

Introducing DISC

Your guide to understanding behaviour with the DISC profiler

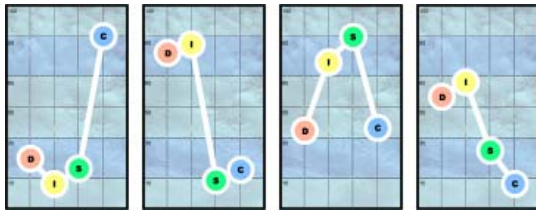


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1. An Introduction to DISC

Welcome! In this brief handbook, we'll be introducing you to an assessment tool called DISC.



So, what exactly *is* DISC? At its most basic, it's a way of describing the patterns in a person's behaviour, and using that knowledge to predict how they are likely to act in the future. It works by creating graphs like those shown above, based on answers to a simple questionnaire. When we analyse these graphs further, we can uncover a host of details about a person's approach to their work.

Why would we want to do this? Well, in business terms, the advantages are clear to see. In fact, DISC has become an indispensable part of everyday life in many parts of industry and commerce. That's especially true in HR, of course, where it's widely used in recruitment, but – as we'll see – it also has wide-ranging applications in areas from management and training to sales and team-building.

One of the reasons DISC is of such practical value is that it's designed to look specifically at business-related behaviours. It isn't a 'personality test' as such, and it doesn't attempt to build a complete picture of a person's psychology. Instead, it just concentrates on describing how different individuals behave in a work setting. This simpler, but more concrete, approach means that a DISC assessment is easy to create, and straightforward to understand, while still providing powerful insights.

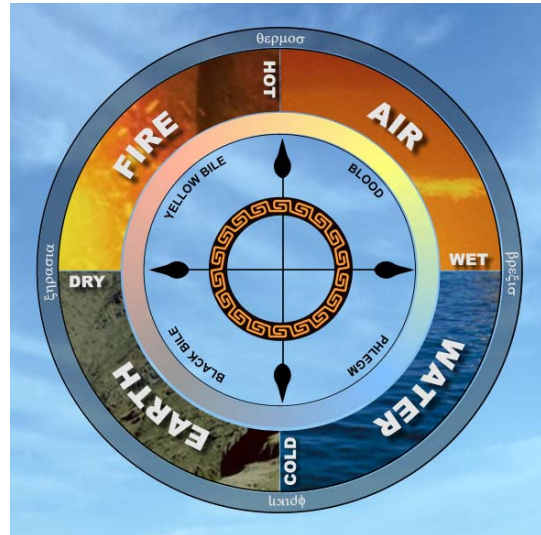
Before we can look into the details of how DISC works, we'll need to understand something about the basic ideas that lie

behind it. The best way to do *that* is to find out a little more about its origins and its history.

2. Origins and Development

It was the Greeks who first attempted to describe human behaviour in any kind of scientific way. From our perspective, their ideas seem rather strange, but some of the fundamental concepts lying beneath those ideas are still useful today.

Physicians like Hippocrates taught that the ways in which a person behaved were directly related to the balance of four 'humours' – like blood or phlegm – within their bodies. Each of these humours was connected with one of the four Greek elements – air for blood, for instance, or water for phlegm.



From a modern perspective, we can now see that these ideas were far from the truth, but what's interesting about the Greeks' approach was how they understood the *connections* between their four elements. Each of the four had some quality in common with another, so that in their terms, water and air were both 'wet', for instance, while water and earth were both 'cold'. In fact, we can map out these relations using two *axes* – one between wet and dry, and

the other between cold and hot. Where each set of axes meet, we find one of the four elements.

This structure, a set of relations based on two axes, is known as a 'biaxial model'. Though modern theories have left the Greeks and their elements far in the past, many still make use of this basic model. For instance, there are versions of this model in the work of both Carl Jung and Hans Eysenck. Jung and Eysenck were both concerned with psychological theory, and so their axes related to technical concepts like 'evaluative functioning' or 'neuroticism' – important ideas from a theoretical point of view, but rather less useful in a business setting!

Also concerned with psychological theory was the American thinker William Moulton Marston, who laid out his own ideas in his 1928 book, *The Emotions of Normal People*. It's fair to say that few of those ideas have stood the test of time, but Marston did have one very valuable contribution to make. He devised a new type of biaxial model, to describe the reactions of ordinary people in everyday situations. That biaxial model forms the ultimate basis of DISC.

DISC as we know it today has evolved from Marston's theoretical work, and in the process, several of its terms and principles have changed. Nonetheless, modern DISC can trace its roots back to Marston's work in the 1920's, and the unique biaxial model he devised.

3. Underlying Theory

The success of Marston's model lies in the nature of the axes he selected, and how they combine together. In a modern system, these axes are typically referred to as *Assertiveness* and *Openness*.

Assertive people are pro-active and direct. They lead rather than follow, and like to take immediate action whenever they can. They believe in grasping opportunities and making their own way. Often independent and commanding, they prefer to give orders rather than take them, and will issue instructions rather than ask for cooperation.

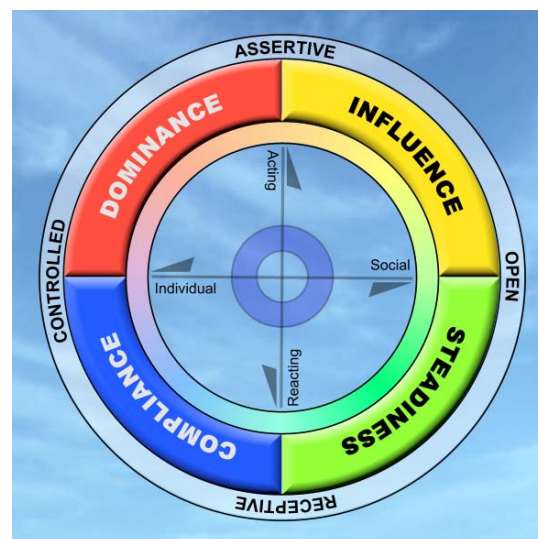
At the opposite end of this first axis, we have people with very low Assertiveness, whom we describe as *Receptive*. That term describes people who are patient and

cautious. They prefer to avoid taking risks, and will rarely take decisive action, unless the pressure to do so is unavoidable. They dislike change or surprise, and will seek calm, predictable situations.

So, the Assertiveness axis deals with how ready a person is to take direct action. At one end, we have people who tend to *act*, and at the other, people who tend to *react*.

The second axis, crossing the first at right angles, measures the concept of Openness. Extremely Open people are friendly, trusting and ingenuous. They express themselves easily, and value strong relationships with other people. Open individuals tend to work on an emotional level, revealing their feelings to others and being ready to sympathise with those around them.

People who fall at the low end of the Openness axis are referred to as *Controlled*. Controlled individuals are practical and somewhat sceptical in style. They value hard facts and rational argument above emotional considerations, and prefer to follow their own ideas, rather than rely on other people. A defining characteristic of this type of person is that they will rarely volunteer information about themselves to other people.



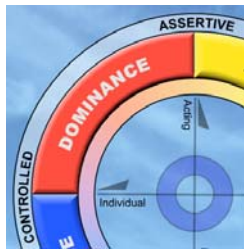
So, the Openness axis describes how ready a person is to communicate with others. At a basic level, more Open people tend to behave more *socially*, while Controlled people tend to work *individually*.

Just as with the other biaxial models we've already discussed, the real power of this structure emerges when we consider how the two axes interact with one other. There

are always four possible combinations – or *quadrants* - in a model like this, and we'll take a look at each of them in turn.

4. The DISC Factors

The four quadrants of the biaxial model each relate to a particular type of behaviour. In DISC, we refer to these as Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance – the four vital ideas that lie at the heart of the theory. Now, we'll go on to examine each of these concepts in more detail.



The first quadrant describes people measuring high on the Assertive scale, and low on the Openness scale (in other words, they are Controlled). How does an Assertive

and Controlled person behave? Their active assertiveness makes them impatient to see results, and this sense of urgency makes them **Direct** and **Efficient**. Control brings a sense of individuality, so that people of this kind are actively **Self-motivated**, and prefer to work **Independently**. Because of their direct independence, others can often see them as **Demanding** in nature, while their sense of self-reliance makes them **Competitive** and often **Ambitious**.

In DISC, behaviours that combine elements of Assertiveness and Control are described by the term **Dominance**. Dominant individuals are attracted to roles that give them independence and personal power, where they are able to meet challenges with energy and determination.

The next quadrant also contains people measuring high in Assertiveness, but here it mixes with Openness instead of Control, and the result is a quite different personal approach. The Open element in their behaviour makes them much more **Sociable** than the independently-minded Dominant types. They're more accepting of others, making them **Friendly** and **Gregarious** – in fact, people of this kind place great importance on positive relations with others. For all their friendliness and sociability, they still have the directness and energy associated with



Assertive types, and that makes them **Outgoing** and **Enthusiastic**. In Dominant types, this pro-active nature tends to appear as self-reliance, but in this case we see it as **Expressive Self-confidence**, instead.

In DISC, behaviours that combine elements of Assertiveness and Openness are described by the term **Influence**. People like this can be expected to show a persuasive and even charming nature. Where a Dominant person might be bluntly demanding, an Influential person will prefer to use strong communication to achieve their aims.

In the third quadrant, we stay with Open behaviour, but now we move away from Assertiveness into more Receptive characteristics.



Receptive people don't show the same levels of energy and drive as those on the Assertive side of the model. Instead, we expect to see more **Patient, Even** and **Calm** characters in this area. People with this type of behaviour tend to dislike change or uncertainty, so they plan their actions **Thoughtfully**, and tend to work **Persistently** once they've set out on a task. Though they're generally less confident or outgoing than Influential types, people of this kind are still Open, but that Openness to others tends to be shown in an **Amiable** and **Generous** nature.

In DISC, behaviours that combine elements of Receptiveness and Openness are described by the term **Steadiness**. Steady people combine the undemanding nature associated with Receptiveness, with a positive approach to others, a combination which makes them generally patient and accepting in style.



Finally, we complete the circle by coming to the fourth and final quadrant, where the Receptive element meets Control. Like the Steady types we met in the previous

quadrant, people in this area are also generally undemonstrative and undemanding, but their Controlled element means that they have a more individualistic approach. They tend to see life in terms of

structure and rules, and they're concerned with being as **Accurate** and **Precise** as possible. Because of this, they're often **Cautious** in nature, and **Sensitive** to changes and developments. With other people, their Receptive side makes them rather **Restrained**, while their cautious and Controlled communication style means that they're also quite **Diplomatic**. While people of this kind are not as naturally sociable as those showing Steadiness, they can see the value in **Co-operating** with others to achieve a goal.

In DISC, behaviours that combine elements of Receptiveness and Control are described by the term **Compliance**. Compliant people combine the undemanding nature associated with Receptiveness with a Controlled approach to others, and this combination makes them generally focussed on rules.

So, the biaxial model gives us four distinct behavioural elements, or 'factors', corresponding to the four quadrants. They are Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance – D, I, S and C – and those initials form the acronym 'DISC'. Together, they create a useful common language for discussing personal attributes and behaviours.

So far, we've presented the four DISC factors independently of one another, to highlight their key features. In reality, of course, people tend to combine aspects of these underlying patterns in their behaviour. We need a tool that can help us understand the relations between all these behavioural factors and axes in an understandable way. It's in this area that DISC really comes into its own.

5. DISC Graphs

The DISC profiling system measures each of these four behavioural factors independently of one another. It does this through a questionnaire consisting of just twenty-four questions. Responses to this questionnaire are graded in terms of Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance, from which we ultimately derive a separate 'score' for each – usually expressed as a value between zero and one hundred.

There's a standard means of expressing these scores that makes their values stand out immediately: the 'DISC graph'. In a DISC graph, each of the four factors is

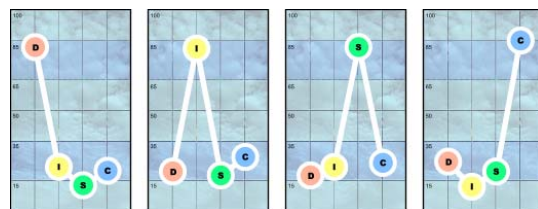
plotted in turn, and bound together by connecting lines. The network of lines brings out a characteristic 'shape' for each combination of factors, and even untrained users can quickly learn to associate different graph shapes with different patterns of behaviour.

Let's take a look at a very simple example of a DISC graph. From our discussion of DISC's biaxial model, you'll recall that the upper-left quadrant describes behaviour that combines Assertiveness and Control – that is, Dominant behaviour. We can imagine a person whose behaviour is dictated entirely by the kind of attitudes described here: their style would be direct, efficient, self-motivated, independent, and so on.

This type of person would map onto a DISC graph with a very high Dominance score, and very low scores for the other three factors. The resulting shape is so familiar to DISC users that it even has its own name. From what we know of the Dominance factor, it's not surprising that this shape has become known as the 'Autocrat' profile.



Each of the four factors has its own graph like this, showing that factor high, and all the others low, and therefore corresponding directly to a quadrant of the original biaxial model. These aren't just theoretical possibilities either – when we create graphs from real DISC questionnaires, it's not uncommon to find people with just these kinds of behaviour.



Because we measure each of the four factors independently, though, there are many more possible graph shapes than just these basic four. An important part of the DISC system is a set of tools that we can use to understand the relations between the different factors, and it's in those techniques, perhaps more than any other aspect of the theory, where DISC's power lies.

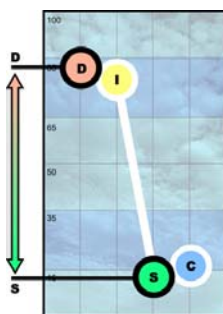
6. A Selection of DISC Combinations

Probably the simplest way to see these levels of interpretation in action is to look at a few typical examples.



Our first example describes a person who has high Dominance *and* high Influence, while the other factors – Steadiness and Compliance – aren't strongly represented. How can we interpret a profile with two high factors like this? From the biaxial model, you'll recall that Dominance relates to Assertiveness and Control, while Influence relates to Assertiveness and Openness. For a person whose behaviour combines the two, the emphasis is strongly on Assertiveness, which is common to both of these factors. So, we'd expect them to be direct, proactive, and impatient.

In terms of Openness and Control, though, there's a balance at work here. A person with this type of profile is not strongly oriented towards either extreme, and is capable of acting independently, or working with others, as a situation demands. These combinations of qualities are often needed, for example, in sales roles – and it's no coincidence that the graph shape we're looking at here is often used to help select successful sales personnel.

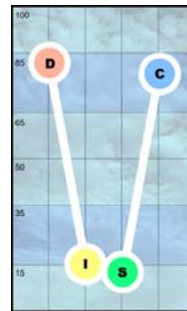


Another level of DISC analysis comes from the 'sub-traits', which look at relations between pairs of factors. For example, in this graph we see a high Dominance score, and a low Steadiness score. We call this combination

'D over S' for short, and it relates to the sub-trait of *Self-motivation*: people with this characteristic tend to show a driving and impatient behavioural style, and as the name suggests, they're motivated by their own success.

There are twelve of these 'sub-traits', each relating to a different combination of high and low DISC factors.

Here's another DISC example. Again, we have two high factors and two low factors, but in this case the high Dominance factor is accompanied by a high Compliance score. Because it shares high Dominance with our previous example, it's not surprising to find that people of both types share certain characteristics, but there are also some significant differences.



Going back to the biaxial model, we can see that the axis where Dominance and Compliance come together is not Assertiveness, but Control, and Control is indeed the watchword for this graph shape, and for the type of person it describes. A person like this will want power over their own conditions, and they can often seek to achieve this, through the direct and determined 'Dominant' feature of their style. Notice, though, that this style is balanced between Assertiveness and Receptiveness. For example, in practice, we often find that people with DISC graphs like this one prefer to work within a set of rules, and will do their best to ensure that those around them do so too.

So far, we've just looked at high factors in the profile, but in fact the *low* factors can often tell us just as much. Notice in this graph, both the Influence and Steadiness scores are very low, and these are the factors that relate to the social and interpersonal behaviours in our model. This is borne out by experience, too: individuals with this characteristic shape tend to be rather formal and direct in the way that they communicate with others.

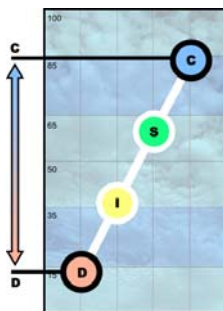
Like our previous example, you'll notice that this shape, too, has a high Dominance score, and a low Steadiness score. You'll recall that we related this to the 'sub-trait' of Self-motivation, and exactly the same quality applies here. In fact, all profiles with this combination of factors can be expected to show self-motivated behaviour. Of course, there are other combinations at work here, too. For example, we can also see that Compliance is high here, while Influence is low – we call this sub-trait *Accuracy*, and it relates to the desire for certainty and precision that we've already discussed.



Each of the examples we've seen so far has contained simple high or low factors. In this graph, however, we see DISC factors at various levels in the profile. In fact, in practical use, this is a much more common configuration, though the information it carries about an individual can be a little more difficult to interpret.

Put simply, where factors exist at different levels like this, they can be considered in terms of priority. For example, this graph shows both Steadiness and Compliance as being relatively high, and that means that we'd expect to see corresponding elements in the person's behaviour. These two factors are often complementary, but because Compliance is rather higher than Steadiness, it will tend to take priority within a person's behaviour. For instance, if a person like this needed to choose between patience (a Steady behaviour) or precision (a Compliant behaviour) we would normally expect them to focus on the latter.

This sense of priority applies to sub-traits, as well. For instance, in this profile we can see that Compliance is higher than Steadiness (we say 'C over S'), which relates to the sub-trait we call *Sensitivity*. We can also see that S is 'over' I, which is *Thoughtfulness*, and that I is 'over' D, which is *Friendliness*. So, this person can be expected to act in sensitive, thoughtful and friendly ways. But compare this to the sub-trait of Compliance 'over' Dominance, which is huge by comparison. We call this sub-trait *Co-operativeness*: that is, a willingness to work productively with others. For a person like this, the Co-operative aspect of their behaviour will take precedence over all the others.



7. Internal and External Profiles

So far, we've talked about DISC as if it described a person's entire behavioural approach with just a single graph. In fact, it's rather more sophisticated than that – a typical DISC questionnaire will produce two primary graphs, and usually also a number of

further graphs developed from these main shapes.

The two primary profiles are known as the *Internal* and *External* profiles. They reflect the fact that the way a person naturally *wants* to behave will not always be the way they *actually* behave. Both of these are valid and useful descriptions of a person's behaviour, and so DISC produces a dual set of results to describe both of these aspects.

In the Internal profile, we see the more natural level of a person's behavioural style: that is, the ways in which they would tend to act if they didn't feel constrained by other considerations. The behaviour described here often emerges when a person feels no need to adapt to their surroundings, or – conversely – where they're unable to do so. For instance, when they're put under unusual pressure, it's not unusual to see people 'revert to type'.

For most people, especially in a working situation, neither of these conditions apply. Instead, they tend to adapt the way they behave according to the expectations and needs of others. Of course, they can't know for sure what those expectations are, so it's actually more true to say that they adapt to the way they *perceive* their surroundings. It's these perceptions that are reflected in the second graph, the *External* profile, and so it shows us the types of behaviour most likely to emerge in a typical working situation.

Not only are these profile shapes useful in themselves, but the differences between them can also be very revealing. Being able to understand a person's perceptions of their working environment, and the ways they are adapting to meet those perceptions, can be vitally useful information in a practical sense. One way to highlight the adaptations is through a *Shift Pattern*, a specialised graph that charts the changes between the Internal and External profile shapes.

8. Applications of DISC

We've looked at the theory in some detail now, but the ultimate test of any theory is how well it works in practice. In fact, DISC is already used in a wide range of different applications, and now we'll take a few moments to look at some of the more common.



Because DISC helps us to understand a person's current behaviour, it also helps us to predict how that person is likely to act in the future. That information can be particularly useful to a recruiter, and perhaps it's not surprising to find that recruitment has traditionally been the area where DISC is most widely used. Being able to anticipate how a job applicant will react in different situations is of obvious benefit in this field, and there are specialised DISC tools designed to facilitate job 'matching' like this.

DISC's usefulness doesn't end at recruitment, of course. We've already seen how it can give an insight into a person's perceptions of their work, and how they adapt to its needs. For a manager, this insight can be invaluable, and DISC can also help to develop an understanding of how to motivate and develop people on a specific and individual basis.



This level of individual understanding makes it possible to adapt a presentation style to other people's own particular motivations. People of different styles tend to respond to quite different kinds of ideas, so that tailoring an approach to an individual's personal needs can bring significant rewards. In training, for instance, this kind of adaptive technique is used to make an

audience as receptive as possible, and the same approach can be used in sales and marketing, as well.

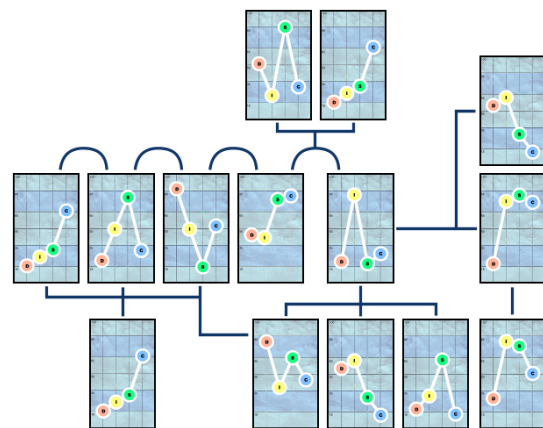
If we're able to understand a person's basic behavioural style, as well as the way they understand and react to their working environment, then we're equipped to help that person in their personal development. Using DISC in this coaching role can help a person understand their own behaviour, and even learn how to adapt that behaviour where necessary.

9. On to the Next Level

Up to this point, we've been looking at DISC as a means of understanding the behaviour of a single individual. It doesn't stop at that point, though. In fact, the DISC methodology can be extended to look at the ways in which that individual interacts with others.

This brings us to the final practical application we're going to discuss – team-building. Using the more advanced features of DISC, we can model the behaviour, not only of a single individual, but of an entire team or group. At this level, we can begin to see the dynamics that drive the team as a whole, as well as the workings of relationships between individual members.

Using DISC for team profiling takes us beyond the limits of the individual, and on to a new level of understanding of the ways that people behave towards one another. These more advanced techniques lie beyond the scope of this simple introduction to DISC, but they do show just what the technique can achieve.



That brings us to the end of our introduction to DISC and DISC theory. Thank you for taking the time to explore the world of DISC.