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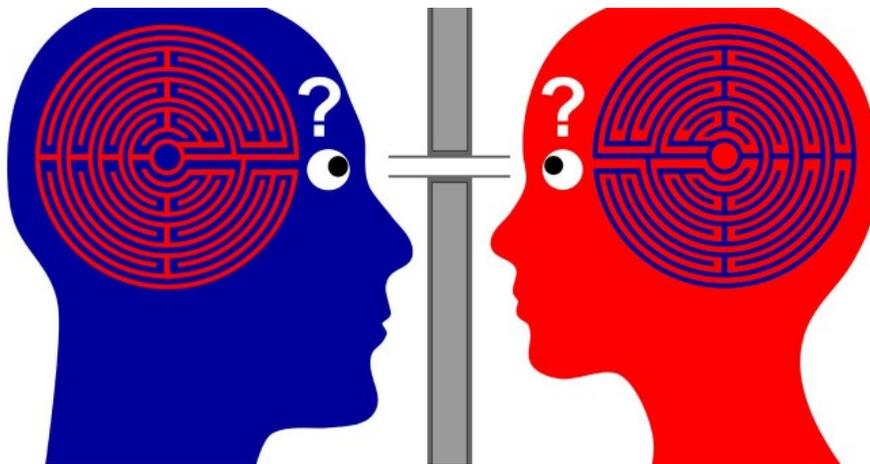
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Style Matters: How Cognitive Diversity Affects Your Work

BY ANNE COLLIER ON AUGUST 15, 2014

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By Anne Collier

Has this ever happened to you? You work with a client and it feels like you're from a different planet...or perhaps it's your colleague who is from Neptune. Here's what happens: you raise concerns, you provide options, you are ready to engage in a productive dialogue to identify the best strategy, and your colleague (or client) dismisses your ideas as if you are from another reality – Neptune, that is. You've just experienced *cognitive diversity*. It's not just that you have a different perspective, you and this other person truly do think differently. Let's consider the following example of cognitive diversity, its impact on work relationships, and what can be done to ensure such diversity doesn't derail success.

Greta is the general counsel of a computer software firm that is seeking to acquire a start up to get its hands on proprietary software and eliminate its future competition. Greta hires Medium Law to make it all happen. Oscar and Madison head the legal team. Overall, Greta is satisfied with the firm's work. There's just one thing: Madison drives her nuts with crazy ideas that seem to have no grounding in reality or hope of succeeding. To make matters worse, she worries that Madison is sloppy or ignores the practicalities and details. Greta complains,

"What kind of lawyer is she!? How can she expect a deal to work if she doesn't spend the time figuring everything out?"

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Greta's CEO Penelope is another story. Penelope can't stand lawyers — even her own general counsel at times. She doesn't understand how they get anything done with all of their non-linear thinking. Penelope thinks it is ironic that lawyers go to school to learn the law, yet seem to disregard it at every turn.

You don't want anyone to think you're like Madison – hard to work with because you seem to operate outside the norms of structure and rules. Nor do you want anyone to think you're like Penelope – hard to work with because you nitpick. Worse, you don't want anyone to think you are lazy, limited, or incompetent because of your problem-solving style. That said, whether you are more like Madison or Penelope, not only can you manage perceptions, but you also can work more effectively with clients and colleagues by adjusting your style to match theirs.

Let's explore cognitive diversity through the lens of Adaption-Innovation Theory (A-I Theory) and the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI).

The Benefit and Challenge of Cognitive Diversity

Successful collaborations require individuals to effectively manage and leverage differences in problem-solving style, i.e., cognitive diversity. The challenge is that while cognitive diversity generally means greater ability to solve a wider range of problems, it also can distract from the work. Increasing awareness and understanding of differences and their implications for collaboration is a necessary step for both leveraging and reducing the friction often resulting from different styles.

Because we work together to solve problems in our personal and business lives, understanding diversity makes for better personal relationships, work, and working relationships. Accordingly, if Greta, Penelope, Oscar, and Madison understand each other's problem-solving styles, not only can they adjust their styles to interact more effectively, but they will likely grow to recognize such differences as advantageous and value each other.

Even if you don't have the luxury of knowing other's problem-solving style via an assessment such as KAI, once you understand the basic principles of the A-I Theory, you'll be able to make educated guesses that will lead to more effective and successful interactions. Let's explore A-I Theory and the KAI's theoretical underpinnings.

The Paradox of Structure

At the core of problem solving is creativity, and all people are creative. All people use their creativity to solve problems that arise from an ever-changing environment. All people, however, do not similarly deal with a critical facet of problem solving: the paradox of structure. The paradox of structure is the seemingly incongruous fact that structure both enables and limits one's ability to solve a problem. The structure, whether in the form of rules, norms, or the "way its always been done," enables problem solving by providing the mechanism or rules to solve a problem. The structure, however, also limits options to solve a problem by eliminating options, or delineating strategies as not viable because they are outside the paradigm or break the rules.

People have a fixed preference for dealing with the paradox of structure. Some – like Penelope – more easily tolerate the structure's limitations because it provides a ready and workable solution. This is called Adaption.

Others, like Madison, prefer to ignore or fail to notice structure when problem solving. The latter group is generally more focused on flexibility and efficiency and is less attached to the system currently in place. This is called Innovation – Madison barely notices rules, if at all, and this style of problem-solving annoys those, like Penelope, who view the rules as an essential problem-solving tool.

The Elements of Problems-Solving Style: Adaption and Innovation Defined



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The table below briefly summarizes the more Adaptive and more Innovative styles:

SUMMARY PROBLEM-SOLVING STYLES	
More Adaptive Style	More Innovative Style
Prefer more structure	Prefer less structure
Sensitive to norms/people's expectations	Prepared to ruffle groups
Target ideas	Proliferate ideas
Master details	Less constrained by how it's been done
Consistent	Challenge assumptions
More prudent risk takers	More daring risk takers

The KAI is composed of three subscales: sufficiency of originality, efficiency, and rule and group conformity. Sufficiency of originality describes idea-generation style. Efficiency describes methodology of problem solving. Rule and group conformity describes the management of structure in terms of both impersonal structures, such as rules, and personal structures, such as collaboration norms. Summary tables below give an overview of each component in the context of more Adaptive and more Innovative styles.

Idea Generation Style (Sufficiency of Originality)

The more Adaptive are likely to	The more Innovative are likely to
Produce fewer ideas	Produce many ideas
Ideas are manageable, concrete	Some seen as exciting
Relevant, sound, safe and for immediate use	'Blue sky' or 'New dawn'
Expect high success rate	Tolerate high failure rate

Methodology Style (Efficiency)

The more Adaptive are likely to	The more Innovative are likely to
Be precise, reliable, methodical, thorough	Think tangentially
Pay attention to detail	Approach tasks from unsuspected angles
Welcome change as an improver	Welcome change as a mold breaker
Seek solutions to problems in tried and tested ways	Manipulate the problem, questioning its basic assumptions

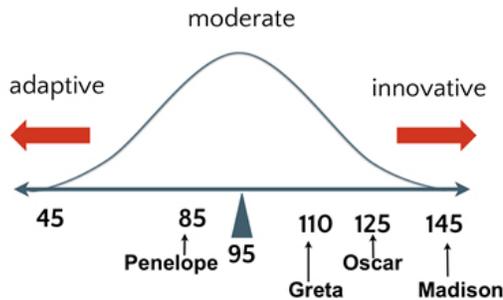
Management of Structure Style (Rule and Group Conformity)

The more Adaptive are likely to	The more Innovative are likely to
Be prudent with authority	Be radical
Solve problems by use of rules	Alter rules to solve problems
Challenge rules rarely and usually when supported by consensus	Challenge rules, customs and consensual views

How Can You Quantify Problem-Solving Style?

The KAI measures a person's preferred way of managing the paradox of structure and does so by putting creativity and problem-solving style on a continuum from more Adaptive to more Innovative, as shown below. This valuable aspect of the KAI quantifies gaps in cognitive diversity, providing a framework for understanding the corresponding implications and developing strategies for increasing success. Gaps can occur between two people, a person and a task, a person and a team, and between teams.

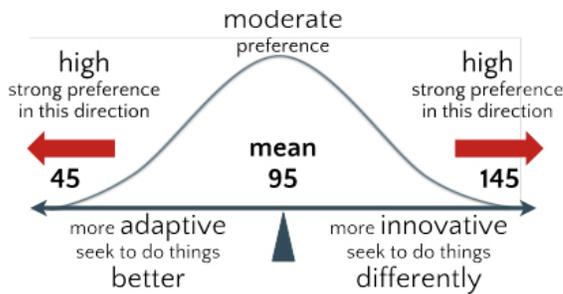
The Adaption-Innovation Continuum



Scores are normally distributed between 45 to 145, with a mean of approximately 95 and a standard deviation of approximately 18 points. One's numeric score describes style, not level. Thus, a score of 130 is not better than a score of 60. Rather, the number merely identifies whether one is more Adaptive or more Innovative. In considering scores, remember that the scores are relative and not absolute (unless the person is at an end of the continuum). Thus, a person with a score of 80 is more innovative than a colleague with a score of 65 even though 80 is more Adaptive than the mean of 95.

Most people are in the midzone, with a style of 77 to 113, as reflected by the normal distribution above. They may use rules to solve certain problems and not others. Their solutions may ignore or, at times, change the rules to solve a particular problem. They may be more comfortable with less detail. That said, people are able to solve many types of problems and will use a nonpreferred style as appropriate.

In the example above, the problem-solving styles ranging from 85 to 145, as shown below:



Greta (110) is in midzone. Oscar (125) is more innovative than Greta and Penelope (85), but more adaptive than Madison (145). Greta is more innovative than Penelope and more adaptive than Oscar and Madison.

People who are close to each other on the continuum (i.e., within 10 points) will have a very similar problem-solving style and will tend to work well together. Oscar and Greta are only 15 points from each other so there are differences, but they are relatively easy to navigate, especially since they respect each other.



People who are more than 20 points from each other on the continuum will approach problem solving differently and

likely will experience challenges.

People with scores 40 points or more apart will approach problem solving in wildly different fashions and likely experience difficulty collaborating unless they devise strategies for dealing with the gap. The 35-point difference between Greta and Madison represents the real challenges they experience in working together.

Madison and Penelope are 60 points apart and they have the most difficulty working and communicating with each other. From Penelope's perspective, Madison really is from another planet and vice versa.

Valuing Differences in Style

The challenge for this and any diverse group is not mistaking differences in style for level of creativity or problem solving. Remember:

Style is *how* a person solves problems.
Level is *how well* a person solves problems.

Distinguishing style from level is critical because failure to do so can result in undervaluing others and their potential for solving the problem at hand. People often mistake differences in style for incompetence, i.e., that others are low level. Such mistake sounds something like:

"Penelope is in such a rut. In fact, I don't think she's ever even looked outside the box much less had an original idea."

or

"Madison is so impractical. I wish she'd stop wasting our time with her ridiculous ideas. We have work to do!"

Whether one is more likely to dismiss Penelope, who is more Adaptive, or Madison, who is more Innovative, depends on one's own style and on the failure to distinguish problem-solving style from lack of ability. Both Penelope and Madison are smart, capable, and creative. They think differently and bring different insights and approaches to a problem. Recognizing the differences as cognitive diversity is critical to transforming annoyance and contempt for one another into appreciation and the power to truly leverage another's style to effectively resolve a broader range of problems.

Bridging and Coping

There are two ways to overcome the challenges presented by cognitive diversity: bridging and coping. Each is a strategy for overcoming the gap in problem-solving style so that people are able to work more effectively together. Bridging and coping are most necessary when KAI scores have a difference greater than 30 points.

Bridging refers to a person with an in-between score facilitating effective collaboration of others. When two people working together have KAI scores with a difference of greater than 20 points, a bridger is particularly useful. The goal is to translate between styles so that the team can accomplish its goals, leveraging each member's style.

Individuals often "cope," which means using a nonpreferred style to effectively deal with a gap between preferred style and another person's style, task, or group. While it is stressful to cope consistently over a long period of time, it is an extremely valuable strategy. We often cope instinctively to be effective in the face of problems that aren't the type we like to solve.

Back to the example; remember Penelope's disdain for lawyers? After years of working together, Greta has figured out how to work with Penelope so that neither of them is frustrated. Greta's coping strategy is to sort through all the details, making sure she can explain the idea and its implementation step-by-step. Over time, Penelope seems to have warmed up to her and respects her counsel.

For Penelope, Oscar and Madison are another matter. And Greta knows that leaving the three of them alone would be disastrous and counterproductive and she'd get blamed for hiring Medium Law. Penelope thinks that Oscar and Madison are the worst kind of lawyers; slick hucksters that have a lot of ideas without a lick of business judgment. While Penelope admits that they always come through for her, she doesn't like the process.

Greta's strategy? She acts as a bridge between the lawyers and Penelope, as Penelope's need for a structured approach is far greater than the lawyers' naturally deliver. Greta pushes Oscar, who seems to understand, and Madison to flesh out strategies along with pros and cons before talking to Penelope. Then, before they meet, Greta grills them with all the questions she thinks Penelope will ask. During the meeting with Penelope, Greta will jump in when necessary to translate between Penelope and the lawyers. In this way, she both helps the lawyers cope with Penelope and she *bridges* the gap so that they can have meaningful discussions.

Oscar senses the problem and wants to be sure that Medium Law doesn't lose the client or that Greta and Penelope push Madison off the team. He values Madison's insight and tangential way of thinking. Oscar pulls Madison aside and explains how she is perceived. Greta and Penelope, he says, want strategies to be more structured, detailed, and fully thought through. He further explains that they often mistake Madison's out-of-the-box emergent thinking style for sloppiness.

Oscar helps close the gap between the client and Madison by helping the latter make her ideas more concrete with detailed and sequential explanations so that Greta and Penelope can see the possibility for success without being distracted and concerned by the lack of detail. And Madison learns that when she introduces truly new thinking – something that she now sees can overwhelm others – she acknowledges that the ideas need to be fully vetted before being seriously considered. Oscar agrees to give Madison "the look" in meetings when she needs to be more concrete.

Conclusion

Cognitive diversity is everywhere. While it's often mistaken for lack of ability, without the push and pull of cognitive diversity, teams can suffer from a lack of robust discussion about issues and consequently deliver mediocre results. When someone thinks differently or raises concerns you hadn't considered, don't dismiss them. Instead, pause and ask follow-up questions. This person is likely doing you a favor by pointing out issues in your blind spot – you know, the issues you tend to overlook. Isn't this better to spend a little time gaining understanding than run the risk of making a terrible mistake?

We recommend that everyone invest time in understanding his or her own style. Such understanding yields great insight into one's own personal effectiveness as well as how to more effectively collaborate with others, leveraging one's own and others' style for the best results. Appreciating and valuing the differences is vital to leading, collaborating, and personal effectiveness.

About the Author



Anne Collier (@annecollier) is a lawyer, professional certified coach, and the founder of **Arudia**, an executive coaching and training firm.

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