Interaction Styles and the Digital Age

I have found when coaching leaders in different organisations that they share two challenges - the "email epidemic" (Cary Cooper) and "meeting madness" (Harvard Business Review). These distract them from their real work, take up their time, and get in the way of them being effective.

The email epidemic causes them to spend a high proportion of their time interacting with their laptops and phones rather than with their colleagues and teams. Yet we know that working successfully with others means building relationships with them, which is much easier to do by speaking to them rather than by sending emails.

Similarly, people do not always communicate constructively in meetings, for various reasons, and they can lead to people being frustrated and drained rather than motivated and energized – meetings: a soul-sucking waste of time.

In many organisations, managers rush from meeting to meeting, grabbing a few moments in between to deal with the emails piling up in their inboxes, and with little time to do the work they are really paid to do. When they get home, they often stay switched on, connected electronically, mentally, and often emotionally too, and ultimately this can lead to overload and burnout.

I have used the Interaction Styles framework with many of my coaching clients and while I can't claim that it has reduced the number of emails they send or the meetings they attend, it has given them more **choice** about how they communicate in different situations, more **influence** in meetings, and more **control** over the emotions they experience when interacting with others.

These are some real examples of how Interaction Styles helped them. (Names have been changed).

John, (Chart-the-Course style) used to go to meetings, open his laptop to do his email, and ignore the other people in the room until the meeting started. The message he sent by his behaviour at best was that he didn't want to communicate and at worst that he lacked interest and enthusiasm. Yet a few simple actions (such as making eye contact and some small talk) completely changed how his colleagues perceived him and he was pleasantly surprised that changing his behaviour meant that people responded more positively to him and to his ideas.

Martin felt he spent a lot of time in meetings where the same topics would come up and be revisited, with no clear decisions being finalised. He described himself as very "frustrated" and talked about how "stressed" he felt in these meetings. He identified with the In-Charge style and knew his "comfort zone" was to have decisions made quickly and things being accomplished; the constant revisiting of topics was taking him out of his comfort zone and he was experiencing negative emotions, which he expressed as impatience and sarcasm, and sometimes withdrawal, which in turn led to conflict with his colleagues. We discussed their likely Styles, what might be driving their behaviour and the benefits these could bring to the team and the organisation; he was able to shift to take their perspective and finally, he recognised that "the problem is me, not them" and that he could find ways to manage his frustrations and avoid having a negative impact on his colleagues.

Jenny's demeanour (Behind-the-Scenes style) came across as unassertive and she found it difficult to make her points heard when in discussion with others. She learned how to signal through her body language that she had something to say, such as by shifting her body, leaning forward, taking in a breath, moving her hand. She also worked on how to express herself more concisely and assertively,

by planning what she wanted to say in advance, speaking more loudly and lowering her tone. She used assertive phrases such as "I think…, I want…, my opinion is…". These small changes helped her to have a bigger impact and she became more influential.

The Interaction Styles framework can help people connect better with others. It:

- Makes you *aware* of your inner drives and stressors and how you might come across to others so you can adapt that if you want to
- Reminds you to *pay attention* to the cues from other people's behaviour so you can respond appropriately to build rapport
- Gives you *practical* suggestions for how to change your behavior to get better outcomes from your interactions – it's a tool for being emotionally intelligent in the moment.

Catherine will be speaking at the conference on *Interaction Styles for the Digital Age.*