

DDI RESEARCH PAPER

DRIVING WORKPLACE PRODUCTIVITY

THROUGH HIGH QUALITY INTERACTIONS

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DDIO[®]
DEVELOPMENT DIMENSIONS INTERNATIONAL

In the four decades leading up to 2010, perhaps the most significant change to the corporate landscape has been the **transition** from an economic society based on **physical and tangible assets**, such as plant and equipment, to one based on **intangible assets** such as customer relationships, ideas, innovation and brand.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than 40 years, DDI has helped the most successful companies around the world close the gap between where their businesses need to go and the talent required to take them there.

Through our Day-in-the-Life assessment process, we have assessed more than 30,000 senior executives and senior executive aspirants globally over the past ten years, 5,000 in Australia alone, to identify and perfect the interaction skills considered essential for their individual roles.

We believe that interaction skills are inextricably linked to productivity and this research paper, 'Driving workplace productivity through high quality interactions', captures this groundbreaking research for the first time.

With this paper, we present a forum through which to challenge the misconceptions around productivity, outline how interactions most commonly go wrong, and provide recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality of interactions in the workplace, driving greater productivity.

It's imperative that our business leaders not only recognise the importance of interaction skills but harness them, to positively impact on their organisation's performance and reverse the overall decline in productivity currently being experienced across Australia.

We believe that interaction skills are inextricably linked to productivity.



Click on the QR codes throughout the research paper for short videos summarising our findings

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1. INTRODUCTION

1A. The productivity challenge

Australia's productivity is declining, yet despite widespread recognition of the problemⁱ, answers have proven elusive.

Currently, the productivity agenda seems dominated by **advocacy to improve technical skills, education, technology and infrastructure**ⁱⁱ. While, these are important determinants of productivity, scant attention has been given to the productivity implications of **day-to-day human interactions** that occur in the workplace.

1B. Powering productivity through interactions

In the four decades leading up to 2010, perhaps the most significant change to the corporate landscape has been the transition from an economic society based on **physical and tangible assets**, such as plant and equipment, to one based on **intangible assets** such as customer relationships, ideas, innovation and brand.

It is estimated that **intangible assets now account for more than 80 per cent of an organisation's value**ⁱⁱⁱ and knowledge workers more than 40 per cent of the workforce^{iv}.

In recent years, McKinsey and Co^v. has explored the relationship between workplace interactions and productivity of knowledge workers, believing that the key to improving the productivity of knowledge workers lies in the ability of organisations to identify and address the barriers workers face in their daily interactions. Drawing on their research in a number of knowledge based organisations they focus on the structural barriers (physical, technical, social or cultural, contextual and time) that inhibit effective workplace interactions.

While these barriers are important and target the broader characteristics of organisations, leaders spend a significant portion of their time engaged in one-on-one and small group **conversations** and the quality of these discussions has a significant impact on the performance and productivity of individuals and the organisation.

2. THE INTERACTION ESSENTIALSSM

Human beings are social creatures. In our daily lives and at work, we are constantly interacting with others. Whether these interactions happen face-to-face, over the phone, or through e-mail or text, the way we treat others and how we communicate with them makes an impact — for better or worse. So what are the skills required to conduct effective interactions day-to-day?

Through our 40+ years of assessing talent, conducting research, and creating development programs, we have found that there exists a core set of skills everyone needs to master in order to effectively build relationships and get work done. We call these the Interaction EssentialsSM.

2A. The Interaction EssentialsSM

The Interaction EssentialsSM represent a set of key behaviours that underpin effective interactions critical to a leadership role, including:

- Team meetings;
- Coaching situations;
- Delegating;
- Leading change;
- Performance discussions.

When people interact, they generally have two kinds of needs:

- Personal needs—to be valued, understood, involved, and supported.
- Practical needs—to reach a productive outcome.

The Interaction Essentials equip leaders with the skills needed to address both kinds of needs and to be successful in any type of interaction.

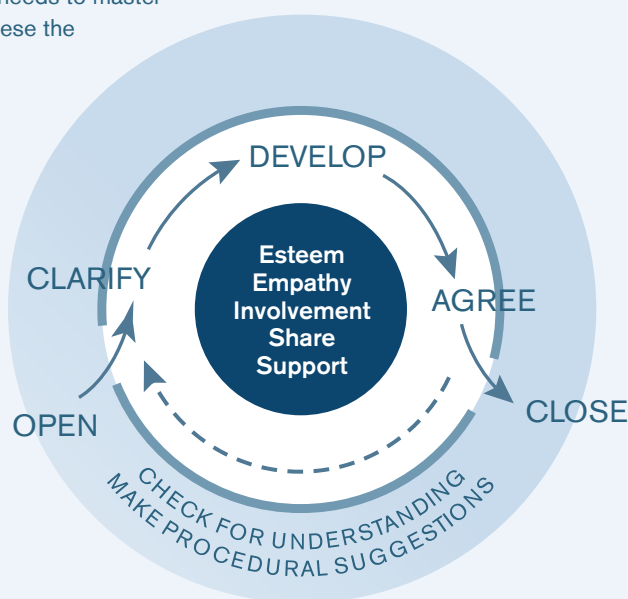


Figure 1: The Interaction EssentialsSM

Personal Needs – Key Principles

Personal needs are addressed through the Key Principles. Key Principles help leaders avoid hazards, take advantage of opportunities, and make people feel appreciated, understood, involved, and supported along the way.

The five Key Principles are:

- Maintain or enhance self-**ESTEEM**;
- Listen and respond with **EMPATHY**;
- Ask for help and encourage **INVOLVEMENT**;
- **SHARE** thoughts, feelings, and rationale. (to build trust);
- Provide **SUPPORT** without removing responsibility. (to build ownership).



Practical Needs – Interaction Guidelines

Leaders can meet practical needs and structure the discussion by using five Interaction Guidelines. These guidelines provide a direct route for the discussion—a route that will take leaders to clear and agreed outcomes.

OPEN: In the OPEN step you ensure that the discussion has a clear purpose and that everyone understands the importance of accomplishing it.

CLARIFY: There are two types of information to collect in this step—facts and figures and issues and concerns. Both are essential to building a complete picture of the situation.

DEVELOP: When developing ideas, it is important to ask questions and include others in the process. Most likely leaders will have ideas about what to do, and should share them. However, they should put equal emphasis on seeking others' ideas.

AGREE: It is important that leaders and the people involved agree on a plan for following through on the ideas that were developed and for supporting those who will take action.

CLOSE: This is the final chance to check that everyone is clear on agreements and next steps and committed to following through.

DDI research has consistently demonstrated that improvements in the ability to use these skills lead to increased productivity. For example, a study of leaders^{vi} who rated high in productivity indicated that **83 per cent** of these leaders effectively used the Interaction Essentials. In contrast, only **two per cent** of leaders who rated low in productivity effectively used the Interaction Essentials.

In DDI's 2011 global research Lessons for Leaders from the People that Matter^{vii}, a key finding showed leaders lacked fundamental interaction skills.

For example, 60 per cent of workers identified that their manager always or most of the time damages their self-esteem, whilst a third of respondents said their manager doesn't remain calm and constructive when discussing a problem.

Both of these observations raise the risk that workers put off or avoid important conversations with their manager. The results for Australian leaders are similar to their global counterparts. Over 50 per cent say their manager most of the time or always lacks effective interaction skills (**Figure 2**).

2B. Scorecard – quality of interactions of Australian managers



Key

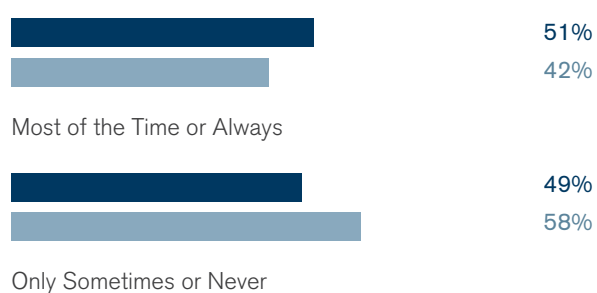


Global

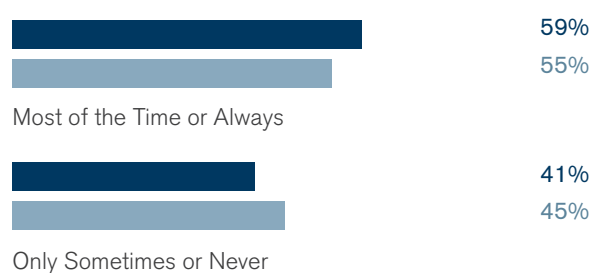


Australia

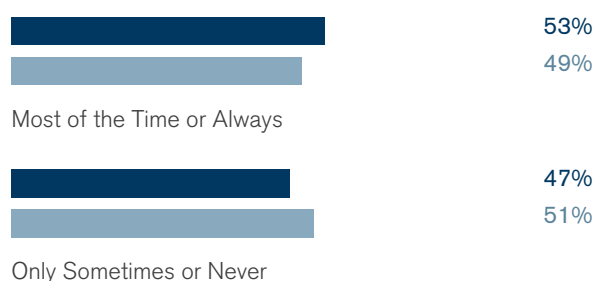
Does your manager ask for ideas about how to solve problems?



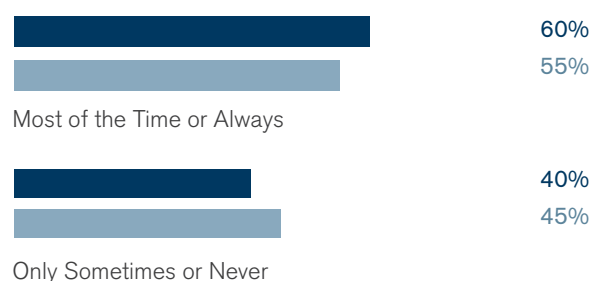
In conversation, does your manager ask questions to ensure he/she understands what you are saying?



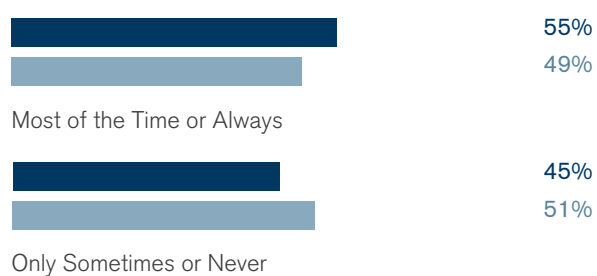
Does your manager help you solve problems without solving them for you?



Does your manager adequately recognise your efforts/contributions?



Does your manager give you sufficient feedback on your performance?



Does your manager handle work conversations efficiently?

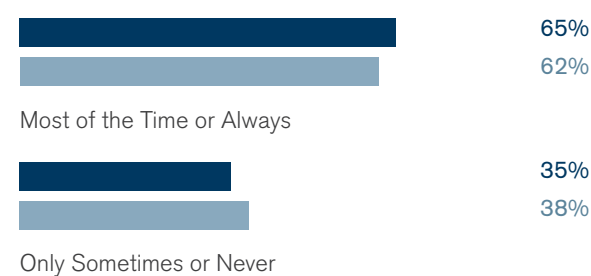


Figure 2: The tables above include data from DDI's 'Lessons for Leaders from the People that Matter' global research.

3. SPOTLIGHT ON AUSTRALIA'S SENIOR EXECUTIVES

This section looks closely at the characteristics of senior leaders, common mistakes made by leaders inhibiting effective communication in the workplace and seven interaction faux pas hurting productivity.

3A. Conversations at the executive level

The ability to facilitate effective conversations is important at all levels of the leadership pipeline however, the consequences of ineffectively deploying interaction skills at the senior level are far greater than the frontline.

Further, it is often mistakenly assumed that mid to senior level leaders will have already mastered these critical interaction skills. There are some particular characteristics associated with senior leaders:

- Senior leaders and executives are dealing with a much broader and diverse group of stakeholders that constantly challenge their interaction skills.
- Senior leaders and executives must balance the needs of multiple stakeholders who often bring competing needs and perspectives to a situation. The diversity of styles, expectations and needs create a complex environment within which to facilitate effective interactions.
- As leaders move through an organisation and up the leadership pipeline, they are faced with numerous transitional challenges. Visibility increases, the consequences of decisions become greater and the pressure and complexity of the role intensifies, leading to greater risk of derailment.

3B. Common interaction mistakes of leaders

In Australia, we have assessed more than 5,000 senior leaders and senior leader aspirants over the past ten years.

We do this through DDI's Day-in-the-Life executive assessment process. As part of this assessment process executives are placed in a variety of interaction situations and evaluated against the Interaction Essentials. The assessment evaluates the strength and frequency of these behaviours in common interaction situations.

DDI's 'Day-in-the-Life'

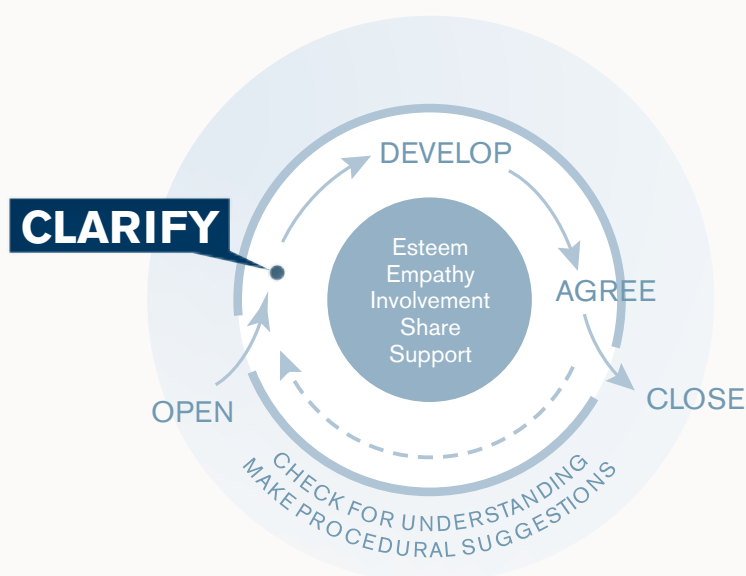
Participants assume the role of a newly hired leader in a large global organisation. Over the course of a day, they will deal with a variety of tactical and strategic challenges typically faced by leaders at a senior level.

This may include meetings with internal and external stakeholders such as coaching discussions with a direct report, a meeting with a disgruntled customer and a meeting with a peer to secure resources or resolve an internal conflict. In addition they will be asked to analyse a variety of background information about the organisation and develop a strategic plan for its future success.

Participants are asked to behave as they would in their usual work environment. This enables DDI to examine and report back on their performance across critical competencies and behaviours.

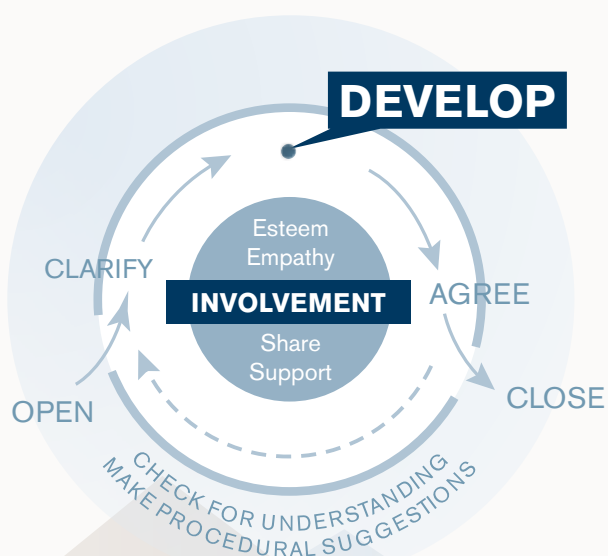


An analysis of these interactions highlights a number of common mistakes and tendencies. While leaders may demonstrate strengths in one aspect, it is the combination of elements that lead to high quality interactions in the work place. This data suggests that there is significant room for improvement in the quality of interactions if we are to successfully address Australia's productivity challenges through better quality interactions. And on page 10, we've identified the common themes and implications at the executive level.



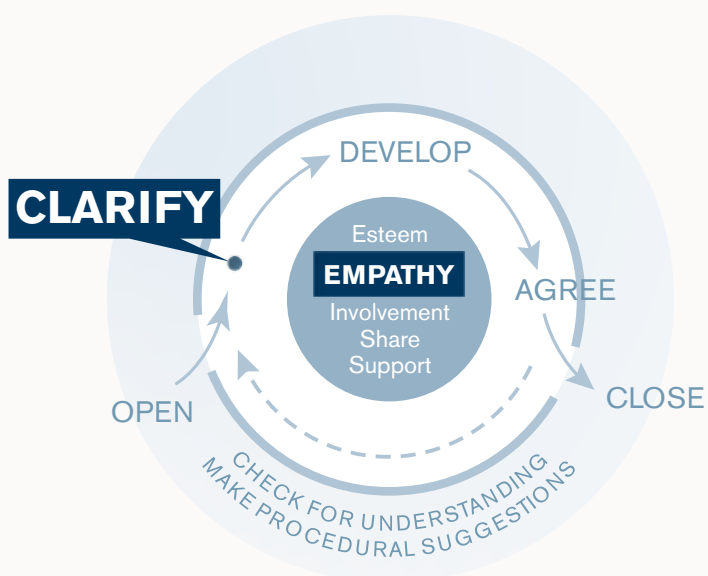
Operating on flawed or unresolved assumptions

We found that more than 45 per cent of leaders don't clarify assumptions or check their understanding of a situation before moving on to addressing an issue. As such they risk operating on flawed assumptions.



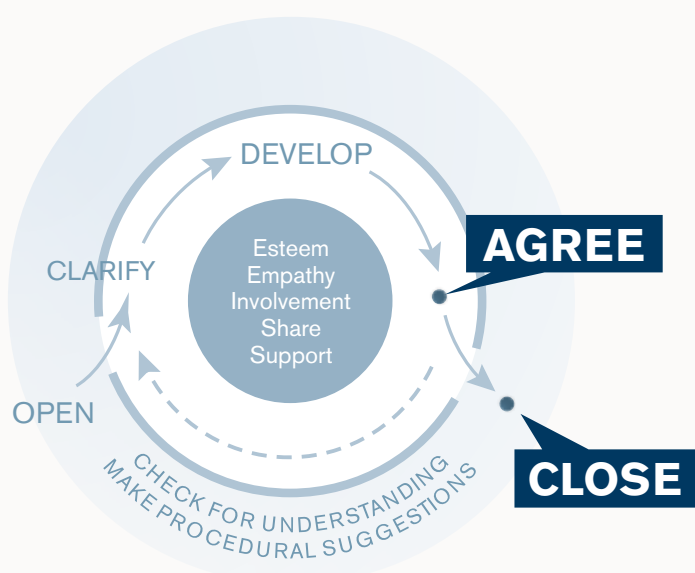
Relying on their own ideas

55 per cent of leaders assessed don't invite ideas from others. Even if they seek to clarify a situation, they often use this to inform their decision or solution. They miss the opportunity to expand the range of options and importantly gain the buy-in and commitment of the other party.



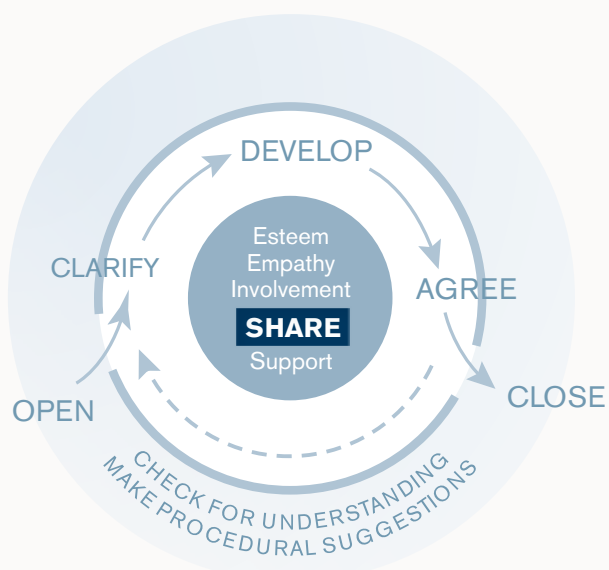
- **Not listening and responding to cues**

50 per cent of leaders assessed failed to listen effectively and respond to interpersonal cues (in particular empathy cues). Listening operates at several levels – facts, feelings and intent. While some leaders may tune in to and respond to the facts of a situation, very few demonstrated the ability to listen for feelings and intent. As a result, these leaders often don't get to the heart of an issue and/or appropriately respond to the underlying feelings of the other party.



- **No clarity around next steps**

48 per cent of leaders leave meetings without clear agreement on next steps. Without clarity and agreement, issues will often be left unresolved or not actioned. This can significantly impact the productivity and outcome of discussions and lead to tensions arising from unclear expectations.



- **Building trust in interactions**

Disclosing of one's own thoughts and feelings is a powerful way of building trust in an interaction and relationship. Almost half of the leaders assessed missed opportunities to share thoughts and feelings with the other person.

3C. Seven interaction sins



Straight to fixing the problem

Senior leaders, who have often been rewarded for getting things done and fixing problems jump too quickly to presenting the solution. They fail to understand the context of a situation and miss opportunities to involve the other party.



One size fits all

Over time leaders develop a preferred style and/or approach to meetings and interactions. They can be oblivious to the impact that this approach has on certain situations or individuals. They may also struggle to accommodate different perspectives.



Avoiding the tough issues

Many leaders struggle to address the tough issues, in particular performance issues. They lack the skills and insight to diffuse situations and or tackle areas that are perceived to be more sensitive. As a result, the issues can be left unresolved, leading to increased tension and consequences.



Inconsistent application across different contexts

Leaders often adopt a different approach to different situations and contexts. Skills that they readily apply in one situation may not be deployed in another. For instance, the highest levels of empathy and diplomacy are often saved for situations where people are trying to influence peers. They are more likely to demonstrate diplomacy and tact, and more effectively clarify a situation in order to calibrate each party's understanding of the issue at stake.



Influencing through the facts only

Executives need to spend much more time understanding the perspective of others before presenting and positioning ideas. Too often they rely on logic and rationale to position an argument or point of view. Senior leaders need to embrace more subtle means that proactively build stakeholder networks and appeal to the unique needs and circumstances of particular stakeholders.



Spotting opportunities for change but forgetting to engage others

Senior leaders often recognise the need for change. They identify opportunities for improvement, in areas such as products and processes. However they struggle to engage others in the change process. They don't proactively encourage others to develop ideas, they oversimplify the issues surrounding change and show little appreciation for the impact a change, assuming others will simply get on board.



Neglecting to coach in the moment

When asked to coach direct reports, senior leaders are generally effective at clarifying what performance is required, having an open dialogue and offering support for future challenges. However, they often neglect to provide guidance 'in the moment of need'. Furthermore, their assessment of development needs can be superficial, missing opportunities to investigate underlying performance gaps.

4. WHY EXECUTIVE INTERACTIONS GO BAD

At some stage in their career most senior leaders have been on the receiving end of a poor conversation. Quite reliably they can reflect on the characteristics of a good and bad conversation. However, as DDI assessment data demonstrates, many senior leaders struggle to consistently and purposefully deploy these behaviours when required. The reasons for this include:

- Some simply lack the fundamental frameworks and tools to facilitate effective discussions, such as the Interaction Essentials.
- Some may lack the insight and awareness of personal characteristics that can derail their intentions and approach. For example a leader with a strong predisposition towards self-confidence may overvalue their own ideas and neglect to seek the input and ideas of others. The overuse of these tendencies can derail a conversation. **Figure 4** summarises common derailing tendencies and the implication of these on interactions.

4A. Common derailers and the implications for interactions

Based on research into leadership success and failure by DDI, Hogan and Hogan^{viii}, and others, **11 key derailers have been identified.**



Common Derailers → Implications for Interactions

APPROVAL DEPENDENT seek and need praise or reassurance from others, particularly from people higher in the organisation.	➔	Often leads to an inhibition to address the hard but necessary issues.
ARGUMENTATIVE sceptical, tense, perhaps paranoid or suspicious, focused on protecting their own interests, and likely to resist coaching and feedback.	➔	Discussion process is overly directed towards catching others out or seeking vindication of one's own view.
ARROGANT overly self-assured or confident, resulting in poor listening and/or dismissal of feedback from others.	➔	Essential input from others may not be proffered and/or considered. Likely to dominate a discussion with their own perspectives.
ATTENTION SEEKING gregarious, charming, and persuasive, perhaps excessively so, which can result in becoming melodramatic and self-promoting.	➔	The conversation is seen as an opportunity for self-promotion. Overly focused on sharing own experiences.
AVOIDANT Tend to be preoccupied with their own agendas, and may prefer to address issues covertly (avoiding more direct solutions), thus being perceived as procrastinators, manipulative, or stubborn.	➔	While seemingly pleasant and cooperative on the surface may be driven by their own agenda. May not address issues openly.
ECCENTRIC creative and, accordingly, different from others, perhaps to the point of being unorthodox or even odd.	➔	Inclined to sell or position their own ideas and forget to 'check in' with others.
IMPERCEPTIVE not naturally inclined to read others' behaviour, intent, and motivations.	➔	Inability to truly connect with the other person's emotional reactions and responses. No empathy.
IMPULSIVE impatient, unpredictable, and inclined to act before considering the consequences of actions.	➔	Jumps to the solution too quickly. Doesn't take time to understand or clarify assumptions or understanding of an issue.
PERFECTIONISTIC micromanagers, controlling, and demanding of others.	➔	May take on responsibility for issues and not involve the other party. Can lead to feelings of disempowerment.
RISK AVERSE indecisive, too deliberate, or reluctant to take unusual or unconventional actions due to overemphasis on the prospect of failure.	➔	Ideas to problems will be safe. May not embrace creative or unusual ideas.
VOLATILE have difficulty controlling their emotions, and are perhaps moody and quick to erupt in anger.	➔	Struggles to control emotions and therefore has difficulty building trust in discussions.

Figure 4: Common derailers and the implications for interactions

5. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5A. Solutions for better leadership

So what can be done to enhance the quality of interactions in the workplace and in turn drive greater productivity?

1. Access to core frameworks and tools that support effective interactions

In the field of electronics a circuit breaker is an automatic electrical switch designed to protect an electrical circuit from damage caused by overload or short circuit. Its core function is to interrupt an otherwise damaging electrical flow. Interaction frameworks and tools, such as DDI's Interaction Essentials, provide leaders with the circuit breakers they require to manage effective interactions. At the core of these frameworks there are processes to facilitate effective interactions, techniques to effectively manage the personal needs of a conversation and core listening and questioning skills.

2. Self-awareness – understanding the impact of personality patterns / derailing tendencies on approach to interactions

The transition to more senior levels of leadership is inevitably accompanied by more pressured and complex conditions. The stress that these conditions produce for leaders create a Petri dish for derailing tendencies such as emotional volatility, impulsivity, and avoidance of others. Although hard-wired traits are very difficult to change, leaders can be taught to manage them successfully^x. Leaders need to:

- Explicate and discuss the tangible impact of derailing personality patterns on interactions. For example, if you are required to review a business strategy or priority, consider the impact of a leader with an arrogant derailing tendency. If the leader acts like a know-it-all in meetings, dominates the discussion, and prevents other's good ideas from surfacing, he or she becomes a serious barrier to generating effective solutions.
- Heighten self-awareness and sustain improvement in managing derailers by creating an open environment and ensuring the use of feedback skills. A leadership team that has an understanding of each other's derailment tendencies and the skills and receptivity to provide feedback will be more successful avoiding situations that trigger these potentially destructive behaviours and their associated business execution flaws.

3. Importance of practice

Leadership must be viewed as a practice, not an ideology. Mastering interaction and leadership skills is like every other discipline. It takes practice. How often we will get it right comes down to the quality and the frequency of practice.






5B. Common leadership interaction styles – which one are you and what to do

DDI has observed tens of thousands of leaders in common interaction situations. Based on our observations and assessment of key interaction behaviours, we have identified a number of common leadership interaction styles. While these styles may be situational, many leaders display a preference towards one or two styles.

For each of the common interaction styles there will be inherent strengths and weaknesses. With a better understanding of their style, leaders are better equipped to leverage the strengths and manage the potential risks.

It is useful to be aware that these dominant styles may reflect a leader's underlying personality traits and therefore will be difficult to change. Furthermore, the approach they take may be different under high and low stress conditions. Using the Interaction Essentials, leaders are better equipped to manage the impact of their own style and enhance the quality and productivity of workplace interactions.

Which one are you?	What to do - The Interaction Essentials Tips
 <p>The Problem Solver feels the need to solve problems on behalf of the other party. They may either jump straight to presenting the solution or clarify the situation simply to help them identify a solution.</p>	<p>Focus on using the Clarify and Develop stages of the Interaction Essentials to better understand the perspective and ideas of the other party. Be sure to include these in your assessment of the situation and development of the ideas. Focus on involvement and provide support while being mindful not to remove responsibility.</p>
 <p>The Interrogator will ask lots of questions (often with an overreliance on closed questions). They typically focus on drawing out the facts of a situation and less on feelings. The other party can often feel under the spotlight and may be reluctant to share perspectives or ideas.</p>	<p>Needs to place greater emphasis on the personal needs of the discussion through Key Principles such as enhancing and maintaining self-esteem, sharing thoughts and feelings to build trust and involvement. Focus on the use of more open questions to enhance involvement. Be sure to seek feedback and input on your own ideas.</p>
 <p>The Relationship Builder tends to focus more on the relationship and less on the outcomes of a discussion. They will be very sensitive to the feelings of others and may not address the practical needs of the conversation. They may also be less likely to tackle the tough issues. They can often confuse empathy and sympathy. People can often leave a conversation feeling 'good' but with little resolution or direction.</p>	<p>Needs to place greater emphasis on the practical needs of the discussion through the use of the Interaction Essentials (all steps). In the Open stage, be sure to clearly state the purpose and importance of the discussion. In the Agree stage, ensure there are clear actions and check for understanding.</p>

Which one are you?	What to do - The Interaction Essentials Tips
 <p>The Straight Talker believes that everyone wants things out on the table and handled directly. They are less interested in the personal needs and will quickly dismiss any emotional responses or references. They believe an open, and 'brutally' honest approach is the best. They rely on presenting facts and business rationale to gain support for a view or idea.</p>	<p>Needs to put greater emphasis on the use of Key Principles, in particular empathy and esteem. Needs to recognise that others may not respond to a direct approach and therefore may need to Clarify both the facts and feelings associated with an issue. Consider using the Interaction Essentials with one-on-one conversations for potentially sensitive issues before jumping into an open group discussion.</p>
 <p>The Sceptic whether consciously or sub-consciously appears to question the intentions of the other party. They tend to favour the tried and tested and will be less open to exploring creative or alternative approaches. The sceptic tends to use a lot of 'why' questions. To the other party they can often appear challenging, overly pessimistic and lacking receptivity to new ideas.</p>	<p>Needs to involve the other person more through the use of open questions. Focus on maintaining the other party's self-esteem in response to ideas and opinions offered and be open to developing ideas collaboratively. Can use the share thoughts and feelings Key Principles to build.</p>
 <p>The Motivator emphasises the positive and opportunities. While recipients may feel motivated and engaged, they often leave discussions lacking clarity on actions and next steps. Furthermore perspectives and ideas are not openly questioned or challenged. The positive nature of the conversation may mask inherent skill and confidence gaps.</p>	<p>Needs to focus on the Clarify and Agree stages of the Interaction Essentials. The Clarify stage will help to draw out all perspectives (both positive and negative). The Agree stage will ensure that there are clear actions and clarity on next steps. Involve the other party, provide support as needed and check for understanding throughout.</p>
 <p>The Detached avoids getting emotionally involved in discussions. While they remain very neutral they can often appear distracted or even disengaged. Furthermore they can be very difficult to read. As a result, others may misinterpret their intentions or actions and come to the conclusion that they don't seem to care.</p>	<p>Listen for, acknowledge and respond to the emotions of the other person through the use of empathy. Use esteem statement to show you value the other person's perspective and ideas. Share to help the other person understand your own perspective. Collaboratively Develop solutions and check for agreement on actions and next steps in the Agree stage.</p>
 <p>The Agreeer often relies on the other party to take the lead in conversations. While they can be seen as agreeable and open to other perspectives, they often lack self-confidence and may not be willing to share their own perspective or ideas. In the end they may simply embrace the other person's point of view. As a result they will often miss the opportunity to express their own point of view, avoid the tough issues and leave issues unresolved.</p>	<p>Be clear on the purpose and importance of the meeting during the Open stage. During the Clarify and Develop stages, share your own perspective and use the share Key Principle to help others understand your perspective. Try not to over use involvement and be clear to close the discussion with clear actions and outcomes.</p>
 <p>The Know it All likes to talk about themselves and will constantly link the discussion back to their own experiences and ideas. They will always have an opinion. While their intent may be to share experiences as a way of demonstrating understanding, the other party will often leave the discussion feeling like their own perspective, feeling or experience has been dismissed or not understood.</p>	<p>Needs to be present in the discussion and focus on listening. Needs to use empathy statements and clarifying questions to demonstrate an understanding of the other party's perspective. When developing ideas and solutions needs to adopt a more collaborative and involving approach.</p>

6. BIOGRAPHIES



Mark Busine general manager NSW

Mark Busine is general manager NSW in the DDI Australia business based in Sydney. Mark has worked with DDI for ten years and recently returned following two-and-a-half years in Asia, where he held the position of managing director, Southeast Asia.

In his current role, Mark consults with organisations to determine appropriate human resource and talent management strategies and implement large-scale succession management and talent development programs. Mark has extensive experience in organisational development and consulting in both an internal and external capacity. He has significant corporate HR and organisation development experience across banking, finance, and professional services. Mark has presented at numerous conferences and seminars on areas such as succession management, leadership development, selection, and employee feedback systems.



Bruce Watt Ph.D. managing director

Bruce is responsible for the creation and implementation of DDI's business strategy in Australia. For over 13 years, Bruce has worked closely with clients, identifying needs and proposing solutions specifically in the areas of talent and succession management, leadership development and selection.

An expert on a broad range of leadership and talent management practices as they relate to the Australian marketplace, Bruce provides business relevant solutions to a diverse range of both private and Government sector organisations in areas including success profile management, organisational change, performance management and executive assessment and development.

7. FOOTNOTES & FURTHER REFERENCES

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