

Below the Surface

By Markku Kauppinen

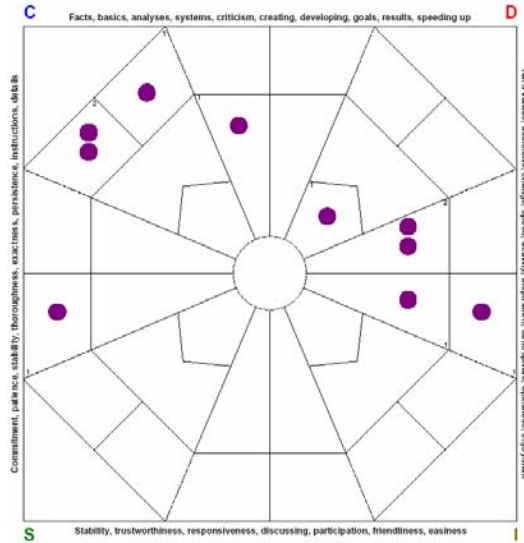
I spend a significant amount of my time on the phone speaking with customers about their specific applications of the Extended DISC assessments. Some of these conversations are about the individual assessment reports. Typically, these discussions are with fairly new customers of the tools and they center around specific questions about interpretations and the practical applications of the results.

However, the vast majority of these conversations are about team or organizational applications of Extended DISC. I enjoy these exchanges immensely because they are always interesting and I usually learn something new. It is also very gratifying to discover how our customers come up with new ways of utilizing the information to improve the performance of their employees, teams and organizations.

Recently, I have worked with several customers who were utilizing the Extended DISC Personal Analysis and Team Analysis in very similar situations. They were helping teams that were successful, yet unable to change their level of performance. They needed to move forward but could not.

One such team was the executive team of a large financial services organization. The CEO was “almost happy” with the performance of his team, but they were not where he wanted them to be in terms of its performance.

The team was made up of the CEO and nine of his direct reports. On the surface, the team’s behavioral style make-up seemed to match well with its goals. The team was comprised of task-oriented individuals who were focused on moving at a fairly fast pace, while maintaining high quality standards.



D	30%	3
I	20%	2
S	10%	1
C	40%	4
Total	100%	10

However, below the surface a different story began to emerge. It was a story that explained why the team was stuck.

When we looked at the individual results of the executives, it revealed that 50% of the team members expressed deeper level emotions that were getting in the way of their performance.

More specifically, four of the team members expressed that they were quite unclear about their own role and felt an uncomfortable level of uncertainty. This was most likely caused by:

- A gap between the goal(s) and the executives’ understanding of how to achieve them.
- Frequent changes, or perceived changes, in CEO’s vision.
- Lack of understanding what the CEO’s vision actually was.

Additionally, three of the nine executives wanted to have clearer instructions, but were not getting

them. This too caused increased uncertainty and anxiety.

The executives who did not express feelings that their performance was being hindered were all very similar in behavioral style to the CEO. As is very often the case, we get along and communicate comfortably and effectively with people who are like us. We seem to speak the same language we understand well. This was happening with this team as well.

So what caused these problems? The short answer: the way the CEO was communicating with his direct reports. He was not doing anything inherently wrong – he was simply communicating in a way that was very natural to him. His approach worked well with his direct reports whose communication style was similar to his, but it caused feelings of uncertainty for the rest of his team. For half of the team, his way of communication came across as inconsistent and lacking clear direction and instructions. While he had a clear vision for his company and his team, it was not being clearly understood by many of his key executives. This hindered communication of the vision throughout the organization and, more importantly, impeded its execution. The cascading impact was significant.

The differences in communication styles and the detrimental effects they can have on employee and organizational performance is nothing new. However, being able to detect when they actually occur with validated tools is something that rarely happens.

Are you equipped to look below the surface to find out the causes, not just the symptoms?

Markku Kauppinen is the President of Extended DISC N.A., Inc. He helps executives to make better decisions about their employees, teams and organization. Markku may be reached at m.kauppinen@extendeddisc.com

Avoiding the Superstition Trap

By Marshall Goldsmith

Walking under a ladder. Breaking a mirror. A black cat darting across our path. Whoa! Most of us scorn superstitions as silly beliefs of the primitive and uneducated. Deep down inside, we assure ourselves that we're above these antiquated notions.

Not so fast. To a degree, we're all superstitious. In many cases, the higher we climb the organizational totem pole, the more superstitious we become.

Psychologically speaking, superstitious behavior comes from the belief that nonfunctional activity followed by positive reinforcement is actually the cause of that positive reinforcement. Years ago, psychologist B.F. Skinner showed how hungry pigeons may repeat nonfunctional behavior when their twitches and scratches are reinforced by small pellets of grain. From my experience, hungry corporate leaders may also repeat nonfunctional behavior when large pellets of money and recognition follow.

Superstition is merely the confusion of correlation and causality. Any human (in fact, any animal) tends to repeat behavior that is followed by positive reinforcement. The more we achieve, the more reinforcement we get. One of the greatest mistakes of successful leaders is the assumption, "I behave this way, and I achieve results. Therefore, I must achieve results because I behave this way."

Almost everyone I meet is successful because of doing a lot right, and almost everyone I meet is successful in spite of some behavior that doesn't make any sense. One of my greatest challenges is helping leaders avoid the "superstition trap." This occurs when we confuse "because of" and "in spite of" behaviors.

Consider Harry. He was a brilliant, dedicated executive who consistently made his numbers. He wasn't just smart. His creative ideas led to groundbreaking new processes and procedures. Everyone agreed that he had been instrumental in helping turn around his organization. He sincerely cared about the company, employees, customers, and shareholders. On top of all that, Harry had a great wife. His two kids were enrolled in top colleges. He lived in a beautiful home in a great neighborhood. Overall, life was very good for Harry.

Except for one thing. Harry was a remarkably poor listener. Even though his direct reports and coworkers respected him, they felt that he didn't listen to them. They were somewhat intimidated by his genius and creativity. At times, they felt that if Harry had made up his mind, it was useless to express another opinion. His wife and kids loved him, but they also felt that he didn't hear a word they said. If his dog could speak, it would have said the same thing.

I suggested to Harry that he was probably successful because of his talent, hard work, and some good luck. I also said that he was probably successful in spite of being an appallingly bad listener.

Harry acknowledged that other people thought he should become a better listener, but he wasn't sure that he should change. He had convinced himself that his poor listening actually helped him succeed. Like many high achievers, he wanted to defend his superstitious beliefs. He pointed out that some people present awful ideas and that he shouldn't just pretend to listen to those stupid suggestions to make them happy. He proudly asserted that he didn't suffer fools gladly.

When I asked whether he really believed that his coworkers and family members were fools, he grimaced and shamefacedly conceded that his comment was stupid. These were people he respected. Upon further reflection, he concluded that perhaps he sometimes acted like a fool.

Harry then went into defensive reaction number two: fear of overcorrection. He expressed concern that he might start listening too much and that the company might not benefit from his creative ideas. Perhaps he would become too unwilling to share his opinions. I pointed out that the danger that a 55-year-old man who had been seen as a bad listener for his entire life would overcorrect and become excessively interested in others' opinions was extremely remote. I assured him that he could remove this concern from his things-to-worry-about list. Ultimately, he decided it was more productive to hear people out than waste time justifying his own dysfunctional behavior.

Think about yourself. What are you doing because it helps you achieve results? What are you doing because of some irrational superstitious belief that may have been affecting your life for years?

What's on your because-of list? I have never met anyone who was so perfect that there was nothing on her in-spite-of list. What's on yours?

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, *The Leader of the Future* and *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.