

# **Learning Styles Explanations**

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## Description of Learning Styles

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### Activists

Activists involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences. They enjoy the here and now and are happy to be dominated by immediate experiences. They *are* open-minded, not sceptical, and this tends to make them enthusiastic about anything new. Their philosophy is: 'I'll try anything once'. They tend to act first and consider the consequences afterwards. Their days are filled with activity. They tackle problems by brainstorming. As soon as the excitement from one activity has died down they are busy looking for the next. They tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences but are bored with implementation and longer term consolidation. They are gregarious people constantly involving themselves with others but, in doing so, they seek to centre all activities around themselves.

#### Activists learn best from activities where:

- There are new or novel experiences, exercises and problems from which to learn.
- They can involve themselves in short 'here and now' activities such as business games, competitive teamwork tasks, role-playing exercises and, where it is appropriate, to have a go.
- There is excitement and drama, things are in rapid flux and chop and change with a range of varied activities to cope with.
- They are thrown in at the deep end to tackle a difficult task.
- They are involved with other people in showing problems as a part of a team and by bouncing ideas off them.

#### Activists learn least from and may react against, activities where:

- They are in a passive role i.e. reading, watching, listening to lectures.
- They are required to observe and not get involved.
- They are required to assimilate, analyse and interpret 'messy' data.
- They are given theoretical explanations.
- They must practise an activity over and over again.
- They have precise instructions to follow with little room to manoeuvre.

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## **Description of Learning Styles - continued**

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### **Reflectors**

Reflectors like to stand back to ponder experiences and observe them from many different perspectives. They collect data, both first hand and from others, and prefer to think about it thoroughly before coming to any conclusion. The thorough collection and analysis of data about experiences and events is what counts so they tend to postpone reaching definitive conclusions for as long as possible. Their philosophy is to be cautious. They are thoughtful people who like to consider all possible angles and implications before making a move. They prefer to take a back seat in meetings and discussions. They enjoy observing other people in action. They listen to others and get the drift of the discussion before making their own points. They tend to adopt a low profile and have a slightly distant, tolerant, unruffled air about them. When they act it is part of a wide picture which includes the past as well as the present and others' observations as well as their own.

#### **Reflectors learn best from activities where:**

- They are allowed to watch and/or think over activities.
- They are able to stand back from things and listen or observe; e.g. observing a group at work, watching a video, etc.
- They are allowed to think before acting, 'look before they leap'; e.g. given adequate time to prepare.
- They have the opportunity to review what has happened and what they have learned.
- They can exchange ideas, views, etc., with other people in a risk-free atmosphere.

#### **Reflectors learn least from, and may react, against activities where:**

- They are 'forced' into the limelight, i.e. role play in front of onlookers.
- They are 'thrown' into situations without warning and which require action without preparation.
- They are given cut and dried instructions of how things should be done.
- They are moved on rapidly from one activity to another and are worried about time pressures.
- They are required to make short cuts or do a superficial job in the interests of expediency.

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## Description of Learning Styles - continued

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### Theorists

Theorists adapt and integrate observations into complex but logically sound theories. They think problems through in a vertical, step-by-step logical way. They assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories. They tend to be perfectionists who won't rest easy until things are tidy and fit into a rational scheme. They like to analyse and synthesise. They are keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories, models and systems thinking. Their philosophy prizes rationality and logic. 'If it's logical it's good'. Questions they frequently ask are: 'Does it make sense?' 'How does this fit with that?' 'What are the basic assumptions?' They tend to be detached, analytical and dedicated to rational objectivity rather than anything subjective or ambiguous. Their approach to problems is consistently logical. This is their 'mental set' and they rigidly reject anything that doesn't fit with it. They prefer to maximise certainty and feel uncomfortable with subjective judgements, lateral thinking and anything flippant.

#### **Theorists learn best from activities where;**

- What they are being offered is part of a system, model or theory.
- They are intellectually stretched, i.e. being tested in a tutorial session and have an opportunity to question and probe basic methodology, assumptions or logic.
- They are in structured situations with a clear purpose.
- They are offered interesting ideas and concepts even though these are not immediately relevant.
- They are required to understand and participate in complex situations.

#### **Theorists learn least from, and may react against, activities where:**

- They are pitchforked into an activity having no apparent purpose.
- They have to participate in situations emphasising emotions and feelings.
- They are involved in unstructured activities in which ambiguity and uncertainty is high.
- They are asked to act or decide without a basis in policy or principle.
- They find the subject matter platitudinous, shallow or superficial.

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## **Description of Learning Styles - continued**

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### **Pragmatists**

Pragmatists are keen on trying out ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice. They positively search out new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications. They are the sort of people who return from management courses brimming with new ideas that they want to try out in practice. They like to get on with things and act quickly and confidently on ideas that attract them. They tend to be impatient with ruminating and open-ended discussions. They are essentially practical, down to earth people who like making practical decisions and solving problems. They respond to problems and opportunities 'as a challenge'. Their philosophy is: 'There is always a better way' and 'If it works it's good'.

#### **Pragmatists learn best from activities where:**

- They can see an obvious link between the subject matter and the job.
- They are introduced to ideas or techniques for doing things that have obvious practical advantages and have high face validity.
- They have a chance to try out and practise techniques with coaching or feedback from a credible expert.
- They are given opportunities to implement what they have learnt.
- They can concentrate on practical issues, i.e. drawing up action plans with an obvious end product.

#### **Pragmatists learn least from, and may react against, activities where;**

- The timing content is not perceived to be related to an immediate need they recognise or have practical relevance and benefit.
- There is no practice or clear guidelines on how to do it.
- Trainees or the content itself seem divorced from reality, i.e. in an ivory tower.
- They feel that people are going around in circles and not getting anywhere fast enough.
- There is no apparent reward to be gained from the training permitted or there are political, managerial or personal obstacles to implementation.

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## Description of Learning Styles - continued

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### Self Development

There is an increasing interest in self-development activities - it has been described as the 'essential training method in a time of limited resources'. So, for those who are going to do something about their own development themselves, these notes may be valuable.

Once the you have established your own preferred style by using the LSQ (Learning Styles Questionnaire) and are happy with its validity it would be sensible to examine how to use it as a basis for deciding which learning opportunities are most likely to suit your style.

No single learning style has any overwhelming advantage over another. They all have their own strengths and development opportunities (weaknesses). It is important to be cautious about labelling strengths and weaknesses since, to some extent, both depend on the context in which they are viewed.

In summary, the relative strengths and development opportunities of each style can be expressed as follows:

#### ACTIVISTS

##### Strengths:

- Flexible and open minded
- Happy to have a go
- Happy to be exposed to new situations
- Optimistic about anything new and therefore unlikely to resist change

##### Development Opportunities:

- Tendency to take the immediately obvious action without thinking
- Often take unnecessary risks
- Tendency to do too much themselves and hog the limelight
- Rush into action without sufficient preparation
- Get bored with implementation/consolidation

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## Description of Learning Styles - continued

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### REFLECTOR

**Strengths:**

- Careful
- Thorough and Methodical
- Thoughtful
- Good at listening to others and assimilating information
- Rarely jump at conclusions

**Development Opportunities:**

- Tendency to hold back from direct participation
- Slow to make up their minds and reach a decision
- Tendency to be too cautious and not take enough risks
- Not generally assertive - they are not particularly forthcoming and have no 'small talk'

### THEORIST

**Strengths:**

Logical, 'vertical' thinkers  
Rational and objective  
Good at asking probing questions  
Disciplined approach

**Development Opportunities:**

- Restricted in lateral thinking
- Low tolerance for uncertainty, disorder and ambiguity
- Intolerant of anything subjective or intuitive
- Full of 'shoulds', 'oughts', and 'musts'

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## Description of Learning Styles - continued

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### PRAGMATIST

#### Strengths:

- Keen to test things out in practice
- Practical, down-to-earth, realistic
- Business like, gets straight to the point
- Technique oriented

#### Development Opportunities:

- Tendency to reject anything without an obvious application
- Not very interested in theory or basic principles
- Tendency to seize on the first expedient solution to a problem
- Impatient with waffle
- On balance, task oriented, not people oriented

It helps to be clear about the relative strengths and weaknesses of each style because selecting appropriate learning opportunities essentially involves finding activities where strengths will be utilised and where weaknesses will not prove too much of a handicap. The activity lists given elsewhere are an invaluable aid for checking the compatibility of a learning activity with the strengths and weaknesses of each style. In the light of your LSQ results you might like to reduce these lists to a few key questions that you can use to assess the appropriateness or otherwise of any learning opportunity that comes your way. Four or five key questions would probably suffice and here are some that are suggested could reveal relevant information depending on your style preference.

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## Summary

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To summarise: in order to use the LSQ to select learning activities that are likely to prove compatible with your style, the following is suggested:

1. In the light of your LSQ result, list your relative strengths and development opportunities using the lists
2. Study the activity lists to see which activities are compatible and incompatible with your style(s)
3. Thereafter, whenever possible, before indulging in a learning activity, get answers to the appropriate key questions.
4. Go ahead with the activity if you are satisfied it dovetails sufficiently with your style.

The section that follows deals with opportunities to develop those styles in which you are less strong.

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## **Self-Development Activities to Strengthen the Activist Style**

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Do something new, i.e. something that you have never done before, at least once each week. Visit a part of your organisation you have neglected, go jogging at lunch time, wear something outrageous to work one day, read an unfamiliar newspaper with views that are diametrically opposed to yours, change the layout of the furniture in your office etc.

Practise initiating conversations (especially 'small talk') with strangers. Select people at random from your internal telephone directory and go and talk to them. At large gatherings, conferences, or parties, force yourself to initiate and sustain conversations with EVERYONE present. In your spare time go door-to-door canvassing for a cause of your choice.

Practise drawing up lists for and against a particular course of action. Take a contentious issue and produce balanced arguments from both points of view. Whenever you are with people who want to rush into action, caution them to consider alternatives and to anticipate the consequences.

Deliberately fragment your day by chopping and changing activities each half an hour. Make the switch as diverse as possible: for example: if you have had half an hour of cerebral activity, switch to doing something utterly routine and mechanical; if you have been sitting down, stand up, if you have been talking keep quiet, and so on.

Force yourself into the limelight. Volunteer whenever possible to chair meetings or give presentations. When you attend a meeting set yourself the challenge, of making a substantial contribution within ten minutes of the start of the meeting. Get on a soapbox and make a speech at Speaker's corner.

Practise thinking aloud and on your feet. Set yourself a problem and bounce ideas off a colleague (see if between you, you can generate 50 ideas in ten minutes). Get some colleagues or friends to join in a game where you give each other topics and have to give an impromptu speech lasting at least five minutes.

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## Self-Development Activities to Strengthen the Theorist Style

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Read something 'heavy' and thought provoking for at least 30 minutes each day. Try philosophy, especially linguistic analysis, logic or the theory of relativity. If this seems a tall order, try tackling a textbook on management. Whatever you elect to read, afterwards try to summarise what you have read in your own words.

Practise spotting inconsistencies/weaknesses in other people's arguments. Go through reports highlighting inconsistencies. Analyse organisation charts to discover overlaps and conflicts. Take two newspapers of different persuasions and regularly do a comparative analysis of the differences in their points of view.

Take a complex situation and analyse it to pinpoint when it developed the way it did, what could have been done differently, and at what stage. The situations could be historical or something drawn from current affairs, or something you have been involved in personally. You could, for example, do a detailed analysis of how you spend your time, or of the workflow in and out of your department or of all the people you interact with and with what frequency in the course of your work.

Collect other people's theories, hypotheses and explanations about events: they might be about environmental issues, theology, the natural sciences, human behaviour - ANYTHING providing it is a topic With many different, and preferable contradictory, theories. Try to understand the underlying assumption each theory is based upon and see if you can group similar theories together.

Practise structuring situations so that they are orderly and more certain to proceed in the way you predict. You might, for example, plan a conference where delegates are going to work in different groupings. Structure the timetable, the tasks, the plenary sessions. Or try structuring a meeting by having a clear purpose, an agenda and a planned beginning, middle and end. Invent procedures to cope with problems such as too many people speaking at once or failures to reach a consensus.

Practise asking probing questions - the sort of questions that get to the bottom of things. Refuse to be fobbed off with platitudes or vague answers. Particularly ask questions designed to find out precisely why something has occurred. "Why do you think the machine has gone down again?"; "Why is absenteeism increasing?"; "Why is heart disease higher in the UK than in Japan?"

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## **Self-Development Activities to Strengthen the Pragmatist Style**

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Collect technique, for example, practical ways of doing things. The techniques can be about anything potentially useful to you. These might be analytical techniques such as critical path analysis or cost benefit analysis. They might be interpersonal techniques such as Transactional Analysis, or assertiveness or presentation techniques. They might be time saving techniques, statistical techniques, improving your memory, or techniques to cope with stress and reduce your blood pressure.

In meetings and discussions of any kind (progress meetings, problem solving meetings, planning meetings, appraisal discussions, negotiations, sales calls etc) concentrate on producing action plans. Make it a rule never to emerge from a meeting or discussion without a list of actions either for yourself or for others, or both. The actions plans should be specific and include a deadline (e.g. 'I will produce Chapter 4 by 31 May. 'Bill will produce a two-page paper listing alternative bonus schemes by 1 September')

Make opportunities to experiment with some of your newfound techniques. Try them out in practice. If your experiment involves other people, then tell them openly that you are conducting an experiment and explain the technique which is about to be tested. (This reduces embarrassment if, in the event, the technique is a flop!). Choose the time and place for your experiments. Avoid situations where a lot is at stake and where the risks of failure are unacceptably high. Experiment in routine settings with people whose aid or support you can enlist.

Study techniques that other people use and then model yourself on them. Pick up techniques from your boss, your boss's boss, your colleagues, your subordinates, your mentor, visiting salesmen, interviewers on television, politicians, actors and actresses, your next door neighbour. When you discover something they do well - emulate them.

Subject yourself to scrutiny from 'experts' so that they can watch your technique and coach you in how to improve it. Invite someone who is skilled in running meetings to sit in and watch you chairing, get an accomplished presenter to give you feedback on your presentation techniques. The idea is to solicit help from people who have a proven track record - it's the equivalent of having a coaching session with a golfing professional.

Tackle a 'do-it-yourself' project - it doesn't matter if you aren't good with your hands. Pragmatists are practical and, if only for practice purposes, DIY activities help to develop a practical outlook. Renovate a piece of furniture, build a garden shed, or even an extension to your house. At work, calculate your own statistics once in a while instead of relying on the printout, be your own organisation and methods man, go and visit the shop floor in search of practical problems to solve. Learn to type, learn a foreign language.

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## **Self-Development Activities to Strengthen the Reflector Style**

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Practise observing, especially at meetings where there are agenda items that do not directly involve you. Study people's behaviour. Keep records about who does the most talking, who interrupts whom, what triggers disagreements, how often the chairman summarises, and so on. Also study non-verbal behaviour: when people lean forward and lean back; count how many times people emphasise a point with a gesture; when do people fold their arms, look at their watches, chew their pencils, and so on?

Keep a diary and each evening write an account of what happened during the day. Reflect on the day's events and see if you can reach any conclusions from them. Record your conclusions in the diary.

Practise reviewing after a meeting or event of some kind. Go back over the sequence of events identifying what went well and what could have gone better. If possible tape record some conversations and play back the tape at least twice, reviewing what happened in great detail. List lessons learned from this activity.

Give yourself something to research, something that requires the painstaking gathering of data from different sources. Go to your local library and spend a few hours in the reference section.

Practise producing highly polished pieces of writing. Give yourself essays to write on various topics (something you have researched?). Write a report or paper about something. Draft watertight policy statements, agreements, or procedures. When you have written something, put it aside for a week then force yourself to return to it and do a substantial rewrite.