the future. They strive for growth—both in themselves and others. They are diplomatic, empathetic, authentic, charming, inspiring, and able to articulate and champion causes. Idealists are on a quest for significance and meaning in their life and need to have a unique identity.

Idealists learn by interacting one-on-one or in small groups and exploring ideas and values. They communicate with ease and will often use metaphors or word pictures to facilitate understanding. Idealists become frustrated by insincerity, betrayal, and a lack of integrity. They strive to be in harmony with themselves and others. An Idealist's motto might be *scito te ipsum*—know yourself.

Some famous Idealists include Eleanor Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Walt Disney.

Table 1 Core Needs and Talents of the Four Temperaments

<p><i>Idealist</i></p> <p>Needs: Meaning, significance, uniqueness.</p> <p>Talents: Diplomat, catalyst, counselor</p>	<p><i>Guardian</i></p> <p>Needs: Belonging, duty, responsibility</p> <p>Talents: Logistician, supervisor, stabilizer</p>
<p><i>Rational</i></p> <p>Needs: Mastery, self-control, knowledge</p> <p>Talents: Strategist, designer, analyst</p>	<p><i>Artisan</i></p> <p>Needs: Freedom, make an impact</p> <p>Talents: Tactician, performer, troubleshooter</p>

Stop for a moment and consider the descriptions just presented. Which of the temperament descriptions best fits you?

Temperaments and Leadership

The key to applying temperament theory to leadership is to understand that we must:

- Lead with our strengths.
- Use the natural talents of those we lead.
- Remain cognizant of the core needs of those we lead.

Lead with our strengths

Each temperament type is going to lead in a different manner. The objective is to know your temperament and capitalize on the strengths of that temperament.

- Artisans lead by action and maintaining a stimulating environment. They are experts at crisis management, negotiation, improvisation, and troubleshooting. They take risks and encourage others to do the same. Their optimism is contagious.
- Guardians lead by procedures and policies and maintaining an organized environment. They are experts in scheduling, standardizing, stabilizing, and consolidating. They conserve an organization's values, follow through on commitments and establish a loyal following.
- Rationals lead with strategies and by promoting an innovative environment. They are experts at long-range and contingency planning and systems analysis and design. They provide an organizational vision and a blueprint for the future.
- Idealists lead with praise and by maintaining an expressive environment. They are experts at personal development, diplomacy, and inspirational communications. They act as a catalyst to help others increase their organizational contributions.

Use the natural talents of those we lead

Not only must we lead with our strengths; we must realize the talent those around us possess. The Artisan has the tactical ability to use the resources at hand to solve the immediate problem. The Guardian has the logistics ability to get the right materials and people to the right place at the right time for the right purpose. The Rational has the strategic ability to see the broad direction a group must travel. The Idealist has the diplomatic ability to help others to work together as a team.

An Artisan leader needs the diplomatic ability of the Idealist, because diplomacy is often the Artisan's weak suit. A Guardian leader needs the strategic ability of the Rational, because seeing the forest through the trees is not easy for the Guardian. A Rational leader needs the logistical ability of the Guardian because details can often be problematic for the Rational. An Idealist leader needs the tactical ability of the Artisan to solve crises and react to the unexpected.

In reality, every leader needs all three of the other temperaments to insure a team's maximum effectiveness. The leader's responsibility is to recognize this need, identify the right people for the right task, and let them loose to use their natural gifts.

Remain cognizant of the core needs of those we lead

Besides using the talents of our people, we also should remain cognizant of the core needs of those we lead:

- The Artisan needs to act on their impulses and make an impact on others.
- The Guardian needs to belong to a group and be given duties and responsibilities that help serve and protect.
- The Rational needs control and knowledge and competence in all their undertakings.
- The Idealist needs significance and meaning in their life and a unique identity.

These needs are the motivational buttons for each temperament type. If we can give the Artisan freedom, the Guardian responsibility, the Rational knowledge, and the Idealist meaning, we are going to provide a work environment where each can thrive and find deep satisfaction. We cannot meet every need all the time, but the more often we can, the more likely we will have the support of those we lead.

Conclusion

The final words in David Keirse's *Please Understand Me II*, capture the essence of leading others by understanding yourself:

Whatever our personality type, to be effective leaders we must continually search for talent; we must nurture the talents of followers we already have; we must make sure that our followers engage in massed and distributed practice of those skills that they contribute; and we must see that our followers get timely feedback on the results of their intelligent operations, as well as frequent appreciation for and acknowledgment of their smart methods.ⁱⁱ

Leadership is one of life's most challenging endeavors. Armed with knowledge about ourselves and others, perhaps we will be better prepared to mine the rich talent around us, motivate those we lead, and develop teams that work together to make significant and enduring contributions.

ⁱ David Keirse, *Please Understand Me II* (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis, 1978) 1.

ⁱⁱ Keirse, 330.