

How to Deal with Difficult Board Members: A Learning Styles Approach

BY
Barbara K. Given



Is there a person on your school board you can't seem to connect with, who ignores your ideas, and refuses to see things your way? The problem may simply stem from a difference in learning styles, the author says.

Given is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Education Learning Disabilities Teacher Preparation Program and the Community College Doctoral Program at George Mason University, Fairfax, Va. She also co-directs the Center for Honoring Individual Learning Diversity, which is affiliated with the International Learning Styles Network.

Given can be reached at 703-993-2053; fax: 703-993-2013; e-mail: bgiven@mason.gmu.edu.

“How can I make a difference on the school board when those jerks won't listen to me?” thought Henry after a lengthy “debate” about selling prime school property to a developer — actually, it was more like a polite shouting match, and Henry felt like punching a couple of people more than once. “Why are they so damned difficult?” he muttered while driving home to an empty house. “And another thing,” he said as if his beloved Ford pickup would respond, “Why the hell did she leave me, anyway? Everything was going great, and she ups and leaves.”

What Henry fails to understand is that it takes two to tangle and that tangling may be based on differences in learning style. Why is it difficult to work with some people and a joy to work with others? Clearly, there are many factors, but a major reason may be how differently different people process the same information.

Fortunately, Henry can learn to work with difficult board members and anyone else whose response patterns differ from his. Adapting to others' patterns of interaction may feel like wearing oversized clothes, but if Henry wants them to embrace his point of view, shuffling around in their learning styles may be essential.

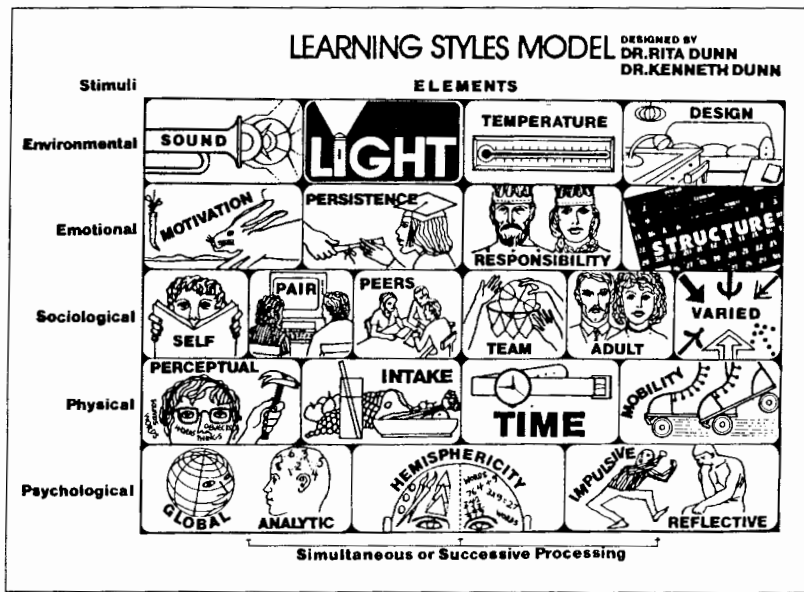
What's a learning style? Learning style pioneers Rita and Kenneth Dunn¹ gave this definition: “Learning style is the way *each* learner begins to concentrate on, process,

and retain new and difficult information.” It is the rather stable way people react to input, so that if two people hear the same thing differently, think about it differently, and then communicate it in ways foreign to the other, problems occur.

To explain this process, the Dunns identified five major learning channels: emotional, sociological, psychological, physiological, and environmental. Each has numerous elements, but the Dunns emphasized 21 primary influences on learning (see page 5). Based on these definitions, learning style may be the fundamental core of our humanness; it may encompass what makes us similar to but unique from one another in how we learn and get along with others.

Learning style is associated with biological structures of the brain molded by development into a set of personal characteristics that make the same methods of working with one person ineffective for others.²

Since learning-style preferences differ significantly from one person to another, the stronger the preference, the more important it is to provide compatible input and feedback. Accommodating individual learning-style preferences through complementary input and feedback has a high probability for increasing positive interactions, and most school board members can learn to use learning styles as a cornerstone of their interactions. This next statement is the hooker: The less successful the individual is at getting his or her views understood,



Learning Styles Model

the more important it is to accommodate the learning-style preferences of others.

A good place to begin is understanding differences between our style preferences and those of others. This understanding can prompt effective alternative communication approaches. Peter Senge,³ in his best-selling book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, noted that people in conflict tend to focus on getting away from what they don't want rather than on creating what they do want. Consequently, when working with difficult people, the tendency is to move away and ignore the source of conflict, or to respond as if threatened — the fight-or-flight reaction. Have you noticed who does the moving away in your interactions? You, the other person, or both of you?

Members of an effective school board work in reasonable harmony toward a shared vision of the school district. That harmony becomes more likely when members have an understanding of learning styles and the role they play in how we feel, think, respond to our environments, and interact. Yes, you're thinking, but I thought learning style pertained to kids, are they effective for adults, too?

Documented evidence exists that style-responsive instruction contributes to higher academic achievement and positive attitudes toward learning in school-aged students.⁴ Surprisingly, however, a meta-analysis conducted on 36 experimental studies completed at 13 different universities revealed that

when style preferences were matched, college and other adult learners showed greater gains than elementary or secondary school learners. Further, accommodating individual physiological preferences such as sensory strengths, food intake, time of day, and mobility had a greater impact than matching emotional, environmental, or sociological preferences.⁵

Consequently, it stands to reason that efforts to understand difficult adults could begin with a focus on their physiological preferences.

Sensory preferences. Does the difficult person need to see, hear, touch, or walk around the information to truly appreciate your point of view? If he needs to see it and the information is presented orally, then only bits and pieces will be heard. If she is tactile and there is nothing to handle, manipulate or play with, then the information may not "feel" right.

Think about a time when you were learning a new computer program or attempting to program your VCR to record a particular selection or putting a doll house together. Did you read the manual carefully before beginning and then follow the directions in a step by step sequence? Maybe you asked someone to tell you what to do? Or, did you look at the pictures without reading the directions? Perhaps you opened all the packages and handled the pieces until you figured out how they fit. Or did you ask someone to show you what to do?

The human tendency is to believe others want information provided in ways that are most comfortable to us, but if the variance is great, so too will be the tension. For example, if you are a visual-tactile learner, you probably need flow charts, diagrams, and illustrations you can touch, trace with your finger, and look at from different angles. If you receive oral descriptions, then chances of your grasping the subtleties of the discussion without visual aids are remote.

Like children, adult learners retain only a portion of what they absorb through their senses. In fact, Magnesen⁵ found that adult learners retain only 10 percent of what they read, 20 percent of what they hear, ▶▶▶▶▶

“With practice and talk about the personal significance of what is presented, adults can increase their memory retention to 90 percent.”

30 percent of what they see, 50 percent of what they see and hear, and 70 percent of what they say. With practice and talk about the *personal significance* of what is presented, adults can increase their memory retention to 90 percent, Magnesen discovered.

Ingham⁶ went a step further. She found that when truck drivers for Enntamann’s Bakery were introduced to new material through perceptual preferences, they remembered significantly more than when the information was introduced through their least preferred modality. Dunn and Dunn reported that most people have just a single perceptual strength, but if they’re interested in the topic, they can remember in a less-preferred modality when that sensory modality is moderately strong.

This research clearly suggests that when the preferred sensory modalities of difficult people are taken into account, they absorb more and respond with greater comfort than when presented the same information with disregard for their preferences. That sounds great, but how do you find out what a person’s sensory preferences are?

Bandler and Grinder⁷ developed an entire business around “reading” the sensory preferences of others. Their NeuroLinguistic Programming business focuses on observing how people express themselves in speech patterns. Visual learners reportedly use phrases like “I see what you mean” and “It looks good to me,” while auditory learners substitute *hear* and *sounds* for *see* and *looks*. Tactile and kinesthetic learners express themselves with words like *feels*, *grabs*, and *moves*.

When Bandler and Grinder used language similar to what they heard, those individuals were more likely to respond positively to requests than if the preferred modality was ignored. Psychotherapists Mills and Crowley,⁸ have found modality strengths so powerful that they use metaphors based on them to treat clients, and Griggs⁹ includes modality preferences as key elements for counseling.

The whole versus parts. In addition to sensory modalities, some people want an overview of the whole issue and what

impact it may exert on the school division and community before they study the details. As youngsters in a geography class studying land features of their state, these adults probably needed to see the pull-down map and a globe of the world, then the continent, country, state, and their town before making sense from details. By contrast, others want a step-by-step detailed presentation that leads up to the whole picture.

The majority of the first group would also prefer to snack while learning something new, while the second group would find food or drink a distraction. Therefore, a person’s intake needs are important during decision-making about something difficult.

Biorhythms. Similarly, biological rhythms help determine whether a person is more alert, able to absorb new information, and make decisions during early or late morning, after lunch, early or late afternoon, or during evening hours. Everyone has a “down” time and a more alert time of day when thinking comes easier. Matching the preference with difficult tasks can result in their timely accomplishment as opposed to a mismatch, which may require extra energy for concentration.

School boards generally meet at night regardless of the time-of-day preferences of its members. Knowing that decisions made at night may resurface with a vengeance later, it may be a good idea to delay decisions until a later meeting, and — in the meantime — phone or send e-mail messages during the morning or afternoon to clarify issues.

Values. Modality preferences help determine values. Visual learners care about how things look; thus meeting in a cluttered environment or presenting a disheveled appearance may prevent others from hearing the details discussed. By contrast, an auditory learner may be totally unaware of the mess while focusing on how a request sounds. Confident language, pacing of delivery, voice volume, and timbre build trust and respect for what is said for an auditory learner, who may dismiss a plan, regardless of its merits, when the speaker’s voice grates on her sensitivities.

Similarly, a strongly kinesthetic learner

“Even though your way of explaining feels comfortable and seems like the ‘way it’s supposed to be,’ without a doubt, you are someone else’s difficult person.”

may find processing information difficult unless given an opportunity to walk, pace, swing a leg, or otherwise move while listening and talking.

Modality preferences, intake needs, and time of day, therefore, help establish what is personally valued and what is not.

What can board members do? Here are some suggestions for accommodating different learning styles among school board members.

If a board member is global, provide a snack while discussing difficult issues from the community or give the big-picture point of view before the details. If she is sluggish during evening board meetings but animated and full of life after lunch or in the late afternoon, save your discussion for the alert, positive time of day. Cognition will be higher and the chances of reaching a solution greater.

If the board member is kinesthetic or needs mobility, take a walk with her while presenting issues of concern. Don’t just tell. Let her *experience* what you are talking about — kinesthetic learners need first-hand experiences. Visual board members want to see your concerns in writing, drawings, photographs, or in person. Write them a memo, give them information to read, and offer alternative solutions in writing before you tell them about it.

Save your lengthy explanations for the auditory member who places heavy emphasis on how things sound. For him, articulate clearly. Know what you want to say, and say it in a confident manner. Select words that match his preferred modality and provide quiet or soft music if appropriate.

Be congruent with your verbal and non-verbal messages so visual-kinesthetic learners believe what you intend as well as what they visually perceive. Further, prepare the environment for the board member’s auditory and visual comfort rather than your own.

What’s the bottom line? Responding to the physiological preferences of difficult board members can go a long way in resolving conflicts and reaching agreements. Clearly, preferences in the other learning style domains — environmental, sociological, emotional,

and psychological — are also important, but based on research evidence, honoring the physiological preferences of difficult people is a great place to begin. In the process, it’s a good idea to monitor your own learning style so you can identify where your preferences differ from those of persons you find difficult.

Even though your way of explaining feels comfortable and seems like the “way it’s supposed to be,” without a doubt, you are someone else’s difficult person. Maybe if Henry understood his style and how it affects others, he might experiment with alternative modes of interaction. If he accepted this premise, and began acting on it, he would be taking a big step toward changing his interaction patterns — both personal and professional. Before long, his difficult board member may turn out to be his best ally. ☉

References

1. Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn, *Teaching Secondary Students Through Their Individual Learning Styles*. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993, p. 2)
2. Modified from Rita Dunn, S. Griggs, J. Olson, M. Beasley, and B. Gorman, “A Meta-Analytic Validation of the Dunn and Dunn Model of Learning-Style Preferences.” *The Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 88 (July-August 1995), pp. 353-362.
3. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (NY: Doubleday Currency, 1990).
4. See Rita Dunn & Kenneth Dunn. *A Review of Articles and Books* (Jamaica, NY: St. John’s University Center for the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles, 1996), and Barbara Given, “The Potential of Learning Styles, in G. Reid (ed.), *Dimensions of Dyslexia, Vol. 2: Literacy, Language and Learning* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Moray House Publishers, 1996, pp. 327-343).
5. V. Magnesen, “Learning and Memory Retention Studies,” *Innovation Abstracts*, vol. 25, 1988.
6. J. Ingham, “Matching Instruction with Employee Perceptual Preference Significantly Increases Training Effectiveness.” *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, vol. 2 (Spring, 1991), pp. 53-64.
7. R. Bandler and J. Grinder. *Frogs into Princes*. (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1979).
8. J. Mills, and R. Crowley, *Therapeutic Metaphors for Children and the Child Within* (NY: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1986).
9. S. Griggs. *Learning Styles Counseling* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: ERIC Counseling and Personnel Services Clearinghouse, 1991).

This article was adapted by the author from materials presented at the National School Boards Association Trainers’ Conference in Denver, June 27, 1996.