Understanding difference in communication/influencing styles

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Purpose

I use this exercise for looking at effectiveness in influencing and negotiating, where my client is experiencing difficulty at the relationship level, which is likely to be due to a difference in style. The model encourages people to look at their preferred style and that of others, increasing their range and flexibility of interpersonal working. It is also useful when people are working across organizational cultures, for example civil servants working with outside contractors from the private sector. It can be a real eye opener for clients to realize that some people are just different and 'different' as opposed to 'difficult' opens up ways forward.

Description

The model is based on work originally by Charles Handy. It uses three 'pure' interpersonal styles, 'Tough Battler' 'Friendly Helper' and 'Logical Thinker'. Each of us uses our own combination of the three in our communication style, particularly relevant to influencing and negotiating. The model enables us to plot ourselves and others in relation to interpersonal style and provides a way of understanding and managing differences in style, which requires no special psychometric training.

Process

The situation normally presents itself – one that your client is finding frustrating at the relationship level. Draw an equilateral triangle, with the three 'pure' styles at the corners. Give a brief explanation of the styles – the names are highly indicative.

Tough Battler

Logical Thinker   Friendly Helper

- Tough Battler – gets satisfaction from the 'fight' and competition.
- Friendly Helper – gets satisfaction from maintaining friendly relationships.
- Logical Thinker – gets satisfaction from good, clear logical arguments.

A key difference is that Tough Battler and Friendly Helper are emotionally based, whereas Logical Thinker is thinking based.

Pull out differences in style by asking: 'How does a Tough Battler see a Friendly Helper?, etc., working through the combinations. Examples giving the flavour are:

- TB sees FH – weak, a pushover.
- FH sees TB – scary, a bully.
- LT sees FH – woolly.
- LT sees TB – illogical.
- FH sees LT – cold.
- TB sees LT – boring.

Your client then places themselves in the diagram – what mix do they see themselves as? – in the chosen situation. You can help by asking them the following questions:

- How did you go about influencing them?
- What did you say and do?
- What did you find frustrating?
- What did you find satisfying?

Your feedback on what you have heard and observed during coaching is also helpful.

The next step is to ask them to place the other person on the diagram. This in itself is often useful. Useful questions might be:

- Does the person behave in the way that frustrates you deliberately to frustrate you, or just because that's their way?
- How do they see you?
- What could you do to make your communication with that person more effective?

The last question leads to further coaching exploring strategies that your client feels could be within their range.

People understand the classification very easily, often enjoy looking at relationships this way and can get very rapid insight. Its simplicity means they can take it away and apply it to other work (and outside work) relationships.

Pitfalls

There's no simple answer! The hard work is in developing and practising other influencing strategies. Otherwise, it becomes a 'so what?' experience.

Bibliography

Handy, C. (1985) *Understanding Organizations*, London: Penguin Books.