



## Leveraging Team Diversity: It Starts With 'What' Not 'Why'

*The optimal recipe when communicating with teams or groups is 'What' before 'Why', then 'How' before 'Who'. Dr Pete Stebbins*

When it comes to effective communication with teams, there's a great myth that needs to be busted. The myth shares its title with one of my favourite books: *It Starts With Why* by Simon Sinek. It's a great book on helping people connect with their deeper purpose but like many outstanding books, it is so profoundly helpful that many of its pearls of wisdom are at risk of being applied beyond the reach of their intended use, and in doing so become unhelpful or even damaging – particularly in the area of team communication.

Over the last couple of years, I have seen many fantastic leaders turn the concept of *'It Starts With Why'* into something it was never intended to be: a modern management mantra that explains all the successes and failures of team communication. *'If the team could just reconnect with their 'why' then everything would improve'* is the catch cry I hear from many leaders during group coaching sessions as they share their frustration about low performance teams. Their peer leaders in the session then murmur and nod in agreement about both the problem and the apparent solution.

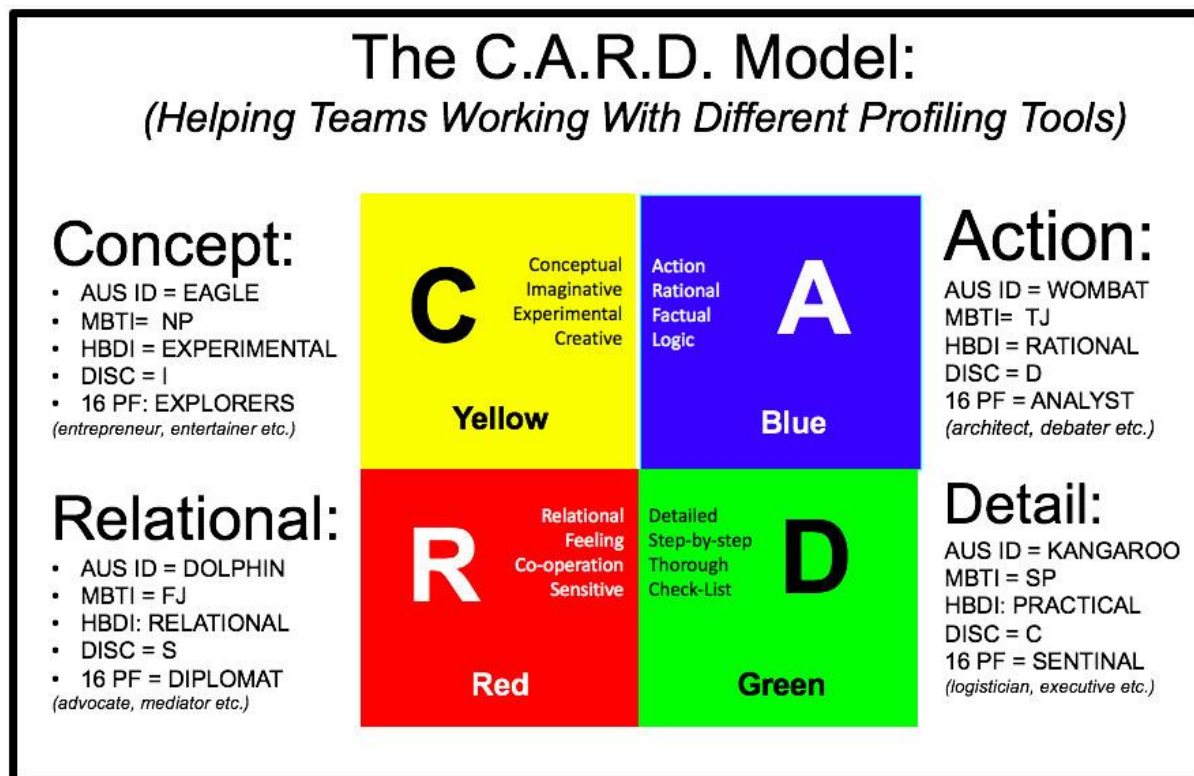
Yet, from my many years of experience working with low performance teams, the issue of 'Why' is less often the underlying problem but rather a problematic combination of 'What', 'How' and 'Who'. As I work mainly in schools and hospitals, there is generally consensus around the 'Why' of the importance of meeting the needs of the student or patient.

The communication breakdowns and conflicts that drive leaders to despair occur because, in the vast majority of cases, there are failures in adequately explaining 'What' or 'How' in a manner that the 'Who' of every team finds supportive and respectful. This is not to suggest 'Why' can be left out of the equation but rather it is simply one part (and not necessarily the most important part) of the effective recipe for communicating with teams or groups. The recipe for success for communication

with teams or groups begins by first understanding Team Dynamics - specifically the 4 communication styles typically found within teams.

## Understanding Team Dynamics: The CARD Model

One of the best ways to understand team dynamics is through the lens of workplace personality styles and communication preferences. There is a vast array of different models of personality and an even bigger array of tools and techniques to profile teams. We like to keep it simple and over time have consolidated and simplified all the various theories down into 4 important workplace personality types reflected in the acronym C.A.R.D and linked them to basic colours.



C.A.R.D. stands for Concept, Action, Relational and Detail which, from our experience over the years, tends to be the most useful descriptors when helping teams understand individual differences. 'C' stands for Concept – the 'Why' people who perform at their best when they understand the vision and purpose behind the tasks they do. 'A' stands for Action – the 'What' people who perform at their best when they have immediately attainable 'next step' goals with the tasks they have to do. 'R' stands for Relational – the 'Who' people who perform at their best when they feel validated and connected with others in completing their tasks. 'D' stands for Detail – the 'How' people who perform at their best when they understand the steps, processes and quality indicators associated with completing their tasks.

# Communicating Effectively With Teams: High vs Low Communication Tolerance

Whilst C.A.R.D. is the acronym we use for the 4 workplace personality types, when it comes to the order of your content for communicating with teams or groups A.C.D.R. is the correct sequence to maximise effectiveness. This sequencing is based on respecting the different needs and tolerances for communication of each profile type (see Table below).

Recommended Sequence of Messaging Based on Communication Tolerance:  
*What before Why, then How before Who*

Type	Colour	Focus	Communication Tolerance	Approach
<b>A</b> ction	<b>Blue</b>	What	Very Low	<i>Emphasis on right now / immediate practical actions</i>
<b>C</b> oncept	<b>Yellow</b>	Why	Low	<i>Emphasis on linking actions to big picture / creative / future focused ideas</i>
<b>D</b> etail	<b>Green</b>	How	Moderate	<i>Emphasis on specifics / detailed steps needed for actions</i>
<b>R</b> elational	<b>Red</b>	Who	High	<i>Emphasis on people, support and interactions needed for actions</i>

Action team members or ‘Blues’ have the shortest communication tolerance – all they care about is ‘What’– so if you don’t want to lose them, start with What! If you can describe what action needs to happen simply and quickly then you will get past the short attention span of the blues – getting them on board and prepared to listen a little longer.

Next are the Concept team members or 'Yellows' who, before their creative mind wanders onto other things, need a clear and explicit conceptual link to 'Why' the action is needed to achieve the bigger purpose.

Then comes the Detail orientated ‘Greens’ who like to unpack and think through the specific details and need to understand the 'How' - measurable specific steps needed to complete the action.

Finally come the Relational team members or ‘Reds’ who are good listeners and easily able to have longer conversations. They need to understand the ‘Who’ of team connections, support processes and personal benefits in completing the action.



## Exemplar 1: Team Hydration in a Very Hot Working Environment

When I was working overseas on assignment with security teams in the central pacific, I saw an excellent illustration of effective team communication from a commanding officer briefing his unit on the importance of hydration.

*“We need to start monitoring our water intake while working in the heat (‘What’ - Action/ Blue) in order to ensure the health and wellbeing of the team during deployment.... (‘Why’ - Concept/ Yellow)”*

If this was said the other way around (i.e., *“In order to ensure the health and wellbeing of the team during deployment...”*), the action/ blues would switch off before we even finished the sentence...

*“.....At the end of each shift note your total water intake in the team logbook (‘How’ - Detail/ Green) and share your results at the team debrief so we can support each other to re-hydrate between shifts (‘Who’ - Relational/ Red).”*

It is important to note you always end a briefing with the ‘Who’ data to keep it warm and personable as well as reinforce individual accountabilities. If this was said the other way around ending with the ‘how’ data you may leave people with a feeling of coldness – uncared for (and maybe even suspiciousness).

## Exemplar 2: Classroom Behaviour in a Regional High School

Another great example I saw more recently was the briefing given by a principal to the team of teaching staff in a regional High School about managing student behaviour in classrooms:

*“We need be more consistent in enforcing classroom behaviour policy (‘What’ - Action/ Blue) to maximise every student’s success in every lesson (‘Why’ - Concept/ Yellow). By explicitly referring to the classroom behaviour standards on the poster at the front of the classroom at the start of each lesson, and then following protocols when breaches occur(‘How’ - Detail/ Green), every teacher can be confident we are*

*increasing positive behaviour and improving the wellbeing of both our students and staff ('Who' - Relational/ Red).*

## **Bringing It Together: Diversity & Team Communication**

How does your team communicate as a group? Take a moment to reflect on your conversations and interactions in team meetings or when working together in groups on shared tasks. Does everyone's communication cover all the bases of What, Why, How and Who or do people simply communicate from their own perspective and assume this is adequate? Remember the following simple recipe (also on our free Tipsheet [HERE](#)) :

### **The Team Communication Recipe: In 2 Simple Sentences**

- 1st Sentence: *We need to do (What)..... in order to achieve (Why)...*
- 2nd Sentence: *By taking these steps (How).....we are able to help (Who)....*

Remember communicating effectively with teams or groups starts with What before Why, then How before Who as this fits the natural pattern of communication tolerance and motivation for each the 4 different personality types!

Dr Pete Stebbins PhD