

HARNESSING DIFFERENT THINKING STYLES

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Have you ever labelled someone as “resistant to change”? I had the opportunity to study under Dr Michael Kirton who spent 30 years studying change and innovation. He focused on understanding our “style” of innovative thinking and problem solving.

When Michael Kirton looked at large organisations and their decisions, he found a parallel between the *style* of the change and the *style* of the people who made the decisions. When he tested his observation, he found that the “change” people accepted reflected their style of thinking – not what the company actually may have needed.

Michael Kirton found that everyone accepts change. If someone resists your change, they are not change-resistant. They just don’t like your proposed change. They likely viewed the problem as you did but created a different solution, as their style of problem-solving is different. Although this is a brief explanation of Kirton’s work, it offers a useful insight as it explains why so much change fails. There are gigantic implications for managers and decision makers that this article will focus on.

Michael Kirton created a tool to help people understand their style of problem solving. You can use these insights to gain a better understanding of your style and those of others you work with. To start, he put a label on the two different styles of problem solving and created a scale between these two extremes. Is one better than the other? No! Each has a unique skill to solve a certain type of problem. The secret is to recognise which style best solves the problem. The reality is that most people fall in the middle. They are called “bridgers” in the context of being able to understand and appreciate both styles of problem solving.

What’s your style?

Here are some words that describe each style. Clearly no one is at either extreme but most people favour one style over the other. Which are you closer to?

1. Adaptive thinkers

Do you make lots of checklists and enjoy crossing off each item when complete? If so, you show signs of being an adaptor. Adaptors are seen as precise, reliable and efficient. Also, they are seen as methodical, prudent and disciplined. As such, they seek solutions to problems in tried and understood ways. Adaptors tend to:

- focus on doing things better
- concern themselves with resolving problems rather than finding them
- reduce problems by improvement and greater efficiency.

Adaptors are often seen as sound, conforming, safe and dependable. Adaptors prefer working “within the rules” or in situations where the structure is known. Thomas Edison was thought to be an adaptor. He often said that he only worked with ideas that already existed.

2. Innovative thinkers

Those who are more like “innovators” tend to do things differently rather than better. Often details are less important than the “big picture”. They often approach tasks from unsuspected angles, and are often seen as being undisciplined and unpredictable. Innovators are described in terms like:

- they often challenge the rules or they may not respect past tradition
- they challenge a problem’s underlying assumptions
- they can be catalysts for change in a group but may be abrasive and create dissonance
- their solutions can be seen as unsound and impractical
- they appear to have low self-doubt when generating ideas, not needing consensus to maintain conviction when opposed.

Innovators are very good at taking control in unstructured situations. Often they foresee a crisis because their eye is on the horizon. But they can get bored when too much structure is involved. They are capable of detailed routine work in short bursts.

Implications for working together

When collaborating with innovators, adaptors supply stability, order and continuity to the partnership. Team unity is important. They are sensitive to people, and maintain group cohesion and cooperation. They can provide a safe base for the innovator’s riskier options.

When collaborating with adaptors, innovators can break with the past and accepted theory but they can appear insensitive to people when in pursuit of solutions. They see the goal as finding the great idea, not developing teamwork or consensus.

You can avoid the issue of managing different styles of problem solvers: hire people who think just like you! You would get along. You would work well together. They will accept your changes. The threat is that your capacity to innovate becomes too narrow for the challenges you face.

Do people at the extremes get valued for their alternative view or supported for their unique insights? Probably not. We tend to kill off our unique thinkers by making it very frustrating to exist in a business that does not support a diversity of thinking styles.

Michael Kirton asks, “If we have two companies – one full of high adaptors and one full of high innovators – which would go bankrupt first?” He says, “innovators” as they can’t stay focused on the core of the business. Eventually the adaptors would also go bankrupt as their company would fail to anticipate the future.

To be successful, a business needs a range of problem solvers. But managers must learn to manage people who do not think, “Just like me”.

For more information on the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory, see www.kaicentre.com

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