

Using the *Extended DISC*[®] Model and the *Feedforward* Process to Create Positive, Long-Term Change in Leadership Behavior

By: Dr. Marshall Goldsmith and Markku Kauppinen

Contrary to some popular practice, the leadership development process does not have to be complicated or expensive. There is a practical way to identify behaviors to change that can have a significant impact on leadership effectiveness – without requiring a large investment of time or money. This process can be used by both individuals and teams. This process can also be used to capture data that provides a unique understanding of the organization's leadership culture.

True leadership development cannot be forced or mandated. To become a better leader, one must be committed to “looking in the mirror” and being willing to make a sincere effort to change. The journey to becoming a better leader always begins with the desire to improve.

In athletics, what separates winners from also-rans is often not simply the talent, but the will to win. The same applies to leaders. If your organization has individuals who are not willing to put forth the effort, the process that we are going to describe won't help.

Our process is not designed to help leaders who don't care start caring. It is designed to help leaders who do care get even better!

Combining *Extended DISC*[®] and *Feedforward*

Extended DISC[®] is a proven tool that can help leaders determine *what* behavior to change. The *Feedforward* process is a proven approach that can help leaders understand *how* to achieve these changes. The combination of the two gives leaders the capability of making a major impact in leadership

effectiveness without having to make a major investment in time and money!

Steps in the process

1. Identify the leaders' behavioral strengths and development areas – using *Extended DISC*®.

The first step in the process of meaningful behavioral change is to carefully select key areas for improvement. It can be very difficult to look into the mirror and be honest with ourselves. It can be hard for successful people to challenge themselves to make the changes that are needed to get even better. The best leaders are the role models that never stop in their efforts to improve.

There can be several ways to identify behaviors to improve. Some leaders may already know what they need to change. For example, some may realize, “I over-commit too often”. In some cases, leaders can simply ask co-workers for input. This informal interaction may work well if the co-workers are comfortable in providing honest feedback. It may not work if the co-workers feel threatened.

Specially-designed 360° feedback instruments may provide a more formal and structured way of gathering feedback. While this process can be an excellent way to gather ideas, it can also be time consuming and expensive. In today's “over-surveyed” world many employees are tired of filling out long, detailed forms. The time between form completion and data analysis can sometimes stretch into many weeks. Also, if the process of reviewing results is not conducted by an experienced coach or facilitator, 360° feedback may create problems because of faulty interpretation.

A popular and convenient way to identify the behaviors to modify is the use of behavioral style assessments. They are typically affordable and easy-to-administer. An advantage with self-assessment tools is that, if the leaders do not like the results, they cannot blame others. Also, the information that a good behavioral assessment tool provides often correlates highly with the 360-feedback results.

If your organization chooses to use behavioral assessment tools for its leaders, it is important to select a methodology with a track record of success. In selecting an assessment process, there are two important considerations:

- The results should be easy to understand and the diagnostic model should be easy to apply. If leaders have to invest too much time in simply understanding the tool – they won't use it.
- It is important to ensure that the tool is designed to identify the leaders' *natural* styles, not their *adjusted* styles. Many adjusted style instruments allow the respondent to influence the results and, hence, to avoid addressing the true areas for development that can have a significant impact on leadership.

The *natural* style refers to the actual behavioral style of the person completing the assessment. Research has shown that our natural behavioral styles do not change much over our lifetimes. We have a behavioral pattern that makes us comfortable and requires little thought, concentration or energy. We tend to repeat the behaviors that are consistent with this pattern. Once our behavioral patterns develop - they can be used to predict our behavior in different situations.

The *adjusted* style refers to how a person needs, or wants to, adjust his/her behavior in a specific environment. These adjustments are based on his/her perceptions, and they require conscious concentration and energy.

Why is it so important to select an assessment tool that is designed to primarily measure natural and not adjusted behaviors? While the assessment tools that measure adjusted style may provide some insight into motivations, they may not measure true behavioral strengths and areas for development.

Adjusted style inventories may indicate that in a particular environment and at a particular moment in time, a person has a certain set of behavioral tendencies. The results may look very different when in different environments (work vs. home, for example).

This type of analysis may be unnecessarily complex. It may also confuse a deeper assessment of true strengths and developmental needs.

Let me illustrate this with an example. In the widely used DISC model, my co-author's primary behavioral style is an S-style. Let's assume that Markku works in an organization where the environment is very fast-paced, results-oriented and competitive (more of a D-Style). In fact, these same adjectives can be used to describe most of Markku's co-workers. Naturally, he wants to fit in and will try his best to modify his behavior accordingly. After all, Markku wants a promotion, nice raise and that corner office with a great view.

If Markku were to complete an assessment that measures his conscious behavior style – how *he* perceives he needs to adjust his behavior in the present environment – the results would indicate that Markku is assertive, competitive, demanding, quick to make decisions, and so on. He may be pleased with the results and would probably be eager to share the results with his colleagues. “Look, I am just like you!” Markku would say. At home, his wife would shake her head and give Markku a smile – realizing that this is not the Markku that she knows!

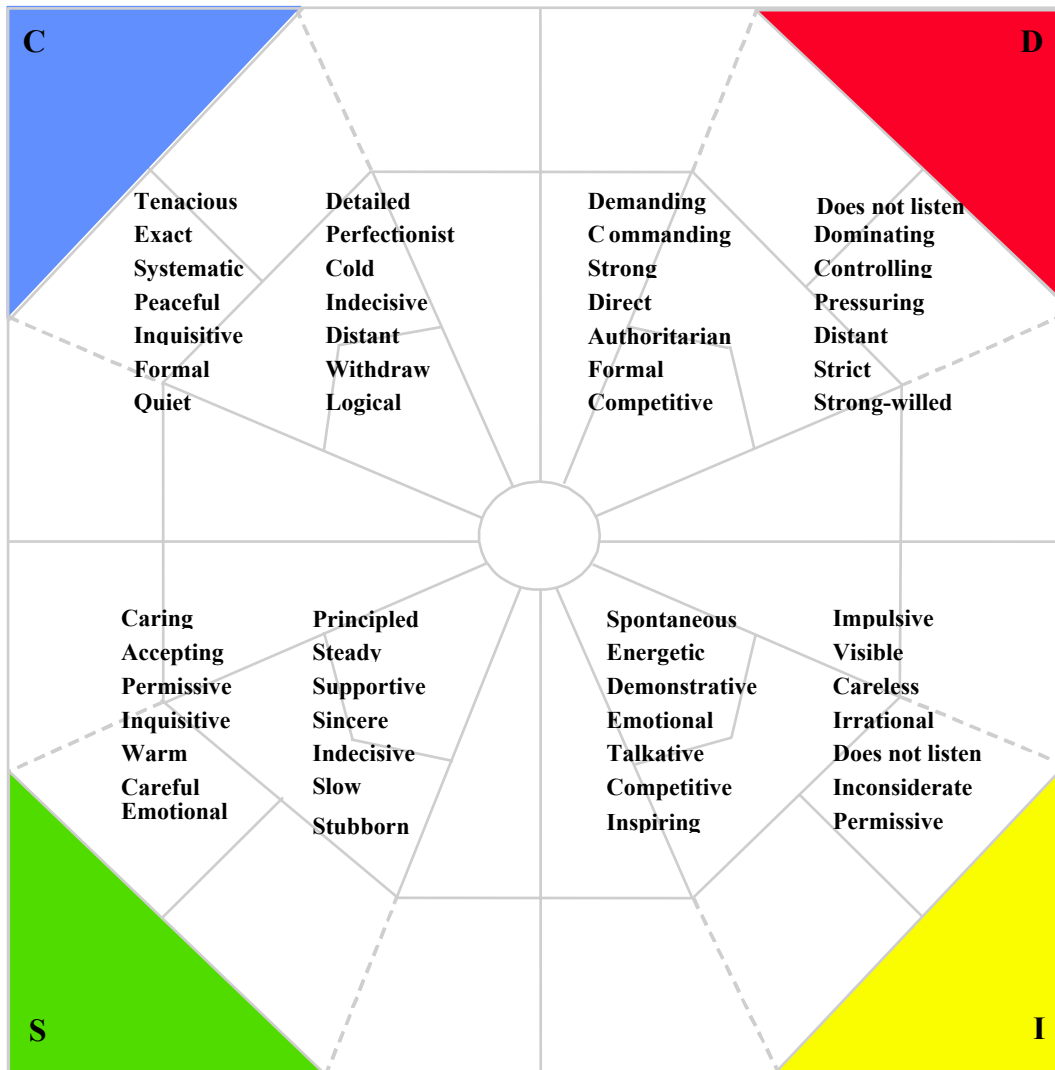
The problem is that the results are not reflective of who Markku really is. If he were to develop an action plan on how he may want to improve his performance based on these results, Markku may try to slow down, listen more, and be more patient and laid back. However, these areas are exactly *opposites* of what he should do. Being a natural S-style, Markku should try to be more assertive, talk more, and speed up. As the famous Nike commercial suggests – he should “just do it.”

Looking at the conscious (or adjusted) scores may give Markku a false sense of security. He may mistakenly think that he doesn't need to change at all. Reviewing the natural scores may point out Markku's true challenges. He may realize why it can be important for him to change.

This is why we recommend behavioral assessments that measure natural styles.

Extended DISC International has joined forces with Marshall Goldsmith to create an assessment and follow-up process, the **Marshall Goldsmith Feedforward Tool**, that is designed to provide individuals, teams and organizations with suggestions for the future and to help them achieve a positive change in behavior. One of the reasons that Marshall has selected the *Extended DISC*[®] System is that its individual assessment measures natural style – as opposed to adjusted style.

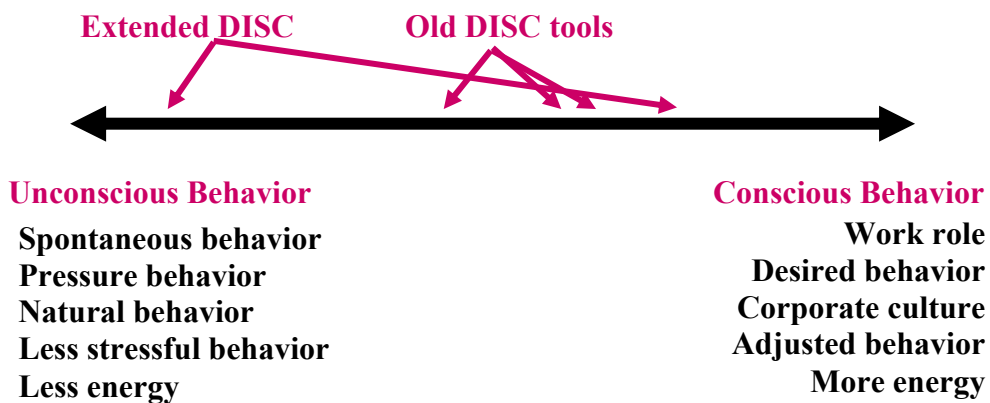
The *Extended DISC*[®] assessments use the time-tested DISC-theory as their foundation. The theory was developed in 1928 by William Moulton Marston. It is based on the Jungian model of human behavior. The DISC-model defines four main behavioral styles (D, I, S and C) that can help leaders in identifying behaviors that can be strengths and behaviors that can cause challenges.

Table 1: The four traits on the *Extended DISC*® Diamond

What makes the *Extended DISC*® System different is its ability to measure at a deeper unconscious level which minimizes the impact of the environment. In practice this means that the results show who the individual actually is and not what the person thinks he/she needs to be in the existing environment. As a result, the report identifies the true strengths and developmental areas to allow for true performance improvement. The original DISC tools focus on the conscious behavior style – how a person perceives he/she needs to adjust behavior in the present environment. Consequently, the results vary over time, making it difficult to determine

what the person's style actually is and how to develop it. The *Extended DISC*[®] System is able to measure both the unconscious and conscious styles, giving it a powerful range of measurement.

Table 2. Range of measurement



The Marshall Goldsmith Feedforward Tool is very easy to use. The online questionnaire takes only about 10 minutes to complete. Based on the responses, a customizable report is generated that provides ideas and suggestions about how to *achieve positive, measurable change in behavior*.

2. Identify the behaviors that leaders want to improve.

When the leaders receive their *Feedforward Tool* results, they should take time to identify the behaviors they want to modify. They should consider which one(s) will have the greatest positive impact on their performance. It is important to ask them to select only 1-2 areas of development. It is imperative that they do not select more. It is better to focus on one or two key areas than try to ambitiously select too many and not to make impactful change. Besides, the leaders in your organization have too many goals on their plate already to add a dozen more.

When selecting the areas for improvement, it is a good idea to get input from others. **The Marshall Goldsmith Feedforward Tool** helps in this process

by identifying specific behaviors that potentially have a major impact on performance. It also identifies what behaviors naturally require a little and a lot of energy from you with the suggestions on how you may want to consider modifying your behaviors. What's more, the tool will allow you to select from 10 developmental areas. They are:

- Leadership
- Sales
- Management
- Customer Service
- Entrepreneurship
- Project Management
- Teamwork
- Information Technology
- Administration
- Training

The leader may select one or several of these areas to help in the development process. In our experience, most leaders select 2-3 of these categories. Within each category the leader can work on their selected 1-2 areas for behavioral change.

It is important to note two things. First, most people tend to select behaviors that are considered to be their weaknesses. This is not always the best option. Often what holds individuals back is not their weaknesses. Rather, they are so comfortable with their strengths that they overuse them until they do, in fact, become weaknesses. For example, if a person is a very outgoing, talkative I-style, his strength is that he is able to influence people, whether they are friends or strangers. However, he may simply talk too much and often forget to listen to others. In such a situation, one option to consider may be to consciously “diminish” his strength. In other words, talk less and listen more. It may have a significant impact on his performance. Although changing this behavior will require conscious effort and energy from him, it

will not be quite as demanding as increasing a behavioral dimension that is not naturally comfortable to him.

Second, while the leaders review their assessment results, they should not take their strengths for granted – a mistake that happens far too often. It is clear that our culture conditions most of us to focus more on our weaknesses than strengths. Unfortunately, often our parents, teachers, friends and co-workers are more likely to criticize our shortcomings than to praise our accomplishments. It is no wonder that we overlook what we have to offer. Many leaders have key strengths that countless people would love to possess. These leaders need to make sure that these strengths are being fully utilized!

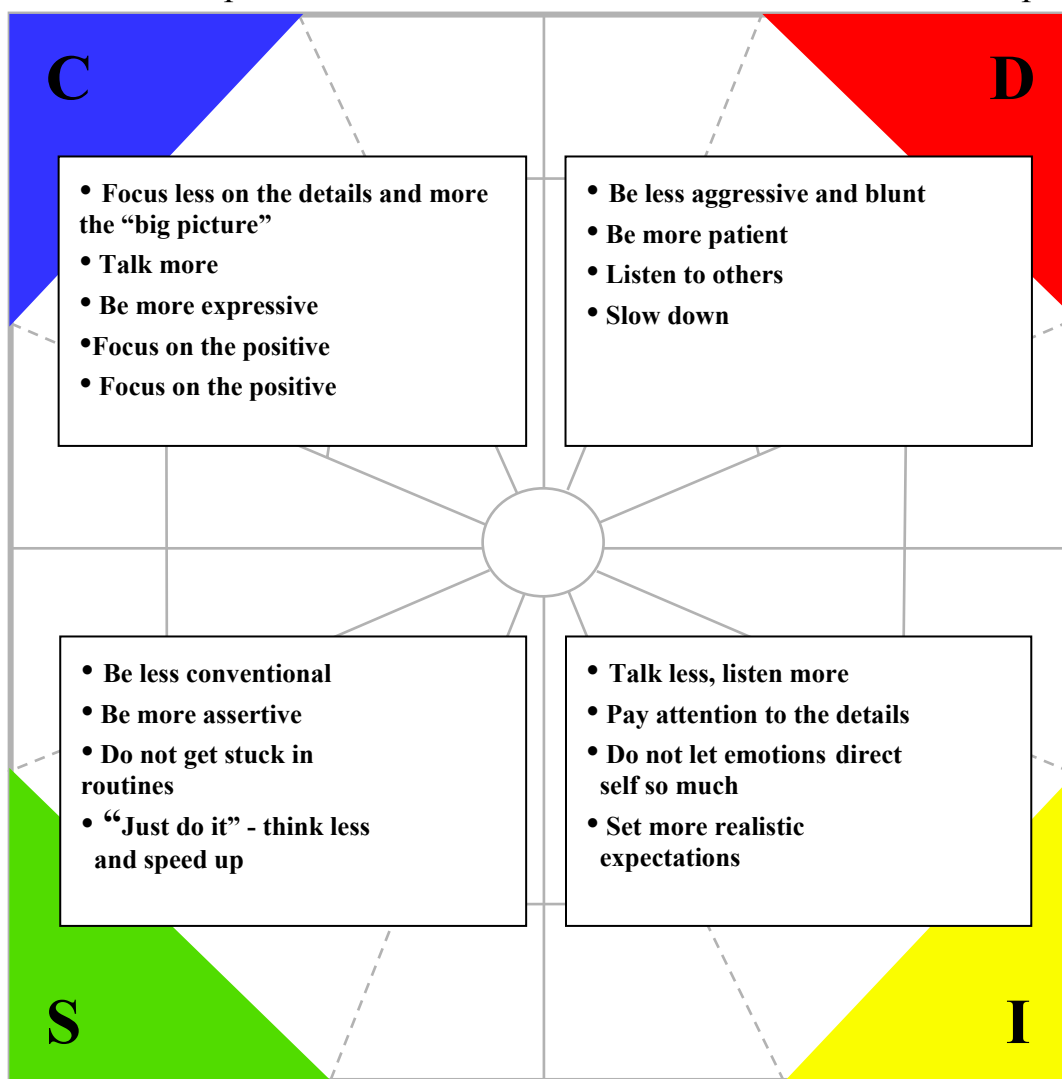
When reviewing the assessment results, the leaders need to consider how relevant the information is to their individual situations. While a report may reveal something very new and insightful, it does not mean that a leader should necessarily take action on that behavioral dimension. It must be relevant to him/her now and in his/her present work environment. We have found that it is beneficial to consider the information from both professional and personal life viewpoints. By doing so, a leader can identify behaviors to improve that will have more far reaching benefits. Also, he/she may be able to achieve positive results both at work and home by consciously focusing on the very same behavioral issue.

It is important for leaders to realize that any behavior style can produce success. It is very easy to identify very successful leaders in all of the D, I, S and C behavioral styles. However, there is one common denominator with the most successful leaders. **They know themselves and understand their own strengths and areas for development.** They consciously work to modify their behaviors to get even better. Many of them have also learned to *recruit to their weaknesses*. That is, they surround themselves with other successful people who have different behavioral styles. Admittedly, it can be easier (in the short term) to get along with people who have behaviors

that are similar to our own. Unfortunately, when there is a team of individuals with similar styles, two things happen: 1) they amplify their strengths and, 2) they amplify their weaknesses. The diversification of behavioral styles can lead to better, more balanced decisions.

The *Extended DISC*® model has been used with thousands of leaders around the world. Some common behaviors that leader choose to improve are listed below.

Table 3. Examples of behaviors that successful leaders choose to improve.



3. Use *Feedforward* instead of feedback.

Providing feedback has long been considered an essential skill for leaders. As they strive to achieve the goals of the organization, employees need to know how they are doing. They need to know if their performance is in line with what their leaders expect. They need to learn what they have done well and what they need to change. Traditionally, this information has been communicated in the form of “downward feedback” from leaders to their employees. Just as employees need feedback from leaders, leaders can benefit from feedback from their employees. Employees can provide useful input on the effectiveness of procedures and processes as well as input to managers on their leadership effectiveness. This “upward feedback” has become increasingly common with the advent of 360° multi-rater assessments.

But there is a fundamental problem with all types of feedback: it focuses on a *past*, on what has already occurred—not on the infinite variety of opportunities that can happen in the future. As such, feedback can be limited and static, as opposed to expansive and dynamic.

Instead of rehashing a past that *cannot be changed* – feedback – Jon Katzenbach (author of *The Wisdom of Teams*, Harvard Business School Press, 1993) and Marshall Goldsmith coined “*feedforward*” to encourage spending time creating a future that *can be changed!*

Ten Reasons to use *Feedforward* Process:

1. We can change the future. We can’t change the past.
2. It can be more productive to help people be “right,” than prove they were “wrong.”
3. *Feedforward* is especially suited to successful people.
4. *Feedforward* can come from anyone who knows about the task. It does not require personal experience with the individual.

5. People do not take *feedforward* as personally as feedback
6. Feedback can reinforce personal stereotyping and negative self-fulfilling prophecies.
7. Face it! Most of us hate getting negative feedback, and we don't like to give it.
8. *Feedforward* can cover almost all of the same "material" as feedback.
9. *Feedforward* tends to be much faster and more efficient than feedback.
10. *Feedforward* can be a useful tool to apply with managers, peers and team members.

Letting go of the past and focusing on the future. It can make you more effective and it is also a lot more fun!

4. Develop an action plan.

Once the leaders have identified the behaviors that they want to modify, they need to determine exactly how they will do it. It is important that the plans come from the leaders and are about what they want to do. As a result, they are more likely to live up to their commitments.

It is very beneficial to involve the key stakeholders at this step. It reinforces the individual's public commitment to change. Ongoing dialogue creates a process in which *both* parties are focused on improving the relationship, not on judging each other. Recent research on follow-up has clearly shown that leaders are much more likely to achieve a positive, measurable change in behavior if they consistently involve selected colleagues (through follow-up dialogues) in the change process. (See "Leadership Is a Contact Sport", M. Goldsmith and H. Morgan, *Strategy+Business*, Fall 2004 for results on increasing leadership effectiveness from over 86,000 respondents in eight major corporations.)

5. Create a follow-up process.

Research clearly shows that follow-up is a critical step in achieving sustained behavioral change. Leaders need to create a system that forces them to monitor their own progress. They should involve others and ask them: “Please give me your best suggestions on how I can improve in the future.”

Mini-surveys are an excellent tool in ensuring an effective follow-up. Mini-surveys can be a simple and efficient way to measure behavioral change. Mini-surveys are usually very short and focus only on the behaviors that have been selected by the person being coached. They are designed so that the raters evaluate behavior that occurs *only* during the coaching period. They focus on the rater’s perception of *improvement*. If the executive agrees upon the desired behaviors for change, selects highly respected co-workers as raters, takes the process seriously and follows-up, positive change will almost always occur. After receiving the mini-survey results the executive thanks the raters, involves them in future change and continues the process. This is almost always a positive experience for the executive and for the co-workers.

Ideally, mini-surveys should be conducted within eight months after using the *Feedforward* Tool. Use a specifically designed mini-survey with key stakeholders. They should be asked whether the person has become more or less effective in the areas targeted for improvement.

6. Review results and start again.

If the leader has taken the process seriously, stakeholders almost invariably report improvement. Leaders can then build on that success by repeating the process for the next 12 to 18 months. This type of follow-up will assure continued progress on initial goals and uncover additional areas for improvement. Stakeholders will appreciate the follow-up. No one minds filling out a focused, two-to-six-item

questionnaire if they see positive results. The person being coached will benefit from ongoing, targeted steps to improve performance.

In summary, the combination of *Extended DISC*[®] analysis and the *feedforward* process can provide a simple, positive and effective way to help leaders develop themselves. The efficiency of this combination makes it feasible for an organization to implement with all leaders – not just a select few. Not only will individual leaders become more effective – organizations will evolve to meet the challenges of the future!

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the *Business Week* best-seller, *The Leader of the Future* and *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.

Markku Kauppinen is the president of Extended DISC North America, Inc. The company introduced the *Extended DISC*[®] System to North America in 1997. Markku is recognized as the foremost authority in *Extended DISC*[®] assessments in North America. He is involved in the education of *Extended DISC*[®] users and he has worked with clients in the US, Canada, Europe, Asia and Latin America. Markku also plays an active role in product development by focusing on the practical applications of the assessment tools.