

Using People Styles for Interpersonal Competence: Encouraging Purposeful Reflection on Communication Behaviours

Tiffany Lee Smith

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Abstract: *This article revitalizes the idea of “soft skills” as an important part of evaluator training by reflecting on use of the People Styles Assessment Inventory as a reflective exercise in a course with Master’s- and PhD-level evaluation and measurement students. It provides an overview of recent literature surrounding interpersonal competency in evaluation, highlighting the need for, and lack of emphasis on, interpersonal skills in evaluation training; presents the teaching-practice context for engaging in the People Styles assessment and reflective activity; describes the People Styles model; and reflects on use of the model for training future evaluation practitioners.*

Keywords: *competency, evaluator training, interpersonal skills, people styles, reflective practice*

Résumé : *Le présent article revitalise le concept des « compétences générales » comme partie intégrante de la formation en évaluation en se penchant sur l’utilisation du People Styles Assessment Inventory comme exercice de réflexion dans un cours de maîtrise ou de doctorat en mesure et évaluation. Il offre un survol de la littérature récente sur les compétences interpersonnelles en évaluation, mettant l’accent sur l’importance des compétences interpersonnelles dans la formation en évaluation (auxquelles très peu d’attention est actuellement accordée); présente le contexte d’enseignement requis pour réaliser l’activité de réflexion et d’évaluation People Styles; décrit le modèle People Styles; et se penche sur l’utilisation du modèle pour la formation de futures évaluatrices et de futurs évaluateurs.*

Mots clés : *compétences, formation en évaluation, compétences interpersonnelles, people styles, pratique réflexive*

“Who am I and what, if anything, can I do about it?”

—Aldous Huxley

Soft skills are one of the more “assumed” evaluator competencies. Though evaluators need a balance of soft and technical skills to meet the needs of the ambiguous

Corresponding author: Tiffany Lee Smith, 236 School of Education Building, University of North Carolina Greensboro, 1300 Spring Garden Street, Greensboro, NC, 27412; tiffany.smith@uncg.edu

and diverse contexts in which they work, the process of becoming a professional evaluator is often focused on technical and theoretical knowledge. In a book aptly named *Evaluation for a Caring Society*, Hamington (2018) notes that “there is more to the story of professional competency than the generalized knowledge of technical specialization” (p. 41). To be responsive evaluators, we must be keenly attuned to interpersonal skills. A 2008 study on evaluator competencies found that employers cited a need for interpersonal skills more than any other competency, and that entry-level candidates often lacked these skills (Dewey et al., 2008). And a 2016 gap analysis conducted with American Evaluation Association (AEA) members pointed to interpersonal competence as an area most in need of training (Galport & Azzam, 2016).

The People Styles model and accompanying self-assessment, developed by Bolton and Bolton (2009), describes four types of communicators based on their typical use of emotionally responsive and assertive behaviours. This article shares the experience of utilizing this model with graduate evaluation students. Students interact with the model, comparing and contrasting their own people style with those of their classmates, their clients and colleagues, and even their friends, family, and significant others, while connecting their use of the model to reflection for self-awareness and improvement (Smith et al., 2015; Smith & Skolits, in press). This article summarizes recent literature surrounding interpersonal competency in evaluation, overviews the People Styles model, describes the teaching practice context for engaging in the People Styles assessment and reflective activity, and reflects on the use of the model for training future evaluation practitioners.

INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCY IN EVALUATION

The Competencies for Canadian Evaluators, updated in 2018, provide a starting point for understanding the role of interpersonal skills in evaluation. These competencies are situated under five domains: Reflective Practice, Technical Practice, Situational Practice, Management Practice, and Interpersonal Practice. Under Interpersonal Practice, the associated competencies “focus on the social and personal skills required to communicate and interact effectively with all stakeholders” (CES, 2018) and include the following:

- using communication strategies appropriate to the cultural, linguistic, social, and political context;
- demonstrating effective and appropriate written and visual communication skills;
- demonstrating effective, appropriate, and respectful verbal and non-verbal communication skills;
- using a variety of processes that result in mutually negotiated agreements as well as shared understandings and consensus building; and
- building partnerships within the evaluation context.

Each competency interacts with our ability to be flexible (Bolton & Bolton, 2009) and responsive to the communication behaviours of our collaborators, and to have a nuanced understanding of the context in which we operate.

As evaluators, we are in a constant communicative role: from pre-evaluation, where it is critical to listen to the needs of the client and set the necessary boundaries and contract for evaluation work, to post-evaluation, where the evaluator may act as a diplomat, providing key findings in a way that helps individuals take the information and act accordingly (Skolits et al., 2009). We communicate with a variety of individuals over the course of an evaluation, from different types of stakeholders to funders, practitioners, program beneficiaries, and evaluation colleagues. Handling diverse perspectives in an authentic, thoughtful way requires an interpersonally adept evaluator. According to LaVelle and Donaldson (2015),

Evaluators need to acquire additional skills to help fulfill the responsibilities of evaluative work, including interpersonal competence, communicating with clients, negotiating political situations, managing team members, successfully conducting projects, capacity building, context-responsive data displays, responding to requests for proposals, and so forth. (p. 41)

We must systematically design and conduct an investigation, and use technical expertise to get us there, but the real challenge is triangulating what we learn into the program contexts in which we work, and conveying that information to the participants in a way that enables them learn something from the findings.

Unfortunately, research over the past fifteen years has found that evaluation professionals lack interpersonal competency (Dewey et al., 2008; Galport & Azzam, 2016). Dewey et al. (2008) surveyed job seekers and employers, looking at what evaluators acquire during training and what employers look for in applicants. They found that employers mentioned the need for interpersonal skills more than any other set of skills, but that this skillset was the one most lacking among entry-level candidates hired for these positions. Job seekers, on the other hand, when asked to identify their weaknesses, never mentioned interpersonal skills. This may be due to a lack of awareness of the importance of these skills, reluctance to admit deficiency, or a lack of awareness of this deficiency.

Similarly, Galport and Azzam (2016) conducted a gap analysis with AEA members to understand practicing evaluators' perceptions of evaluation competencies and of the need for additional training in both interpersonal competence and reflective practice. The competencies of reflective practice and interpersonal practice are intricately intertwined. Knowing oneself as an evaluator is a key component of the reflective process (Smith et al. 2015; Smith & Skolits, in press; Stevahn et al., 2005), and understanding how you interact with others, in terms of both assertiveness and responsiveness, can influence interpersonal dynamics (Bolton, 1989; Bolton & Bolton, 2009).

THE PEOPLE STYLES MODEL

In *People Styles at Work*, Bolton and Bolton (2009) present a descriptive model and reflective tool for interpersonal communication that was developed in the Western context and has been used in industrial psychology and organizational trainings for almost 40 years (May & Gueldenzoph, 2006; Merrill & Reid, 1981). They note that 75% of the population differs from us in their communication behaviours, which can produce difficulties in communication situations. Many people think differently, decide differently, express their feelings differently, handle conflict differently, and assert themselves differently than we do. They outline a reflective self-assessment based on two observable constructs: assertiveness and emotional responsiveness. The latter portion of their text focuses on what they call “style flex” (Bolton & Bolton, 2009), or being interpersonally versatile (Merrill & Reid, 1981) in communication situations. In line with the CES competencies, the People Styles model capitalizes on being flexible, adaptable, and responsive to a communication situation.

Assertiveness

A person’s assertiveness level is determined by the level of directness or forcefulness they express through their behaviours. Importantly, high assertiveness does not equate to aggressiveness, and low assertiveness does not equate to submissiveness. More assertive people might exude more energy, speak more loudly, or decide more quickly, while those with less assertiveness might speak more softly, be less confrontational, or exert less pressure for action.

Emotional responsiveness

A person’s emotional responsiveness is determined by their expression and awareness of their own and others’ emotions. Of course, according to Bolton and Bolton (2009), someone who is highly emotionally responsive does not necessarily “let it all hang out,” and someone low in responsiveness does not necessarily lack emotion. More emotionally responsive people might be more facially expressive, express their feelings more openly, gesture more freely, or even dress more casually. Less responsive people might be more reserved in their behaviours, use less small talk, seem more task-oriented, or be more structured with their time.

The four People Styles

The challenge of using the People Styles model is to see yourself as others see you (Bolton & Bolton, 2009). The model focuses on habitual behaviours rather than personality, including a person’s gestures, inflection, facial expressions, and other observable characteristics. According to the authors, this assessment, consisting of 18 paired statements, operates better than personality assessments due to its basis in observable, habitual behaviours. The aim is to choose the statement in each pair that best describes the way you think others see you. The tallying of responses to each statement provides four scores, with two representing responsiveness and

two representing assertiveness. The score then places you into one of four categories: Analytical, Amiable, Driver, or Expressive.

According to Bolton and Bolton (2009), each People Style makes up approximately 25% of the population, and each has unique strengths and weaknesses. The assessment is non-judgmental (Merrill & Reid, 1981); no style is better than another. Following is a brief description of each People Style; Table 1 (adapted from Bolton & Bolton, 2009) provides a quick snapshot of the styles' strengths and of what overuse might look like.

Analyticals

These individuals fall low on both the responsiveness and assertiveness continuums of the People Styles model. They crave quality over quantity, enjoy data, rarely act on impulse, and are more punctual and task-oriented. They are the quietest of the styles, provide a lens of complexity, and can be hard to read.

Amiables

These individuals fall low on the assertiveness continuum but high on the emotional responsiveness continuum. They are more empathetic, enjoy working with others, are less likely to be power hungry, speak more about people and emotions than tasks or deadlines, appear to be relaxed or "low key," are diplomatic and tactful, enjoy routine, and may be reluctant to tell it like it is.

Table 1. Strengths and overuse of People Styles

Strengths		Overuse
	Drivers	
Independent		Poor collaborator
Results-oriented		Impersonal
Candid		Abrasive
Pragmatic		Shortsighted
	Expressives	
Articulate		Poor listener
Fast-paced		Impatient
Visionary		Impractical
Fun-loving		Distracting
	Amiables	
Diplomatic		Conflict avoider
Cautious		Risk-averse
Supportive		Permissive
People-oriented		Inattentive to task
	Analyticals	
Prudent		Indecisive
Painstaking		Nitpicky
Task-oriented		Impersonal
Systematic		Bureaucratic

Drivers

Drivers are low in emotional responsiveness but high in assertiveness. They are oriented toward the bottom line, are fast-paced and erect-postured, manage their time, have serious facial expressions, do a lot of talking, are more likely to change their minds, and may not have the best listening skills.

Expressives

These individuals are high in assertiveness and high in emotional responsiveness, making them the “most flamboyant” of the styles (Bolton & Bolton, 2009, p. 49). They want to be where the action is; they are playful, high-contact, impulsive, story-telling individuals who might speak before thinking. Their emotions are key players in their decision-making, and can find time-management challenging.

Versatility, flexibility, and style identification

Merrill and Reid (1981) discuss versatility and the ability to be situationally adaptable. Like versatility, the idea of style flex (Bolton & Bolton, 2009) is about adjusting your behaviour to make the interaction more comfortable for the other person. This third dimension of the model (J. Bolton, personal communication, May 22, 2020), to be considered along with assertiveness and emotional responsiveness, is highly important for understanding how People Styles operate in practice. Bolton and Bolton (2009) provide specific recommendations for style flex based on your style, but generally the best strategy is to operate under the “Golden rule”: treat the person the way you would want to be treated, and ask yourself, “Would I be willing to be a recipient of my action? If not, don’t do it” (p. 132). In line with this, “people who are more highly flexible/versatile tend to be more successful in their roles” (J. Bolton, personal communication, May 22, 2020).

In identifying your style or another person’s, it is important to separate observable behaviours from feelings and beliefs—or separate observing from inferring. For your own style identification, it is important to remember that the assessment itself is self-reported and thus subject to change based on your own feelings and the context you’re reflecting on. Ridge Training reports that, in workshops on People Styles, self-assessments of People Style are wrong about 50% of the time (J. Bolton, personal communication, May 22, 2020). It is hard for us to accurately see our own behaviours.

Part of the reflective process is understanding that we present ourselves to different groups of people in different ways—and acknowledging that that is the beauty of reflecting on our communication. Our flexibility is something to pay attention to, but our go-to style—the one in which we find the most comfort—is the overarching style we can use to understand and utilize the model for intentionally implementing communication flexibility.

To identify another person’s style, pay attention to their body language, note their degree of assertiveness and responsiveness, and perhaps let them take the “lead” in your interactions in order to see how they behave. Once you have identified whether you and your conversation partner are analytical, amiable, driver,

or expressive individuals, the next step is using this information in a meaningful way in your communication with others.

TEACHING PRACTICE CONTEXT

Self-knowledge comes when you observe yourself... with all the people around you, it comes when you observe the manner of another, his gestures, the way he wears his clothes, the way he talks, his contempt or flattery and your response; it comes when you watch everything in you and about you and you see yourself as you see your face in the mirror.

—Krishnamurti (1964, p. 40)

I have used the People Styles model (Bolton & Bolton, 2009) for over five years, with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, nations of origin, sexual orientations, and age groups. I have employed it in a larger course on interpersonal effectiveness for applied psychology Master's students specializing in evaluation research, and I recently adapted the training to a short stand-alone workshop with Master's- and PhD-level evaluation and measurement students.

I engage primarily in a facilitator role, promoting a collaborative learning environment. According to Peters and Armstrong (1998), in collaborative learning, “the relationship is defined in terms of learner to learner, learner to group, and group to learner” and “dialogue is the principle mode of discourse” (p. 80). There is no one right way to communicate. It is a give and take between individuals that depends on the situation's context, including its cultural components. Setting up the learning environment as a lateral space for open communication sets the stage for more authentic reflection on how we continue together. The model itself is meant to be non-judgmental, with no style better than the other. This helps facilitate personal and cultural expectations around communication.

Using the People Styles model provides students with a model of communication based on observable behaviours so that they can reflect on how their own and others' assertive and responsive behaviours interact in communication situations and consider how to be versatile, “flex” (Bolton & Bolton, 2009, p. 91), and adapt accordingly in their professional practice. Students read the book or are provided with a brief overview of the model and then take the accompanying self-assessment. Participants then engage in reflective practice with their peers to examine how their communication style interacts with that of clients, colleagues, and even friends and family members. This process provides students space to examine their own communication behaviours, identify the styles of people with whom they regularly interact, and see when their own and others' styles cause conflict and discomfort in communication situations. It is beneficial for students to bring the assessment home and select appropriate people in their lives to complete the assessment on them. I usually send them home with three additional assessments for others to complete, and often they come back with multiple People Style categorizations to reflect on—and that's okay!

REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF THE PEOPLE STYLES MODEL

“All models are wrong, but some are useful.”

—George Box

The People Styles model, according to [Bolton and Bolton \(2009\)](#), enhances our ability to foster productive, thoughtful relationships, and to increase our own self-awareness and self-management. Through my own reflections on five years of watching students use this model to grapple with their communication abilities and behaviours, I point to four key benefits of providing time and space for reflection and intentional focus on interpersonal skills. It is important to note that “names or labels never do justice to the reality they identify” ([Bolton & Bolton, 2009](#), p. 39), and that model is meant to help organize our thinking in a useful way. The model provides the following:

- language and structure, with observable behaviours, through which to gauge the communication styles of oneself and others;
- awareness of oneself and one’s typical interaction behaviours;
- awareness of others, including clients, colleagues, and personal relationships; and
- a basis for critical reflection in- and on-action ([Schön, 1983](#); [Smith et al., 2015](#); [Smith & Skolits, in press](#)).

Having the language and structure of the People Styles model in the classroom gives us a common lexicon with which to explore our behaviours. Students have noted that the categorical labels of the styles, the constructs of assertiveness and responsiveness, and the identification of observable behaviours to accompany that language, help them ground theory in practice. The model’s simplicity allows them to relate their previous experiences with evaluation clients and their own personal relationships to the use of the model in practice. An amiable student in my recent training, for example, reflected on the need to be more assertive and take more charge and ownership of the evaluation with a client who tends to take a more “driving” role. An overly expressive student reflected on the need to be more responsive to client needs, letting them voice their perspectives more often during stakeholder meetings so as to finish with a stronger final report. Having this language and structure provides students the opportunity to engage in critical dialogue around their areas of growth and have honest conversations about how they interact with their clients and colleagues.

Awareness of oneself and others are two additional benefits of the model. Having taught this model in both undergraduate- and graduate-level courses, one of my most salient reflections is that it is clear that many students have never taken the time to think about how they come across to others, or how their ability to assert themselves and respond emotionally to people affects the communication environment. Use of the People Styles model is a self-monitoring system. Students reflect and ask questions such as these: Am I coming across too strong with this

person? Should I be more assertive in this situation? Who am I in the room with, and how will thinking through that potentially change my interactions? Why do I come across as an amiable to my colleagues, but a driver to my significant other? The key to good communication is awareness.

Finally, the model provides a basis for critical reflection in- and on- action (Schön, 1983; Smith et al., 2015; Smith & Skolits, in press). Reflecting on the model can help us make in-the-moment adjustments to our own communication to advance the interaction (reflection in-action) and can also help us take a step back from daily operations to analyze our situation more deeply and act in light of this analysis (reflection on-action). In the classroom, students are hyperaware in the moment, noticing how their behaviours influence others in real time during discussion of the model and the content itself—reflection in-action. They also take the concepts learned through the model and apply them to thinking about past and future communication situations—reflection on-action.

By using the model, students can ask questions such as “How does client X typically interact when I engage with them?” and adjust their behaviours accordingly, so that when we meet the next time we are flexing our styles for improved interaction and productivity. As noted earlier, reflective practice and interpersonal competence are related concepts, and using the People Styles model can increase both capabilities, if students honestly and authentically engage in the process.

CONCLUSION

In thinking of evaluation as a “caring” practice, Hamington (2018) noted that “[p]rofessional competence is not static as in the achievement of a degree but dynamic and in constant need of fine tuning to maintain competency” (p. 41). The pairing of the People Styles model with authentic and open reflection on how we interact with our environment and the people in it (Smith et al., 2015; Smith & Skolits, in press) helps us understand that being an evaluator means a constant assessment and reassessment of who we are and what we bring to the table as professionals in practice.

This critical reflection arms future professionals with the ability to reflect on and hone key interpersonal skills. The People Styles model is a reflective tool that can help evaluators unlock the doors to thinking about their own and others’ interpersonal behaviors in evaluation contexts, and pivot accordingly in practice. I plan to continue using this model as a reflective experience to help create stronger and more thoughtful, flexible, and versatile evaluation professionals. Using it in your own classroom will help you shine a light on an area that is often under-emphasized in evaluation curriculum, though essential to practice—the interaction between the self and other(s) in context.

REFERENCES

- Bolton, R. (1989). *People skills: How to assert yourself, listen to others, and resolve conflicts*. Simon & Schuster.

- Bolton, R., & Bolton, D. G. (2009). *People styles at work and beyond* (2nd ed.). Amacom.
- Canadian Evaluation Society (CES). (2018). *Competencies for Canadian evaluation practice*. https://evaluationcanada.ca/txt/2_competencies_cdn_evaluation_practice.pdf
- Dewey, J. D., Montrosse, B. E., Schroter, D. C., Sullins, C. D., & Mattox, J. R. (2008). Evaluator competencies: What's taught versus what's sought. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 29(3), 267–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214008321152>
- Galport, N., & Azzam, T. (2016). Evaluator training needs and competencies: A gap analysis. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 38(1), 80–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214016643183>
- Hamington, M. (2018). Care, competency, and knowledge. In M. Visse & T. A. Abma (Eds.), *Evaluation for a caring society*. Information Age.
- Krishnamurti, J. (1964). *Think on these things*. Harper & Row.
- LaVelle, J. M., & Donaldson, S. I. (2015). The state of preparing evaluators. In J. W. Altschuld & M. Engle (Eds.), *Accreditation, certification, and credentialing: Relevant concerns for U.S. evaluators*. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 145, 39–52.
- May, G. L., & Gueldenzoph, L. E. (2006). The effect of social style on peer evaluation ratings in project teams. *Journal of Business Communication*, 43(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943605282368>
- Merrill, D. W., & Reid, R. H. (1981). *Personal styles & effective performance*. TRACOM Corporation.
- Peters, J. M., & Armstrong, J. L. (1998). Collaborative learning: People laboring together to construct knowledge. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 79, 75–85.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Skolits, G. J., Morrow, J. A., & Burr, E. M. (2009). Reconceptualizing evaluator roles. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 30(3), 275–295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214009338872>
- Smith, T. L., Barlow, P. B., Skolits, G. J., & Peters, J. M. (2015). Demystifying reflective practice: Using the DATA model to enhance evaluators' professional activities. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 52(2015), 142–147.
- Smith, T. L., & Skolits, G. J. (in press). Conceptualizing and engaging in reflective practice: Experienced evaluators' perspectives. *American Journal of Evaluation*.
- Stevahn, L., King, J. A., Ghore, G., & Minnema, J. (2005). Establishing essential competencies for program evaluators. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 26(1), 43–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214004273180>

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Tiffany Lee Smith is the Senior Evaluation Specialist in the Office of Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Services (OAERS) office in the Department of Educational Research Methodology at UNC Greensboro. Her current research interests revolve around the topics of reflective practice (self- and contextual awareness), interpersonal communication, evaluator responsibility, and the role of ignorance in evaluation practice. She teaches classes and workshops in evaluation, research methods, interpersonal skills, and reflective practice, where she emphasizes dialogue, collaboration, and critical/evaluative thinking. She has led approximately 40 different evaluation projects.