Social Styles

We all want to influence or persuade other people. We want to recruit their support, to gain investment or access to resources, to form a partnership, or to get them to try something new.

This note describes a simple, well-established and effective method to understand how both you, and the people you need to work with, think and make decisions – the Social Styles Matrix. It helps you to build a positive and mutually supportive relationship with others so that you can both achieve.

It will explain how you can rapidly decide someone's preferred style through conversation and observing behaviour, and how you can flex your own style to get onto their wavelength and maximise mutual understanding.

Unlike some other approaches social styles is a tool you can use live in real-time, and it is simple enough to carry in your head.

The background

The concept of social styles was originally developed in the 1950's and 1960's by psychologists David Merrill and Roger Reid[1] as method to improve interpersonal relationships in the work environment.

It starts from the assumption that everyone displays a set of behaviours that are their default 'style'; their way of working and interacting. This style reflects who they are.

A style is not good or bad, it is just more or less appropriate to the task in hand. Instead of trying to change style, they talk about learning to work with your own style and that of others.

Merrill and Reid were able to group descriptions of the way people behave along two axes:

- Assertiveness – also known as Ask / Tell
- Responsiveness – also known as Open / Closed

People at the 'ask' end of the assertiveness axis are questioning. They seek information from others and may withhold their own opinions. At the other extreme, people at the 'tell' end of the spectrum are always in transmit mode. Confident and direct.

People at the 'open' end of the responsiveness scale wear their hearts on their sleeves and have no problem sharing their thoughts with you. At the 'closed' end they are more reserved and hidden, holding their thoughts and cards close to their chest.

The matrix

According to the tendency they show on each axis, people can be grouped into four main styles (see diagram)

- Analyticals – ask/closed – also known as Thinkers and Owls
- Drivers – tell/closed – also known as Directors and Hawks
- Amiables – ask/open – also known as Relators and Doves
- Expressives tell/open – also known as Creators and Peacocks

People who show each style gather and process information and make decisions in different ways. They have specific ways of interacting with other people and need to be influenced in different ways. An understanding of social style can really help you work effectively with other people.
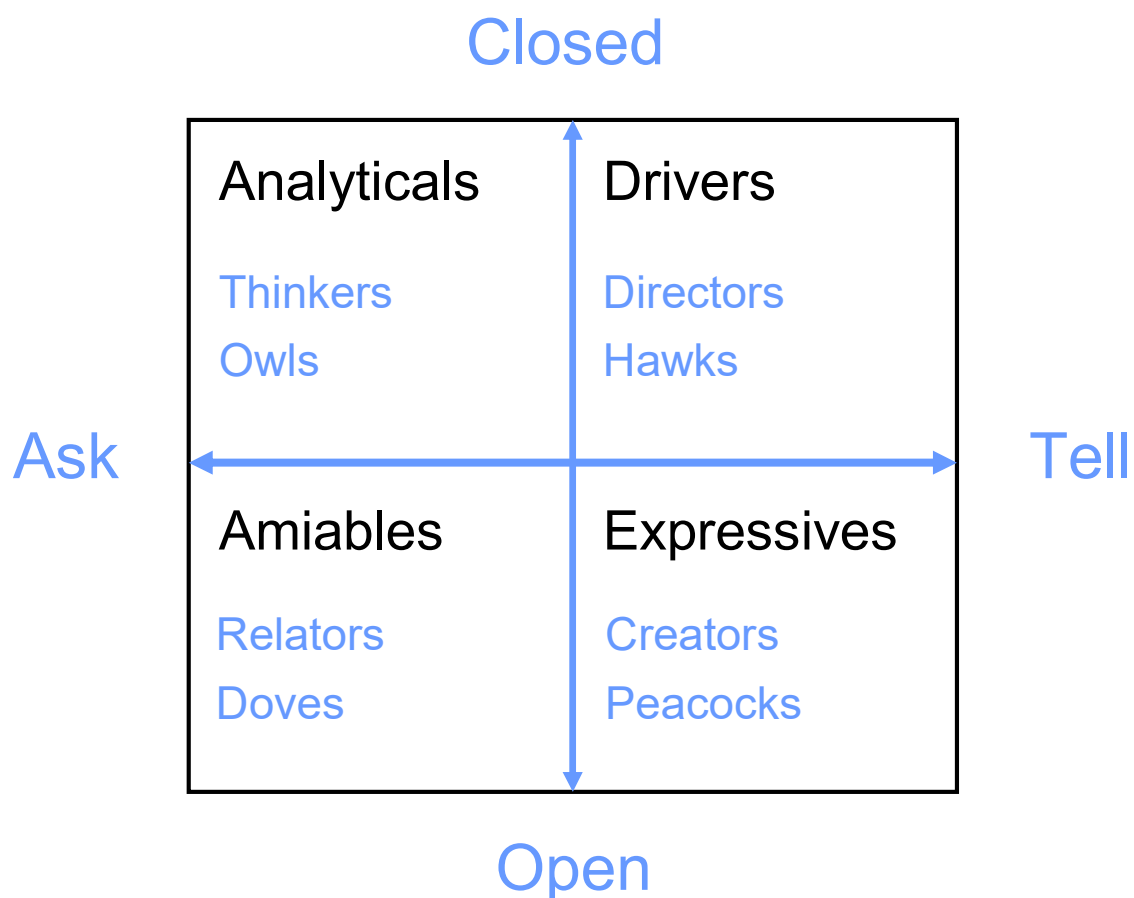
Analyticals appear logical and reserved. They want to think things through carefully and get it right.

Drivers are forceful and determined. They are action oriented and want results.

Amiables are about people and relationships. They appear relaxed, informal and easy-going.

Expressives are imaginative, visionaries, spontaneous and opinionated.

I am sure that you can already see some of the people you know in these descriptions, and perhaps to place yourself on the matrix.
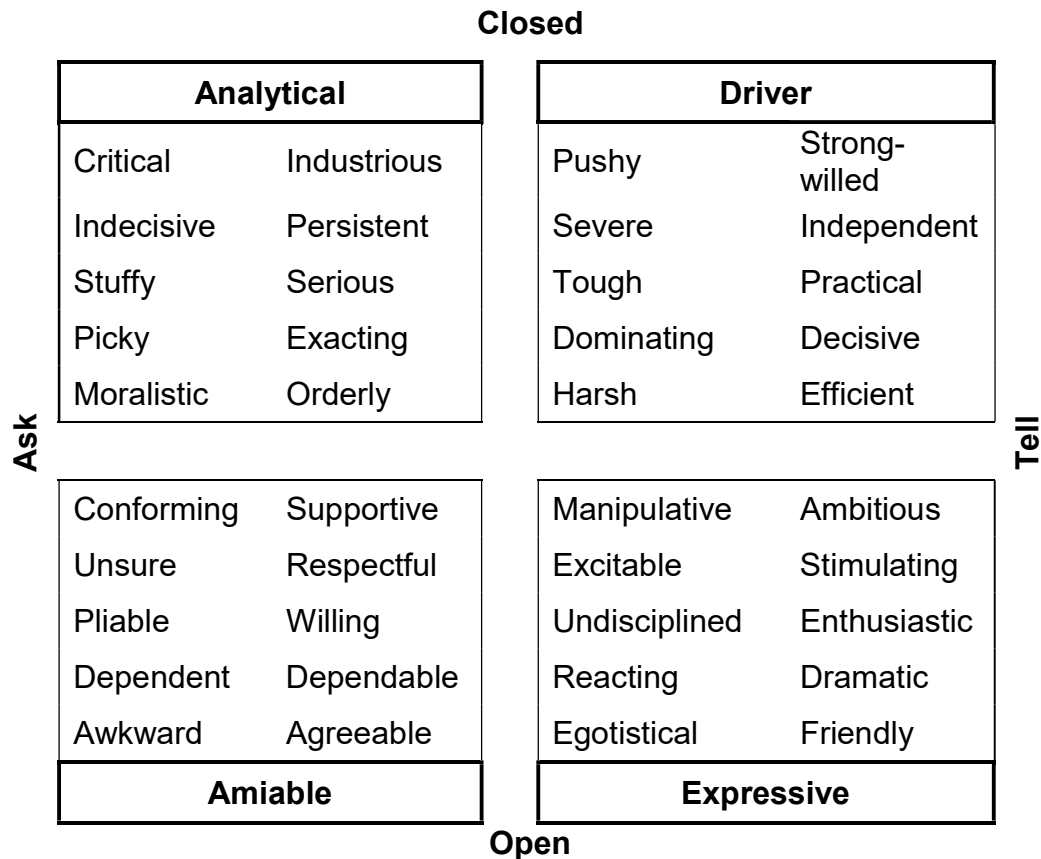
Identifying preferred style

Verbal and non-verbal cues can be obtained from how people talk.

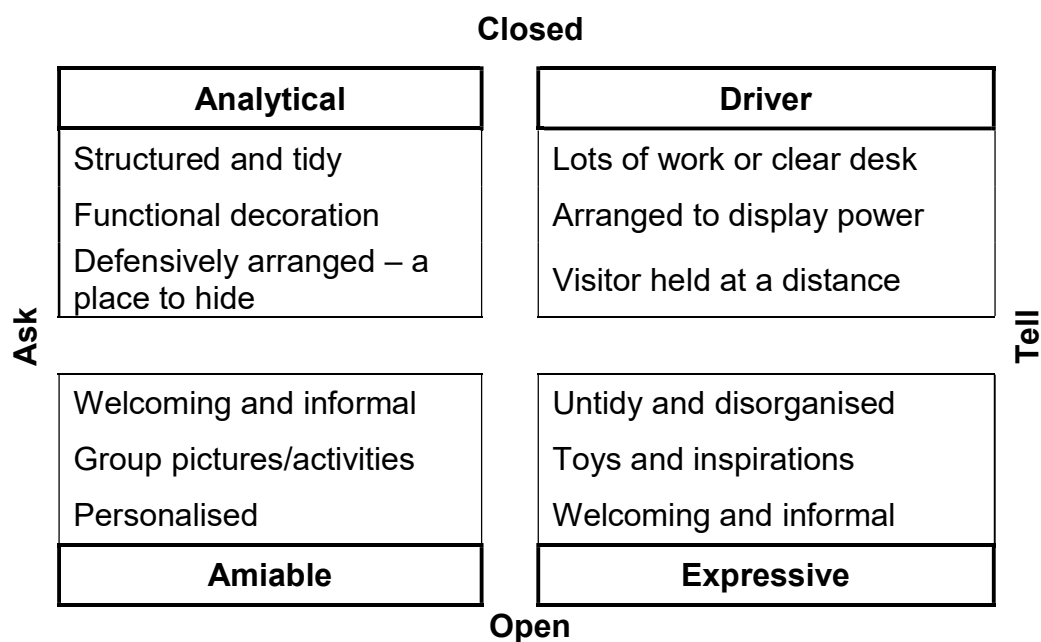(tables simplified from Merrill and Reid[1])

		Less Assertive - ask	**More Assertive** - tell
Verbal cues	Pace of speech	Slower	Faster
	Quantity	Fewer statements	More statements
	Volume	Softer	Louder
Non-Verbal cues	Use of hands	Relaxed or cupped	Pointing at others
	Body posture	Leans back whilst talking	Leans forward to make a point
	Eye contact	Indirect eye contact while speaking	Direct eye contact while speaking

		Less Responsive - closed	**More Responsive** -open
Verbal cues	Emotion in voice	Monotone	Variety and inflection
	Subjects of speech	Tasks	People
	Descriptives	Facts/Data	Opinions/Stories
Non-Verbal cues	Use of hands	Closed	Open palms
	Body posture	Rigid	Casual
	Facial expression	Controlled	Animated

Preferred social style can be identified from the adjectives people use to describe a personality.

Closed

Analytical		**Driver**	
Critical	Industrious	Pushy	Strong-willed
Indecisive	Persistent	Severe	Independent
Stuffy	Serious	Tough	Practical
Picky	Exacting	Dominating	Decisive
Moralistic	Orderly	Harsh	Efficient

Ask (left axis) / **Tell** (right axis)

Conforming	Supportive	Manipulative	Ambitious
Unsure	Respectful	Excitable	Stimulating
Pliable	Willing	Undisciplined	Enthusiastic
Dependent	Dependable	Reacting	Dramatic
Awkward	Agreeable	Egotistical	Friendly
Amiable		**Expressive**	

Open

Some experts even claim that offices and workspaces give vital clues. Whilst I can see how this could work in a traditional office environment, it is less obvious in a modern open-plan office or shared workspace with hot-desking. But humans are nest-making animals and marking of personal space has not vanished.

Closed

Analytical	**Driver**
Structured and tidy	Lots of work or clear desk
Functional decoration	Arranged to display power
Defensively arranged – a place to hide	Visitor held at a distance

Ask (left axis) / **Tell** (right axis)

Amiable	**Expressive**
Welcoming and informal	Untidy and disorganised
Group pictures/activities	Toys and inspirations
Personalised	Welcoming and informal

Open

It should be obvious that whilst people have a preferred social style, it is often a mix of the four types rather than a pure type, and people will shift and change with emotional state, fatigue and stress.

These diagnostic types are ways to explore how someone generally thinks and acts, and how you can best work with them.

And to do that you must know your own preferred style. You may be able to work it out from the diagnostics above, but it is always a good idea to ask some co-workers their opinion. Knowing your own style, you will be aware of the frictions that could arise when you are trying to persuade someone else, and you will be in a position to try and adjust your behaviours.

Just looking at the characteristics of the four types you can imagine the difficulty of an Analytical and an Expressive working together. The Expressive would be bored rigid by the meticulous approach of the Analytical, their suspicion of intuitive leaps and their constant need for ever more evidence as they examine a proposition from all sides. The Analytical would be appalled by the butterfly mind of the Expressive, their impatience and urge to act on insufficient information, and their disdain for carefully collected and curated evidence. To make a successful team both would have to recognise and adapt to the style of the other.

Influencing and persuading different social styles types

Knowing something about another person's preferred style you can organise both formal meetings and presentations, and informal discussions, so that you present your argument in the way they are most at home with. You can also avoid cutting across their thought processes and decision-making with aspects of your preferred style that jar.

The high-level advice is:

- To engage with an Analytical, give them plenty of facts and be patient.
  - Analyticals are data sponges.
- To engage with a Driver, give them clear options and a recommendation.
  - They will make the final decision.
- To engage with an Amiable, give time to a conversation and a mutual exploration.
  - Amiables need to trust you.
- To engage with an Expressive, connect with their dreams and imagination. Create a vision.
  - "Just imagine…" will grab most Expressives.

More detailed behavioural do's and don'ts are given in the tables below. I am indebted to Alastair Grant of GPB Consulting[2] for introducing me to this approach.

Influencing Analyticals

Do	Don't Do
Provide facts and data in a logical, organised format.	Don't be disorganised or messy.
Approach them in a straightforward, direct way. Stick to business.	Don't joke, be casual, informal or loud.
Support their principles. Use a thoughtful approach building your credibility by listing pro's and con's to any suggestions you make.	Don't rush the decision-making process.
Contribute to their efforts. Present specifics, and do what you say you can do.	Don't be vague about what is expected of either of you. Do not fail to follow through.
Take your time, but be persistent.	Don't waste time.
Draw up a scheduled approach to delivery; assure them there will be no surprises.	Don't leave things to chance or luck.
If you agree, follow through.	Don't threaten, cajole or coax.
If you disagree, make an organised presentation of your position.	Don't use testimonies of others or unreliable sources.
Give them time to verify the reliability of your actions. Be accurate and realistic.	Don't use other people's opinion as evidence.
Provide solid, tangible, practical evidence.	Don't use gimmicks or clever manipulators.
Give them time to be thorough.	Don't push too hard or be unrealistic with deadlines.

Influencing Drivers

Do	Don't Do
Be clear, specific, brief and to the point.	Don't ramble on or waste their time.
Stick to business.	Don't try to build a personal relationship.
Come prepared with all their requirements in a well organised "package".	Don't be disorganised or messy. Do not confuse or distract their mind from business.
Present the facts logically and concisely.	Don't leave loopholes or vague issues.
Ask specific (preferably "what") questions	Don't ask rhetorical or irrelevant questions.
Provide alternatives and choices for them to make their own decisions.	Don't come with a ready-made decision, and do not decide for them.
Provide facts and figures about probability of success of effectiveness of options	Don't speculate wildly or offer guarantees and assurances if you can't be sure.
If you disagree, take issues with facts not the person.	If you disagree, do not let it reflect on them personally.
If you agree, support results not the person.	If you agree, do not reinforce with "I will support you".
Motivate and persuade by referring to objectives and results.	Don't try to convince by "personal means."
Support their conclusions.	Don't direct or order
After finishing business, leave quickly.	Don't stay for personal chat after business.

Influencing Amiables

Do	Don't Do
Start with a personal comment; break the ice	Don't rush into business or the agenda.
Show interest in them as people, find areas of common interest, and be candid and open.	Don't stick solely to business; on the other hand, do not lose sight of goals by being too personal.
Draw out personal objectives and work to help achieve these. Listen and be responsive.	Don't force them to respond to your objectives; do not say "This is how I see the situation."
Present your case softly, in a non-threatening manner.	Don't be domineering or demanding; do not threaten them with position power.
Ask "how"? questions to draw out their opinions.	Don't debate about facts and figures.
Watch carefully for possible areas of early disagreement or dissatisfaction.	Don't manipulate or bully them into agreeing because they probably will not fight back.
If you disagree, look for hurt feelings and changes in attitude.	Don't patronise or demean them using subtlety or invective.
Behave casually and informally.	Don't be abrupt and rapid.
Define clearly, preferably in writing, individual contributions.	Don't be vague. Do not offer options and probabilities.
Reassure that their decision will minimise risks, and emphasise the benefits.	Don't offer assurances and guarantees you cannot fulfil.
Provide personal assurances. Give clear, specific solutions with maximum guarantees.	

Influencing Expressives

Do	Don't Do
Support their dreams and intuitions.	Don't lay down the law or suppress their opinions. Don't be dogmatic.
Leave time for socialising.	Don't be curt, cold or tight-lipped.
Talk about people and their objectives; they find opinions stimulating.	Don't concentrate on facts and figures, alternatives, abstractions or go into detail.
Get their commitment to a course of action.	Don't leave decisions up in the air.
Ask for their opinions and ideas about people.	Don't waste time trying to be impersonal, business-like, task-orientated.
Provide ideas for carrying out decisions.	Control "dreaming" with them or you will lose time.
Use enough time to be stimulating, fun- loving, fast-moving.	Don't mess around too much; don't stick too rigidly to the agenda either.
	Don't talk down to them; do not patronise.

A more detailed treatment of social styles and how to apply them can be found in Merrill and Reid[1], and the website of the consulting and training company they founded – Tracom Group[3].

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[1] "Personal Styles and Effective Performance", David W Merrill & Roger H Reid, CRC Press, 1981, ISBN 9780801968990

[2] www.gpb.eu

[3] www.tracomcorp.com