

Versatile Leadership

Executive Summary

It is well documented that people who understand differences in communication preferences, and learn to adapt their own communications to make others more comfortable, are more effective leaders. This skill is called Versatility, and it is the core of Wilson Learning's Social Style capability. But how does that actually work? What are the kinds of adjustments managers and employees need to make in order to increase their Versatility and make their work unit and organization more effective?

In an attempt to better understand how managers and employees express their Versatility, and the needs that different employees and managers have, Wilson Learning conducted a set of in-depth interviews with both managers and their employees, each lasting at least one hour. In all, 82 interviews were completed, from 35 different organizations in various industries. These interviews provided detailed information about the style preferences of managers and employees, and the impact of Versatility on their relationships.

The results indicate that leaders need to pay attention to a number of factors in order to increase their Versatility. For leaders, Versatility is most critical during performance review sessions and when dealing with conflict. Individual employee expectations regarding performance objectives, feedback, and support all differ according to the Social Style of the employee. How a leader approaches these issues can greatly affect individual and organizational performance.

What Are Social Style and Versatility?

Effective communication between managers and their direct reports is critical, both for the success of the organization and the success and satisfaction of employees. The most common reason people give for leaving a job is poor communication, or a poor relationship with their manager. Good communication skills are associated with success in sales, sales leadership, negotiations, and a host of other areas.

Versatility is key to effective communication.

Versatility is based upon Wilson Learning's Social Style model. Nearly half a century of research has shown that people are divided equally across four primary communication styles. These four Social Styles are called Driver, Expressive, Amiable, and Analytical. When you find that a person is easy to communicate and work with, it is often because you share the same Social Style. When a person seems difficult to work with, it is often because your styles are different.

Because each style represents about 25% of all people, managers only share Social Style with about one-fourth of their employees. As a result, almost all managers are faced with the dilemma of creating effective communication with the remaining three-fourths of the work force. The Versatility skill allows managers to do just that.

Understanding the Causes and Consequences of Leader Versatility

To help leaders develop Versatility, we needed a clear understanding of how a manager's actions affect the performance of the four Social Styles. That was the purpose of this study.

Our primary objective in this study was to truly understand how the things leaders do and say affect employee performance. Therefore, we felt that an open-ended interview procedure was the best approach. While this does not provide statistical or numerical results, it does provide a rich description of situations and actions that can guide organizational leaders toward increased Versatility. This study had some important and unique characteristics:

- We needed to interview both managers and their employees to have a complete picture of communication patterns
- We needed to know the Social Style of both the managers and their employees
- We needed a balance of all four styles
- We needed a representative sample across a range of organizations and industries

Each interview lasted at least one hour, and many lasted much longer. Our questions covered a wide range of topics, including how different Social Styles manage people; how different Social Styles prefer to be managed; situations in which Versatility was most valuable; the impact of Versatility on trust; and how managers and employees build and lose trust in each other.

In total we interviewed 82 people, evenly divided among the four Social Styles and between managers and employees. These 82 people came from 35 different organizations, representing several different industries, including high-technology, pharmaceutical, financial services, insurance, telecommunications, and automotive.

The results provide a rich description of how Versatility skills can affect the manager-employee relationship and the important role of communication in building high performance. In this paper, we will focus on two major outcomes: the impact of Social Styles on the manager-employee relationship and the role of trust in the manager-employee relationship.

What Do Leaders Need to Pay Attention to?

We start by describing the results relative to the impact of Social Style on key elements of the relationship between a manager and employee. It is important that leaders know Social Style and how it impacts their employees' performance.

The Ideal Manager

Employees with different Social Styles see different characteristics as being descriptive of an ideal manager. While all employees express that ideal managers give them clear objectives and the autonomy to carry them out, the following characteristics tend to be related to the style of the employee:

Style of the employee	Ideal characteristics of managers
Driver	Is sincere and direct
Expressive	Is friendly, open in communication, trusting, and empathic
Amiable	Shows confidence in employees; is honest and trustworthy
Analytical	Is knowledgeable and shares information openly

A manager needs to be aware of his or her own behavioral tendencies and the expectations of different employees. For example, an Analytical manager who does not express empathy and an open sharing of feelings may not be meeting the needs of all his or her employees.

Managers' Weaknesses

Parallel to views of the ideal manager, the primary weaknesses of managers are also style related. While all employees express that a common weakness of managers is supervising too closely (“micro manager,” “looks over my shoulder too much”), each Social Style describes slightly different characteristics as weaknesses in managers.

Style of the employee	Weaknesses of managers
Driver	Giving too much or too little direction. Too little makes the task too vague to be effective; too much keeps employees from using their personal discretion.
Expressive	Being closed-minded. Expressives do not like managers who see only one way of doing things and are closed to discussing options.
Amiable	Not expressing personal concern for the employee. Amiables do not like managers who show little personal interest in them.
Analytical	Giving too much or too little information. Analyticals do not like to be told things they already know or that are irrelevant to the task; at the same time, they don't want gaps in the information that the managers could have provided.

Thus, effective leaders balance the amount of information, direction, options, and expression of concern for their employees, and match that to the style of their direct reports.

Giving Support to Employees

From time to time, all employees need support from their managers. The employees interviewed said that managerial support—in the form of advice and removing organizational barriers—was critical to their performance. But, different Social Styles also expressed some differences in the types of support they want and expect to receive from their managers.

Style of the employee	Support expected from managers
Driver	They want advice but not direct intervention. They want the freedom to solve problems themselves.
Expressive	They want a sounding board; someone with whom to discuss and evaluate options and choices. They want managers to support and back up their ideas.
Amiable	They want a manager to guide them down the right path, checking in and expressing confidence in them and making small course corrections along the way.
Analytical	They want managers to give them direct feedback on their decisions, and provide a clear and full acceptance of their decisions.

Managers who give support in the way they would want to be supported (that is, as their own Social Styles would want to be supported), may not be providing the kind of support the employee needs to be most effective. Managers need to be aware of their own tendencies, and adjust them to the varying needs of the different employee Social Styles.

When Is Group Involvement Needed?

When to involve a group or team in a decision is a common dilemma for managers. When asked what situations are appropriate for group involvement, the answers by both managers and employees were consistent, and differed by Social Style.

Style of employees and managers	When to involve the group in a decision
Driver	When the decision or action affects the responsibilities of any individual in the group, or for coordinating work efforts
Expressive	When the whole group is affected
Amiable	Anytime the group can contribute to brainstorming, problem solving, or planning
Analytical	When decisions or actions affect them directly

Managers' Biases for Giving Employees More Responsibility

One clear finding that may affect the success and advancement of different employees is how managers of different Social Styles tend to give additional responsibilities to employees. In this case, Drivers and Analyticals (both being more task-directed) gave similar answers, as did Expressives and Amiables (both being more people-directed).

Style of the manager	When they provide more responsibility
Driver Analytical	Tend to give more responsibility to employees who repeatedly exceed expectations on current tasks; that is, based upon a demonstration of desire to do more
Expressive Amiable	Give more responsibility to employees who ask for it and directly express a willingness to do more

Of course, in all cases, the primary factor is the employee’s ability to do the job. But if you are an Expressive or Amiable manager, don’t assume that those employees who don’t ask for more responsibility don’t want it—they may be trying to communicate their desire for more responsibility by working hard to exceed your expectations. Similarly, if you are a Driver or Analytical manager, pay attention when people say they want more responsibility.

How Employees Judge Their Own Performance

Employees will perform based upon both their manager’s and their own criteria for good performance. An employee’s criteria for judging his or her performance also seems to be closely related to whether they are more task-directed (Drivers and Analyticals) or more people-directed (Amiables and Expressives).

Style of the employee	Criteria for judging own performance
Driver Analytical	Tend to focus on measurable criteria. Driver and Analytical styles (Task-Directed Responsiveness) base their own performance on indicators such as deadlines, number of mistakes, tasks accomplished, etc. They place less emphasis on the positive reactions of others.
Expressive Amiable	Tend to base their self-judgements on feedback from others—coworkers, managers, and customers.

While neither group ignores the quantifiable indicators of performance, or the reactions of others, it is clear that when employees are asked to judge their own performance, they will likely make reference to Social Style-specific criteria.

When Is Knowledge of Social Styles Most Helpful?

Most managers and employees indicated that knowledge of Social Styles is useful in any interaction. However, there were three specific situations in which both managers and employees agreed that knowledge of Social Styles was most helpful:

- **Conflict situations:** Whether the manager is dealing directly with a conflict, or is helping others deal with conflict, almost all of the people interviewed indicated that knowledge of Social Styles is very helpful in addressing these situations. This knowledge helps people focus less on the emotions of the situation and more on the resolution of the conflict, and helps identify the differences that are at the root of the conflict.

- **Performance reviews:** Knowledge of Social Styles was also seen as greatly helpful during performance review or appraisal meetings between a manager and an employee. Social Styles knowledge can help put the employee more at ease during performance reviews, and can help focus the discussion on areas of particular concern for both parties.
- **Efforts to persuade:** While more an issue for employees than managers, knowledge of Social Styles was also seen as critical when presenting information in an effort to persuade a specific course of action or decision. Knowledge of Social Styles can help in addressing interests that are highly important to the other person, and as a result, increase success in efforts to persuade.

A Common Misperception: The Social Styles of Top Management

One common misperception we identified through the interviews was employees' assumptions about the Social Styles of top management. While we did not know the Social Styles of the executives in each of the organizations, when asked their perceptions of the dominant style in top management, the majority of employees indicated that Drivers dominate. However, the actual results from our database of Social Style Profiles tell quite a different story. As the chart below shows, Expressives actually dominate top management positions. In addition, Amiables are much more frequent in top management positions (17% of all top managers profiled) than was assumed to be the case by the employees interviewed.

Style	Employees' perception of top managers' dominant style	Wilson Learning's Database: Percent of top managers by style
Driver	53	25
Expressive	14	39
Amiable	6	17
Analytical	20	19
Mixed/don't know	7	

Trust in the Manager-Employee Relationship

One of the most critical elements of effective leadership is trust between the manager and the employee. The more trust a manager has in an employee, the more autonomy and job responsibility he or she gives the employee. The more trust an employee has in a manager, the more open and honest the communication is, and the employee has more commitment to the organization. Knowing how to build trust is an important skill for all people.

When Do Employees Lose Trust in a Manager?

Managers need to know what kinds of actions might cause employees to lose trust in them. Unfortunately, there are two potential blind spots. First, the Social Style of the employee affects what he or she sees as the primary causes of low trust. Second, the manager's Social Style affects what he or she assumes leads to low trust. The chart below summarizes the primary causes of an employee losing trust in a manager.

	Causes of Lost Trust	
Style of the employee or manager	Employees' views	Managers' assumptions
Driver	Breaking confidences or making poor decisions	Failure to answer questions or resolve problems
Expressive	Failure to back up employees	Breaking confidences
Amiable	Failure to adequately address requests for support	Misinterpreted behavior
Analytical	Lack of manager competence, inconsistency in providing feedback	Monitoring work too closely, not consulting with the employee

None of these causes are unique to a particular style—they all cause lower trust for all styles. However, the style-related actions represent manager behavior that is more likely to cause a loss of trust for that style in particular. The fact that employees and managers have different perceptions of what causes a loss of trust is an interesting finding, and can greatly influence manager-employee relationships.

The Impact of Lost Trust

When trust is lost (the manager losing trust in the employee, or the employee losing trust in the manager), it affects both parties. In all cases, there is increased strain and tension in the relationship. In addition, there are style-related effects, noted in the table below.

	Impact of Lost Trust	
Style of the employee or manager	Employees' responses	Managers' assumptions
Driver	Anger and defensiveness	Need to supervise more
Expressive	Less contact and communication	Need to supervise more
Amiable	Anger, defensiveness, and less communication	Termination of relationship
Analytical	Expectation that time is required to smooth over the issue	Loss of employee responsiveness

One clear finding had to do with efforts to re-establish trust. For both Amiables and Analyticals, re-establishing trust inevitably involves the passage of time. In other words, Amiable and Analytical styles expressed that efforts to re-establish trust immediately after an incident will fail, and that only "time heals wounds." This is particularly important information for Driver and Expressive leaders, who may attempt to re-establish trust too early, only to increase the resistance of the Amiable or Analytical employee and further delay the re-establishment of a productive relationship.

Conclusions

Employees don't leave companies; they leave managers!

Numerous studies have shown that the most common reason people give for leaving a job is a poor relationship with their manager. Turnover, productivity, performance, and employee satisfaction are all tied to a manager's ability to build effective relationships with employees.

Versatility is the key. While several studies in the past have shown the link between performance measures and Versatility scores, this study shows in more detail how Versatility actually works in the manager-employee relationship. A manager who is sensitive to the style of his or her employees, and takes steps to adjust his or her behavior to meet the needs of employees, will communicate more clearly and establish a more trusting relationship.

By: Michael Leimbach, Ph.D.
Vice President, Research and Design
Wilson Learning Worldwide

More information about Wilson Learning is available from:

WILSON LEARNING 

Wilson Learning Worldwide
8000 W. 78th Street, Suite 200
Edina, MN 55439
800.328.7937
www.wilsonlearning.com