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# surrounded by idiots

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**The Four Types of Human Behaviour**  
and How to Effectively Communicate  
with Each in Business (and in Life)



thomas erikson



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# Surrounded by Idiots

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and How to Effectively Communicate  
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Thomas Erikson

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## Introduction

# The Danger of Being Surrounded by Idiots

### HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Reader be warned:

Since my readers' views on anything and everything mean such a great deal to me—for without you, dear reader, I would have achieved nothing—I wish to explain before the book begins just what it is you are holding in your hand.

This is an expanded anniversary edition of *Surrounded by Idiots*. In practice, this means that many parts of it are reworked and updated from the original edition of *Surrounded by Idiots*. Time flies, the world changes, and as an author I have a duty to keep up. This book is actually rather different from the original in that it includes the answers to the majority of questions people have asked me after reading the first. This is an expanded, heavily revised book specifically aimed at the reader who wishes to improve their relationships with the people around them. I've added a number of new sections that didn't make the cut in the original version on the grounds of length. I have also revisited and revised many other parts of the book, although some remain largely intact. The language has been updated and clarified, but this should really only be regarded as the application of new makeup.

In short, this is simply a more complete and—I believe—better book.

But it's also important to note what it is not: This is not a brand-new book.

Right, that's out of the way. If you've read the original edition of *Surrounded by Idiots*, then maybe you don't need to buy this book, too.

Both editions are basically about the same thing: how a deeper understanding of the four colors—what's known as the DISC model—can genuinely make your life easier in the most incredible ways.

If this isn't what you're looking for, then now is the moment to check whether you kept the receipt.

The original Swedish-language edition of *Surrounded by Idiots* has been translated into the most languages of any Swedish book since the late, great Astrid Lindgren was still writing. It may be a decidedly different tale from that of Pippi Longstocking, but it's reached every corner of the globe with translations into close to seventy languages.

It's a completely surreal experience, and as a writer, I am humbled by it, but the content of the book evidently speaks to people everywhere on the planet. It's clear there are many people out there who feel they are surrounded by idiots.

Personally, it strikes me as deeply unfortunate that despite all the tools at our disposal today, we continue to struggle so badly to get through to each other and to communicate meaningfully.

It is my firm belief that the world would be a more beautiful place if only people better understood each other's differences. Perhaps that's my inner romantic speaking, but I really do mean it—many of the conflicts unfolding on the surface of this planet are down to misunderstandings and indifference.

From a global point of view, it's hard for any one individual to do much about this, but I'm driven by the old maxim: No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

If I can help to simplify communication between people in their everyday lives and make life a little easier, then that's something I will gladly do. I believe it's more important than ever that when something goes wrong, we stop and ask questions instead of immediately leveling accusations at each other left, right, and center. Including that of being an idiot, to name but one example.

That being said, I want to briefly set out why I decided to write a book about idiots in the first place.

After a few years spent in banking, where I did admittedly encounter an awful lot of idiots, I finally got it together and became a management consultant. I had met a fair number of admirable people in the world of consultancy—often within the sphere of what is generally known as inspirational or motivational speaking. Education was another sector I often came into contact with, and I was always equally impressed with them. These consultants always seemed to have the answer to everything. They were smart, quick-witted, confident, and determined. They even wore nicer suits than the ones I had been able to afford on my old banker's salary.

The job itself offered a lot of freedom but it was extremely demanding. In effect, I was at liberty to spend my time however I pleased so long as I was bringing money in for the company and not only securing work for myself but also getting bookings for other consultants as often as I could.

But it was also scary because there was no system to follow, unlike in a bank where everything was regulated. A tremendous amount of my potential success really did hinge on me and my own performance. For the first time in my life, I began to doubt my own abilities.

I remember one day, about six months in, sitting in an armchair in our small library seeking inspiration from a book and instead nodding off as a result of pure exhaustion and stress.

The CEO happened upon me and woke me up, saying we needed to have a little talk.

But things got better. Little by little, I mastered the craft: selling; having the confidence to call pretty much anyone; meeting senior executives from well-known companies. I was barely thirty years old and starting to get a sense of how it all worked at this company.

In just my second year I was named peak performer of the year, and I figured my fortune was made. This was going to work out. I'd finally found the right place. Maybe this was something I was actually good at.

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And sure, things were going absolutely fine. I worked like the devil and took on every task I could. As I added assignment after

assignment to my résumé, my self-confidence also grew. And with that increasing self-confidence there came new opportunities to make a fool of myself.

On one occasion I crossed paths with a guy who ran his own business. Sture was in his sixties and had founded and built his own company from the ground up over the course of thirty years. I had called him completely unaware of his legendary hot temper, and scheduled a meeting in which I envisioned selling him a project I thought his company needed.

The needs analysis was actually extremely simple. Sture had an obvious need to get something off his chest, and it wouldn't be long before I realized what the actual problem was. We started out discussing what was and wasn't working in the company.

One of the very first quips Sture made was that he was surrounded by idiots. I remember laughing because I thought it sounded funny. But he really meant it. And he stuck to his guns, insisting he was literally surrounded by idiots.

After he'd said as much several times over, I remember raising a hand and stopping him. *Obviously, you don't really mean that your coworkers are idiots, so what exactly do you mean?*

Sture persevered. Idiots was exactly what he meant. The place was full of nitwits.

Amused by the entire conversation, I requested examples.

The color rose on his face as he told me that the people working in Department A were complete idiots—the whole bunch of them. There was only one person in Department B who understood anything at all, while the rest of them were a bunch of clueless losers. Department C was worst of all—it was staffed by people so strange and aberrant it was beyond Sture how they even made it to work in the morning.

The more I listened to him, the more I realized that there was something very peculiar about this whole story. I asked him whether he really thought he was surrounded by idiots. He glared at me and then explained that very few of his staff were really up to scratch.

Later on, I discovered that Sture was more than happy to let on how he felt to his coworkers, too. He had no hesitation in calling someone an idiot in front of the whole company. This resulted, among

other things, in his employees steering clear of him. No one dared to meet with him one-on-one and no one ever wanted to impart bad news to him because he usually shot the messenger. Metaphorically, in case you're wondering.

At one of his sites, someone had rigged up a warning light in the lobby. It was discreetly positioned above reception and when he was inside, it would be illuminated red. When he was off the premises, however, it would be illuminated green.

Everyone knew about it. Staff and customers alike would automatically glance at the light to check what they might encounter when they crossed the threshold. When that light shone red, some would simply turn on their heel and come back later. (With the passing of the years, I've come to wonder whether Sture might not, in fact, have been aware of that light. I suspect he liked the mythic status it gave him.)

Anyway, as we all know, when you're young, you're full of brilliant ideas. So I asked the only question I could think of: *Who let in all these idiots?*

Of course I realized that he himself had hired most of them. What was worse was that Sture knew that I knew. What I had implied was: *Who's really the biggest idiot here?*

His face turned beetroot red in a split second, and he leaped to his feet, pointed at the door, and roared: *Meeting over!*

Sture kicked me out.

What I didn't reveal in the first version of this book is what happened right after that meeting. In the car heading back to my office, I felt shaken up. When I got back, my own CEO appeared like a flash and wanted every last detail about the meeting and how it had gone. You see, there were very great expectations for this deal.

I remember staring at him while I searched for words, before eventually having to tell him the facts of the matter. So I said: *Look, I'm going to tell you the truth, which is . . . that guy was . . . a complete idiot. He didn't understand a thing.*

But the incident got me thinking. Here we had a man on the brink of retirement. He was evidently a skilled entrepreneur and highly respected for his knowledge in his specialized area of business. But in truth, he was incapable of dealing with people. The only resource

in an organization that cannot be duplicated—the employees—was one he did not understand. And anyone who couldn't be understood, well . . . it went without saying they must be idiots.

Since I was from outside the company, I could easily see how wrong his thinking was. Sture didn't grasp that he always compared people to himself. His definition of idiocy was simply anyone who didn't think or act like him.

He used expressions that I also used to use about certain types of people: "arrogant windbags," "rude bastards," and "tedious block-heads." Even though I would never call people idiots for no reason, I too faced clear problems with certain types of people.

And then it hit me. It was an utterly appalling thought to have to go through life constantly thinking that I was surrounded by people who were impossible to work with. It would be such a huge limitation on my own opportunities in life. What would my own encounters with others be like if that was my mindset?

On paper, Sture had it all: a profitable company, wealth, prestige, status, power. But he was deeply unhappy.

I tried to look at myself in the mirror. The decision was an easy one to make—I didn't want to end up like Sture.

So I plucked up the courage and called him again, and managed to schedule a follow-up meeting.

As we sat down for our second meeting, Sture said the following to me, word for word: *I haven't left the shotgun in the car this time.*

This relationship could undoubtedly have gotten off to a better start.

After a particularly poisonous encounter with him and some of his miserable coworkers, I had a knot in my stomach. Everyone was pissed off. Some of them were brokenhearted. And all this had emanated from Sture's inability to deal with people.

Right there and then, I resolved to acquire the most important knowledge of all—how people work. Given that I was going to be crossing paths with people for the rest of my life and since I was always going to be dependent on other people, it was easy to see that I would benefit from such a skill.

I was true to my word. I began to study more specifically how we can understand people who initially seem difficult to understand. Why some people are quiet, why others never seem to stop talking, why some always feel compelled to impart the truth while others never do. Why some of my colleagues always showed up on time while others rarely did. Why I liked some people more than others—because I did.

The insights I began to stow away were fascinating, and I haven't been the same since I embarked upon this journey. The knowledge I gained has changed me as a person, as a friend, as a colleague, as a son, and as a husband to my wife and a father to my children.

This book is about what is perhaps the world's most common way of describing the differences in human communication, and I have been using variations on this tool for more than thirty years with spectacular results.

The first edition of this book received its fair share of criticism. Me, too, for that matter. Not to mention the four-color model—the DISC model. Most of that criticism has come from people who don't like that it simplifies human behavior.

Which it does. On the other hand, so does every other model of this type. The human psyche is fascinatingly complex, and I am aware of the shortcomings of this particular method. I'll touch on these later.

But—and this is something I will stand by—the four-color model is good enough. It's been out there for decades. Of course, it wasn't invented by me and I can't take any credit whatsoever for its creation or the way it works, but I do like it as long as it is used for what it is intended for.

For me, it's more important to use a method that is effective and works than to search for a method that is 100 percent exact.

Then there's the obvious: Methods for creating an exact description of a living person's psyche do not exist, and I would be surprised if any such method were to come into being in the future.

How do you get really, really good at dealing with different types of people? Learning the theoretical part doesn't make you a world-

class communicator. It's only when you start *using* the knowledge that you can develop actual, functioning expertise in the area.

It's like learning to drive a car: Studying theory is not enough. You have to get out on the road with everyone else and experience what it's like to be surrounded by . . . other motorists. Some of them know how to behave and that's great. Others aren't quite as on it, which means you have to know how to react. But it only works once you're behind the wheel. Only then do you realize what it is you have to do.

As a wise man or woman once said: *In theory there is no difference between theory and reality—but in reality there is.*

Since I started studying how people function and really took pains to understand all the possible—and sometimes impossible—permutations, I've never been the same. Nowadays, I'm nowhere near as dogmatic as I was and I don't judge someone simply because they aren't like me. With a little luck, I can engender the same respect in return.

My patience with people who are my direct opposite has been much greater for many years now. I wouldn't go so far as to claim that I'm never embroiled in conflict, just as I wouldn't attempt to convince you that I never lie, but both phenomena are rarities these days.

I hope you don't interpret this as boasting. It's taken me decades of study and practice to reach this point and I am acutely aware of how much I have left to learn.

I do have one thing for which I should thank Sture and his mad warning light: He was the one who sparked my interest in all this. Without him, this book would probably never have been written. Without him and his catchphrase, stuck like a broken record, I would probably not even have given this book its title: *Surrounded by Idiots*. And who knows, dear reader? Without that, you and I might never have met.

Statistically speaking, nonfiction books are rarely read in full. On average, people only read the first three chapters. That's a pity if you ask me, given it means you miss out on a heck of a lot of the knowledge contained in each book.

What can you do to increase your knowledge? A start could be

reading this whole book rather than just the first three chapters. With a little luck, in a few minutes' time you'll be starting the same journey I embarked upon some thirty years ago.

And, dear reader, that wouldn't be such a bad thing, would it?

Thomas Erikson

Behaviorist, mentor, lecturer, and author

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# Communication and Why It's So Important

## 1.1 IN ALL COMMUNICATION, IT'S THE RECIPIENT WHO IS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

People see what they see and they hear what they hear.

You knew what you wanted to say, so you said it as you saw it in your head. Setting aside for one moment how you expressed yourself, what you chose to emphasize, the tone of voice you adopted, and what your face looked like as you said it—what came out came out.

But what remains of what you said to someone after it has been filtered through that person's frame of reference, views, attitudes, experiences, prejudices, and preconceived notions is ultimately the message that has been understood. They may, for various reasons, perceive what you are seeking to convey in an entirely different way from what you intended. Of course, just how much is understood varies depending on whom you're talking to, but it's very rare that the full message arrives exactly as you pictured it in your head.

Perhaps it's even a little depressing to have so little control over what the recipient understands. No matter how much you want to hammer it into their thick skull, there's really not much you can do

about it, and therein lies the rub. Naturally, you can consider this one of life's many challenges. God knows we can learn from facing down our challenges, but there's no way to change what makes the recipient tick.

Most people are probably aware of and sensitive to how they would *like* to be treated. But as you and I both know, the world is rarely that simple. By *adapting yourself* to how other people want to be treated, you will become more effective in your communication.

### 1.1.1 What Does It Matter How We Treat Each Other?

You can help people understand you by creating a secure arena for communication—on their terms. That means the recipient can expend their energy on understanding what you're saying instead of consciously or unconsciously reacting to the way you communicate.

People really are very different. There are so many dimensions to consider that simply thinking about it can leave you a little perplexed. We all need to develop some flexibility so we can vary our communication style and adapt it when talking to people who don't function in the same way we do.

Because that's another truth: No matter how we choose to communicate, you, the individual, will always be in a minority. Whatever your type of behavior is, the majority will work in a different way. And there's always going to be more of them.

My mother was wrong. Don't treat others as you'd like to be treated. It's a nice thought—but a misguided one. Sorry, Mum.

You can't base everything on yourself. This flexibility and ability to interpret other people's needs and adapt yourself according to these observations is what characterizes a good communicator.

Being familiar with and understanding another person's behavioral style and way of communicating means that your guesses become more sophisticated in terms of how that person might react in different situations. This understanding also dramatically increases your ability to get through to said individual.

## 1.2 NO SYSTEM IS WATERTIGHT

By the time you've gotten your hands on this book, a lot will have happened since I wrote it.

*Surrounded by Idiots* makes no claims whatsoever to being comprehensive when it comes to how we humans communicate with each other. There is no book that can do that, since it would be impossible to fit all the different signals we are constantly broadcasting into one book. If we included body language, the differences between male and female dialogue, your position in your sibling group, cultural differences, and every other way there is to define difference, we wouldn't be able to get it all down on the page. It would be the world's longest book.

We could add psychological aspects, graphology, age, and astrology into the mix without achieving a picture that was 100 percent complete. Neuroscience—that's brain research to you and me—is making constant advances.

Tricky. But as far as I'm concerned, that's also the charm of it all. Not everything can be quantified. People aren't Excel spreadsheets. We're too complicated to be fully described. Even the simplest, most uncultured, lowest-ranking individual in our respective scales is more complicated than can be expressed in a book. But we can avoid the worst mistakes by understanding the basics of human communication.

There are simply no theories, tools, or aids that can fully describe a person. "We see what we do, but we do not see why we do what we do. Thus, we assess and appraise each other through what we see that we do." So said psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Different behaviors are what create dynamics in our lives. Everyone has to behave somehow or another. Certain behaviors will be ones you recognize in yourself, while there will be other types of behavior that we either don't recognize or don't understand. As you know, each and every one of us also behaves differently in different situations, which can be a cause for joy or irritation for those around us. It can certainly be refreshing, but it can be confusing at the same time.

There aren't really any behaviors that are right or wrong in this

regard, and most behaviors can probably be considered as perfectly okay. What I mean by this is that there is no such thing as correct or incorrect behavior. You are who you are, and there's really very little point pondering over why that is. You're good, no matter what you're like. Regardless of how you choose to behave or how you are understood, you are okay. Within reason, of course. Manipulative behaviors and generally psychopathic or narcissistic actions are very much not okay. But then again, you knew that already.

### 1.2.1 This Is Just How I Am, Okay?

In a perfect world, it would be easy to say, *I'm a particular kind of person and it's okay because I read it in a book. That's just how I am and this is how I act.* Sure, wouldn't it be great not to have to restrain your own behavior? To always be able to act and behave precisely as you feel at the time? You can do that. You can behave exactly as you wish. All you have to do is find the right situation in which to do so.

There are two situations in which you can be you, only you, and nothing but you:

1. The first situation is when you're alone in a room. Then it doesn't matter very much how you speak or what you do. It doesn't hurt anyone if you scream and swear or if you want to sit silently and ponder the great mysteries of life or wonder why Bill Gates is the biggest farmland owner in the US. In your solitude, you can behave exactly the way you feel. Great, right?
2. The second situation where you can completely be yourself is when all the other people in the room are exactly like you. Feel free to follow your mother's advice and treat others as you want to be treated. Excellent advice and very well intentioned. And it works, too—as long as everyone is like *you*. All you need to do is make a list of all the people you know who believe, think, and act exactly like you in all situations. Then all you've got to do is give these people a call and start hanging out. Exactly like you, remember.

In any other situation, it might be a good idea to understand how you are perceived and to learn how other people function. I don't think I will make headlines by saying that most people you meet aren't exactly like you.

The words and expressions we choose to use vary. The title of this book alone demonstrates our different interpretations of mere words. I've received several emails from people who think it was a poor choice of title. They say we shouldn't call each other idiots. And on the whole, I'm inclined to agree, while also noting that humor and irony are probably not for everyone.

But when you use the wrong word, well, maybe you are an idiot. What do I know?

Well, I know this: We're all the idiot in *someone's* story.

### 1.2.2 Surrounded by Idiots—or Not?

Hang on just a second. What does this actually mean?

Somewhere along the way, I picked up the following analogy: Behavior is like a transmission. It doesn't work with just one gear. The more gears you have at your disposal, the smoother the drive. Just like with a gearbox, sometimes one of the gears is the right one, but other times that very same gear is very much the wrong one. It's fine to start the car in first—starting in eighth would be a little tricky. In other situations, it's hopeless trying to use first—for example, if you're doing sixty miles per hour.

In some situations, every single person ends up stamped, labeled, and categorized faster than you can say “stereotype.” On the other hand, before you draw your labeling gun and start firing words like “stupid,” “lazy,” or “generally weird,” let's explore the option of not putting labels on each other at all.

The benefits of not labeling people are just as amazing as finding extra french fries with your meal. Firstly, it makes life more exciting. Instead of simply seeing someone as “annoying,” you might discover that they are an unexpected source of entertainment.

Then there's the whole thing about avoiding embarrassing situations. Labeling someone as “dumb” can quickly turn embarrassing

when it transpires that the individual in question is a professor of astrophysics or a chess grand master. It's like pinning a note that reads "kick me" on their back and then realizing said individual is, in fact, a champion kickboxer.

But it's not all sunshine and rainbows when it comes to avoiding labels. Sometimes it feels as if our brains are programmed to automatically apply labels to people, as if we need to pigeonhole each other if we're to deal with each other, period.

Who is she, really? Age, fashion choices, profession. Married, single, cohabiting, straight, or something else. A college graduate? That much you could probably have figured out from the start. In what major? Oh, she's one of *those*. Does she live in a condo? Oops. A house, then? That explains it. Well-traveled or a couch potato? Kids? Why? Oh right, no kids? How come? Washes her car every Sunday? How dull. Never washes her car? Eww. Dirty.

And so on. Applying labels to each other—we do it all the time. I suspect it's baked into our DNA. We quite simply have to find ways to relate to one another; otherwise, it ends up being too difficult to keep track of everyone.

But next time you're tempted to pull the trigger on your labeler, stop to think about the advantages of refraining. You might find that life is a little more fun and that you make more unexpected friends along the way. And who knows, you might even avoid being labeled as a "label junkie" in the process.

But what does this have to do with our beloved idiots? Well, you see . . . in this book I also apply labels to people. And there are those who are opposed to the idea of sorting people into different personality types. Perhaps you're among those who believe people shouldn't be categorized in that way—that it's wrong to pigeonhole people. Even if—as I said—everyone does it.

Sometimes they may do so differently from the way I do in this book, but we nevertheless all note our differences. And the fact of the matter is that we are different, and pointing this out can in my view be a positive thing, provided that you do so in the right way and, most important, for the right reason. Anyone who labels people

out of downright prejudice is on the wrong track. But I believe those who do so in an attempt to understand are onto something.

Not that this comes without its risks. Used incorrectly, any type of tool can be harmful. I think it's more to do with who is using the tool than the tool itself.

As such, consider this book an introduction to how human behavior works and a dialogue on how we can adapt to each other in the best possible way. The rest of it is up to you.

### 1.2.3 Note the Following

**Behavior . . .** is relatively predictable. But:

- Every individual reacts according to their own routines to similar situations.
- It is impossible to predict every possible reaction before it happens.

**Behavior . . .** is part of a pattern.

- We often react in ways that are consistent. As such, we should respect one another's patterns. And understand that our own . . .

**Behavior . . .** is changeable.

- We should learn to listen, act, speak openly, and reflect—as the prevailing situation demands. Everyone can adapt.

**Behavior . . .** can be observed.

- We should be able to observe and understand most forms of behavior without being amateur psychologists.

**Behavior . . .** is understandable.

- We should be able to understand why other people feel and do what they are doing right now. Everyone can think about why.

**Behavior . . .** is unique.

- Despite what we have in common, each person's behavior is unique to them. Everyone can succeed on their own terms.

**Behavior . . .** is excusable.

- Reject personal envy and griping—it helps to talk about it. Learn the arts of tolerance and patience, both with yourself and others.

**Behaviors . . .** are like a toolbox.

- Every type is needed. Depending on the situation, a tool can sometimes be right and sometimes wrong. A ten-pound sledgehammer is good for knocking down walls, but it's not the best if you're hanging a painting in your living room.

# How Our Behaviors Came into Existence

## 2.1 WHY DID WE END UP THE WAY WE ARE?

Where does behavior come from? Why are people so different? How come we're not all the same? You tell me. In short, it's all about the combination of nature and nurture. The foundations of the behaviors we exhibit in adulthood are laid before we're even born. Hereditary temperaments and traits of character influence our behavior, and these trigger a process at the gene level.

Scientists are still squabbling about exactly how this works, but I think we can safely agree that it matters. Not only do we inherit traits from our own parents, but we also inherit them from their parents, not to mention in varying degrees from other relatives. At some point or another, we've all heard that we speak like or look like an uncle or an aunt. As a child, I resembled my uncle Bertil—something to do with my red hair. To explain how this is genetically possible would take a tremendous amount of time. For the moment, let's simply accept that this inheritance lays the foundation for our behavioral development.

What happens once we're born? In most cases, children are born impulsive, intrepid, without any inhibitions whatsoever. A child does as it pleases. The child says, *No, I don't want to!* or, *Yes I can!* They are immersed in the thought that there's nothing they can't do. This kind of spontaneous and sometimes uncontrolled behavior is, of

course, not always desirable to the child's parents. Then hey, presto, what was once an original pattern of behavior begins to transform, in the best- / worst-case scenario, into a copy of someone else's.

### 2.1.1 What the Science Tells Us

To begin with, we would need to find enough researchers who are sufficiently in agreement in order to know what the science is actually telling us. But fear not—there are clues. Our behaviors, no matter how diverse and complex they may be, originate from just a few different, identifiable sources. Of course, these sources are psychological, but they are also biological and social.

The nature-versus-nurture debate is one of the oldest chestnuts in psychology, especially in the study of human behavior. It revolves around the relative contributions of genetic inheritance (nature) and environmental factors (nurture) in human development and behavior.

In recent decades, consensus in the field has shifted toward a more nuanced understanding that emphasizes the interaction between genes and environment rather than seeing them as separate or opposing forces.

There are a lot of ways to look at this issue, including through the lenses of interactionist perspectives, epigenetics, gene-environment correlations, brain plasticity during critical periods, quantitative genetics, cultural and social factors, and neuroscience.

Biologically, our behavior is influenced by our brain's synapses and chemistry—and what we eat seems to be of greater significance than previously thought. All sorts of things affect how we process information, how we react to stimuli, and even how we communicate.

It's clear that we inherit a great deal from our parents. But which traits end up in your DNA? Are they the same as your sister's? Why or why not? I don't know. You don't know. No one knows. Yet another excellent question to which we don't have an answer.

Basically, why an individual ends up the way they are still remains something of a mystery. And perhaps it's not all that important, given that you and I are already the way we are. We're hardly likely to change to any great extent at this juncture in life.

Psychologically, our upbringing, experiences, and environment all play a significant role—and don't forget the social dimension.

There is increasing recognition of the impact of cultural, social, and individual experiences in shaping behaviors.

Our interactions, our culture, and our collective norms all influence the way we express ourselves. Context naturally plays a role. An individual might change a little (or even a lot) when they switch jobs, start a new relationship, move to a new neighborhood, join a club, or do just about anything else.

The prevailing view of the field at present is that human behavior is the product of complex interactions between genetic and environmental factors. This is not a question of nature versus nurture, but rather how one interacts with the other. The consensus is that almost all traits and behaviors are affected by a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

Understanding where our behavior comes from helps us understand and sometimes even predict why people act the way they do. As you read this book, remember these roots—the biological, psychological, and social factors. This isn't just about putting labels on each other; this is about understanding behavioral origins and learning how to navigate and react to them effectively. It's also about doing this without judging people, which is one of my core values.

## 2.2 MY CORE VALUES

And now for a smooth DJ transition: How to interpret the behavior you observe is an undeniably fascinating subject. Let's disregard the whole nature-and-nurture thing for now. Deep within me, in what eventually became my personality, are my core values—elements so deeply embedded in my character that it's barely feasible to alter them.

These are the things I learned from my parents as a child or that I learned in school when I was very young. In my case it was different variations of "study and do well in school so you get a good job when you grow up" or "fighting is wrong." The latter, for example, means

that I've never laid a hand on another person. I haven't fought since third grade, and I seem to recall that I lost then. (She was really strong.)

All of us carry many such core values. We know instinctively what is right and what is not. No one can take my core values away from me. They're just there.

### **2.2.1 My Attitudes and Approaches**

The next layer is my attitudes, which are not exactly the same as core values. Attitudes are things I have formed opinions about based on my own experiences or on conclusions I have drawn from encounters in the latter part of my schooling, high school, college, or my first job. Even experiences later on in life can form attitudes. Everything I experience with other people will either reinforce or confirm my previously formed attitudes. Unfortunately, we rarely change our minds.

### **2.2.2 My Core Behavior**

Taken together, both my core values and attitudes affect choices I make in my behavior, forming my core behavior—the person I most want to be. My core behavior is what I use with full latitude without any influence from external factors, when it's just about me.

I'm sure you've already spotted the challenge this poses: When on earth are we ever completely free from any external influences? When I discuss this issue with groups in different contexts, we usually settle on one situation where this is true: while we're asleep. We are otherwise subject to various influences more or less all the time.

If I'm comfortably reclining in my favorite chair with a good book on a Sunday afternoon and recharging my batteries ahead of another intense week of work and all that entails in the form of responsibility, there will always be someone else on my mind. As I tear through the pages of this novel I've been wanting to read for ages, I'll be listening out for my wife. Stereotype or not, if she catches sight of me idly sitting there, then you can be sure she'll find me something more useful to do.

But people are different. Some don't care. They're always themselves

since they've never stopped to think how others might perceive them. A liberating yet worrying thought, if you ask me. How you're perceived by others is sometimes the key to success rather than failure.

The stronger your self-understanding is, the greater your probability of adapting to the people around you. The self-preservation instinct, if you like.

### 2.2.3 Adapted Behavior

What the rest of us usually see is adapted behavior. It's an interpretation of a specific situation and a choice about how to act—this is the behavior that is put into practice. Think of it as a mask you wear to fit into a given situation: the mask you think is the right one based on the form of adapted behavior that will allow you to blend into that situation. That gives rise to an interesting reflection: Different people in the same situation put on different masks. Why? Well, we quite simply interpret the very same surroundings in different ways.

What's more, we may naturally have several masks. It's not at all unusual to have one at work and another at home. And maybe another one when visiting the in-laws (a wise choice, if you ask me). I'm simply noting that our interpretations differ and we then act accordingly.

### 2.2.4 Surrounding Factors

Consciously or subconsciously, surrounding factors cause me to choose a particular course of action. I don't claim in the course of this simplified explanation to have fully accounted for the many factors that create a person's behavioral patterns, but it serves as an introduction.

Take a look at this formula:

$$\text{Behavior} = f(P \times Sf)$$

- Behavior is a function of Personality and Surrounding factors.
- Behavior is that which we can observe.

- Personality is what we try to figure out.
- Surrounding factors are things that have an influence on us.

Conclusion: We continually affect one another in various ways. The trick is to try to figure out what's there, under the surface.

### 2.3 WHAT'S THE CONCLUSION TO ALL THIS?

As I touched on in the last chapter, some are opposed to the idea of sorting people into different categories according to their behavioral types. You may feel you shouldn't categorize people like that and that labeling people is wrong. But we do notice our differences. This is just my way of doing it.

The fact remains that we're all different, and if you ask me, pointing this out can be a positive thing if done in the right way. Improperly used, any tool can be harmful. It's more about the person using it than the tool itself.

# What Are the Four Colors—Really?

## 3.1 AN INTRODUCTION

At the end of this book you will find a description of how the system at the heart of this book came into being, but since you probably want to dive into its most interesting elements—how everything works in practice—please feel free to read on.

In the main, there are four primary categories of behavior types, and we will look at how you can go about recognizing them. It won't be long before you picture certain faces when reading about specific colors. Sometimes it might even be your own face you see.

It's a pretty fun exercise, but remember that we have to start with the basics. Just like when baking a cake, it's good to know what adding milk will do to your batter, not to mention flour and every possible spice. What happens if you add extra eggs to the mix? That's only something you can fully understand once you know what an "egg" is.

Every single person you meet has a range of different qualities, and sometimes you may wish you had some of them. You may even occasionally be envious of people. Everyone you meet—without exception—knows things you don't. They have mastered things you haven't.

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Maybe you'd like to be more decisive, like a Red, or perhaps you wish you had an easier time getting along with strangers, like a

Yellow. Maybe you'd like to be less stressed out and more easygoing, like a Green, or perhaps you wish you had the skill to organize your notes in the way that comes naturally to a Blue.

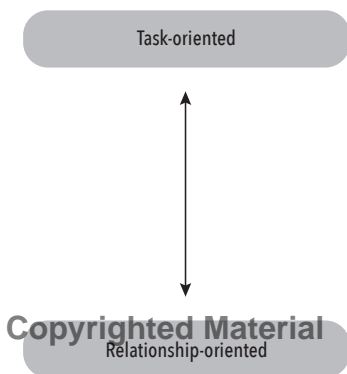
This book is going to teach you how to be like that and in which situations one or the other will work best.

Of course, it also works the other way around. You might read things that make you realize you boss everyone else around too much, like Reds tend to do. Or maybe it's that you talk too much, like Yellows. Perhaps you take it just a little too easy and can't engage with anything—the flip side for Greens. Or maybe you're always suspicious of everything and see risk everywhere, like Blues. This book will teach you to identify your own pitfalls and what to do to circumvent them.

No matter what you read or otherwise see: Feel free to take notes, underline passages in your copy of this book, and make sure you get what you need out of it.

### 3.2 TASK-ORIENTED VERSUS RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED

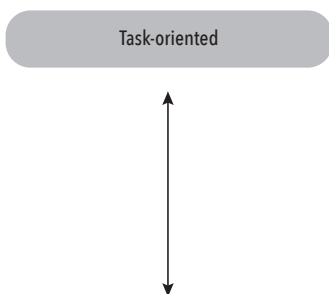
So just how different can people be? Let's see if we can dissect this. The DISC model starts by observing the divide between task orien-



tation and relationship orientation. There's no right or wrong about veering toward one or the other, but it does entail differing points of focus.

### 3.3 WHEN YOU'RE MORE INTERESTED IN TASKS THAN RELATIONSHIPS

Being task-oriented entails focusing on the task at hand. While this will be very apparent in a workplace, you may also spot the signs outside working hours.



Instead of devoting lots of thought to who ought to be involved in a project to build a new fence—a job that's going to take half your holiday—you look at the hard facts of what needs doing. There's digging to be done, not to mention piling, casting, and so on. You calculate how much lumber you'll need and attempt to guess how long the whole caboodle might take.

Then you get to work. It's not necessarily that you're uninterested in others, it's just that the job comes first. Maybe you get your best friends involved, but that's not the most important factor, either.

What really matters is getting the job done. Who knows who simply isn't important, as long as you get help with that damned fence. Sure, you might talk about sports or holidays as beads of perspiration form on your brows, but that'll only be outside working time. During your lunch break, say.

### 3.3.1 The Advantages of Task-Oriented Behavior

Task-oriented individuals tend to be fairly neutral about what it takes to get the job done. They don't easily get caught up in emotional issues, they don't lose focus in the way that relationship-oriented people can, and they have an easier time moving forward.

They're less likely to stand docilely by and listen to emotional outbursts or to tolerate any other forms of drama. They're more level-headed about the task itself—be that building a fence or running a household budget—and they're less likely to be as emotionally affected when people around them face problems.

### 3.3.2 The Disadvantages of Task-Oriented Behavior

Since so many tasks require cooperation, individuals who are overly task-oriented may fail to take into account the views and perceptions of others.

Someone feeling stressed or downright tired simply doesn't matter that much to them. The goals of the task-oriented individual come first: The fence must be completed. Of course, it's understood that stuff comes up, but they'd prefer not to hear the whole story about sick kids.

There's a risk that these people will press ahead instead of listening to others. Moreover, since the majority of the population is more relationship-oriented than task-oriented, this can give rise to conflict, as task-oriented individuals may be perceived as insensitive, harsh, and bad listeners.

## 3.4 WHEN YOU'RE MORE INTERESTED IN RELATIONSHIPS THAN TASKS

Relationship-oriented members of society think differently. They're more focused on the people and relationships involved in the fence-building project—let's stick with our metaphor—than the grind itself. Of course, this doesn't mean they're not interested in getting



Relationship-oriented

the job done. They too want a fence. But relationships matter to them.

They find it much harder to call their old buddy to ask him where the hell he is—work was supposed to start at 9:00 A.M. sharp. In fact, odds are it won't happen. They treasure their relationships and that means broken promises are accepted with more understanding.

When that friend replies that he was on a bender the night before and can't drive today, a relationship-oriented person will have an easier time stomaching this, even though a promise has undeniably been broken.

In order to work well as part of a team—whether it's at work or elsewhere—you need to be cognizant of your fellow human beings, know who they are, and understand them a little. Only then will the task be done with aplomb and everyone will feel able to pitch in.

### 3.4.1 The Advantages of Relationship-Oriented Behavior

Listening to the views and ideas of others comes far more naturally to these individuals. They have no trouble remembering to look around and consider what others might be thinking.

They ask questions. *What do you think? Could you do that? And also the obvious stuff—How are the husband and kids? Family doing well?*

They quite simply exhibit a natural interest in their surroundings—and not just because the fence needs building, come rain or shine. They're also more inclined to try to gain support from their families for different ideas and projects before they get started.

A relationship-oriented individual who has embarked upon a fence-building project will quite likely have sought advice from their family, while their task-oriented counterpart probably wouldn't have bothered.

### 3.4.2 The Disadvantages of Relationship-Oriented Behavior

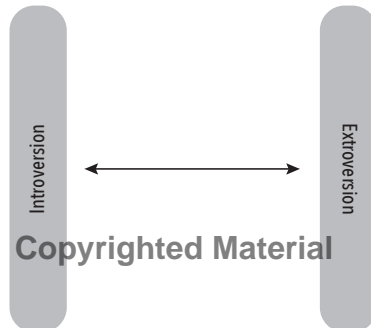
These people are, however, more inclined to listen to people they like than to those who actually know how to do things. If someone in the neighborhood isn't pulling their weight in the annual spring-cleaning drive on the street, this immediately poses a problem for a relationship-oriented project manager.

If a neighbor is dragging their heels and barely lifting a finger, nothing is going to get done. That necessitates negative feedback, which is something a relationship-oriented person is reluctant to give. Who wants to be criticized? After all, they might end up in a conflict situation.

They'd rather maintain a good vibe and will happily sidestep any potential conflicts. This can be to the detriment of the very project itself. The street (or should that be the fence?) might never be finished.

That's one dimension, and it's actually quite simple to manage. Things get a little trickier when we add the next axis into the picture.

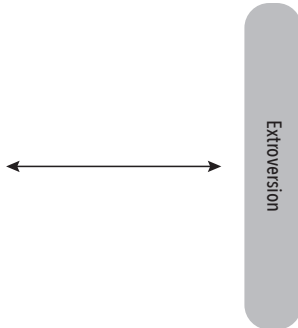
## 3.5 INTROVERSION VERSUS EXTROVERSION



The biggest challenge is encapsulated in the next dimension: introverted behavior versus extroverted behavior. This is where it gets really interesting. You see, there can be real clashes between these dimensions. When things go awry, much of it can be traced back to this difference.

### 3.5.1 Being More Extroverted than Introverted

Being an extrovert entails being receptive to impressions from outside. A rather simplistic way to put it is to say that extroverts draw their energy from what goes on around them. Activity alone boosts their energy.



Extroverts move swiftly from thought to action and devote less time to reflection. Not infrequently, they are results-oriented, and they like it when things are happening. Inactivity is a negative thing.

Their energy is outward-focused on other people and the world at large. Diversity is good and they imbibe a lot of strength from the outside world. This often causes them to surround themselves with people. Their energy comes from activity and from constantly coming up with ideas.

Forcing an extrovert to sit down on the sofa to “recover” creates more stress than the situation requires. For many of them, solitude is a boring drain on their energy. They like to talk to others and prefer the spoken to the written word. Experiences are important; otherwise, they’re unlikely to keep up.

It was probably someone with this personality type who cooked up the idea of open-plan offices. They wanted to pave the way for dynamism, quick decision-making, and communication across boundaries. The beating pulse of that setting energizes them. (Alas, they went on to fill these offices with introverts—so it goes.)

### **3.5.2 The Advantage of Extroverted Behavior**

Extroverts are fast. Very fast. They get a lot done. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad. But they don't sit still and wait. They need to stay active.

Extroverts rarely waste time on overanalyzing data and details or on taking in too much from their surroundings. Not infrequently, their egos are big and they quickly make up their minds about any given question.

This makes them natural decision-makers, and they're happy to take risks. They're often fearless and dare to dominate larger groups of people. As a result, we see large numbers of extroverts in leadership roles. They're seen and heard. Their receptiveness to external impressions also provides the impulses for many new ideas.

### **3.5.3 The Flip Side of Extroverted Behavior**

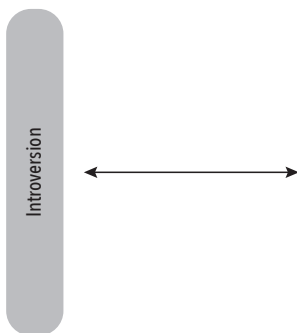
Pace isn't everything. Sometimes speedy decision-making can cause trouble. Things proceed at breakneck speed and go horribly wrong because these people are driven to keep going; they stand up for their ideas even when it's become obvious that they don't have a clue what they're talking about.

You see, their egos are so big that they sometimes take up too much space and forget to listen to what others think. Their own ideas tend to be the only ones acceptable to them.

They're used to arguing, which in turn makes their views sound better. They know how to express themselves plainly and the result is that this occasionally wins people over to the wrong side. They're no more right than anyone else—they just sound like they are.

### 3.5.4 Being More Introverted than Extroverted

Then we have introverts, who are more active on the inside. The technical term for this is “passive behavior,” but you’d be wrong to interpret that as meaning they don’t do anything. You just can’t see it in the same way you can with extroverts. There’s a lot more going on under the surface than you might realize.



Introverts tend to bide their time. They’re thinkers. They think ahead and can spend a long time assembling facts and impressions before they make a big decision. The path to a decision is just as important as, if not more so than, the decision itself.

Introverts are energized by being able to withdraw and find themselves in their own heads. They crave privacy: Forcing them onto the dance floor or dragging them around endless cocktail parties will always result in serious inner tension.

They direct their energy inward toward their own world and whatever is going on there. That means they need a serious amount of peace and quiet in order to concentrate. They’re often thoughtful and those ideas they do propose tend not to be drawn from inspiration but are instead based upon reflection. They will have thought it over until they came up with something. And reflection is something they want and appreciate.

For an introvert, the written word supersedes the spoken, whether they are sending or receiving, so there’s no guarantee they will