

surrounded by idiots



The Four Types of Human Behavior
and How to Effectively Communicate
with Each In Business (and in Life)



thomas erikson

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Thomas Erikson



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[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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Foreword

Many years ago, Bill Bonnstetter and his son David developed a revolutionary software system based on the DISC method—a way of describing human communication and classifying behavior and the method that is used throughout this book. Sadly, Bill has since passed away, but David continues to run their company—TTI Success Insights—to this day. From its humble origins in rural Iowa, this method of behavior profiling has now been used by businesses and corporations all around the world.

It all began with one question. A simple, specific question: Could an agricultural salesperson sell more seed simply by looking at a farm?

As a child growing up in rural Iowa, I watched my father apply the foundational principles of William Moulton Marston's *Emotions of Normal People*. At the time, my father was focused on Buyer Profile Blending, giving agricultural salespeople the knowledge of Marston's tools to better understand themselves and their farmer customers. I can still recall the earliest days, sitting at a knotty-pine table over meals of hot pork tenderloins and roast corn, when my father was working through his observations. "Pristine driveways and neat groves? Definitely a Blue. New and experimental livestock and buildings? You're looking at a Red."

Although we were close, our paths were incredibly different. My father, a true entrepreneur and Red/Yellow in every sense of the phrase, was driven to build consulting firms and agencies that helped salespeople refine their craft. I sought the collegiate path, attending university at the University of Iowa, leaning into my Red/Blue nature while studying accounting and computer science. I spent my free time in the computer lab, pouring my soul into programs through my fingertips. While I was studying, my father perfected his wizardlike ability to understand people.

My father and I always remained close and spoke to each other most weeks, even though we were at different milestones in our lives. While I was studying at the University of Iowa, my father sat me down and asked me about contributing to his venture. He asked, “What if we could couple your ability to develop software with my ability to analyze human behavior?” I was ambitious, hungry for fun coding work, and proceeded to embark on the most exciting journey of my life. Together, we built a software system that would produce reports about human behavior. This was a multiplying factor; soon we were able to reach more people and reveal a person’s potential through 3.5-inch floppy disks and twenty-four-page reports. My father and I built a company, TTI Success Insights, in 1984 in Iowa to do just that.

Over time, we escaped the frigid winters in the Midwest of the United States, relocated ourselves, our families, and our business to sunny and warm Scottsdale, Arizona. In the late nineties, we began using the web for distribution of our famed assessments. Today, we have a thriving business with distributors all over the world.

Up until now, you might have wondered why you are so different. Human behavior is, for the most part, complex and nebulous. In some cases, the people around us are idiotic. Understanding human behavior is a never-ending task, an endless pursuit to know the how, what, and why behind a person’s choices. It is both easy and dangerous to categorize someone who behaves differently from you as ignorant, wrong, or even thickheaded. Today’s world requires a more sophisticated understanding where you value a person for his or her strengths and weaknesses.

My father has since passed on. But the purpose we invoked, to reveal human potential, continues to live on. This book is written about the concepts my father applied in sales trainings and applies them to an even more complex situation—understanding the idiots who surround us all.

As you read, I think you will understand the worth of a Red, a Yellow, a Green, and a Blue. I hope you will pull away some practical advice in communicating effectively with each type. But the most important lesson that you can walk away with is that the idiots who surround you are, in fact, not idiots at all. Instead, they are individuals worthy of respect, understanding, and being valued.

Anyone can use the frameworks outlined in this book to get ahead in the game of life. And look at it this way: If you don’t understand and use the

principles, you'll continue to be surrounded by idiots. And nobody wants that.

—David Bonnstetter
Chief Executive Officer
TTI Success Insights

Introduction

The Man Who Was Surrounded by Idiots

I was in high school when I first noticed that I got along better with certain people rather than others. It was easy to talk to some of my friends; in any conversation, we always found the right words and everything just flowed smoothly. There were never any conflicts, and we liked one another. With other people, however, everything just went wrong. What I said fell on deaf ears, and I couldn't understand why.

Why was speaking to some people so easy, while others were total blockheads? Since I was young, this certainly wasn't something that kept me awake at night. However, I still remember puzzling over why some conversations flowed naturally, while others didn't even start—no matter how I conducted myself. It was just incomprehensible. I began using different methods to test people. I tried to say the same things in similar contexts just to see what reaction I got. Sometimes it actually worked and an interesting discussion developed. On other occasions, nothing happened at all. People just stared at me as if I were from another planet, and sometimes it really felt that way.

When we're young, we tend to think of things very simply. Because some people in my circle of friends reacted in a normal way that meant, of course, that they were automatically the good guys. And so I just assumed there was something wrong with the people who didn't understand me. What other explanation could there possibly be? I was the same all the time! Certain people just had something wrong with them. So I simply began to avoid these weird, difficult people because I didn't understand them. Call it the naïveté of youth if you will, but it did give rise to some amusing consequences. In later years, however, all of this changed.

Life went on with work, family, and career, and I continued to pigeonhole people into two groups—good and sensible people and all the rest, the people

who didn't seem to understand anything at all.

When I was twenty-five years old, I met with a man who was self-employed. Now in his sixties, Sture had founded his own business and built it up for many years. I was given the task of interviewing him just before a new project was to be implemented. We started talking about how things were functioning in his organization. One of the very first comments Sture made was that he was surrounded by idiots. I remember laughing at the time because I thought it was a joke. But he truly meant what he said. His face turned crimson as he explained to me that the people working in Department A were complete idiots, every single one of them. In Department B you found only fools who understood nothing at all. And he hadn't even come to Department C yet! They were the worst of all! They were so weird that Sture couldn't fathom how they even made it to work in the mornings.

The more I listened to him, the more I realized that there was something very odd about this story. I asked him if he really believed that he was surrounded by idiots. He glared at me and explained that very few of his employees were worth having.

Sture had no issue letting his employees know how he felt. He didn't hesitate in the least to call anyone an idiot in front of the whole company. This meant that his employees learned to avoid him. No one dared to have one-to-one meetings with him; he never got to hear bad news because he would often shoot the messenger. At one of the offices, a warning light had even been mounted at the entrance to the building. Discreetly placed above the reception desk, the light went red when he was there and turned green when he was away.

Everyone knew about this. Not only staff but even clients would automatically cast a nervous glance at the light to find out what awaited them when they stepped over the threshold. If the light was red, some people would simply turn back at the door, deciding to come back at a more opportune time.

As we all know, when you're young you are full of great ideas. So I asked the only question I could think of: "Who hired all these idiots?" I knew, of course, that he had hired most of them. What was worse was that Sture understood exactly what I had implied. What I implicitly asked was: Who is actually the idiot here?

Sture threw me out. Later on, I was told that what he really wanted to do was fetch a shotgun and shoot me.

This incident got me thinking. Here was a man who would soon retire. He was obviously a proficient entrepreneur, highly respected for his sound knowledge of his particular line of business. But he couldn't handle people. He didn't understand the most critical, complicated resource in an organization—the employees. And anyone he couldn't understand was simply an idiot.

Since I was from outside the company, I could easily see how wrong his thinking was. Sture didn't grasp that he always compared people to himself. His definition of idiocy was simply anyone who didn't think or act like him. He used expressions that I also used to use about certain types of people: “arrogant windbags,” “red-tape jackasses,” “rude bastards,” and “tedious blockheads.” Although I never called people idiots, at least not so they could hear me, I had obvious problems with certain types of people.

It was an utterly appalling thought to have to go through life constantly thinking that I was surrounded by people who were impossible to work with. It would make my own potential in life so unbelievably limited.

I tried to see myself in the mirror. The decision was easy to make. I didn't want to be like Sture. After a particularly toxic meeting with him and some of his unfortunate colleagues, I sat in the car with a lump in my stomach. The meeting had been a total disaster. Everyone was furious. There and then I decided to learn what is probably the most important knowledge of all—how people function. I would be encountering people for the rest of my life, no matter what my profession was, and it was easy to see that I would benefit by being able to understand them.

I immediately began to study how to understand the people who initially seem so difficult. Why are some people silent, why do others never stop talking, why do some people always tell the truth while others never do? Why do some of my colleagues always arrive on time, while others rarely manage to? And even why did I like some people more than others? The insights I gained were fascinating, and I've never been the same since I began this journey. The knowledge I acquired has changed me as a person, as a friend, as a colleague, as a son, as a husband, and as the father of my children.

This book is about what is perhaps the world's most widely used method to describe the differences in human communication. This method is called the DISA—an acronym that stands for Dominance, Inducement, Submission, and Analytic ability—system. These four terms are the primary behavior types, which describe how people sees themselves in relationship to their

environment. Each of these behavior types is associated with a color—Red, Yellow, Green, and Blue. This system is also commonly called the DISC system, where the final letter of the acronym stands for Compliance instead of Analytic ability. I have used variations of this tool for over twenty years with excellent results.

But how do you become really, truly proficient at handling different types of people? There are, of course, various methods. The most common method is to research the matter and learn the basics. But learning the theoretical part doesn't make you a world-class communicator. It's only when you begin using this knowledge that you can develop real and functioning competence in the field. Just like learning to ride a bike—you have to get on the bike first. Only then do you realize what you need to do.

Since I began studying how people function and painstakingly strove to understand the differences in the way we communicate, I've never been the same. I'm not as categorical anymore, judging people just because they are not like me. For many years now, my patience with people who are the complete opposite of me has been far greater. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I never get involved in conflicts, just as I wouldn't try to convince you that I never lie, but both these things happen very seldom now.

I have one thing to thank Sture for—he awakened my interest in the subject. Without him, this book would probably never have been written.

What can you do to increase your knowledge about how people relate and communicate? A good start may be to keep reading this book—the whole book, not just the first three chapters. With a little luck, in a few minutes you can begin the same journey I began twenty years ago. I promise you will not regret it.

One thing to note: To simplify reading this book, I have chosen to use “him” and “he” consistently when I refer to examples not associated with any specific person. I know that you have enough imagination to insert a “her” or “she” in your thoughts where this may be appropriate

1

Communication Happens on the Listener's Terms

Does that sound strange? Let me explain. Everything you say to a person is filtered through his frames of reference, biases, and preconceived ideas. What remains is ultimately the message that he understands. For many different reasons, he can interpret what you want to convey in a totally different way than you intended. What is actually understood will, naturally, vary depending on who you are speaking to, but it is very rare that the entire message gets through exactly as you conceived it in your mind.

It may feel depressing knowing that you have so little control over what your listener understands. No matter how much sense you would like to knock into the other person's head, there's not that much you can do about it. This is one of the many challenges of communication. You simply can't change how the listener functions. However, most people are aware of and sensitive to how they want to be treated. By adjusting yourself to how other people want to be treated, you become more effective in your communication.

Why Is This So Important?

You help other people understand you by creating a secure arena for communication—on their terms. Then the listener can use his energy to understand rather than to consciously or unconsciously react to your manner of communicating.

All of us need to develop our flexibility and so be able to vary our style of communication, adapting it when we speak to people who are different from us. Here we find another truth: No matter what method you choose to communicate with, as an individual, you will always be in the minority. No matter what kind of behavior you have, the majority of people around you will function

differently from you. You can't just base your method of communication on your own preferences. Flexibility and the ability to interpret other people's needs is what characterizes a good communicator.

Knowing and understanding another person's style of behavior and method of communication will result in more educated guesses about how a person may possibly react in various situations. This understanding will also dramatically increase your ability to get through to the person in question.

No System Is Perfect

Let me be clear about one important point: This book doesn't claim to be totally comprehensive with respect to how we, as people, communicate with each other. No book can do that, because the number of signals we constantly transmit to those around us wouldn't fit into any book. Even if we could include body language, the differences between male and female dialogue, cultural differences, and all the other ways to define variations in communication, we wouldn't be able to write everything down. We could add psychological aspects, graphology, age, and astrology and still not get a 100 percent complete picture.

According to the *American Journal of Business Education* (July/August 2013), more than 50 million assessments have been made using the DISA tool. And yet even with all this information communication remains a fascinating and puzzling topic. People are not Excel spreadsheets. We can't calculate everything. We're way too intricate to be described in full. Even the youngest child is far more intricate than anything that could be conveyed in a book. However, we can avoid the most blatant blunders by understanding the basics of human communication.

It's Been Going On for a While

"We see what we do, but we do not see why we do what we do. Thus, we assess and appraise each other through what we see that we do."

These words come from the psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Different behavior patterns are what creates dynamism in our lives. When I refer to behavior patterns, I don't just mean how a person acts in a single instance (his actions) but rather the whole set of attitudes, beliefs, and approaches that govern how a person acts. We can recognize ourselves in certain behavior patterns, but other

forms of behavior we neither recognize nor understand. Besides, each of us acts differently in different situations, which can be a source of either joy or irritation for those around us.

Though individual actions can, of course, be right or wrong, there is really no pattern of behavior that is right or wrong. There is no such thing as proper behavior or incorrect behavior. You are who you are, and there's no point in wondering why. You're fine no matter how you're wired. No matter how you choose to behave, no matter how you are perceived, you are fine. Within reasonable limits, of course.

In a perfect world, it would be easy just to say, "I'm a particular kind of person and it's okay because I read it in a book. That's just how I am and this is how I act." Sure, wouldn't it be great not to have to mishandle your own behavior? To always be able to act and behave precisely as you feel at the time? You can do that. You can behave exactly as you wish. All you have to do is find the right situation in which to do so.

There are two situations in which you can just be you:

The first situation is when you're alone in a room. Then it doesn't matter how you speak or what you do. It doesn't hurt anyone if you scream and swear or if you just want to sit silently and ponder the great mysteries of life or wonder why fashion models always look so mad. In your solitude, you can behave exactly the way you feel. Simple, isn't it?

The second situation where you can completely be yourself is when all the other people in the room are exactly like you. What did our mothers teach us? Treat others as you want to be treated. Excellent advice and very well intentioned. And it works, too—as long as everyone is just like you. All you need to do is make a list of all the people you know who believe, think, and act exactly like you in all situations. Now just give them a call and start hanging out.

In any other situation, it might be a good idea to understand how you are perceived and to learn how other people function. I don't think I will make headlines by saying that most people you meet aren't like you.

Words can have incredible power, but the words we choose and how we use them vary. As you have seen from the title of this book, there are different interpretations of—yes, you got it—words. And when you use the wrong word, well, maybe then you're an idiot.

Surrounded by Idiots—or Not?

What does this actually mean? As I was writing, the following analogy hit me: Behavior patterns are like a toolbox. All types are needed. Depending on the occasion, a tool can sometimes be right and sometimes be wrong. A thirty-pound sledgehammer is great for tearing down walls, but it's hardly the thing if you want to hang a picture in the foyer.

Some people are opposed to the idea of sorting people into different behavior types. Maybe you believe that you shouldn't categorize people in that way, that it's wrong to pigeonhole people. However, everyone does it, perhaps in another way than I do in this book, but we all register our differences nonetheless. The fact remains that we are different, and in my opinion, pointing that out can be something positive if you do it in the right way. Improperly used, every tool can be harmful. It's more about the person using it than the tool itself. This book is your introduction to human behavior and dialogue. The rest is up to you.

Parts of what you are going to read I have gathered from TTI Success Insights. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Sune Gellberg and Edouard Levit for so generously sharing both their experience and their training materials.

No Matter How Strange It Might Seem, in Theory, Every Kind of Behavior Is Normal

Normal Behavior ...

... is relatively predictable.

Every person reacts in a habitual manner in similar situations. But it's impossible to predict every possible reaction before it happens.

... is part of a pattern.

We often react in consistent patterns. Therefore, we should respect one another's patterns. And understand our own.

... is changeable.

We should learn to listen, act, speak openly, and reflect in order to do what is relevant right now. Everyone can adapt.

... can be observed.

We should be able to observe and consider most forms of behavior without being amateur psychologists. Everyone can take note of the people around them.

... *is understandable.*

We should be able to understand why people feel and do what they do—right now. Everyone can think about why.

... *is unique.*

Despite the conditions that we have in common, each person's behavior is unique to him. Succeed in your own conditions.

... *is excusable.*

Dismiss personal jealousy and complaints. Learn to have tolerance and patience, both with yourself and with others.

2

Why Are We the Way We Are?

Where does our behavior come from? Why are people so different? Search me! Very briefly, it's a combination of heredity and environment. Even before we're born, the foundations for the behavior patterns we will exhibit in adulthood have been laid. The temperament and character traits we have inherited affect our behavior, a process already begun at the genetic stage. Exactly how this works is still a bone of contention among scientists, but all are in agreement that it does come into play. Not only do we inherit traits from our own parents but also from their parents—also in varying degrees from other relatives. At some point or other, we have all heard that we speak like or look like an uncle or an aunt. As a child, I resembled my uncle Bertil—something to do with my red hair. To explain how this is genetically possible would take a tremendous amount of time. For the moment, let us just establish that this inheritance lays the foundation for our behavioral development.

What happens once we are born? In most cases, children are born impulsive, adventurous, without any barriers whatsoever. A child does exactly what he wants. The child says, “No, I don't want to!” or, “Sure I can!” He is immersed in the thought that he can manage just about anything at all. This kind of spontaneous and sometimes uncontrolled behavior is, of course, not always what his parents wished for. Then, hey presto, what was once an original pattern of behavior begins to transform, in the best/worst-case scenario, into a copy of someone else.

How Are Children Influenced?

Children learn and develop in multiple ways, but the most common is by imitation. A child mimics what he sees around him, the parent of the same sex

often becoming the model for imitation. (This is clearly not an exhaustive study on how the process works, as this book is not about how we influence our children.)

Core Values

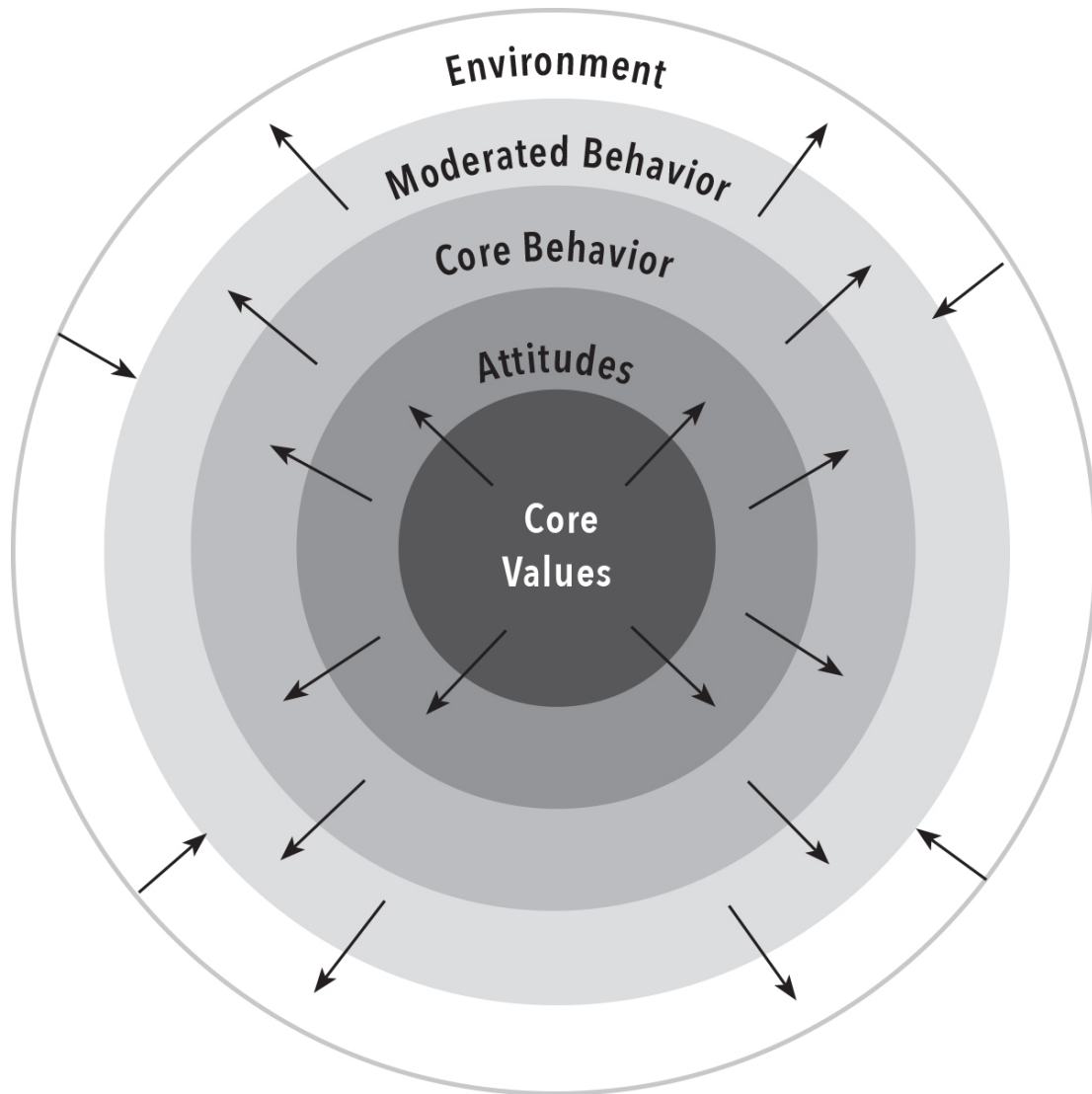
My core values are found deep within me, values so deeply embedded in my character that it's almost impossible to change them. These are the things I learned from my parents as a child or that I learned in school when I was very young. In my case it was different variations of "study and do well in school" or "fighting is wrong." The latter, for example, means that I've never laid hands on another person. I haven't fought since third grade, and I seem to recall that I lost then. (She was really strong.)

Another important core value is that all people are of equal worth. Because my parents demonstrated this to me during my childhood, I know it is deeply wrong to judge a person based on his or her origin, sex, or color. All of us carry many such core values. We know instinctively what is right and what is not. No one can take these core values away from me.

Attitudes and Approaches

The next layer is my attitudes, which are not exactly the same thing as core values. Attitudes are things I have formed opinions about based on my own experiences or on conclusions I have drawn from encounters in the latter part of my schooling, high school, college, or my first job. Even experiences later on in life can form attitudes.

A relative once told me that she didn't trust salespeople. She's definitely not alone in having strong feelings about salespeople, but in her case it resulted in comical practices. She couldn't buy anything without returning it. A sweater, a sofa, a car—the buying process was endless. Every fact had to be examined and explored. No matter how much research she did beforehand, she always wanted to return her purchases afterwards.



Once I had observed the pattern, I asked her why she did this, and she explained the reasoning behind her attitude: Eighty-five percent of all salespeople were swindlers. Explaining that I too was a salesperson had little effect. To this day, I don't know if I belong to the 85 percent or if I can count myself among the fortunate 15 percent. The important thing is that an attitude can change. My relative had probably been badly fooled a number of times and therefore learned to distrust salespeople. However, if she had a number of positive experiences her opinion could change.

The Results

Both my core values and my attitudes affect how I choose my behavior. Together they form my core behavior, the real person I want to be. My core

behavior is how I act in complete freedom, without the influence of any external factors at all.

You probably already see the issue here: When are we ever completely free from external influences? When I discuss this question with groups of people in different contexts, we all usually agree: only when we're sleeping.

But people are different. Some don't care. They are always themselves because they've never reflected upon how they are perceived. The stronger your self-understanding is, the greater your probability of adapting to the people around you.

How Do Others Really Perceive Me?

The people around you most often see your moderated behavior. You interpret a specific situation and make a choice about how to act based on that evaluation—this is the behavior that others around you experience. It's all about the mask you wear to fit into a given situation. We all have several different masks. Having one at work and one at home isn't that unusual. And another one for visiting the in-laws, perhaps. This book is not an advanced course in psychology—but I am content to establish that we interpret situations differently and act accordingly.

Consciously or subconsciously, surrounding factors cause me to choose a particular course of action.

And this is how we act. Look at this formula:

$$\text{BEHAVIOR} = f(P \times Sf)$$

Behavior is a function of *Personality* and *Surrounding factors*.

Behavior is that which we can observe.

Personality is what we try to figure out.

Surrounding factors are things that we have an influence on.

Conclusion: We continually affect one another in some form or other. The trick is to try to figure out what's there, under the surface. And this book is all about behavior.