

Self-Awareness: A Foundation for Team Success



For over 25 years I have developed and coached leaders in law firms using personality profiling to increase awareness of the impact of behaviours on others and to perfect leadership style. The last 18 months have revealed how tough it is to lead a team and as many firms move to hybrid working, the demands on leaders are set to continue.

In law firms we have always paid lip-service to the time and skills required. The pandemic revealed it is not sufficient to lead by example. Partners had to invest time in supporting their teams – time which for many was hard to find. They had to steer teams through change and do what they could to ensure wellbeing. Partners who didn't reach out to their team, who were inaccessible, or disorganised, are now paying the price as those treated badly resign and prove difficult to replace.

The silver lining – but then I am an optimist – is that we have learned leadership is necessary and makes a difference. Leadership should be developed, supported and rewarded. Already I can see firms are more willing to tackle leaders who are unaware of the negative impact of their behaviours on teams – even if they are high billing.

Leading the team

Leading isn't as instinctive as some people like to think and needs to be developed. I find that different personalities struggle with different issues:

- Some are stuck in the detail and not clear on what they want to achieve
- Some are very negative and struggle to enthuse others
- Some are too hands-off and do not consider the steps to complete the work
- Some are too optimistic and don't plan how to manage risks
- Most are so busy they don't review and learn lessons for next time

Personal style preferences can result in a communication pattern which omits some of the following, all of which leaders need to do:

- Set direction for the team
- Get and keep the team enthused
- Ensure the team knows what steps to take and when
- Help the team avoid problems and manage risks
- Monitor progress and outcomes

To address this, I developed the **ABCDE** tool which can be used in a wide range of leadership situations. Different personalities, as represented in the four quadrant DISC model in figure 1, tend to prioritise different elements:

A	Achieve: The end results we need to deliver
B	Benefits: Why and for whom this is important
C	Clarify how: The steps we need to take
D	Difficulties: How we will avoid these
E	Evaluate: Our progress and outcomes

Achieve: First we must talk to our teams about what we need to achieve. Highly directive leaders (*Dominants in the DISC model*) will naturally emphasise this. Goal oriented team members are listening out for this. What's the challenge? What do we need to do to win? What do we need to prioritise? This is where big picture thinkers start (and sometimes finish!)

Benefits: We need to get our team enthused about what we want them to do. Inspiring team leaders are able to (*Influencers in DISC*) sell the idea to them. Leadership is a trade – if you work hard for me, this is what I'll give you in return. For some team members this is critical – they want to be inspired, enthused, excited; they want to feel that they chose to get involved, that this project is important for them and their career.

Clarify how: We need to be clear about what is going to happen, the steps we need the team to take to achieve the goal. Practical team leaders (*Steadiness in DISC*) will focus on the steps, the process to be

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followed. They will give their team a project plan or a checklist to follow. Some team members distrust a big idea until the leader can demonstrate that they have thought it through. They are more reluctant to start until they know what is required.

Difficulties to avoid: Not everything goes as smoothly as planned so we also need to anticipate what could go wrong and take action to prevent it. Cautious team leaders (*Compliance in DISC*) will have this at the front of their mind, but optimists often neglect this. Cautious personalities are risk managers and problem solvers; they will emphasise the difficulties that need to be overcome. For cautious team members this will be reassuring – they also focus on what could go wrong and they resent being set up for failure by a leader who hasn't anticipated the rocks ahead.

Evaluate progress and outcomes: Finally, once the team gets working, all leaders need to ensure that the team is making steady progress. Some leaders are initiators but not

good at follow-up and we all know that what gets measured, gets done. It is critical that all leaders tell their team how they are going to monitor and evaluate progress so that the team knows that the project or the idea won't fizzle out and that they will get the leader's support during implementation.

Enabling the team to work together

The **ABCDE** tool helps leaders to communicate effectively with their team, but they also need to ensure the team can work together efficiently. Healthy teams are diverse and include a range of personalities, all bringing something to the table. This means leaders and team members need to know how to play to each other's strengths. However, too often in fast-paced environments we don't take the time to learn how to do this and so we can be too quick to dismiss the style or efforts of someone unlike us.

Someone who is a perfectionist with demanding standards, may be seen by

others as picky; someone who is outgoing may be seen by reserved team members as overbearing; to someone pacey, a calm team member can be perceived as someone who doesn't care. These misperceptions limit team working and can create capacity problems when people don't want to work with someone unlike them.

I recently helped a fast-growing team to understand how to work together. Recruited from a variety of backgrounds, this was a diverse team and some in leadership roles didn't know how to bring out the best in team members unlike them. Everyone completed a DISC personality profile, indicating behavioural preferences such as how reserved or task focused you are (*see the axes in figure 1*). This helped team members to understand and respect their differences.

One of their takeaways from the process, was that before starting to work together on a new project, those involved would first agree their approach and how to flex their preferred ways of doing things when required. This openness, alongside good planning and role allocation will reduce frustration and enhance efficiency.

Finally, self-aware leaders also have better quality conversations and make better decisions when building a team. Whether recruiting, onboarding, reviewing performance or development planning they will be more perceptive as to how to bring out the best in an individual. Self-awareness is the foundation needed for team success.



Figure 1- the DISC four quadrant model

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