The Eight Classic Types of Workplace Behavior

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Learn how to identify the 'styles' of your staff members to improve communication.

In any workplace, there are eight classic styles of behavior: commander, drifter, attacker, pleaser, performer, avoider, analytical and achiever. By learning how to identify the general characteristics of each style, managers can optimize their interactions with staff members.

In particular, you will learn what motivates each style of behavior; how to give effective feedback to each behavior style; and tips for getting the best out of each behavior style.

Management isn't a cookie-cutter process; each person is motivated differently and responds to communication methods differently. And a good manager knows which method works for each employee. Here, then, are the eight classic types of behavior in the workplace and how to deal with each one:

The Eight Behavior Types

1) Commanders. Demanding and domineering, commanders are stereotypical control freaks. They're extremely bossy. Abrupt to the point of rudeness, they speak in crisp, direct, hard-hitting tones without bothering to be tactful. But, being rude isn't their intention. It's just that they're usually mentally engaged in some issue or another, and the softer side of human interaction isn't a priority. They are uncomfortable with and aggravated by phrases such as "I feel" or "Let's share."

Their greatest strength is their ability to implement, regardless of what barriers may exist. Commanders can be relied upon to do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Commander subordinates will be either your greatest blessing or your worst management nightmare, depending on how you manage them. Because commander behavior is motivated by the need for control, it is not unusual for managers to feel threatened by commander employees. Behavior you may view as an attempt to take away your authority is, in the view of a commander, a demonstration of drive and initiative. If you chastise them for not "knowing their place," they will go around, over or through you—or they will go out the door.

Delegate to your commander. Assign projects by being specific about the desired result and letting them figure out the how-to's. When providing critical feedback, speak in terms of desired results, outcomes or objectives and avoid talking about feelings. When reasonable, include them in strategic planning sessions. Take a few moments to prepare for interactions with your commander, so your communications will be clear, direct and concise. Value and validate their ability to overcome obstacles and get the job done.

2) Drifters. Free spirited and easy going, disorganized and impulsive, drifters are virtually antithetical to commanders. Their extremely short attention span means they don't pay attention to details, they fail to follow up and frequently miss deadlines. They have difficulty with structure of any kind, whether it relates to work hours, policies, procedures, dress codes or commitments.
Their behavior, though wrapped in personal warmth and friendliness, causes extreme exasperation among their colleagues, making the drifter one of the most difficult subordinates to manage effectively.

Their greatest strength is innovation and creativity. Able to improvise on a moment's notice, they are extremely flexible.

Successfully managing the drifter requires that you inject as much fun and variety into the work day as possible. Integrate short but more frequent team meetings where updates or interesting tidbits are announced. Try to "lighten up"--at least in front of your drifter. Include your drifter in the entertaining of clients or other social activities. Keep assignments short, and try to build variety into the tasks that your drifter must perform. If possible, provide for a "roving" capacity in the drifter's job.

When it's time to give critical feedback, remember that if you tense up, become angry or stressed, your drifter will simply zone out" until you are approachable again. Instead, try delivering the feedback outside the office. Drifters respond well to personal appeals, so tuck your comments into the context of how improving their work will help you personally. Value and validate their "out-of-the-box" thinking. And keep it short. Make sure that when you are done, you're re-energized, talking about a non-business related topic such as an upcoming party, sports event or other social activity.

3) Attackers. Angry and hostile, cynical and grouchy, attackers often are the most demoralizing influence in the workplace. They are highly critical of others in a demeaning and condescending tone. With biting sarcasm, their attacks on others are personal in nature, tantamount to verbal abuse. When something goes wrong in the workplace, attackers have a real need to know who is to blame. Attackers view themselves as superior and are continually expressing contempt and disgust for the incompetence and inadequacy of their fellow workers.

Their greatest strength is that they can withstand professional loneliness longer than the rest of us because they're utterly convinced that they don't care whether others like them.

The problem for managers is that they usually are unaware of their attacker's behavior. Other subordinates may complain to the manager, but it's not likely that the manager has ever witnessed the attacker's abusive behavior. Your initial vulnerability therefore lies in a demoralized, embittered staff. Your immediate strategy is to make sure your staff knows how to cope with attacker behavior. Essentially, this will involve enabling your staff to behave in android-like fashion, no matter what behaviors the attacker manifests.

Attackers interpret any critical feedback as a sign of disrespect. Although this may be precisely what they've earned, the direct approach will not be effective with attackers. What does work is to ask the attacker "self-convicting" questions, such as, "What do you believe to be the most important characteristics of teamwork?" or "How do you plan to evidence these over the next review period?" or "In your opinion, what is the quality of interaction among the members of Team X? What can you do to positively impact team interactions?" Value and validate their apparent resilience and their willingness to do the ugly, unpopular jobs that no one else wants to do.

4) Pleasers. Thoughtful, pleasant and helpful, pleasers are easy to get along with on a personal basis. They want the approval of others, so they give in easily, feigning agreement to maintain
harmony. Pleasers view their work associates as family, remembering special occasions and expressing interest in their outside activities. By indulging their familial natures, pleasers use up time needed to complete their work assignments.

Exacerbating this problem is the inability of pleasers to say "no" to the requests of others. They won't ask others the tough questions necessary to get the job done, and they won't complain if they are badly treated by others. Pleasers won't provide information necessary to the effective management of your department if providing that information will get someone else in trouble or upset others.

Their greatest strength is that they humanize the workplace. Pleasers nourish a congenial atmosphere and a fundamental caring for others.

It is actually the very kindness of the pleaser that makes their managers most vulnerable. Essentially, managers allow themselves to be held hostage by the very nature of pleasers and fail to give them the critical feedback pleasers need to grow and develop. Giving feedback to pleasers is done most effectively through the "sandwich technique," in which you insert a criticism between two compliments. You begin and end the conversation with praise, while ensuring that the remedial need is adequately addressed.

Being familial with your pleaser--knowing the names and activities of their family members, remembering special occasions and being personally thoughtful--will be helpful because it establishes a "savings account" of good things against which you can make withdrawals or critical comments without it being so devastating. Value and validate the assistance they provide in helping to balance professional and personal lives.

5) Performers. Flamboyant and loud, jovial and entertaining, performers are often the most favorite personality in the workplace. They make us laugh; they seem to roll with the punches, finding humor even in bad news.

In fact, performers are actually self-promoting hustlers who use others as stepping stones on their path to the limelight. They create a false impression of their own status and importance by always seeming to be in a hurry and talking about their high-profile projects. In fact, the reason performers are in such a hurry is that they've been so busy promoting themselves that their work load really has backed up.

The motivator for performers' behavior is the need for recognition. Always the first to volunteer, they will over-promise to look good. Managers need to monitor their performers to ensure they deliver what they promise. If they don't reach their goals, performers will deny any responsibility, blame others or rationalize away their failure to produce.

The greatest strength of performers is their ability to establish--not to maintain--relationships. Their wit and mental quickness equip them to charm and delight others with ambassadorial sophistication. But, if you act on what the performer tells you without first checking the facts yourself, you're likely to get egg on your face.

In giving critical feedback to your performer, try telling a story in which the undesirable behavior is assigned to someone you worked with in another company. The indirect approach works because it allows the performer--who really will get the message--later to be credited with discerning that your message was meant for him.
Because performers are notoriously poor with administrative details, managers will either need to shore up this weakness with strong support personnel, or build incentives into the review system to ensure compliance with administrative expectations. Value and validate their ability to establish new relationships.

6) Avoiders. Avoiders are the stereotypical wallflowers of the world. Quiet and reserved, they create warm, cozy, nest-like environments and prefer to work alone. Fear is almost always a factor for avoiders. If forced to work on a team or committee, they speak only in superficial terms, in cliches or to validate what someone else has already said. This, they believe, protects them from saying anything that others might consider to be stupid.

Fear also prevents them from taking initiative. They shun both recognition and increased responsibility because both impose undesirable levels of visibility and accountability. Avoiders will sacrifice money, position, growth and new opportunities for safety.

The greatest strength of avoiders is their commitment to doing the job right the first time, every time. They can be relied upon to do exactly what they're told--no more, it's true--but no less either.

When giving feedback to avoiders, it's important not to threaten them. What motivates their behavior is the need for security, so fear is disabling to them. When being critical, be careful to first assure the avoider that his job is not at risk and to reassure him of this at the conclusion of your remarks.

Always provide detailed instructions in writing. Don't push positions of increased responsibility on your avoider or assign him to high-profile projects. If either the work environment or the nature of your avoider's job won't permit the implementation of these ideas, you should consider reassigning him. Value and validate your avoiders for their meticulous attention to your instructions, and express confidence in their ability to continue doing their jobs effectively.

7) Analyticals. Cautious, precise and diligent, analyticals proofread photocopies as they come out of the copy machine. They are the personification of procrastination, checking everything thrice and overanalyzing it. It is this near obsession with detail that incapacitates analyticals in times of urgency.

To be effective in giving feedback to your analytical, you must have examples of the behavior you're criticizing. If you lack examples to back up your allegations, your input will be perceived as invalid.

To build a good working relationship with your analytical, show respect for details. When he submits a project, go through and highlight sections and ask meaningful questions, and then express appreciation that you can rely on him for any other explanations needed. Help your analytical meet deadlines more comfortably by having him break down projects into interim steps and assign his own deadlines to each of the interim steps. Value and validate the analytical's commitment to provide accurate information.

8) Achievers. Content, peaceful and pleasant to be around, achievers are self-confident without being arrogant. Unlike other personalities who must exact something from others to establish their sense of self, achievers develop their sense of self through inner directedness and self-discipline.
Achievers exude a serenity and authenticity that illuminates the absence of hidden agendas, and they hold themselves accountable for their results. Genuinely interested in the opinions of others, achievers actively seek feedback, listening carefully for the value provided in criticism, and they find humor in their shortcomings and make appropriate adjustments. Their greatest strength is their ability to positively influence others.

It seems that no matter what new idea anyone has, analyticals have a reason why it shouldn't be done. Although aware that others perceive them as socially awkward nay-sayers, not much pain is associated with this because analyticals prefer data to people. People have emotions, and emotions are not logical; data, on the other hand, have no emotions and are logical.

The motivator for analytical behavior is the need for certainty, which is why it takes people of this type two hours or more to answer your questions. They have to be certain they're providing you the correct answer because they have to respond fully to every possible permutation of your question.

The greatest strength of the analytical is their ability to see several steps ahead and to anticipate the various potential risks. If there's a possible downside, analyticals can be relied upon to reveal it far enough in advance to avoid it.

Achievers don't run around moralizing, philosophizing and admonishing others. Instead, one merely observes achiever behavior and is influenced positively. Achiever subordinates are low-maintenance individuals. They adhere to their own performance standards, which are likely to be considerably higher than those set by managers. Achievers are not driven by personal gain, so they don't make their managers vulnerable in any way. Instead, managers can rely on their achievers to focus consistently on what's best for the organization. Value and validate the achiever's objectivity and their ability to interact effectively with all behavioral styles.

No Absolutes

Of course, these descriptions are general and stereotypical. Some of your associates may seem to fit a particular profile exactly, while others may reflect a combination of several of the eight styles. You will have to borrow the strategies from each of the eight styles where appropriate and interject your own judgment when necessary. There aren't any absolutes in dealing with human behavior, but, used effectively, these strategies will help you get the most out of all your subordinates.

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