

The DiSC model

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The DiSC model: Theory and background

The traditional theories

Since ages past, there have been attempts to understand human beings and human behaviour: What we do and why. Different societies, from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the American Indians, have had different ways of comprehending and describing what they observed in others and in themselves.

Some of the methods of describing human behaviour, which were developed in ancient societies, are still in use today; some even have the status of basic knowledge. E.g. reference is often made to Hippocrates (400 BC) and his description of the four temperaments, or to Galen (200 AD), who in a similar manner described four body fluids.

In the eighteenth century, Galen's works were translated by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, and in 1903 Wundt undertook a further revision of the Kant-Galen-Hippocrates theory of four types of temperament.

With Freud, Jung, Adler and others, the modern psychological approach was established. Freud described the id, ego and superego; Jung spoke of fundamental archetypes; Adler stressed that early-developed motives were based on social need. Later on came the behaviourists, who maintained that human behaviour was a direct result of whether our reactions were unpleasant, pleasant or neutral.

In spite of the historical development, the theories and theoretical struggles, there is still a strong interest in human behaviour, and the need for simple and effective means of understanding and communicating behaviour is greater than ever before.

See the following account of the story behind the DiSC model.

The fundamental DiSC model

The Personal Profile System is a powerful tool, which is both easy to understand and also a simple method of understanding complex human behaviour. It is valid both for psychologists and for others who are interested in learning more about themselves and others.

The Personal Profile System is based on the DiSC model with two axes and four dimensions. The model divides behaviour into four different dimensions: Dominance, influence, Stability and Conscientiousness (Competence) (DiSC).

The Personal Profile System is unique, in that it is a self-evaluating and self-interpreting tool, developed on the basis of the DiSC model. This means that DiSC is directly accessible and applicable.

The DiSC model was first described in 1928, in Marston's book "Emotions of Normal People". The title itself indicates the object of Marston's focus. In contradistinction to many of his contemporaries, such as Freud and Jung, Marston was not interested in pathology or mental illness, but rather in the normal man's feelings and behaviour in interplay with his environment.

Even though, viewed from a modern standpoint, the book is written in an old-fashioned academic language, the model it describes is nevertheless dynamic, vital and just as profound as it was when Marston created it. It is important to notice that the book deals with Marston's model and not with the tool. Marston produced a system for understanding and describing human behaviour. He never developed a tool for measuring human behaviour.

With time, the model has been further examined and revised in the light of the latest knowledge and research.

The DiSC model is based on two ideas: 1) That we perceive our surroundings as either favourable **or** unfavourable, and 2) that a person perceives himself to be either more **or** less powerful than his surroundings. It is worth spending some time on a closer inspection of the model. Most people, namely, are convinced that, once they have fully understood this model, the Personal Profile System is significantly easier to interpret and yields much greater benefit.

The DiSC model in detail

An important word in the DiSC model is the word 'perception'. The way we perceive and act in relation to certain situations, events and surroundings, is much more important than these situations, events and surroundings in themselves. Strictly speaking, we can hardly talk of an event **in itself** – the event equals our perception of it.

There are several examples of this: One reacts to incidents in a book or film and laughs or cries as if it were real; A person alone at home is sure that the noise caused by a branch tapping against the window pane is a burglar; another person panics because he or she has misunderstood the situation and believes that the project should be completed in 2 weeks rather than in 2 months.

Our particular reactions in relation to situations, people and events depends on our perception of them. Marston knew, and later psychological research has confirmed, that our feelings and behaviour are based on our thoughts about the world and the situations we meet in our lives.

Definition of *Surroundings*

We know that the DiSC model is based on a person's perception of his surroundings and of himself in relation to the surroundings. But what is meant by **surroundings**?

In the present case, the word 'surroundings' covers everything outside the person. It includes everything from people, actions and circumstances to demands of the situation, the place and the weather.

The figure below shows the person, his or her surroundings and actions in relation to the surroundings:

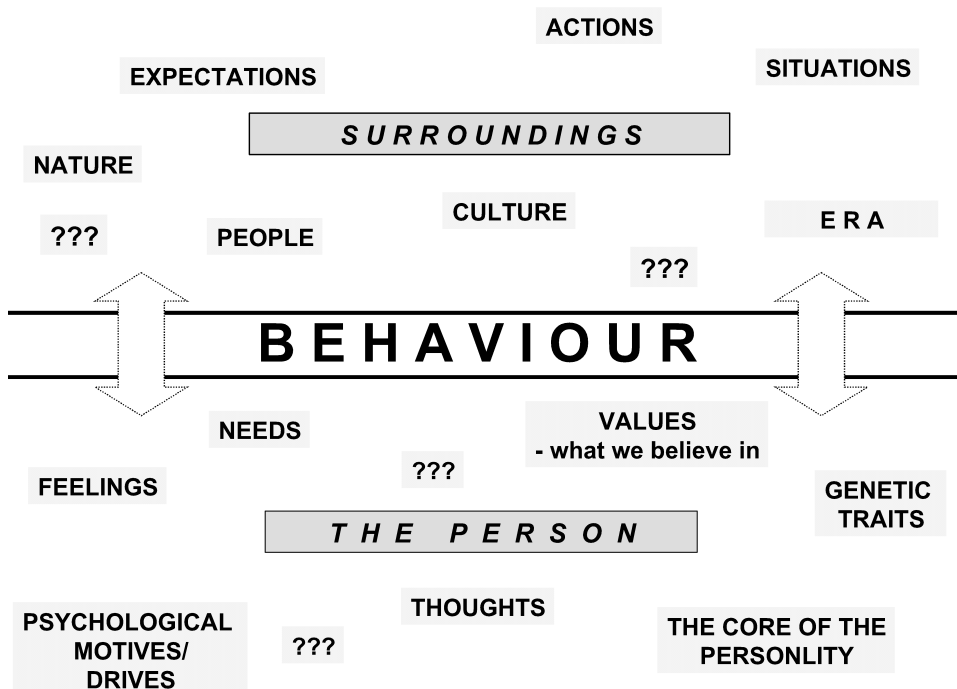


Figure A. the person in relation to his surroundings

The DiSC model was developed at a time when the greater part of psychological research was creating uproar with its view of mental functions as being physically determined. Marston wished to discover what was happening mentally, emotionally and physically during human interaction with the surroundings. He measured factors such as perspiration level and skin reactions; he questioned people about their reactions and behaviour; and he interviewed trained observers.

As his work progressed, Marston began to discern certain patterns which implied that everyone has one out of four ways of acting and reacting in relation to their surroundings. These four ways correspond to what we today know as D, i, S, and C-behaviour. There are other factors which can influence behaviour, such as: values, culture, upbringing, religious beliefs, etc.

Definition of favourable – unfavourable surroundings

According to the DiSC model, a person perceives his surroundings as being **either** favourable **or** unfavourable. Those who perceive their surroundings as unfavourable notice challenges, hindrances and possible pitfalls in the tasks they set themselves. Those who perceive their surroundings as favourable notice the pleasure, the human warmth and the possible success in the tasks they set themselves. Neither of the two perceptions is either more correct or appropriate than the other; they are simply different.

Most people's perception of their environment is direct and automatic. The difference between the two perceptions can be very fine, but it exists, as the following examples show:

Two people enter a restaurant where there is a queue of people waiting for a table. The first thinks, "This place must be very popular". The second thinks, "This place must be really badly run if they cannot deal with the custom".

A workgroup receives the task of evaluating a training programme with a view to its usefulness. One person says, "It would be useful to see some results on how much can be learned by this programme." Another says, "We must take care to ensure that we learn something from this programme."

In their preparation for a sales meeting, one person looks forward to hearing whether or not the customer likes the product, whereas the other looks forward to answering the customer's direct questions.

During a group meeting, some people are happy that a decision has been reached and that everyone supports it; others are worried about whether or not the right decision has been made.

The above are all different views of the same situation. Each point of view makes the overall picture more detailed and various, adding to the situation a richness which, if everyone perceived it in the same way, otherwise would not exist.

Figure B illustrates perception of surroundings as either unfavourable or favourable.

Figure B: DiSC Model: Perception of surroundings

The DiSC model

How one perceives...



Definition of *Oneself*

The second part of the DiSC model is the theory, that we each perceive ourselves as being **either** more powerful than our surroundings **or** less powerful than our surroundings. This indicates, how much influence and control the individual perceives himself as having over the situations, people or events in his surroundings.

Those who perceive themselves as being more powerful than their surroundings believe that they can achieve their goal through will-power or by persuading others.

Those who perceive themselves as being less powerful than their surroundings believe that they can achieve their goals through sustained collaboration with others, or by sticking to established procedures for ensuring quality.

Again, neither of the two perceptions is more correct or appropriate than the other; they are just different.

Here also the difference can be very fine, but it exists, as the following examples show:

- One person waiting in a crowded restaurant thinks, “I could really straighten out this place”. Another thinks, “ I must find out how many are ahead of me on the waiting list”.
- In the evaluation of a new training programme, one person is convinced that he or she can persuade the others to accept the programme he or she likes best. Another trusts to the evaluation of the whole group and wishes to proceed with the programme the majority thinks best.
- At a sales meeting, one person is convinced that he or she can overcome all possible obstacles to the sale. Another knows that his or her product meets all of the customer’s demands on standards and quality.
- During a group meeting, one person contributes by being able to raise the others’ enthusiasm, while another contributes by supporting and backing up the group.

Figure C illustrates perception of *oneself* as more or less powerful than the surroundings.

The DiSC model

How one perceives...

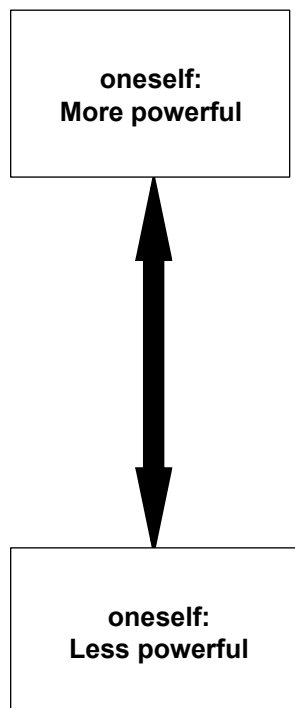


Figure C: The DiSC model: Perception of oneself

The integrated model

By combining *perception of the surroundings* and *oneself in relation to the surroundings* we get a model with four dimensions/factors, each of which is distinct from the others. The integrated model appears thus:

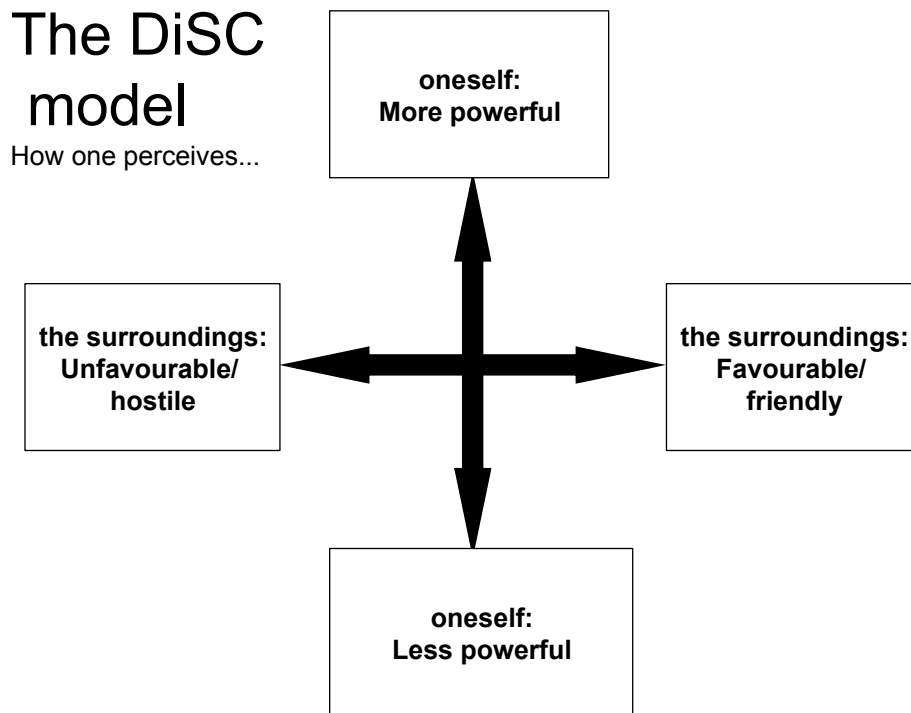


Figure D: the DiSC model – integrated

The integrated model gives four distinct combinations of perceptions, each with its derived behavioural tendency:

Surroundings	Oneself	Behavioural tendency
Unfavourable	More powerful	Dominating behaviour (D)
Favourable	More powerful	Influencing behaviour (i)
Favourable	Less powerful	Stabilising behaviour (S)
Unfavourable	Less powerful	Competence-seeking behaviour (C)

People with a strong D-tendency dominate, because they see challenges for them to overcome and see themselves as more powerful than the challenges. They will try to change, overcome or control things.

People with a strong i-tendency try to exercise influence over others out of a feeling of being powerful in favourable surroundings, and wish others to share their perception. They try to exercise influence, because they are convinced that they can.

People with a strong S-tendency cannot be moved to wish radical change, because they wish to preserve their favourable surroundings and because they see themselves as less powerful than their surroundings. They are convinced that the whole is good enough and ought to remain as it is.

People with a strong C-tendency see themselves as being less powerful in unfavourable surroundings. They either use careful analysis as a basis for working towards the achievement of high standards, or they follow existing rules to achieve their goals.

The DiSC dynamics

We know that behaviour can be changed, adapted and is situation-specific. The DiSC model is in keeping with this knowledge. Because the model is based on perception, it makes good sense to talk of changed perception leading to changed behaviour, and vice versa. The dynamic interplay between perception of oneself and of one's surroundings explains why the individual's behaviour can vary from one situation to another. The differences evince a behavioural flexibility that is based on the individual's perception.

Anyone who fills out a Personal Profile at different points in time must notice how the Personal Profile shows variations in perception. Deployed in this way, the Personal Profile System becomes a powerful tool for creating an understanding of oneself in different situations, and reflects the individual's attitude to changing circumstances.

Even though behaviour can change from one situation to another, many behavioural features remain common to a series of situations. As already described, behaviour is also based on fundamental character traits. These traits change little over time and form the basis of who a person is and what he or she does. We can therefore expect that we adapt ourselves and are flexible to meet the situation's demands, but we cannot expect to become completely different.

The Personal Profile System reflects both the behavioural consistency and adaptation of the person filling it out.

The Story behind DiSC: It is older than you think

It began in Greece

The four human types were first described in Greek mythology. According to the legend, the Greek god Zeus gave four gods permission to help mankind receive more of the gods' endowments: Apollo was to endow mankind with spirit; Dionysos was to endow mankind with joy; Epimetheus was to endow mankind with a sense of duty; and Prometheus was to endow mankind with analytical ability.

The Babylonian rulers Heraclitus and Empedocles, who reigned c. 450 BC, identified the four elements: fire, water, earth and air, and they associated these four elements with the four "primary colours": red, blue, yellow and green. They also said that these colours and elements were linked to four fundamental emotional conditions, but unfortunately no record of what these latter were has survived.

At the same time around 450 BC, the Greek doctors Hippocrates and Galen wrote of the four basic temperaments: choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic and melancholic. They claimed that people's temperament was determined by the kind of bodily fluid which predominated inside their inner organs. Yellow gall indicated a choleric temperament – characterised by being decisive, easily angered and self-assured. Blood indicated a sanguine temperament – a warm heart, easily moved, optimistic, outward-going. The phlegmatic temperament, with its inner organs dominated by plasma, was characterised by slowness of action, patience and calm. Black gall indicated a melancholy temperament - serious, worried and gentle. The four temperaments were regarded as being mutually exclusive – an individual assigned to one of them was automatically excluded from the other three. The four temperaments remained popular up to and throughout the Middle Ages.

A couple of thousand years later

The next known and documented contribution to the theory of four types came in the middle of the 19th century. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant identified four comprehensive types of traits, which were linked to the four temperaments.

About a hundred years later, the psychologist Wilhelm Wundt maintained that people possessed two qualities in varying degrees: speed/slowness and strength/weakness. He reorganised the four temperaments in relation to these two varying qualities and placed them in a matrix. He thereby distanced himself from the mutual exclusivity expressed in the earlier theories.

Shortly after, Carl Jung developed his famous theory. He maintained that from the following four pairs of factors, people have in each case one of two fundamental attitudes: introvert/extrovert; sensual/intuitive; intellectual/emotional; judgemental/cognitive. Both attitudes are present in the personality, says Jung. One of them is dominant and conscious, while the other is subordinate and unconscious.

Jung did not mention the four temperaments. Wundt's works appeared several years before Jung's, and as both men lived in fairly close geographical proximity to each other, it seems reasonable to assume that Jung was aware of the four-types theory, but chose not to mention it in his works – not even to refute it to the advantage of his own theory.

In 1928 William M. Marston published his book, "The Emotions of Normal People". For the first time, the four types were identified as dynamic and situation-specific. As Dr John Geier says in his introduction to the modernised version of Marston's work: "It was recognised that that an individual can display many traits." Marston was clearly ahead of his time. Thirty to forty years later, most psychologists began to recognise that a human being can change with his surroundings.

Marston and Jung

Both Marston's ideas on traits and Jung's ideas on types received little recognition from their contemporaries. At that time, the world of psychology was mainly interested in theories and characteristics which applied to all men in common, and not in characteristics which distinguished people from one another.

Did Marston know Jung's work? Did he base his own work on it? Jung's theory is not mentioned in Marston's book. Jung's book was originally published in 1921, and the English version was presumably published a few years later. "The Emotions of Normal People" was published in 1928. It seems reasonable to assume that, even though the dissemination of information took longer in those days, Marston nevertheless had access to Jung's works. If Marston had based his work on that of Jung, he would doubtless have mentioned it.

The present time

No further development of the four-types theory took place until the middle of the 1950s, when the Russian psychologist Pavlov, with his famous experiments on dogs, tried to demonstrate that certain behavioural traits are connected with certain processes in the central nervous system. He maintained that there were four types of central nervous system, and linked them to the four temperaments. The experiments have since been discredited on the grounds that they were carried out under laboratory conditions rather than in "real life". Regardless of the fact that they were experiments, Pavlov did identify the neurological background which underlay the observable characteristics.

In 1977, Max Lüscher presented a new "angle" on the four-types theory. In his book "The Four Colour person" he postulates that a person's choice of colour represents characteristics of which the colours are the expression. People who prefer red are attracted to prestige, success, power and competition. Those who prefer yellow are attracted to joy, sincerity, speed and hopes. Those who prefer blue are attracted to peace, security, loyalty and patience. Those who prefer green are attracted to stability, resistance to change, acquisitiveness and precision.

Right now

Recently, especially within the last ten years, a lot of tools/measuring instruments have made their appearance all over the world. A number of them are based on the aforementioned fundamental – and acknowledged – theories, and are loyal to these. Other tools proceed from theories of a more “modern cut”, which usually means a popularised combination of the most easily comprehensible elements of several of the fundamental theories. It thus appears that even the Baltic “test market” consists of tens of different systems. Only few of these can demonstrate an adequate validity and reliability in application to the Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian population. One of these is Inscape’s Personal Profile, of which since 1997 more than 15,000 examples have been used in the Baltics.

Correlation between the DiSC model and other theories concerning human behaviour-types

William M. Marston: Emotions of Normal People (1928)	D Dominance	i Social influence	S Stability	C Conscientiousness Competence
Greek Mythology	Apollo (spirit)	Dionysus (joy)	Epithemeteus (sense of duty)	Prometheus (analysis)
Hippocrates i.a.: The 4 temperaments (450 BC)	Choleric (yellow bile)	Sanguine (blood)	Phlegmatic (plasma)	Melancholic (black bile)
Wilson Learning Systems: Managing Interpersonal Relationships	Driver	Expressive	Amiable	Analytical
Robert Blake & Jane Mouton: The Managerial Grid	9.1	1.9	4.9	9.4
Paul Hersey & Kenneth Blanchard: Situational Leadership	S1	S3	S3	S1
Max Lüscher: The 4-colour person	Red	Yellow	Blue	Green
Eric Berne: Transaction Analysis	Critical parents The rebel (child)	Sollicitous parents The natural child	Sollicitous parents The well-adjusted child	Critical parents The little professor (child)
The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator	Cannot be compared with DiSC as the 2 theories were developed with a different focus and thus describe 2 different things. For further information see the article on DiSC/MBTI of July 1995			

Elaboration of D-, i-, S- and C-behaviour

D – Dominance

The “Dominating” person loves challenges. Some regard him as being inconsiderate, and he is very competitive. He has respect for those who can win even in the face of very poor odds, and he contributes his best efforts when he has authority and responsibility. He sets himself high targets and wants his authority to be accepted and taken seriously. If he has no challenges facing him, he is liable to “rock the boat”. The “Dominating” person often works very long and diligently. In fact, challenges bring out the best in these persons.

In their intercourse with others, the “D”s are normally immediate, direct and straightforward. They say what they mean and mean what they say. They can be brusque, even sarcastic, but they do not bear a grudge. They flare up easily and they come easily into discussion with their colleagues. They take it for granted that others look up to them, they like taking the lead and being in the limelight. If they are not the centre of attention, they can well become offensive. They easily hurt others’ feelings without being aware of it, and particularly like being praised, although at bottom they are egoistic. The “Dominating” person is normally an individualist who goes his own way and is self-sufficient. They can be tyrannical and disregard others in order to achieve their goal. They do not worry too much about rules and promises, and can be excessively critical and judgemental if people or things do not live up to their expectations. Once they have said what they want, they often forget what they have said. They normally want to enter an organisation with a view to achieving a particular result, rather than to take part in social activities.

The “D”s are interested in the unusual and dangerous. They are curious and normally have many different interests, and are ready to try their hand at anything. They are full of new ideas. Because of their many interests, they prefer surroundings that are continually changing, but easily lose interest in a task if it provides no further challenges, and thus are happy to have others complete the work for them. The “Dominating” person has a tendency to get involved in too many things simultaneously, simply in order to participate in as many different activities as possible. Their inherent restlessness causes them always to be seeking new horizons. They tend to become dissatisfied and impatient with detailed work, although they can do it if it is necessary to attain a particular goal – but on the condition that these details are not too repetitive or monotonous.

It often happens that, in an early stage of their careers, “Dominating “ persons frequently change jobs because of impatience or insufficient adaptability. They tend to take a liberal view of others’ rights when it comes to getting work done or getting on in life. They should receive goals and recognition of their efforts.

i – Influence

Persons of the “Influence”-style are outgoing, persuasive and usually optimistic. As a rule, they see something good in every situation. They are chiefly interested in people, their problems and activities. They are willing to help others with their tasks and also to accept others’ help with their own tasks. In this way, the “i” tends to lose sight of the commercial perspective, but others appear to be very accommodating towards him or her. They enter an organisation because of the concomitant social activities.

“Influence”-people easily make new acquaintances. At first meeting they address others by their first name and adopt the warm and direct attitude of life-long friends. They claim to know an incredible number of people and like to bandy names about.

The “i”s tend to superficiality and can change sides in an argument with no apparent sign that they are aware of their inconsistency. They often draw premature conclusions and act from emotional motives. “Influence”-people make general decisions based on a superficial analysis of the facts, and their trust in and acceptance of other people leads them to misjudge others’ abilities. They feel that they can persuade and motivate others to act and be as they wish them to act and be.

This person works well in surroundings where it is important to empathise with others. Public relations and promotion are areas where they naturally feel at home. As they are not much inclined to destroy the “pleasant atmosphere”, they can find it difficult to make demands or give an objective response.

S - Stability

The “Stable” person is normally friendly, calm and relaxed. Such people are reserved and controlled. As they very seldom flare up, they can often nurse a grievance and bear a grudge. They like to have a close relationship to a relatively limited group of staff or colleagues. The “S”s appears to others as content and relaxed. Patience and steadiness are the qualities that characterise their normal behaviour. They are good neighbours and always ready to help those they regard as their friends. They strive to maintain the status quo by resisting change, especially when it is unexpected or sudden. Once they have mastered a certain pattern of work, they can pursue it with an apparently limitless patience.

They are usually quite “acquisitive”, and are very attached to their work group, their club or their family. They are closely bound to their family and do not well tolerate being separated from them for long periods at a time.

The “S”-person functions well as a member of a group and has a great facility for coordinating his efforts with those of others. They are quick to develop good working habits and are good at routine tasks (not necessarily at a low level).

C – Conscientiousness, Competence

The “Competent” person is peaceful and adapts to the situation in order to avoid hostility. They are modest and placid, and they endeavour greatly to do their work as well as possible. They seek to avoid criticism from their environment by exercising a high degree of self-criticism.

They are careful and can take a long time to make important decisions, as they first wish to consider all the available facts. This can be a source of irritation to their colleagues who perhaps act more swiftly.

Because they find it difficult to make decisions, they often wait to see “which way the wind is blowing” before taking any action. They have a good sense of timing and a fine power of judgement when it comes to choosing the right decision at the right time.

The “Competent” person is able to form himself according to the image which he thinks is expected of him. He will go to extreme lengths to avoid a conflict and very rarely steps on others’ toes.

They strive to live an orderly life and are inclined to follow prevailing customs, be they norms or guidelines, both in the personal and business spheres.

They like to proceed according to a fixed plan, and work precisely with attention to detail. In this way, they seek to be prepared for possible consequences and to avoid being in an unexpected situation.