

# Versatility: It's NOT Soft Stuff!

*Don't let the economy blind you to the importance of your organization's human bottom line. With the right tools and the power of versatility, you can engage the endless power of your staff's human spirit and commitment.*

**By Francie Dalton**

In the last week alone, three longtime clients have called to discuss the impact of the economic crisis on internal relationships among staff. Despite improved forecasts, they said, staff was still operating out of fear, and they were having more frequent and more severe interpersonal problems than ever before. All three wanted the same advice:

What can we do in times like these to unify staff—to stop this pulling apart, this unraveling-at-the-seams kind of contention that's occurring every single day? It's eroding productivity and making me crazy!

"Hats off," I said to all three of them, "for being attentive enough to notice that relationships are fraying and for acknowledging the undeniable but often trivialized impact on productivity." Beyond the crazy-making effects of these conflicts, there are real costs imposed by such contention.

Some CEOs have little esteem for what they see as the "soft stuff," citing wages for work as the extent to which they should be expected to engage with their employees. Others are so drained by protracted periods of crisis management that they lack the energy for any initiative that seems esoteric. But CEOs can't afford to ignore relationship problems. Emotional and distracting, such problems interfere with productivity, imposing negative impacts on business operations. That's not esoteric! Consider these examples:

- Two feuding vice presidents were rivals for a CEO's favor. Both actively incited their fiefdoms toward ardent territorialism, nonresponsiveness, and gossip.
- A senior director, coached toward a less abrasive management style, believed he had complied. A key subordinate disagreed and couldn't cope. Her work quality suffered. His harshness increased. She thought, "hostile work environment." He thought, "termination." The standstill persisted as each dug in.
- An IT genius who was deeply engaged in various critically important, revenue-generating initiatives had meltdowns whenever he convinced himself his boss didn't like him best.

- A CFO was so rigid that his operation ceased to serve the evolving needs of the organization. No one individual had sufficient grounds to complain to the CEO, but cumulatively, the CFO's inflexibility was making innovation impossible.

In these examples, senior executives absolved themselves of any accountability for resolving "such trivialities." As a result, the situations festered, quickly and continuously exacting what I call the "Six Costs of Interpersonal Toxicity in Organizations":

1. Project delays;
2. Cost overruns;
3. Rework;
4. Missed deadlines;
5. Consulting costs;
6. Productivity losses and opportunity costs.

In the first example alone, imagine how much time was wasted while the CEO listened to the two rivals' complaints, the combatants duked it out with each other, the combatants and their colleagues commiserated with each other, and staff gossiped about the latest escalation.

That's not "soft stuff" — that's millions of dollars in lost productivity and revenue.

### Resonant Leadership

None of us can afford such losses. But the solution isn't a spreadsheet or a strategy; it is a sustainable quality of leadership that stimulates and nurtures committed human spirits in the workplace — a quality that elicits emotional maturity and collegiality within even the most pressured and battle-weary executive teams.

An essential prerequisite to successfully achieving this quality of leadership is versatility, because it enables you to construct and communicate messages that resonate with a diverse group of individuals, all of whom are wired differently. In tough times like these, your messages must penetrate staff members' intellect, connect with their best self, and inspire them to adjust their behavior toward the

achievement of specific results.

Now, want the good news? Developing and practicing the versatility necessary to craft resonant messaging for your diverse team isn't as difficult as you may think. The first step is understanding the seven basic patterns of workplace behavior, and their implications for how you communicate and interact with those you lead.

There is much more to these behaviors than what is presented below; for the purposes of this article only the aspects of each style that are most difficult to manage in today's economy

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are emphasized. To help you develop a heightened appreciation for how versatility contributes to resonant messaging, examples of how tough messages can be tailored to align with the core values of each of the seven styles have also been included.

Understanding these seven styles will give you clearer insight into how your employees are responding to today's economy. Combine that understanding with a commitment to use the principles of versatility, and you'll enhance your effectiveness in calming, stabilizing, and unifying staff.

### Style One: Commanders

Results oriented, aloof, bossy, and not terribly tactful, Commanders need to be in a position to take initiative.

**Motivated by:** Control. Results and order are what they value most. Delegate substantive assignments to them, then step back and let them wing it.

**Effective feedback:** Commanders want

to be evaluated based solely on results without consideration for method. Instead of criticizing behavior, clarify the difference between the results they achieved and the results that could have been achieved with more regard for method. Commanders will listen to feedback if it is grounded in improving results, order, and/or control.

**Sample message:** "As you know, the economy is hurting our attendance numbers. I need your skills to achieve two crucial and urgent results. First, how much do you believe you can reduce attrition, and what would that require? Then I need

to know by how much you can negotiate a reduction in hotel penalties for whatever attrition you determine is inevitable."

**Sweet spot:** Commanders want to be valued and validated for their ability to overcome obstacles, to implement, and to achieve results.

### Style Two: Drifters

Free spirited and easygoing, disorganized and impulsive, Drifters are virtually antithetical to Commanders.

**Motivated by:** Flexibility. Drifters have difficulty with structure of any kind, including rules, work hours, details, or deadlines. Give them short, highly varied assignments, providing as much flexibility as possible. Keep the work context light hearted and establish a sense of collaborative comradeship around their work.

**Effective feedback:** If you make Drifters aware that their behavior is about to cause negative consequences for *you personally*, they will deliver whatever is needed. Impervious to reprimands

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brought upon themselves, Drifters' benevolent natures prevent them from knowingly getting others in trouble.

**Sample message:** "Yep, with the budget cuts we've made this year, I know we gotta allow for some pretty creative approaches to make everything work. And your materials look fantastic. But hey, help me out a little bit here. What you're doing involves multiple departments and deadlines, so you gotta deliver on time. Otherwise I'm the one who's gonna take heat. Ya know? You gotta have my back on this."

**Sweet spot:** Drifters want to be valued and validated for their innovation and creativity, ability to improvise on a moment's notice, and out-of-the-box thinking.

## Style Three: Attackers

Angry and hostile, cynical and grouchy, Attackers are often critical of others in public.

**Motivated by:** Respect. Attackers view themselves as superior and communicate using condescending tones and biting sarcasm. They cannot tolerate peace and tranquility; if there is no war to fight, they'll create one. Leverage this by reassigning work to minimize the frequency of others' interactions with the Attacker, or consider isolating the Attacker so that person can work solo.

**Effective feedback:** Rather than directly reprimanding their behavior, ask "self-convicting" questions that elicit Attackers' opinions—without seeming to bait them. For example, asking Attackers to tell you what they believe to be the top-five characteristics of effective leaders shows respect for their opinion. In answering the question, they set the bar

for their own performance.

**Sample message:** "Strength and resilience don't reside equally in everyone. Those of us who have it in abundance must use it to augment, not to further disable, those who didn't get their share, especially those who are really feeling this economic pressure. Our private interactions can and should be unedited—you can say whatever you feel the need to say to me—but I need to rely on you to temper your interactions with absolutely everyone else, in order to get an effective outcome."

**Sweet spot:** Value and validate Attackers for their ability to take on the ugly, unpopular assignments no one else wants to touch and for their ability to work for long periods of time in isolation and high stress.

## Style Four: Pleasers

Pleasers humanize the workplace and smooth ruffled feathers.

**Motivated by:** Being liked. Pleasers give compliments that always align with what we most want to be recognized for. They know the names of our family members, remember our special occasions, and make us feel cared for.

Although easy to get along with, Pleasers can impede your ability to manage effectively by withholding information that may get an associate in trouble or by lying about something upsetting, buying time to fix it before you find out about it.

**Effective feedback:** Continually stress the greater good. Help them understand that by protecting one person they put numerous others at risk, and they'll be more likely to keep you informed.

Thin skinned and tenderhearted, Pleasers have a tough time with criticism. An effective management tool is the "sandwich technique," which requires any critical observation to be sandwiched between two phrases of praise.

**Sample message:** "While your tenderness and compassion are sometimes the only thing holding this organization together, when we were struggling mightily to prevail in that difficult business situation, your empathy for our adversary may have been misunderstood as disloyalty. That doesn't help any of us."

**Sweet spot:** Value and validate Pleasers for being an "oasis in the desert," for their consistently cheerful attitudes, and for their caring, collaborative work style.

## Style Five: Performers

Witty and charming, jovial and entertaining, Performers are often the favorite workplace personality.

**Motivated by:** Recognition. Unsurpassed as ambassadors, charismatic Performers excel at establishing relationships, but not at maintaining them. Their interest in and effort toward any initiative is directly linked to the possibility of stardom. If there is "runway" potential, they will likely excel. Otherwise, they will find a way to offload their responsibilities.

**Effective feedback:** Performers work hard to be perceived as busy, when in truth, their activities merely masquerade as productivity. Astute observers recognize this behavior for what it is: a false impression of productivity artfully created around high-profile projects to inflate perceptions of status.

Resist the urge to act until you verify

a Performer's story, because a Performer will distort the truth to protect her image.

**Sample message:** "What I really need in a board liaison is someone who knows how to let others shine—someone who has a demonstrated track record of being OK with not taking credit. With our financials under such scrutiny, the results from this initiative will likely gain more visibility than any other single undertaking this year, and the board must be seen to have achieved it, to own credit for it. No one here is more savvy than you when it comes to working with our elite, and I'd like to be able to think that you're ready for the kind of 'back seat' facilitating role this would require."

**Sweet spot:** Value and validate your Performers for their ability to establish new relationships and for their persuasive, entertaining public speaking skills.

### Style Six: Avoiders

Quiet and reserved, Avoiders are the wallflowers of the world.

**Motivated by:** Security. Reliable and predictable, Avoiders are low-maintenance employees who never make waves. Their fear of negative consequences prevents them from taking initiative or risks. They shun increased responsibility in favor of status quo.

Sudden change can be immobilizing for Avoiders. Talk about and prepare for changes far in advance, walk through all the implications, and provide time for the Avoider to adjust.

**Effective feedback:** Effective management of Avoiders is about reassurance. When explaining what you want the Avoiders to do, clarify how it will insulate and protect them from unwanted risk, attention, and responsibility. Follow any criticism by reaffirming their positive traits, discussing the specific next steps required, and reassuring them that their jobs are not at risk.

**Sample message:** "We will never outgrow the need for this particular service, no matter what happens with the economy. And I certainly have no intention of moving the function out from under someone whose performance has been as reliably flawless as yours. But the cur-

rent economy requires that we adjust our delivery method to align with changing member needs. There's no one I'd rather have in charge of this than you, and I know we'll work through whatever hiccups we experience."

**Sweet spot:** Value and validate your Avoiders for their reliability, stability, and meticulous compliance with your instructions.

### Style Seven: Analyticals

Highly skilled at evaluating risks far enough in advance to enable mitigation, Analyticals are fluent in both deductive and inductive reasoning.

**Motivated by:** Certainty. Analyticals forecast with uncanny accuracy, calculating the probabilities of various business scenarios and predicting radial impacts. Unable to "think light," Analyticals will analyze and reanalyze in an endless struggle to achieve unassailable certainty before taking action or making a decision.

**Effective feedback:** Using hype and emotionalism in an effort to expedite Analyticals' decisions only evokes suspicions of recklessness and slows them down. They resent shortcuts to standard operating procedures and see exceptions as dangerous. Give them time to complete each task before assigning another and demonstrate respect for data.

**Sample message:** "With the economy so unpredictable, thank goodness I can always count on actual data and solid projections from you. Let's you and I take a close look at what the facts are, and then I'll be able to determine the best course of action."

**Sweet spot:** Value and validate your Analyticals for their commitment to accuracy and for their ability to anticipate and evaluate risk far enough in advance to allow risks to be reduced.

### Connect With the Core

As nonprofit leaders continue this journey of economic recovery, multiple forces must be adroitly maneuvered to operate in their favor. Among the most powerful of these is the committed human spirit. Nations have been birthed and built by it, bodies have

been healed by it, disadvantaged warriors have prevailed as a result of it, and organizations have been sustained through crises because of it. Yet its power is often overlooked, particularly in times of economic crisis, when so many quantitative indicators are competing for attention.

Tailoring your messages to resonate with each of these styles is the essence of inspirational leadership, particularly when an organization is under pressure. At such times, the degree to which employees trust you, strive to surpass expectations, and stick with you despite hard times, dramatic change, or more attractive options is directly related to how they think of and feel about you. But these emotions cannot be commanded; they must be elicited. Your resonant messaging will achieve this and more, unlocking the power of committed human spirits.

Using versatility to package your messages helps staff want to hear you. Versatility eases the achievement of all your initiatives, whether in good times or bad, by ensuring that increased productivity is the deliberate, voluntary choice of each individual. And that's not soft stuff! **an**

*Francie Dalton is president and founder of Dalton Alliances Inc., a Maryland-based consultancy specializing in the communication, management, and behavioral sciences. Her book, Versatility: How to Optimize Interactions When 7 Workplace Behaviors Are at Their Worst, is available at [www.asaecenter.org/bookstore](http://www.asaecenter.org/bookstore). She can be reached at [www.daltonalliances.com](http://www.daltonalliances.com).*

*Dalton will be speaking on the power of versatility to motivate the unmotivated at ASAE & The Center's Annual Meeting from 3:15-4:30 p.m. on August 17th.*

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