

# Mentoring with DISC Style

by Kathy Wentworth Drahosz and Nicole Bridge

## FOUNDATIONS OF YOUR PARTNERSHIPS

As a mentoring consultant who specializes in the area of organizational development, I have spent the past two decades coaching countless mentoring relationships at all stages of their development, from matching behavioral styles and launching partnerships to maintaining the connection between them for the duration of their mentoring program. In my studies, clear patterns have emerged that tell a tale of what makes some partnerships thrive with chemistry and productivity while others fizzle or never even get off the ground.

Believe it or not, the formula is actually quite simple: the most successful partnerships involve two people who appreciate and trust one another's commonalities and differences.

In a mentoring relationship there are ways you can tailor your DISC communication style so that you quickly put each other at ease and find satisfaction in the mentoring experience.

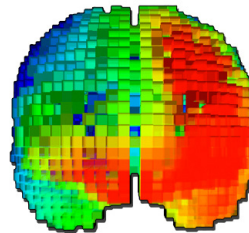
In this executive summary, we will delve deeply into the issue of building trust with your partner by understanding and respecting DISC behavioral styles and communication preferences, and how incorporating DISC will improve the mentoring process for both participants.

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### DISC Behavioral Science



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*"The DISC behavioral science enables mentoring partnerships from different career paths, generations, and genders to learn about each other, appreciate differences and quickly establish long-term trusting relationships."*

*~Kathy Wentworth Drahosz*

# Mentoring with DISC Style

## Isolating DISC Strengths

### ISOLATING DISC STRENGTHS

When you first meet your mentoring partner, it's sometimes difficult to determine whether or not you will have chemistry and authentically trust each other. You may be asking yourself:

- *What do we have in common?*
- *Will I like them?*
- *Will they like me?*
- *What makes them perform so well?*
- *How are they able to put others at ease so quickly?*

Once you get to know the other person, you might find yourself matched with a mentoring partner who struggles with building relationships. You might soon realize their reserved nature will not only impact the success of your mentoring partnership but also their own success on the job.

Understanding and respecting preferences is vital to how you are received by your mentoring partner but also people in your professional environment. The more you know about navigating varied displays of interpersonal communication, the better equipped you are to convey your authentic self and build long lasting and productive relationships.

Let's consider Kate, a very bright editor of technical manuals. Kate is a focused, methodical worker, thought to be quiet and shy by her co-workers. She sits at a neat desk in a less traveled corner of the office where there are few interruptions to break her concentration. As she works through each manuscript, she follows her task list closely and in order, corresponding with colleagues primarily by email.

Through her talent and hard work, she secures a coveted management position. Quickly, however, Kate realizes the pace and demands of this new role fall far outside her comfort zone. In order to keep her team on task she needs to run

weekly staff meetings and give feedback on various writing projects, deadline issues and changes. Although she starts each week with a plan, she often has to juggle a variety of tasks and meetings to accommodate schedule changes and special requests.

Once a month she meets with the rest of the management team to discuss new priorities and share strategies. The other managers are talkative and have known each other for a long time, often socializing after work or on the weekends. They can speak easily about their upcoming projects and defend their schedule projections and changes with ease.

When we consider Kate's professional experience and work style, it is no surprise that management may be a difficult fit. The nature of the work makes her feel disorganized and out of control. Speaking with employees, peers and key stakeholders all day long is draining and painful. Her colleagues are confident and personable, making her seem dull and unsure of herself by comparison. She is overwhelmed by her stress, making her think "I'm a dedicated employee with a strong work ethic. Why isn't this working?"

Kate's story is common not only in management but in a variety of disciplines. Employees find a path to promotion totally outside of their comfort zone, making them feel weak and off-balance. What's more is that they struggle to adapt their tendencies and preferences to those of their mentors, peers, colleagues and managers.

Moving through career advancements may be challenging but success is within reach if you take time for some simple study of both your personal preferences and those of the ones around you.

# Mentoring with DISC Style

## Why Study Behavioral Style?



### WHY STUDY BEHAVIORAL STYLE?

The first step in this study is understanding the modes of communication and the intensity you display of each. The DISC method is based on the intensity of four traits in each of us:

- How you approach challenges (**Dominance**).
- How you deal with people (**Influence**).
- How you deal with pace and consistency (**Steadiness**).
- How you deal with policies and procedures (**Compliance**).

Understanding our behavioral styles affords us some flexibility. While personalities are generally fixed, behaviors adjust depending on our circumstances.

For example, if your neighbor is chatty, even though your preference might be to take out the garbage quickly and head straight back to the house, every now and then you might stop and chat about the weather, —even if it makes you uncomfortable— because you don't want to hurt their feelings. You think it's important to have a good relationship with your neighbor.

Similarly, studying the four DISC components and their intensity in our own behavioral style helps us understand how to adapt to different situations in order to maintain effective communication and happier relationships. It's encouraging to realize that our behavioral styles cannot be reduced to a cemented category but that, instead, we have control over the way we perform in professional situations, even those that make us feel stretched.

#### ***The DISC Behavioral Science***

The idea that our behaviors are always evolving originated from Dr. William Moulton Marston's research on the way emotions influence our actions. In his 1928 book, "Emotions of Normal People," he developed a behavioral science

based on four quadrants that he believed would help people understand their preferences and use that knowledge to improve their own relationships and resulting experiences.

In 1940, psychologist Walter Clark used this theory to create the first DISC Profile, which quickly gained popularity in professional circles as a way to evaluate job applicants.

When an agricultural salesman in Iowa named Bill Bonnstetter began applying these principles to his research on farmers' buying habits, the impact on his own sales work was so powerful that he used the DISC model to help people in other fields understand their clients. In 1984, Bonnstetter and his son, David, took their knowledge and passion for studying and applying human behavior and created a company originally called Target Training International. Later renamed TTI Success Insights, they applied Marston's foundation to modern organizations, helping managers to place employees in positions that would maximize their talent and positively impact the organization. Bill and David were the first to computerize the DISC assessment, enabling people all over the world to access and apply DISC in their relationships.

#### ***What Do the Styles Mean?***

Before we delve into the kinds of tendencies and traits associated with each style, understand that each of us demonstrates varying intensities of every single DISC style. Your DISC profile categorizes your behavioral style as a D, I, S or C, based on your most dominant or core factor, though all four factors play a role in making up your true behavioral style. The comprehensive nature of the DISC profile helps you to understand your tendencies as the communicator but also your value to the team and ideal work environment.

# Mentoring with DISC Style

## DISC Style Breakdown

### DISC STYLE BREAKDOWN

#### **A Note on the Energy Line**

As mentioned earlier, we each have some level of intensity of all four DISC styles inside of us. The bold line that cuts across your DISC graph, known as “the energy line,” is the basis for measuring that intensity. Intensity of behaviors is measured by how far above or below the midpoint, or energy line, that behavior falls. It’s important to understand that a very low factor is just as significant as a factor that is very high. As an example, a person who does not feel confident responding to problems and challenges on the fly (Low D) is as significant as a person who prefers clear instructions and details (High C).

*Think of the energy line as the surface of a swimming pool. Above the surface, a good bounce on the diving board provides momentum for the dive. But you don’t stop working once you hit the water- you keep your body in strong form as you pass through the surface and glide through the water. You don’t slow down until you hit the bottom of the pool.*

Your behavioral style isn’t just about what happens above the energy line. What’s happening at and below the line is equally important. If your D is way below the energy line, you are likely sensitive to confrontation and demands for faster work output. If your D is above the energy line, you are at your best in situations that require quick problem-solving and directness. If your D hovers at the energy line, — just a little below or even a little above — you might be flexible in this area, meaning, you can build a business case before making a decision and step on the pedal if needed.

#### **Recognizing the Styles**

Even if you do not have the opportunity to read your co-workers’ assessments, DISC styles are highly observable. The way we communicate, hold ourselves accountable, and our expectations of those around us all say something about our DISC tendencies and preferences.

When discussing human behavior, many tend to speak to the highs— referring to a person as a High D, High I, High S or High C. In truth, however, “high” simply means a person’s plot point is above the energy line.

Consider, Dana who loves being in a group and always has a funny story to share — you know she is a High I! Her motto is “strangers are just friends I haven’t met yet.”

However, to really understand the science of DISC we need to look at an individual’s behavior holistically (not only the High D, I, S or C) but also the intensity of the low factors and their relationship to the energy line. The further away from the energy line the more intense and visible their style will be to others.

That Dana is also fiercely independent and prefers to take her own approach to work (sometimes away from the group’s standards) tells us her C is below the energy line and that she may need to be careful that her comfort level with challenging the status quo doesn’t become an obstacle to her own success.

Here are some characteristics of each style that you might observe in your own professional relationships or even in yourself:

#### **D- Dominance**

The High D prefers to lead the group. They soar when they have the opportunity to do something daring or make a difficult decision. High D’s are driven to make things happen, which can often come across as demanding or urgent. Others will notice that they are:



- Results oriented
- Competitive
- Problem solvers
- Risk takers

# Mentoring with DISC Style

## DISC Style Breakdown



### DISC STYLE BREAKDOWN

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Low D's tend to work in an organized environment using traditional procedures, prefer limited authority, and pursue a calculated approach to problem solving. These individuals tend to have a long fuse and be slow to anger. Others will notice that they are:

- Leary of extremes
- Methodical
- Conservative
- Calculating

#### I- Influencer

The High I strives for likeability. They can see the best in everyone and try to make it work even with the most difficult co-workers or colleagues. They are effortless conversationalists and always find a way to relate to others. The High I's playful nature and good sense of humor makes it easy for them to recruit allies. Others will notice that they are:



- Optimistic
- People-oriented
- Outgoing
- Charismatic

Conversely, Low I's tend to be reserved in their interaction with others. They have the ability to persuade with data and facts and are comfortable working alone or on projects that give them a sense of autonomy. Low I's appreciate traditional approaches to doing things and will want a strong business case of why to change if the process has been working. In other words, they lean toward the premise that they must be convinced before they will trust. Others will notice that they are:

- Fact and information-oriented
- Logical
- Insightful
- Observant

#### S- Steadiness

The High S exudes a laid back and relaxed style. Stability and harmony are of utmost importance to them. They are loyal teammates and logical thinkers. The High S enjoys the opportunity to serve and will be calm under fire. Others will notice that they are:



- Steady
- Reliable
- Calm
- Methodical

The Low S, on the other hand, is fast paced, adaptable to change, very spontaneous and leans toward variety in the workplace. Unlike their counterparts, Low S's are emotional and easy to read and often "wear their hearts on their sleeves." Others will notice that they are:

- Energetic
- Multifaceted
- Passionate
- Able to switch gears frequently

#### C- Compliance

The High C prefers complete data and clear rules to follow. They rely on methods that are proven and prefer a safe work environment. The High C asks a lot of questions in order to get the full story. Others will notice that they are:



- Disciplined
- Detail-oriented
- Careful
- Systematic

In contrast, a Low C often demonstrates a commitment to independence, is a bold risk taker, and believes that the fewer rules there are to follow the better. Low C's are fearless and will break the rules but will expect forgiveness if the risks they have taken do not

# Mentoring with DISC Style

## Natural Style v. Adapted Style

### NATURAL STYLE V. ADAPTED STYLE

prove worthwhile. Others will notice that they are:

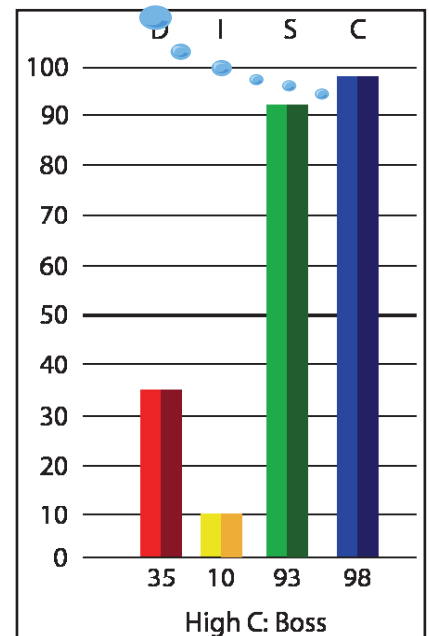
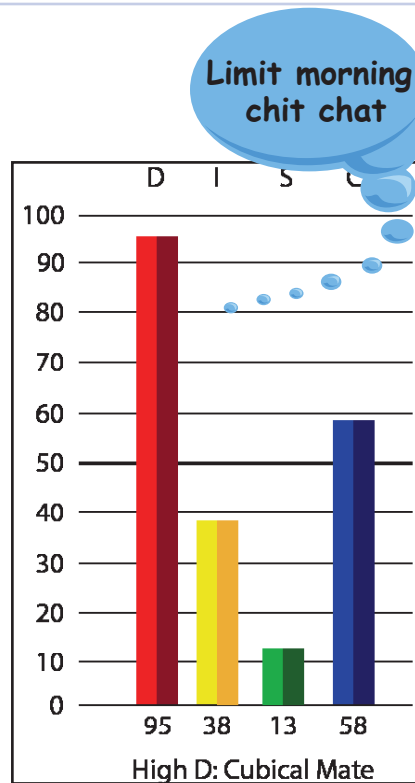
- Independent
- Prone to taking risks
- Courageous
- Relentless

#### **Natural Style v. Adapted Style**

In addition to examining the intensity of each style in your profile, the DISC assessment measures the way you change your behaviors in order to fit in your environment. Natural style reflects your hard-wiring: the behaviors you lean on most frequently and with the greatest ease. Adapted style refers to the behaviors you force yourself to change in the workplace in order to succeed. You might limit morning chit chat if your cubicle mate is a High D or include a budget tracker in your status updates if your boss is a High C. Understanding the preferences of those around you will assure them of your competence and make working together much easier.

On the flip side, while your ability to adapt is commendable, too much adapting can be an energy drain. Consider, for example, a High D who delivers a direct bottom line but feels required to stop and compose carefully worded emails to accommodate a High S colleague who prefers thorough background information. The High D might be meeting the High S's expectations, but the extra effort is tiring. If the High D is reporting back to the High S for the duration of a long-term project, finding the energy to write these lengthy detailed messages might leave the High D fatigued and maybe even agitated.

Managers who are looking to avoid employee burnout can use the DISC assessments to plan teams and organize projects. The goal is to place each employee in a position where they can shine based on their natural styles.



# Mentoring with DISC Style

## The DISC in Action



### THE DISC IN ACTION

Now that we have a better understanding of the preferences associated with each style, let's consider how DISC can be used to build a strong mentoring partnership. In the same way that DISC study illuminates strategies for recognizing differences in behavior, attention to style preferences can help to build chemistry within your mentoring relationship and put your partner at ease.

#### ***Working with an Opposite Style***

Sometimes, you might be paired with someone because of their career trajectory or technical expertise but find that you do not share much else in common. Here are some ideas for working with a partner whose style feels in opposition to your own:

**A High D and a Low D** — For the High D adapting to the Low D: Slow down. Drop the intensity. Create a safe learning environment. If the Low D feels calm and comfortable, they are more likely to admit “I don’t know” or “This is where I need help.” Low D’s like lessons to follow and a forum to discuss problem-solving options.

**A High I and a Low I** — Outwardly, these two styles share very little in common— one is people-oriented and the other is task-oriented. One tends to trust indiscriminately while the other tends to remain guarded and untrusting. The High I will need to respect the Low I’s low trust level and work to build trust gradually. They should ask the Low I for their input while planning developmental activities and for their impressions on how comfortable they are with stretch assignments.

**A High S and a Low S** — In this relationship, someone who prefers to think things through (High S) is working with someone who moves quickly. The High S will need to pick up the pace when communicating with the Low S: cover only the high points and strive for directness. The Low S will need to give the High S time to think things through before making a decision and or shifting direction.

**A High C and a Low C** — Because the High C and the Low C are both task-oriented, the area of potential conflict lies within the scope of compliance and risk taking. The risk-averse High C competes with the Low C’s need for independence which can many times cause a considerable amount of tension. The High C will need to give the Low C honest feedback if they are tackling problems with little regard for the possible ramifications of a quick decision.

#### ***Using DISC to Design Developmental Activities***

No matter what style each partner brings to the relationship, savvy mentors will look for opportunities to move the mentoring meetings beyond philosophical chats and/or venting sessions. In other words, mentors should engage the mentoree in a variety of situations and developmental experiences to maximize learning.

To keep your mentoree engaged, consider their DISC style (both highs and lows) when designing developmental activities. For example:

**High D’s, High C’s or Low I’s** — These three behavioral types may prioritize tasks over people, which can lead to struggles with interpersonal skills. To enhance their people skills, encourage your mentoree to spend one day each month listening to the concerns and needs of their peers and colleagues. Additionally, suggest that they look for opportunities to assist others with challenging projects.

**High I’s or High S’s** — These two behavioral styles have trouble setting clear standards and holding others accountable — particularly people over whom they do not have authority. In this case, the goal would be to work with your mentoree to create a project management system for following up on outstanding tasks and action items.

# Mentoring with DISC Style

## The DISC in Action

### THE DISC IN ACTION

**Low S's or High D's** — These two styles tend to struggle with maintaining emotional intelligence during difficult times/situations. The ideal developmental activity would be to identify someone for the mentoree to shadow who is going to lead a team through a difficult conversation about a failed project.

**Low D's, High S's or High C's** — These styles need time to think things through before making a decision or taking a risk. To help build confidence in decision-making and risk-taking, encourage your mentoree to journal about what holds them back from making a decision. At your next mentoring meeting, discuss the pros and cons of the decision and an action plan for moving forward.



### *Using DISC as a Guide for Mentoring Meetings*

**When meeting with a High D or High C:** Expect these meetings to be brief and to the point. Be sure to show up on time and be prepared to dive into business.

**When meeting with a High I:** Provide a friendly and fun environment. Give them plenty of time to talk. Remember they get pretty excited about things – lots of things – so you might need to ground them a little.

**When meeting with a High S:** Just like the High I's, they need a friendly environment. Don't rush headlong into business, give them a chance to break the ice and warm up to you. Always give them time to think things through. Be sure to send an agenda ahead of the meeting so they know what topics you would like to discuss.

**When meeting with a High C:** Be sure to show up on time and stick to business. Don't expect the meeting to run a full hour if they run out of things to discuss. Be careful of appearing too lighthearted, casual or showy and be sure to follow through on your promises. Just like the High S's, they will appreciate an agenda sent ahead of time.



# Mentoring with DISC Style

## Planning an Agenda



### PLANNING AN AGENDA



One of the most immediate ways to acknowledge your partner's different styles is to use the DISC model to design your next meeting agenda. Consider how your partner's preferences play into the way they receive information.

#### Here are some tips:

- High D's most easily absorb direct and to-the-point updates. Be sure to include a polished set of bullet points.
- High I's like to see creative presentations that include illustrations and opportunities for participation.
- High S's often struggle with asking for help and benefit from space within the meeting to process the information and share needs and requests.
- High C's prefer precise details and the context for each initiative.

#### Sample Agenda

To give you a better handle on how this might work, see the below sample agenda for a High S or High C meeting:

**Sample:** Mentoring Meeting Agenda

**Purpose:** Develop skills in conflict management and resolution.

#### Agenda Items

##### Topics for the mentoree:

- Share a supervisor-related problem.
- What are the obstacles to confronting the problem?

##### Questions for the mentor:

- How do you handle conflict?
- Have you ever had to confront your supervisor?
- What slows you down?
- What in my DISC holds me back from confronting someone?
- What tips do you have?

#### Insights Gained:

Next meeting schedule: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose of the meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

# Mentoring with DISC Style Conclusion

## CONCLUSION



We have now studied DISC through several different lenses:

- Head on with the communication preferences associated with the highs and lows of each style.
- From the perspective of someone who is stretched too far outside of their natural style.
- And within a partnership between two seemingly polar opposites.

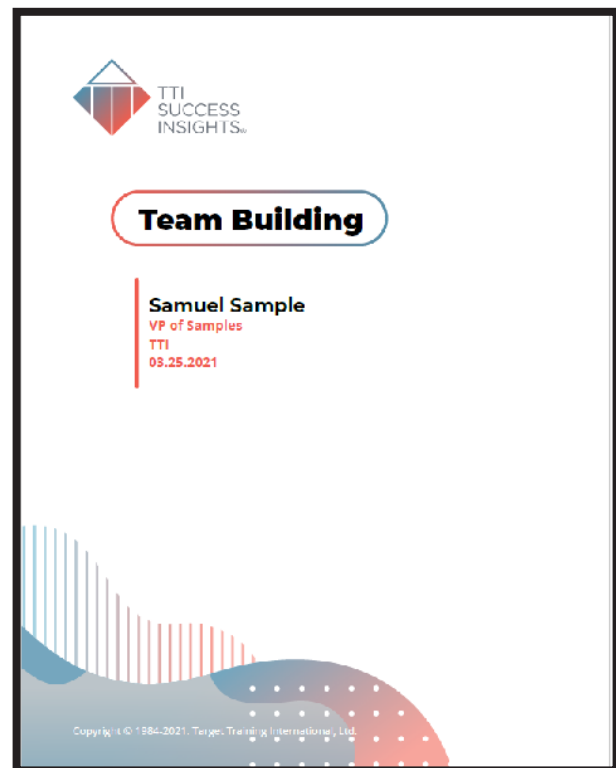
The hope is that you will be able to apply this information two-fold, both in recognizing your own strengths and behavioral tendencies and in relating to your mentoring partner.

Our DISC style speaks volumes about the situations under which we are most likely to succeed. But, of course, we often don't have complete control over our professional circumstances such as who we work for, what projects are assigned to us, and sometimes even our mentoring partnerships.

Understanding you and your partner's styles will help both of you identify opportunities where each of you can thrive and find the utmost satisfaction from your mentoring experience.

## Key Takeaways

- Respect and value the differences that each style brings to the table.
- Remember the lows are just as important as the highs.
- Adjust your communication style to put your partner at ease.
- Consider their style when determining developmental activities for your partner.
- Manage your meetings with DISC in mind.



## For more information:

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# Mentoring with DISC Style Notes

NOTES



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**NOTES**