



University of Maryland

Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering
Communication for Project Managers (ENCE424)
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Pearl Diving Assignment 1

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1. Introduction

Management is a subject that I have been interested in for a long time, and I do believe that communication is one important aspect of it, especially because in a project it is possible to go as far as we need or wish to into analysis, scheduling, risks and costs, but if all of that information is not well communicated throughout the project's stakeholders than the purpose of the information itself (inform) is not met.

2. Techniques and concepts acquired

2.1. The Pool of Shared Meaning

The *Pool of Shared Meaning* (Patterson *et al.*, 2012) is a concept that I truly find interesting and that has had a real impact on how I deal with conversations, especially in a group.

The *Pool of Shared Meaning* is the concept where in a conversation there is a pool of opinions which is the sum of the opinions of each individual willing to share his/her opinion in it. It is obvious to say that if an individual is not comfortable in sharing his/her thoughts, it is going to be impossible to have that piece of opinion inside the “*Pool*” (Patterson *et al.*, 2012).

The first point I would like to discuss is exactly the one just mentioned where an individual must feel comfortable in sharing an opinion, otherwise the pool will not be filled with helpful opinions. From these words I have realized that in the best, as a project manager for various University project, I may have not made the team environment a good place to share ideas. A practical example of this would be me thinking that, because someone was not speaking and sharing opinions, was because they did not have anything to share; throughout other project, and especially after reading about this concept in the cited book, I have come to realize that I may have not developed a comfortable space to share ideas. In my first projects I had a different approach than the one I have developed in more recent projects (or general approaches to group conversations): the one where I would let anyone that wanted to talk the chance to just speak, without raising a hand or anything alike; this made it possible for more extrovert personalities to speak, but made it really hard for introvert personalities to do the same as they were mostly overwhelmed by the speeches of the previous ones. Another approach that I now believe is more useful, and that in other management classes I have been taught, is the one where the Project Manager goes “around the table” and asks each individual their thoughts and opinions; I saw that this led to an increase in participation as everyone was encouraged to speak, and while they were the ones speaking nobody else could speak, and everyone would listen. This approach doesn't always work and there are of course other communication problems that leads to people not sharing their opinions in the “*Pool*” – I will cover this topic in the next section.

Another reflection that I managed to develop after reading about the *Pool of Shared Meaning* concept is the one where I personally need a pool of shared meaning to develop my ideas and knowledge and in turns grow as an individual. I believe that the pool of shared meaning puts us in a very uncomfortable position sometimes, a position where we must listen, record, and consider opinions that might be completely different from our owns. Nonetheless this makes us (or at least me) more prone to understanding whether my opinion is actually a “good” one, or a “bad” one, or if may have to change my beliefs and opinions on a certain subject.

In my home University a lot of the projects we had to work with were design-based projects, this means that many ideas are related to design problems (the type of material, the type of design, the benefits of using a certain solution, the benefits of using a certain technique, ...); especially in a setting like this one, I strongly believe that having many opinions that might disagree with each other of enormous benefit to the success of the project itself, and since no individual can be sure to have the perfect solution, it is important that everyone is open to accept other ideas to verify if their original opinion was the right one for the project, or if there is a better one. In more broader senses I believe this is true also for more normal conversations where someone might be speaking about any topic (cultural topics, political topics, economical topics, ...). Therefore, after understanding its importance, I have decided to make myself capable of better understanding, listening, accepting, and considering other opinions and ideas that might disagree with mine.

2.2. Body language – The importance of understanding others

In one of the lectures, we have discussed about body language, and this sparked some thoughts connected to the concepts discussed in the previous section (2.1).

Research has extensively managed to prove that body language is a fundamental part of our communication, and it is a crucial one since often it is involuntary (Mandal, 2014) and in some cases cross-cultural (Patel, 2014).

There are many parts of the body that can communicate something to the receiver (posture, facial expressions, hand movement, body movement, ...), the one that I have been mostly interested in, and that I found more useful for myself is facial expressions. The reason why I believe this specific non-verbal vehicle of communication is the most useful for me is simply due to the setting that a project is based in. Usually team meetings are either online, or around a table where people sit, and you can often only see the upper part of the body (or at least it is easier to see that part).

As previously mentioned, there are some modes of non-verbal communication, such as eye contact, which are cross-cultural (Patel, 2014). It is easily understandable why these are the most powerful: I do not need to fully comprehend the cultural background of a person to decipher (or better assume) the non-verbal signals that the individual is sending me. This highly applies to the concept of the *Pool of Shared Meaning* that was discussed previously, and more specifically to the problem that the pool must be shared, otherwise it is useless. I therefore believe it is crucial to differentiate between people that are not speaking because they do not have anything to add and people that are shy, feel uncomfortable, or do not have the courage to express their opinion – one tool to decrease the number of these occurrences is the one expressed previously, another one is through the analysis of facial expressions, and particularly eye-contact where a downward look might indicate modesty or insecurity (Patel, 2014; Mandal, 2014), or more generally a sign that a person is not confident about their opinion, and maybe that is the reason why they are not sharing it. It is nonetheless important not to assume that this is a direct correlation, when talking about broader samples of people it is easier to draw generic conclusions, but individuals are often different from the average conclusions that can be drawn from the vast sample to which the individual belongs (Le Bon, 1897); and it is equally

important in my opinion to realize that only one signal (such as eye-contact) can't be sufficient to draw a meaningful conclusion. This led me to realize that, after individualizing the people that might have something to say, but were not comfortable enough to do it, it is important to “double check” with a one-to-one conversation to understand the problem, try to solve it, but most importantly receive the feedback that was not originally expressed, which is important to the *Pool of Shared Meaning*.

2.3. Know your audience

While reading the section in the “*Pocket Guide to Public Speaking*” about the importance of knowing your audience (O’Hair, Rubenstein & Stewart, 2019), I have come to realize how useful it is to fundamentally understand who I am talking to, and that in the past I could have avoided wasting my and other people’s time.

The concept of analyzing the audience simply refers to the importance of knowing various factors that define who we are talking to, for example age, gender, education, cultural background, ... It has happened to me once that I gave a presentation to an audience, I was not expecting to have a defined knowledge (much higher than what the presentation was about), the presentation therefore, turned out to be completely useless for the listeners as they already knew all about it. I gave the same presentation before, to an audience that was not knowledgeable about the topic and the feedback was extremely positive. I have only come to realize and analyze my mistake after reading the concept in the previously cited book. I did not analyze my audience at all, I had the tools to do it, I chose not to because I was confident that the audience was not knowledgeable about the topic, and I was wrong.

After that occurrence, fortunately, I never gave a presentation to the “wrong” audience, but surely after reading the book, I have decided to take an active approach and inform myself as much as possible about the audience in front of which I will be presenting. This job is fairly easy to do, especially when the presentation is given in a well-known setting (if I know I will be presenting something in a particular podcast, I can sure ask the host about the audience).

3. My network

Thanks to my past education in management (at my home University) I have a good grasp of the importance of networking and through the years, thanks to various factors which I will explain in the next paragraphs, I have managed to grow my network to the point where now it is growing at a relatively slow rate.

I have always understood the importance of keeping a connection with people I was working with, that is why since I started working (around the age of 14) in the Engineering field, I have tried to keep as many work-connections as possible. This helped me recently to find an internship for example.

Along with this type of connections (which mainly are personal ones, and not strictly professional) I also developed strictly professional connections thanks to my YouTube channel. In fact, I started to collaborate with a company in the financial education field exactly because of my YouTube channel, which gave me sort of a “portfolio”; they reached out to me and asked to collaborate. The same collaboration led to me acquiring the certification as a technical

analyst, which led to me entering the Italian Society of Technical Analysts, which led to more connections, which led to me doing a course (for free) to pass the exam as financial advisor in Italy, which led to more connections in a “cascade effect”. In addition, viewers of my channel are also a grate connection, and I have made several ones that made me acquire more skills.

In the future I plan to continue exactly as I did so far, take the opportunities I manage to find on my path, and keep the numbers, emails, names, ... of the people I encounter. But I generally found that speaking is a great way to increase my network, just being a part of a society is not sufficient (and often not necessary), but speaking, and letting people know you are interested in a certain topic has led to stronger and better connections, that in my case tend to be more useful in the future. One of the many ways to keep myself connected with someone that I believe works the most in my culture / country (Switzerland) is phone numbers: having a WhatsApp number of someone is a great way to be able to reach out to them and at the same time be available to them (not many people use Linked-in, and traditional social networks are considered less professional environments).

4. Key Attributes of an Effective Communicator

4.1. Confidence: 6/10

My lack of confidence is primarily since my native language is not English, and in oral conversations I sometimes make grammatical, or sentence-structure errors that might make it harder for people to fully understand me. For this reason, I have decided to practice English more by either making YouTube videos or simply speak more since the problem is not a lack of knowledge, rather a lack of extensive practice; a third solution is exercising the muscles to speak more clearly and with less stress on pronouncing correctly, which helps in giving more attention to wording for example.

4.2. Captivating: 5/10

I consider myself as being too much of an “engineer”, this refers to the stereotype where engineers are often too technical and mathematical, and when they tend to explain something, they tend to involve a lot the brain, and less the “heart”. This often results in my presentation or speeches to be less captivating than what they should be. To solve this problem, I am trying to make emotional connections (often through real-life examples) with the concepts I am expressing and the people that are listening to me; I therefore think of the examples, think if those examples are easily relatable, and analyze the audience to understand the degree of technicality I can speak with.

4.3. Concision: 5/10

Connected to the “engineer” problem I often find myself not being concise enough. I tend to overexplain myself and the ideas I am expressing; this often leads to confusion and boredom. To solve this problem, I am trying to express my ideas in the shortest amount of time possible and with the simplest wording possible; to achieve this I make a list of the most important things to say, think about the wording to use, plan an “A to B” path in my head, and if possible, rehears the speech.

4.4. Eye-contact: 6/10

I am generally an introvert person, it is therefore harder for me to have strong eye-contact with people, especially for an extended period, and especially in one-to-one conversations: I feel shy and uncomfortable. To solve this problem, I simply decided to force myself through the discomfort, try to “act normal” and try to think about it as least as possible. Closing my eyes for a second of two while “humming” also is a great technique for me as it relaxes me and breaks the tension I feel.

4.5. Patience to respond: 7/10

This is one of the things I have been able to improve through the years, but I am still trying to improve to this day. I am quite impatient to let everyone know my opinion, especially my opinion about other people’s opinions. I have come to realize that this is not a very efficient way to collect ideas and make a more informed decision myself. For this reason, I have decided to “go around the table” and let everyone speak before me, take the time to consider everyone’s opinion, doubt myself and then speak my mind. I also double check with everyone and ask if they are finished talking (unless it is obvious that they have).

5. DISC Personality Test

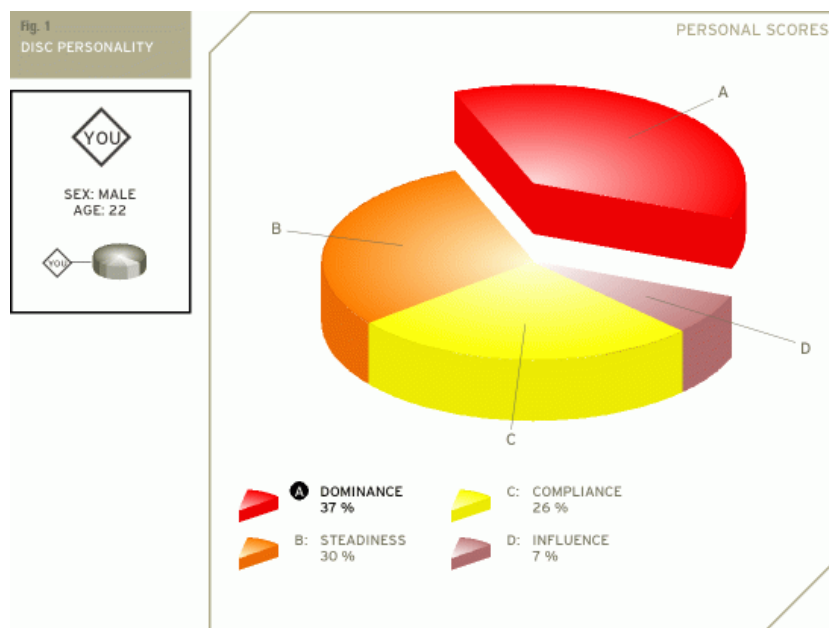


Figure 1 - DISC Personality Test results (123test.com)

I find myself agreeing quite a bit with the results of the test. In the past I have taken other personality tests (16 Personalities for example) which showed very similar results. I am a “Dominant” person in the sense that I do take problems as they come, and I tend to deal with them in a very practical manner. I could spend hours (or days) to analyze and solve a problem (whether a problem with my behavior or personality, or a generic practical problem). I believe this helps me being a better project manager because I don’t let myself down as easily, I tend to fight long and only when a problem (or project) is unsolvable I quit.

I also agree with the low score in “*Influence*”; I don’t influence people effectively, I speak my opinions but I don’t really want people to accept them and often prefer using other people’s ideas; this is not to say that if I have a problem to solve I can’t do it, I can (as explained above), I just prefer hearing from others and taking inspiration from others. I believe being able to connect with people and have a higher rating in “influence” is a must for leaders rather than managers, but knowledge in leading people is beneficial to a project manager too, and that is why I try to be more connected to people, understand their feelings better, and have one-to-one conversations to better understand how they are feeling while working on a project I am the manager of.

The quote on the website says that I am supposed to be perceived as “*rational and creative at the same time*”. I do believe I am rational and creative at the same time, but I also believe people usually perceive only the rational part of me. Speaking with my psychologist I have realized that I am a bit of a creative person, and that is a reason why I find myself switching between many professional projects, personal projects, and always trying new things.

Being aware of these traits helps me understand my strengths and weaknesses, and how to use them in a professional and personal setting to grow as an individual and to make myself a better project manager (for example I know I must improve my abilities to emotionally connect with people).

6. Conflict Management Styles Assessment

The test shows that I have a collaborative style of dealing with conflicts and I must agree with the result. I do find myself trying to find the root of the conflict and understand the other person to try and find a solution for the problem itself. I think there is a mutual investment that must be made from both parties to solve the problem, and I think everyone must be willing to listen to others and understand them. I have my opinions and ideas, but I am open to changing them if I believe the other person is “more” right than me, or if solving the conflict, the way the other person suggests is beneficial to the relationship and / or project.

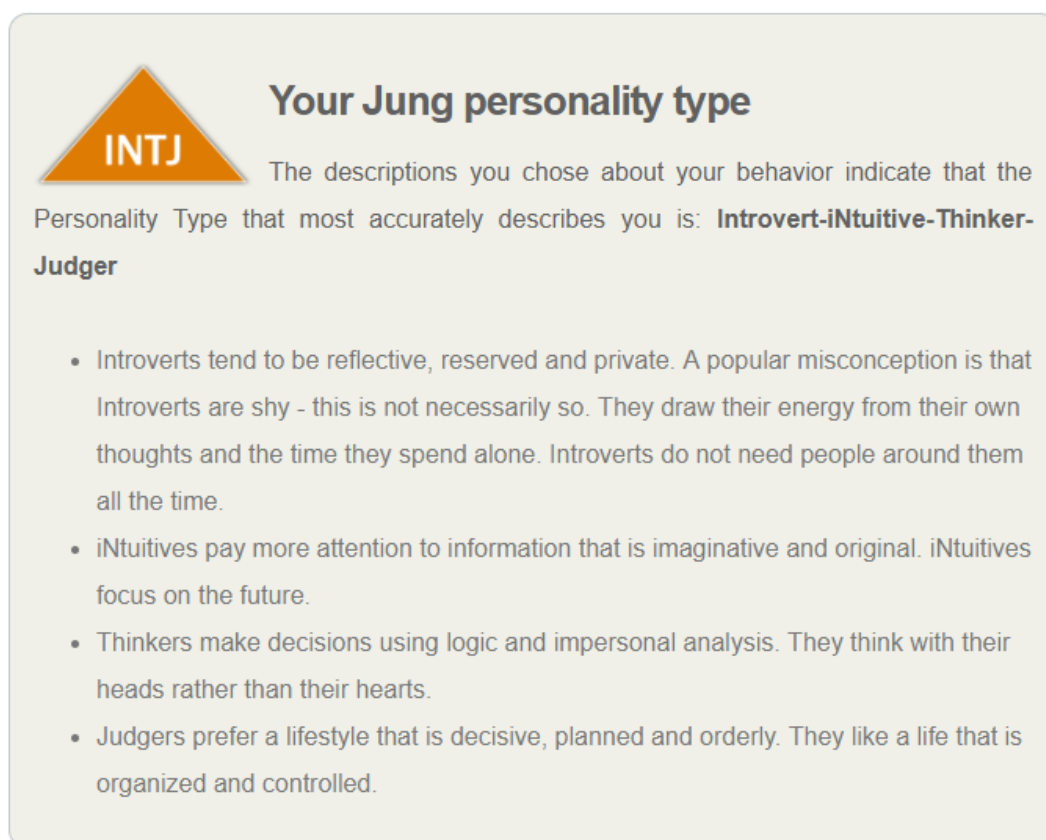
For this reason, I am also compromising, and I like to find a compromise that suits all the parties involved, which nonetheless requires everyone to give up on something. This is a style I would like to improve because I sometimes find it difficult to give up my portion, but if it is beneficial, I should try to “let it go” more.

To make it easier for me to “give up” my part is to understand what I truly want (Patterson *et al.*, 2012). Asking myself that question helps me understand where I want to go with the conflict, and what is the end-result I want; in addition, it helps me understand what I can and what I can’t give up. Sometimes I find myself being picky about a certain topic that is only a “childish cry” of mine and has no real benefit to the project or conversation – these are the things that I don’t need and asking the question of “What do I really want?” helps me to identify and let go.

I remember a specific occasion, where I was being the manager of a group project and I was having an idea on how to approach a problem. I thought that in that occasion was better to use a specific material (mineral wool insulation) to insulate the wall of the building we were designing. A team member proposed natural wool, and I thought at first it was not a good idea, but I did not say so immediately, I instead asked why he thought natural wool was better, how

we were going to source it, where was manufactured and what were the advantages. It turned out natural wool was a lot more sustainable than the regular mineral insulation (a requirement of the project imposed by the teacher). It also had similar heat resistance factors, better behavior against mold and so on. My problem was that I never considered natural wool insulation, I was not aware of it, and my past experience led me to think that there was a reason why in the industry I was often seeing mineral wool and never natural wool, the problem is that the reason was mainly cost, but since the University project was not highly based on cost, but other factors were more important (mainly sustainability) in that situation natural wool was a better choice. So, I made a compromise, I changed my opinion, and decided (with the support of other team members as well) that we should have proceeded with natural wool.

7. Jung Personality Test



The image is a screenshot of a Jung Personality Test result from 123test.com. It features an orange triangle icon with the letters 'INTJ' inside. To the right of the icon, the title 'Your Jung personality type' is displayed in a bold, dark font. Below the title, a paragraph states: 'The descriptions you chose about your behavior indicate that the Personality Type that most accurately describes you is: **Introvert-iNtuitive-Thinker-Judger**'. Below this paragraph, there is a bulleted list of four points describing the characteristics of each personality type: Introverts, iNtuitives, Thinkers, and Judgers.

INTJ Your Jung personality type

The descriptions you chose about your behavior indicate that the Personality Type that most accurately describes you is: **Introvert-iNtuitive-Thinker-Judger**

- Introverts tend to be reflective, reserved and private. A popular misconception is that Introverts are shy - this is not necessarily so. They draw their energy from their own thoughts and the time they spend alone. Introverts do not need people around them all the time.
- iNtuitives pay more attention to information that is imaginative and original. iNtuitives focus on the future.
- Thinkers make decisions using logic and impersonal analysis. They think with their heads rather than their hearts.
- Judgers prefer a lifestyle that is decisive, planned and orderly. They like a life that is organized and controlled.

Figure 2 - Jung Personality Test (123test.com)

I believe this test highly represents my personality and I must agree with basically all the statement; actually, I have done a 16personalities test a couple of years ago which showed the same result (INTJ-A or “Architect” type of personality with an assertive tendency). I am introvert and I do find it hard and tiring to be in a socially active environment (parties and such). I also am a very logical person and I do believe this is a very important trait of mine; this is also why I tend to question my beliefs and double check the facts I assume “true”. My main weakness, which is something that I want to work on, is being “Dismissive of Emotions”, I do believe that I am not often capable of giving an emotional context to situations and

problems (especially when it comes to conflicts), even though I try to understand this emotional context.

I think that this test and the previous test (which I have spoken about in section 5) highly agree with each other, and to me is no surprise at all. I have also spoken about this with my psychologist and the approach that I have decided to take is to simply investigate and talk to people as much as possible, listen to them and try to relate to them.

Overall, I believe that my personality can suit a Project Manager position, but I also believe that I need to improve my emotional intelligence to be able to talk to people and communicate with them more effectively.

8. References

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