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***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## **ALPHABET SOUP**

Sometimes it is downright difficult to figure out what a person really is - or ought to be. There is a tendency for people to try to put labels on us. In the fire service we talk about a person being a particular type of leader or manager. The problem is that the labels often fail to stick. It is actually very difficult for a person to be the same person all of the time. We change.

But, sometimes labels are handy. We try to define our style in order to respond to the questions of others. I have been on hundreds of oral boards and assessment labs where one of the questions given to the candidates was: "And, Candidate X, just what is your: (a) leadership style, (b) management style, (c) communications style, (d) all of the above." Candidate X almost always tries to describe what he thinks is his "style" so the assessors will be duly impressed and he will get a good score he anticipates. Your response regarding your "style" is evaluated on the basis of the scorer's perception of what that style's impact may be on the organization conducting the examination.

Is this a double-edged sword?

We can blame it all on MacGregor. In his textbook "The Human Side of Enterprise" he coined basic theories that frame our references with respect to leadership style. He labeled them "Theory X" and "Theory Y." Theory X was supposedly based on the premise that people were no good at supervising themselves and have to be told what to do. Theory X was (in its most simplified version) a style classified as being autocratic. Many individuals read that to mean dictatorial.

Theory Y was supposedly based on the opposite premise. It was the concept that everybody wants to do the right thing. Subordinates will always do what has to be done, if given the chance. Theory Y was classified as being democratic and some have interpreted that to mean laissez-faire.

Problem! In our business there are many times when we absolutely have to be dictatorial. The fireground or the scene of a major medical emergency is not the place to practice decision-making by committee. Participating management doesn't function under high stress. There are other times when the rule of majority vote is not only traditional, but is essential in making the system in the firehouse work. Try, for example, dictating what will be served at the evening meal at a firehouse, or controlling what will be eaten for the next ten shifts in a row!

Frequently, fire officer candidates will recognize this dilemma when trying to respond to the interviewers. The standard response is "Well, I guess I'm sort of in the middle of... I guess my style is a mixture of..." and, of course, the board has to guess just what that mixture means to that candidate. Or, worse yet, they have to guess what it means to that particular department or to the promotional opportunity of the candidate. Sometimes the candidate lucks out; other times, he is condemned for



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being wishy-washy or indecisive.

To make matters worse, someone came along and added the letter z to this alphabet soup. If the fire service thought it had problems with Theory X and Theory Y, it was in for big trouble with Theory Z! It was advocated as a panacea for production problems and was being imported from Japan.

Recently, an article in INC Magazine labeled this theory by a new letter: Theory F. This article alleged that the real element making Theory Z work is fear. There are many who pose questions whether or not Theory Z is a management theory which is culturally acceptable in the Western world.

In order to put all this management alphabet soup into perspective, we must go back to the basic design of the leadership and management model as proposed by MacGregor. The model used to illustrate this concept is fashioned on the basis of a rectangle. Theory X was placed on the abscissa of the rectangle and Theory Y on the ordinate. This placement makes a lot of sense from the standpoint of the methodology used in describing charts. The inference is that a person could be placed on the chart on the half-way point. But where does Theory Z fit in?

There is another chart labeled "The Leadership Grid" that provides another orientation to these values. In that illustration the chart places a value on orientation towards people or orientation toward production. This chart, which is illustrated with the article, doesn't say anything at all about the style a person has for accomplishing the task. It merely suggests that some people are more people oriented and some people are more production oriented. The manner they go about achieving that objective may or may not be masked by a particular management theory.

If we look at these two rectangles we can suppose that Theory X be oriented towards the task-oriented and that Theory Y can be oriented towards the people orientation. Where does that leave Theory Z? According to the literature it most likely fits into one of the opposite corners. The Japanese like to state that their country is probably the highest in production and the highest in people orientation.

But, there are some problems with the geometry of this model.

If one takes a look at the leadership grid and then examines MacGregor's model, they begin to take on the dimensions of being two ends of a box. Instead of being a unit dimensional model, I propose that leadership and management theory and the application thereof is more of a three dimensional concept. If we look at the leadership grid from a standpoint of management theory, one might be able to explain "style." The leadership grid model uses the numbers 1 through 9 on two different axis. The two axis as we mentioned earlier are labeled Tasks and People. The inference of this model is that a person can be oriented towards either completing tasks or meeting the needs of people. The individual can be 1 at the task level and 9 people - or 9 on the task level and 1 on the people level - or 9 task and 9 people. The



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remaining style is 1 task and 1 people. In the center is a group of individuals who try to please all people by being a 5-5.

If we suppose that these are actually ends of boxes and begin to frame a three-dimensional model, we can see that there is a correlation with a leadership grid and MacGregor. For example, 9Ts and 1Ps tend to be very autocratic - 9Ps and 1Ps tend to be very democratic - 9Ps and 9Ts tend to be productive. Simple! Theory X, Theory Y, Theory Z. However, this is not necessarily so.

What do we call the area that is missing? What about the 1Ts and 1Ps? Is there a theory for them? I propose that there is and it fits in the alphabet sequence in the theories proposed by MacGregor. I suggest that this quadrant of the model be labeled "Theory W." The "W" in this case stands for "Wishful Thinking." It is axiomatic that in an environment with a limited focus on the needs of either the tasks to be performed in an organization or on the needs of the people it is merely wishful thinking to anticipate that the organization will ever accomplish anything.

Chances are that the organization may be able to muddle along for a while but sooner or later it will die of atrophy or obsolescence. It is highly unlikely that any fire officer candidate will admit that this is his style. Unfortunately, it does exist as a style of leadership management in many organizations despite the members' denial of its existence. In fact, the more organizations that deny the use of Theory W in the day to day activities, the more likely the theory is alive and well in the policies and practices of the department.

So what is missing from these models of leadership and management theory? Why is it so hard for new officers to get a fix on their style in this matrix? Is it because the model implies a rigid, two-dimensional aspect? They feel they have to be placed on the spectrum one way or the other? Placement of individual behavior on this matrix seems to create the impression that the person is subscribing to that theory. Continued utilization of that style on a permanent basis seems to imply that a person is that way all the time. So, if a person is labeled as Theory X as a leader, it is anticipated that all his behavior will be Theory X.

But, is a person always one thing? Not usually. Most of us modify our behavior over a lengthy period of time in order to achieve success, especially in dealing with others. The term often applied to the use of that technique is called Situational Leadership. The only problem with that label is that the term sounds sort of wishy-washy or uncommitted, even manipulative. It doesn't seem to have any substance.

Temporarily then, let's go back to the grid and look at the alphabet listing. We have Theory X and Y as provided by MacGregor. We have Theory Z as provided by the Japanese. We have Theory W provided by apathy and indifference. But, that's not the sequence of the end of the alphabet. There are several letters missing.



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The proper sequence should be U, V, W, X, Y, Z. Now, as we have mentioned earlier, we also have a problem in that the leadership grid provided by MacGregor is unidimensional. The leadership grid provided on Task-People orientation is unidimensional. Imagine if you will that we stood these two grids on end to serve as the ends of a box. The leadership grid can be rotated on any axis to become either desirable or undesirable under any set of circumstances in an organization. Likewise, the X-Y grid can be rotated.

Imagine, if you will, that the two ends of the rectangle can be attached to form a box. At the bottom of the box would be the undesirable application of a leadership theory or an undesirable application of a leadership grid. At the top of that box would be the desirable and/or productive utilization of the leadership grid and of a particular leadership style.

We can then label the top of the box as Theory V, the bottom of the box Theory U. Theory V is based on the premise that any style can be utilized in a productive and useful manner if the user of that style has a sufficient grasp of the organizational situation and the future implications of the use of that style. In this case, Theory V stands for "Visionary." Theory U, on the other hand, is based on the premise that ANY style can be used in a negative fashion. Democracy can be taken to the level of anarchy and autocracy can be taken to the level of dictatorial dominance. Theory U stands for "Undesirable." Any leadership style can be made undesirable if the individual fails to realize its implications and its ineffectiveness.

In the accompanying illustrations, we can see that these two grids (Leadership and MacGregor's) form a box in which we now have a third dimension of the matrix. It really makes no difference as to what is at the top or bottom of the box - it has to do with application.

Some people fall into the trap of believing that there is always one style that is supposed to be much more effective than all the others. That is simply not true. As a matter of fact, if it were true, then sooner or later, through the process of evolution, everybody would have evolved into the "most successful style." Instead, we have different people under different circumstances who utilize styles in both effective and ineffective manners. This does not say anything about the results being desirable or undesirable, but rather how the person uses the style to accomplish the objectives of the organization.

There are very few people today who would agree that the tactics of dictators used in the past are desirable - and yet, from an internal point of view, they were extremely effective. There are leaders to be found in every avenue of life that have utilized these differences in style to shape organizations, individual behaviors and activities on both a personal and political level.

If we consider our effectiveness as being like this box, then it is easy to visualize that some individuals



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have a very, very small container. The degree to which an individual is conscious of either using or misusing the different styles is a variable.

It should also be readily apparent that a person who has a visionary use of style and a strong sense of reality is able to mix the Task/Production elements with the leadership assumptions that make those conditions work. It is also easy to visualize that Theory U is almost always based upon ego and self-centered behavior regardless of the individual's orientation towards tasks or people.

At the beginning of this article I lamented the fact that people have a difficult time trying to identify their style. They feel very uncomfortable being placed in a unidimensional matrix that seemingly is based on assumptions provided by others. If we accept the fact that Theory V exists, then it is possible for any individual to explain his behavior in the context of his vision of what the future holds. It may be that you are a taskmaster but that you do so with a game plan in hand. It may be that you are a humanist but you are not relinquishing your goals and objectives to others' desires. An individual should be able to explain his leadership style not in terms of Theory X or Theory Y, but in terms of application.

Granted, most people don't like to be pigeonholed. We don't like being put into "boxes." But this theory provides us with a box of our own construction. It can be as small or as large as we desire. The one thing we have to our advantage is that we are the carpenters - it is our construction, our design. If it fails, we suffer the consequences; if it works, we get the credit.