

FOUR CORNERS

An exercise in understanding preferences in group work

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Based on work done by the National School Reform Faculty

The Four Corners exercise is based on the work of Carl Jung and, most directly, on the Myers-Briggs personality inventory. While the Myers-Briggs inventory focuses on individuals, Four Corners assists groups in understanding personality styles as they relate to preferences in approaching group work. To begin the exercise, a facilitator might provide an explanation like the following:

Have you ever come out of a wonderful, productive meeting and had someone say to you, "That was the worst meeting I've been to in months. We accomplished nothing. I am so sick of useless meetings!" There is a good reason why your great meeting is someone else's horror show. When people work together in groups, each individual has a preference for how the common work is best undertaken.

For some, it matters that a structure is developed so that everyone knows "the rules of the game," how and by whom decisions will be made, the format of meetings, the way plans will be developed and carried out. If a structure is not in place, everything else seems useless or disorganized. For others, a common understanding of the overriding vision is first and foremost. If the meaning is not clear, then nothing else can be. For others, action is at the core of all important work. These people don't want to talk forever; they prefer jumping in, doing something, seeing how it feels and what can be learned, and then refining the next set of actions. Structure and meaning will come out of action. For others, it matters most that everyone is included, that time is taken to know each other well and to understand the strengths and contributions each can make, and that a process is developed that sets norms for maintaining group cohesiveness, approaching conflict and solving problems.

For each of these positions, the particular preference is usually just a starting point, not the only way. Most people recognize the need for all four approaches, although they generally prefer one point of entry.

The Four Corners exercise might proceed like this:

1. Set up the room with four signs corresponding to the four points of a compass. Place one in each corner or on each wall. The signs should read: North/Action. East/Meaning. South/Caring, and West/Structure. I usually add quotations to each wall as well, ones that are likely to resonate with people who exhibit the particular style preference associated with that direction.
2. Use some form of the narrative above to explain each direction in terms of preferences in group work. Let people know in advance that they will eventually be asked to select ONE of the directions.
3. Following the explanation of each direction, invite people to go to the corner of their preference. Generally, they do this quite easily. Occasionally, a few people can't decide on a corner and end up in the middle. The center should not be offered as an option at the outset, but those who end up there might be allowed to stay and form their own group. I usually ask them to choose one of the four corners for this activity, and only one – *no Northeasters!*
4. Tell the new groups that have formed that their task will be to answer a set of questions (see below) and to record their answers on a piece of chart paper. As an alternative, they might be asked to decide together on a persuasive argument to convince the other three groups that their point of entry is the best one for approaching a particular job.
5. Following the small group discussion, ask each group to report to the whole as a starting point for a large group discussion. I usually ask each group to share its answer to the first question before moving to the second question, and so on. I also alternate which group answers first.

NORTH: Action
Just do it!

WEST: Structure
*Who, what,
when, where?*

EAST: Meaning
*Imagine, generate,
create.*



SOUTH: Caring
*We need to consider
feelings.*



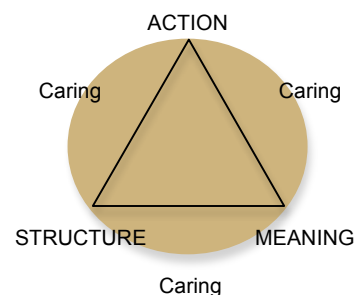
QUESTIONS

After you have decided which of the four "directions" most closely describes your personal style, join with others who have identified themselves as the same direction (North, South, East or West) to answer the questions below. (Time for this activity: approximately 20 minutes.)

1. What are the strengths of your style?
2. What are the limitations of your style?
3. With which styles is it difficult for you to work and why?
4. What do the other directions need to know about you so that you can all work together most effectively?

During the debrief, the facilitator should look for the following points and trends in the conversation and add or draw out as appropriate:

- Look at the distribution of people into the four groups. If it is lopsided, what might this mean for the group? (Example: A group with a large number of members in the Meaning camp, a few in the Action and Caring camps, and no one at all in Structure, might have a tendency to talk too much, thereby frustrating the Action people. They would need to make a point to develop some workable structures since no one is likely to take on that task naturally.)
- Help people see that Meaning people and Action people can drive each other crazy. The need for balance between talking and action is often at the core of group dissatisfaction. (Perhaps this problem can be solved in part by identifying the nature of a particular meeting in advance. If Meaning is the focus, Action people might be invited to bring their knitting – *seriously!*)
- Consider those in the Center: Folks who see all preferences might help to facilitate a balance. Or they might jump all over the place and never decide what is important.
- Notice the kinds of questions and language that each group uses. Caring folks ask: “How is everyone feeling about this? Do we need a break?” Structure folks ask: “When, how, who says, how long, what time?” Action folks say: “Enough talk. Let’s move. Just do it!” Meaning people ask: “Why are we doing this? What’s the purpose here? The big picture? Does it matter?”
- Create a visual image to assist the discussion. Meaning, Action, and Structure are at three points of a triangle. Surrounding the triangle is a circle representing Caring. Caring, which holds the points of the triangle together, needs to go on at all times. When there are a large number of Action and Structure people, it can become easy to ignore the Caring orientation.
- Be aware of preferences. Acknowledging the advantages and potential discomforts of each can greatly help the functioning of a group. When understanding of styles is enlarged, people are more inclined to laugh when the going gets rough instead of getting mad at one another.



EXTENSIONS of FOUR CORNERS

BUILDING A CONTINUUM

Following is an activity for further exploring styles among team members. It is not about judgment. It is about differences and preferences and how those affect the way we work together.

1. In order to present a visual image during this activity, identify members of each Corner group (North, South, East and West) with some kind of identification, like a certain colored badge.
2. Invite people to line up according to their preferences on two ends of a continuum.
 - Importance of time:
Means nothing...Obsessively prompt.
 - Physical proximity (personal space):
Two inches...Two feet.
 - Desk at school or work:
White glove inspection... Mt. St. Helen’s.
 - Time of day when you do your best work:
Early dawn...Dark of night.
 - Tolerance for ambiguity:
Detailed plans...Go with the flow.
 - Preferred size of work group:
Whole organization/world...Alone.
3. Follow the activity with a discussion of what the group learned about one another and how these preferences might impact the work they do together. Which differences/ similarities will be an

advantage for group work? About what things will the group need to be mindful?

4. Make up any other continuum your group would like to explore that might affect its work.

CREATING BALANCED TEAMS

To emphasize the importance of all four directions, consider intentional ways to ensure all are represented on work teams. In a classroom, for example, teachers might require that one person from each corner makes up a group – although this must be done in a way that avoids stereotyping or typecasting.

EXPLORING HISTORICAL ROOTS

The Leadership Compass draws from a Native American Indian -based practice called the Medicine Wheel or the Four-Fold Way. Angeles Arrien has written a book called THE FOUR-FOLD WAY TO WISDOM in which she presents cross-cultural research showing how societies throughout time have consistently accessed four archetypal patterns that support creative expression, health, and adaptation to change. These four archetypal ways are The Way of the Warrior (North), The Way of the Healer (South), The Way of the Visionary (East), and The Way of the Teacher (West). All directions have profound strengths and potential weaknesses, and every person is seen as capable of growing in each direction.