Ways Thinkers and Feelers Can Accept, Respect, and Embrace Human Differences

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What is the fundamental mental process you use to make a decision? Some people, for example, make decisions based on pure logic. They follow a step-by-step process leading to a conclusion that makes the most logical sense, generally disregarding the consequences to other people. Do you step away from a situation, take an impersonal approach, and after assessing the cold, hard facts arrive at a logical conclusion? Individuals who prefer this decision-making approach are known as “thinkers” (T) in the language of personality type. This more easily defendable approach to decision-making is revered in many important aspects of our daily life. However, using logic is not the only recognizable approach to making a decision. Others prefer to step into the situation and carefully assess what is best for the people involved. In this approach, people take a more personal view of decisions, carefully considering how others are impacted, and how all aspects of the situation play a role in arriving at the final decision. In this case, there is more focus on creating harmony in the process rather than relying solely on logic to arrive at a decision. People who use this mental process are known as “feelers” (F).

These two ways of reaching a conclusion or determining what we are going to do about situations we encounter represent only one aspect of what is known as personality type. Carl Jung, a prominent 20th century psychologist, spent years looking at differences in preferred processes and approaches to living our lives and defining the basic components of personality type. The basic ideas resulting from his observations and study are summarized in the box below.

It is the nature of humankind to live in a complex lacework of social and interpersonal relationships. Habits of mind act in combination with other innate dispositions to influence how we perceive and judge these relationships. Perceptions and judgments, in turn, promote typical, discernible expressions in behavior that tend to be consistent and enduring. The structure that explains these habits and typical behaviors is psychological type.

Early in the 20th century, Kathryn Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Myers, developed a series of questions and a scale to differentiate and assist in the identification of these types. Their work was an attempt to help people understand the inherent and observable differences in human behavior that originate with differences in personality.
type. Their mission was to help people see differences as natural and predisposed rather than diabolical plots spawned in the dark of night to irritate you to distraction and stymie all your wonderful ideas and good work! When we observe differences in other’s behaviors, there often is triggered within us a natural and common response. That is, we may see these differences as but temporary manifestations of madness, badness, stupidity, or illness. We naturally account for observed differences in behavior in terms of flaws and afflictions in other people.

“Oh, why couldn’t they be more like me?” Or more pointedly, “They should be more like me or see things the way I do!” Our attempts to reconstruct others can result in change, but when it is done by taking away their preferred processes and approaches, we often create a scar rather than a genuine transformation.

Our attempt here is to help people see the contributions of two contrasting mental processes from the Myers/Briggs Personality Types, the “thinker” (T) and the “feeler” (F). In addition, suggestions are given to help people resolve difficulties they may experience with the opposite type.

Thinkers

People who prefer the thinking process of decision-making or reaching a conclusion tend to be more impersonal, cool, objective, and tough-minded. They take an analytical approach by stepping back and looking at situations with an “objective” point of view, often using a technical and scientific orientation, even at the cost of harmony. They tend to focus less on the personal aspects of a decision, and take action based on logical consistency. They analyze situations from a cause-and-effect approach, valuing directness, clarity, and telling the truth more than tact. In this way, being clear and direct is more important than how the information affects others, although they do care about people. The priority, however, is on telling the “truth” as they see it revealed through the application of a logical analysis of the facts. They depend on logic to explain or decide everything, focusing more on fairness than personal impact. Because of their approach to situations, thinkers may be experienced as overly task oriented, uncaring, and indifferent. The following are other characteristics of thinkers:

Thinkers usually:
* value individual achievement over group cooperation
* need to know “why” things are done
* enjoy talking with experts more than with peers
* dislike small talk
* enjoy projects that require library research or the input of experts
* prefer information to be presented briefly and concisely
* enjoy debates
* find ideas or things more interesting than people
* need opportunities to demonstrate competence
* are devastated by failure

Feelers

People who prefer the feeling mental process that leads to conclusions and decisions are more personal, warm, caring, and empathic. Feelers have a people or communication orientation, seeking harmony at the cost of objectivity. They focus more on personal values and whether decisions and actions are worthwhile. They are more concerned about what is best for the people involved than the logical or consistent outcome. Feelers tend to be sensitive to what is important to others. They make decisions on what matters to you can pull the fangs from a lion; but you have not created a domestic cat, only a toothless lion.
them and their system of values and how the outcome affects the connections between people, often expressing concern for others. They believe tact and the impact on others is more important than being direct and telling the cold, hard truth. From their approach, feelers may be experienced as too idealistic, mushy, and indirect. Feelers have trouble delivering bad news. In fact, they may be so focused on tact and the avoidance of hurtfulness, that the receiver of the message may have no idea of the point that is being made. The following are some other observable characteristics of feelers:

Feelers usually:
* enjoy sharing information in small groups
* are loyal
* try to help others feel secure and comfortable
* avoid confrontation and conflict, minimizing differences
* are sympathetic and empathetic
* are skilled in understanding other people
* view things from a personal perspective
* enjoy pleasing people, even in seemingly unimportant matters
* enjoy subjects that concern people
* need to know how topics affect other people
* have difficulty accepting criticism, especially prior to developing a bond with the other person

Additional Contrasts
Thinkers need to know why something is done and try to substantiate their position using a logical analysis. They speak their truth directly and want rules to be fair and uniformly enforced. Feelers aim more to please than understand why and try to persuade others of their point of view. They are more focused on social awareness, establishing harmony, and considering all aspects of the situation rather than adherence to rules. In this way, decisions become more complex for feelers, while logical conclusions seem simple, defensible, and concise. Also, thinkers can independently judge their own self-worth, will only respect criticism from a “credible” source, and need praise that is specific and speaks to their level of competence. Feelers, on the other hand, depend on those around them to give them self-worth, accept criticism only after establishing a personal bond, and need praise that makes them feel valued by others. In these ways, thinkers and feelers can seem like they come from different worlds, with little common ground from which to work in personal relationships. Like the sensor and intuitive (see Fact Sheet 06-99), this often is a fundamental issue that can lead to real difficulties in relationships. Yet there are ways to strengthen relationships when the people involved are willing to accept the need for greater understanding, less judgment, and more compromise. The two most dangerous assumptions to a relationship are: 1. that feelers do not think, and 2. that thinkers have no feelings.

Working Out Differences
There are many things both thinkers and feelers can do to help and support each other in relationships. One of the most important, however, is to begin to see the opposite process as an inherent preference and the most comfortable approach to life of that person. It does not represent a flaw but simply a difference from the mental process that you prefer. Its origin is a natural
predisposition and is not born of a desire to make life difficult for you. In other words, it is important to accept the contrasting mental process as a strength that brings balance to the relationship. For each person the preferred process brings a sense of security, comfort, and confidence in making decisions. With this in mind, here are some suggestions to help address the differences that originate in these two contrasting approaches to making decisions.

For thinkers, it is important to understand that the feeling approach is “rational,” even if it does not seem logical to you. It also is sophisticated and a legitimate approach to problem solving, for logic is not the “end all” and the only thing to consider in making a decision. Consideration of the impact on others is a legitimate element of the decision-making process and one that is important to many other people. The greatest problems begin when thinkers expect and insist that feelers defend their position using pure mental logic.

Other suggestions include:

For Thinkers:
* Take into account other aspects of decision-making along with logical outcomes.
* Begin to include how decisions impact others in the decision-making process.
* Understand the rational, sophisticated, and legitimate approach that feelers use.
* Show your caring for people and tact in expressing outcomes as part of decision making.

For Feelers:
* Appreciate pure logic as important in the decision-making process.
* Understand that thinkers do care about others, even when it does not appear as an element in the decision-making process.
* Practice logical explanations as part of any decision justification.
* Increase your clarity and directness, even when it may increase uneasiness and discomfort in the process.

With feelers it can be helpful to practice searching for, inserting, and defending decisions from a pure, logical explanation. Begin to see this as part of the justification for what you are doing, practicing such explanations as part of your rationale for your preferred outcomes. In this process, it is important to generate greater appreciation of pure logic as an important element in the decision-making process. It also is important to increase directness in communication so that your points get across to others. Do not be so concerned about impact and tact that the other person does not have a clue regarding the point you are trying to make. Practice being more clear and direct with others, especially thinkers, even when it may be uncomfortable for you. They will greatly appreciate the directness and clarity, especially if the message is concise. Often the feeler’s empathy and search for harmony muddles the point of the message through an extraordinary volume of words. In seeking to avoid conflict, the feeler may be more focused on caring for themselves and sacrifice clarity and truth in the process.

Other Resources

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