Starting to understand team strengths

So you have all got together at your first meeting to tackle your assignment brief (and if you've not yet started, begin by reading ASK handout *Introducing team work* from the *Working in groups* series. To start to build a *team* you will all need to think closely about how individual team members fit together in a complementary, resourceful and constructive way. Learning style preferences are a useful starting point to this process and there are a number of models to choose from.

Here, a very simplified adaption of the Activist/Reflector/Pragmatist/Theorist model proposed by Honey & Mumford in their 1992 *Manual of Learning Styles* will be used.

Style	Style characteristics
Activist	Acts first, asks questions later. Open to new experiences. Adaptable. Less comfortable working alone or to detailed instruction. Can be impatient with detailed or lengthy rationale/explanation.
Reflector	Cautious observation precedes any action. Good at data collection/ analysis and 'big picture' conclusions. Tendency to miss deadlines. Can be less adaptable in faster changing situations. Tend to dislike being pushed to conclusions.
Pragmatist	Excited when applying theory and technique to a challenge. Putting ideas to work comes naturally but needs to see the point and benefit of putting such ideas to work. Can find others' lack of focus irritating.
Theorist	Relishes logic and rationale, and objectivity and evidence-based thinking. Can find lack of structure and clarity uncomfortable. Discussing feelings is not a strength.

Remember, these are oversimplifications and we will all be combinations of these style preferences (and probably of other style-types as well). One style preference may tend to dominate in certain contexts, but in different situations and at different times this may well vary. It is also the case that as we gain experience, we tend to become more 'multi-modal' in style. In other words, although we might have a default style preference, we can develop adaptability and 'agility' in our use of different learning styles. To be able to consciously mix and match styles and strategies to different contexts is a treasured asset to acquire.

Despite its simplicity you can use this model as a starting point to identify and discuss what sort of overall style profile you and your team members appear to have. To do this, each team member ranks themselves against each style characteristic summarised above using the following criteria.

Criterion	Rank value
"I am mostly like this"	4
"I am often like this"	3
"I am sometimes like this"	2
"I am rarely like this"	1

Some worked examples of this are shown below. (Note: you can award yourself the same rank value for more than one style preference as you probably already have some multi-modality!)

Name: *Nikhil*	Activist	Reflector	Pragmatist	Theorist
Rank value	1	2	4	4

So Nikhil sees himself mostly with Pragmatist/Theorist characteristics, sometimes with Reflector characteristics and rarely with Activist characteristics.

Name: *Suzie*	Activist	Reflector	Pragmatist	Theorist
Rank value	4	1	2	1

Suzie on the other hand sees herself with mostly Activist characteristics, sometimes with Pragmatist characteristics, and rarely with Reflector or Theorist characteristics.

Remember there is no right or wrong, or better or worse outcome to this. It is about open and honest self-appraisal. It will also help you to have those all important first meeting agenda conversations (see ASK handout *Introducing team work* from the *Working in groups* series).

Once you have all done this individually, you can use this information to start to build a team profile. To do this you need bring all of the individual 'profiles' together: an example is shown below.

	Activist	**Reflector**	**Pragmatist**	**Theorist**
Nikhil	1	2	(4)	(4)
Suzie	(4)	1	2	1
Zahraa	1	(3)	1	(4)
Sam	1	2	2	(3)
'3s and 4s' total	1	1	1	3

Next, to get a sense of where the strengths and possible gaps in capability lie in the team, add up the number of times a 4 or a 3 occurs in each column, as shown above.

What is quickly revealed in this example is that whilst there is capability across the styles, there is a combined tendency towards the Theorist style. One possible consequence of this is that the practicalities of delivering your assignment might be problematic. But the fact that you have identified this right at the beginning means that you can plan for this and manage it effectively as a team. It is only a problem if you do not know it exists, or having identified it then ignore it and do nothing to adjust for it.

The other great value in this exercise is that you have started to work together as a group on a task that will contribute directly towards your project outcome. Further, you have got to know each other in a professional and purposeful way, and have already started to problem-solve and to think constructively about solutions to challenges.

Reference: Honey, P., & Mumford, A. (1992). *The Manual of Learning Styles*. Maidenhead: Peter Honey.

For further guidance, contact the Academic Skills Unit (ASK).

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