

Check-up from the Neck up

How Team Personalities Can Affect Your Season

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Have you ever asked yourself any questions that sound like, “Why doesn’t Mary understand what I want her to do?”; or “Why does Sue always have to be talking when I’m trying to explain something?”; or “Why doesn’t my setter take control of the court like I asked her to do?” Eventually these questions become “rhetorical” and we don’t spend a great deal of time working on answers. Have you ever wondered why you think you are on planet Earth and a player or two or three are on planet Mars? Or have you resorted to yelling, frustration and the age-old remedy of running to get their attention? What’s the “effectivity factor” of those approaches? Did you have to start over at the next practice only to start saying to yourself, “This kid is not coachable”? So many questions!

As a former player who at times couldn’t always relate to his coach, and after stepping to the sidelines as a coach for 25 years, I have had players who just couldn’t or wouldn’t pay attention, listen, focus or do what I wanted them to do. I resigned myself to the fact that I lacked efficient communication skills. So, I started reading and learning how to be a better “communicator.” I worked on presentation skills, slower presentations, quicker presentations, presenting with more detailed discussions and explanations, working more demos, working less demos, etc. In instances where I spent more time trying to convey the message, I had other players looking at me and thinking, okay, I got it, let’s move on. What are we doing? Why aren’t we running the drill? Let’s just *do it!* In instances when I spent less time detailing the presentation, I had players who wanted to talk more about the drill but I also had players on that same team who wanted to execute the drill RIGHT



NOW. Then there were instances when I had a player or two who needed to analyze the drill and make sure they fully understood every detail before even attempting to execute. Obviously, we aren't faced with all these situations at the same time but over the course of a season, how often do we see situations like these arise? And what was the outcome? Did the outcome help or hinder team chemistry?

Right now you might be asking yourself, "Okay, so what is his point already?" Or you might have read the first two paragraphs twice to fully understand what I've said. As a coach have you been able to relate to anything I've said yet?

If you have, you will understand the frustration you feel when situations like this arise and you just can't seem to break through. You have players chomping at the bit to get started; others wanting more discussion; others having to think about what they are going to do before doing it; and still others not finished analyzing for completeness. Around this time of self-evaluation as a coach, I was sitting at a business convention listening to a presenter hopping around on stage telling stories about him and his daughters and their inability to truly understand each other and at times to really "get through." I was sitting there thinking to myself, "What's the problem? Just tell them what to do and stop being so nice – you are the adult in this situation!" Others were laughing so hard they were falling off their chairs. Others were quietly thinking there is some merit to what he's saying but I need more information. Others were thinking, "I'm not sure what he is saying is viable ... what's the source of his information? We need to be really careful implementing this – it may not be the best solution!"

The speaker's name was Dr. Robert Rohm and he was talking about personalities and how personalities affected our ability to understand and relate to each other. He was introducing the **DISC** personality concept further developed through Personality Insights. As I sat there, I thought back to my inability as a coach to reach certain players in any given situation. As I heard more and listened to Dr. Rohm, on numerous subsequent instances I made the connection. It wasn't that my

actual presentation was incomplete or inadequate or my demonstration of skill was inadequate. It was the fact that the player's reception and interpretation of the message was different depending, in the words of Dr. Rohm, "how she was wired."

We all know there are numerous personality "tests" out there and it's likely we have been through some of them, e.g. Meyers Briggs, Keirsey Temperament Sorter, etc. So what makes Dr. Rohm's approach any different, you ask? I found it was straightforward, simple to understand, easily transferred to younger and older players alike, fun for the players and coaches to work through together, AND effective in ultimately understanding the big **why** questions we coaches have about our players. I've found it's a very useful tool to add to our toolbox – if we are persistent with use. By answering a set of questions supplied by Personality Insights, each player and coach is provided a "picture" of their personality traits, strengths and weaknesses. The results are illustrated from the perspective of how **you** personally think you act and react and then how **others** would perceive your actions and reactions. When you sit with your players to discuss the results, you begin to realize why players do and think the way they do and how best to "get to them" for maximum results on the court. More importantly, **they** begin to realize why their teammates don't respond to their directions and why teammates get upset when expectations are not met. By seeing the diversity in individual personalities, they begin to understand how to build and nourish relationships within the team and in their personal lives with parents, siblings and peer groups.

So, now that we have the "why this" explanation out of the way, let's talk about the process developed by Dr. Rohm and the Personality Insights organization. We will not go into great detail here, but we will discuss the concept just long enough to encourage you to start thinking about what and why you do what you do and what and why you get reactions like you do.

The Personality Insights approach is termed **DISC**. You may have heard of it or been exposed to the concept. If you have and you are a high **D** personality, bear with me! (You will understand that comment in

a few paragraphs following!). Draw a circle and divide it into quarters and then label the quarters **D-I-S-C** and label each side shown in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1

The top half of the circle (**D** and **I** quadrants) is "Outgoing" and the bottom half of the circle (**C** and **S** quadrants) is "Reserved." The right side of the circle (**I** and **S** quadrants) is "People" oriented and the left side (**D** and **C** quadrants) is "Task" oriented. So, combining these you have Figure 2 which says the **D** quadrant is Outgoing-Task oriented; the **I** quadrant is Outgoing-People oriented; the **S** quadrant is Reserved-People oriented; and the **C** quadrant is Reserved-Task oriented.

Two very important things to remember: 1) We all have some combination of these traits. We are not solely a **D**, **I**, **S**, or **C** personality but a blend of types typically with a dominant type; and 2) **There is no personality that is better or worse than the other, just different.**



Figure 2

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To understand each personality type at the 30,000-foot level, I have listed some words that tend to be attributable to each. They could be termed defining traits or “wires” in each personality type.

D – Dominant, Direct, Demanding, Decisive, Determined, Doer

I – Inspiring, Influencing, Impressionable, Interactive, Impressive, Interested in people

S – Supportive, Stable, Steady, Sweet, Status Quo, Shy

C – Cautious, Calculating, Competent, Conscientious, Contemplative, Careful

Given the premise that we all are some blend of these four personality types, but that we tend to have a dominant personality wire, we can start to understand why some interactions go the way they do. Each year we have tryouts and we attempt to form a TEAM based on what we have seen on the court over the high school year and what we see in a two- to three-hour tryout. We rarely have insight into player personalities unless it manifests itself during a match we happen to see. And then rather than really understanding the player involved and why she reacts the way she does, we make

judgments which may impact our ultimate decisions (We may discover later that the attitude exhibited on the court is a manifestation of personality type interaction, but more on that later). Now we have a TEAM of 10 players and we go about the task of building a cohesive, well-oiled machine! However, as Dr. Rohm points out, those 10 players will have different personality blends each with strengths and weaknesses. Add the coaches in that mix who also have distinct personality types and you unknowingly have the potential for some controversy, hard feelings, discontent, communication issues, misunderstanding issues, etc. throughout the seven-month season.

If I give you a few examples, I’m sure you will sit and say, “I’ve been there!” Consider the following:

Example #1: I once had a setter who drove me crazy! As a coach with a dominant **D** personality, and some **I** traits intermixed, I tend to dominate conversations, direct traffic and expect assigned tasks to be executed – NOW and without a lot of discussion. I rarely stop to consider the gray

area between black and white. Not a bad set of traits for a head coach to have – right? However, on the not-so-good side of the ledger, when a high **D** is in a stressful situation we tend to be impatient, pushy, dictatorial, arrogant, ruthless and, to a point, offensive. After my team took the profile evaluation that year we started to look at the results. Unbeknownst to me before this exercise, my setter turned out to be an **I/S** blend personality. If you look at Figure 2, you will see both those personality types are “People” oriented. As a coach, I chose her essentially based on what I saw at tryouts: skill, hustle, etc. However, words that would describe this personality are personable, popular, tactful, fun, excitable, emotional, warm, easygoing and softhearted. When she is in a high-stress situation and out of control she can be described as unfocused, excitable, directionless, indecisive, resistant to change and resentful. So how do you think those traits would fit with the high **D** coach who, by Figure 2, is highly “Task” oriented and expects strong team leadership in all situations?

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If you take some time and compare personalities in this instance you have a coach who is demanding and task-oriented (me) with a setter who is looking to be everyone's friend and when under stress trends in an opposite direction you would hope a setter would respond. Without knowing the setter's personality trends, how do you think a conversation would go if the coach started demanding, dictating and expecting execution with a setter who was fun-loving, emotional and easygoing? Been there, done that! It didn't turn out so well! But, knowing more about the setter's personality early in the TEAM development, how might a conversation go in this instance? We could stress the importance of setting balls so the hitters get good swings and making them more successful? Or relay the concept that playing great setter defense will get her team player recognition and acceptance? Each of these tends to make someone feel good and think she is an important part of the team but without the dictator high **D** approach. She would likely play harder based on that conversation rather than the "do it or else" card a high **D** personality would have

available to play. A "do it or else" position could be interpreted as "he doesn't like me"; or "this isn't fun anymore"; or "I'm upset that the team doesn't like me." You certainly run the risk of her shutting down or, at a minimum, not playing up to expectations.

Example #2: In this example assume you have a high **D** personality setter, a high **D** coach, and a high **I** primary passer. Again refer to Figure 2. The coach and setter are both "Task" oriented with a results-focused execution mode. Both the coach and setter trend toward the dictatorial, demanding mode that directs the passer get the setter a ball to set. Couple that with a dominant **I**, people-oriented passer hearing both the demanding coach and setter and saying to herself, "They don't like me and this isn't fun." She becomes sullen and takes a step backward in execution. Emotions begin to rise. Just the opposite reaction the coach and setter wanted. Why? The setter and coach do not understand what motivates a high **I** personality. She wants to be liked by all, she's impressionable, she doesn't like looking bad, and she wants a lot of friends! In this situation, both the setter and coach are perceived not to

be her friend. Obviously, we know that is not the case, but for the time on the court and under that stressful condition the passer may not be focused on the task at hand. A better approach from the coach might be to tell the passer that unless she executes, our offense is ineffective and our TEAM performance will be impacted. This implies people will be disappointed in her performance. The passer will relate that to "everyone will like me if I do my job!" This will put everyone in a better position to have success.

Example #3: In this example assume you have a high **C** personality player who by definition is a perfectionist, thorough, orderly, cautious and questioning. Referring to Figure 2, she is a "Reserved-Task" oriented person. Looking at some defining "wires" for a high **C** personality above, she is a cautious, contemplative and careful person who does not like doing things quickly and without analysis. Now, put her in a new situation, e.g. in practice where you want quick learning and immediate results. What do you think her reaction would be? Her initial reaction might be one or more of the following: 1) I have to think this through;



or 2) May I ask one more question?; or 3) I need to work through this to make sure my footwork is exactly correct; or 4) Could we try that one more time? Put her with a high **D** coach who has limited patience for *more* questions, *more* explanation or *more* detail. He just wants her to execute the drill! How will this situation turn out? Take a guess!

In summary, a team's individual player personalities can make a coach's life enjoyable or very difficult. One player who exhibits traits that conflict with a coach's perspective can be seen as a player who is not a team player or is difficult to coach. Add two or three more to that mix and suddenly you have groups of players who are contrary. But are they really? Or are they just frustrated with the inability of a coach and player to effectively communicate and connect due to personality differences? On the other hand, a player(s) and a coach with similar personalities (e.g. all high **D**) really get along well because the coach directs and the players execute without further discussion. Suddenly other players think there is some favoritism in play because those players and the coach always agree on what, when and how to execute – and they are having FUN!

I have found understanding my players' personalities and talking through them together is a fun and rewarding exercise. To really be effective, both the coach and player constantly need to be mindful of the perspective each personality is based upon. Assuming a high **I** will relate to a high **D** just because you had a meeting, answered some personality questions and reviewed them once doesn't suffice. Or worse, as a high **D** coach expecting everyone to do exactly what you want, when you want and as quickly as you want just because you are the coach and you have talked once about personalities in a team meeting does not suffice either. The results don't always turn out the way you expect. Continued real work is required from each personality to understand why certain messages are transmitted the way they are and why those same messages are received they way they are. If we can make continuous adjustments throughout the season both on the transmittal and the receiving end of the conversation, players tend to have more fun, and understand more because they think, "Wow, he/she really understands me and we really communicate well."

This process does take time and effort. But, if you measure the season-long "frustration factor" against the time and effort invested to understand, you might come away with a different perspective. Dr. Rohm and his organization have developed a concept that we can leverage and improve our communication and connection. If we are truly interested in team cohesiveness and long-term relationship building/enhancement, we will agree to invest time and effort into a concept that provides a better environment for everyone. I encourage coaches to consider what their desired communication would look and sound like; how we deliver that communication; and finally how that communication is received by each player or group of players. If we approach the task as a time **investment**, we will come away with positive results. Using the **DISC** concept we have the opportunity to better understand our players and open that communication channel to help ourselves and help others as well. Oh, and by the way, it's a blast! ☺

To learn more about DISC and Personality Insights go to www.personality-insights.com.