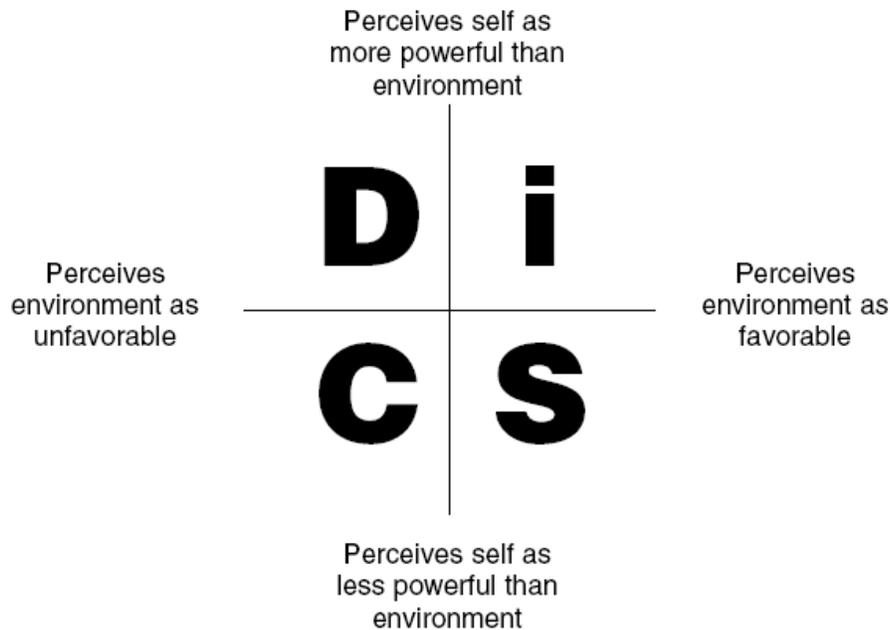


# DiSC<sup>®</sup> THEORY

## DiSC DIMENSIONS

The foundation of what we call DiSC<sup>®</sup> was first described by William Moulton Marston in 1928 in his book *Emotions of Normal People*. Marston identified what he called four “primary emotions” and associated behavioral responses, which today we know as Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Conscientiousness. Marston never used his ideas as a typology—or a way to label individuals as a specific “type.” But he did believe that each person would project a greater intensity and frequency of the behaviors of one or two of the styles. Marston believed that by understanding how our “normal” emotional responses adapt to the demands of people, situations, and societal expectation, we could evolve into better-integrated people who were more independent and able to realize true happiness in our work lives and personal lives.

Nearly half a century later, Inscape created an assessment using factor analytic statistical methods applied to adjectives that Marston used in his 1928 book. Our analysis yielded a mathematical structure consisting of two major dimensions that we labeled “perception of personal power in the environment” and “perception of relative favorableness of that environment.” This model appears below.

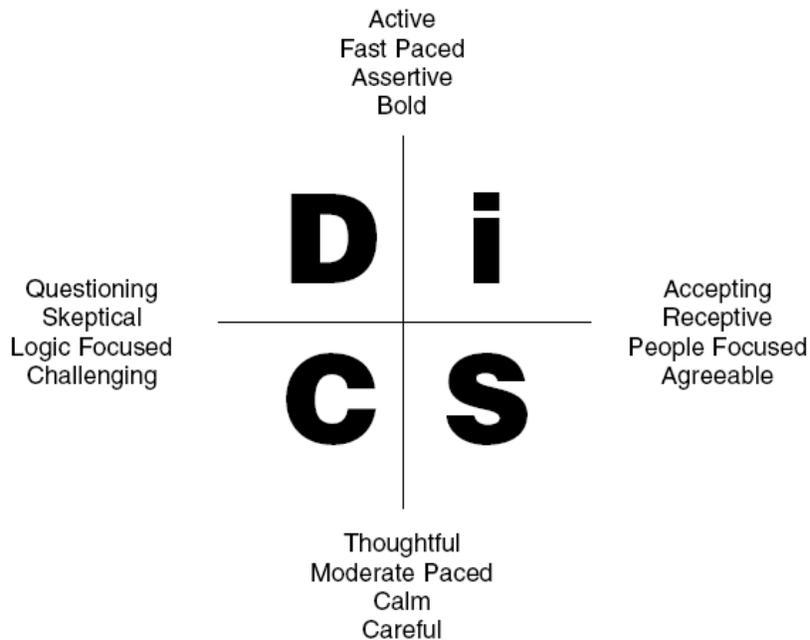


In this model, the vertical dimension is described in terms of perceived power. The “D” and “i” styles both tend to perceive that they are more powerful than the environment. That is, they feel they have control over their surroundings and may be more assertive and pro-active. On the other

**DiSC® DIMENSIONS**

hand, the “S” and “C” styles both tend to perceive that they are less powerful than the environment. That is, they feel they have little direct control over the environment and may be more adaptive and reactive. The horizontal dimension is described in terms of **perceived favorability** of the environment. The “D” and “C” styles tend to perceive the environment as unfavorable (i.e., resistant, unwelcoming, or skeptical). The “i” and “S” styles tend to see the environment as favorable (i.e., accepting, welcoming, or friendly).

The concepts of perceived power and perceived favorability, created in the 1980s, are adequately aligned with Marston’s work, but they are impractical as far as providing insight into the world of normal emotions and everyday behavior in ordinary language. In reviewing the literature and conducting our own research, we found a more contemporary language that supports the Marston model and is far more effective in conveying meaningful behavior that is easily put into practice.



It is important to note that the dimensions of the DiSC® model are not changing, but instead the anchor points have been re-labeled to provide additional utility for practitioners and learners. As before, the four DiSC styles are related to each other. Each style has something in common with the styles adjacent to it. Looking at the figure above, “D” shares a common dimension with “i” (Active) and with “C” (Questioning), but none with “S.” For instance, someone who is thoughtful and generally accepting of things will tend to be patient and empathetic, common characteristics of the “S” or Steadiness style. At the other end of the axis, someone who is active and is generally questioning would be seen as direct and results-focused and have the “D” or Dominant style. This combining of dimensions establishes a common foundation, which ensures that the styles are strongly related to one another.

The two dimensions form a model that we can picture in our mind's eye. We can then use it as a simple way to organize and remember our DiSC® insights. This allows participants who learn the dimensions to readily see the similarities and differences among the styles more clearly. Once someone understands the two dimensions, he or she can think more clearly about the relationships that the different styles share. DiSC professionals find that teaching these two dimensions has a number of advantages. They help people

- Understand the essence of the four styles quickly and intuitively
- Quickly see the similarities and differences among the styles
- Easily read the DiSC style of others
- Understand what is necessary to adapt from one style to another

Facilitators who understand the significance of the theory underlying the dimensions gain a deeper knowledge of the model's intricacies, and they are better equipped to answer respondents' queries about behavior and communication.

## **CURRENT RESEARCH ON DiSC® DIMENSIONS**

**There are a variety of different ways to label the two DiSC dimensions.**

Both the vertical and horizontal dimensions have a wide variety of descriptors that can be used to describe them. The labels we have suggested have moderate to strong correlations with the two DiSC dimensions. You will notice that each reflects a slightly different flavor of the dimensions.

It is important to note that none of the labels are perfect. We don't know of any single set of labels that describes every feature within the two dimensions. These dimensions are, in fact, very complex and complicated, much like human nature. Each label does, however, capture an important and central aspect of the dimensions. The key is to choose the labels that best suit the needs of your facilitation.

**Each label may be more appropriate for some applications than others.**

The labels that may be useful for a general application are Thoughtful/Active and Questioning/Accepting. These two pairs have high statistical correlations with the underlying dimensions and contain few negative connotations. Of all of the labels we suggest, these appear to have the broadest application and capture many different elements within each the four DiSC styles.

Many facilitators discuss the two dimensions in terms of "pace" and "priority." The vertical dimension is thought to reflect the pace that a person prefers: Fast Paced or Moderate (or Slow) Paced. The labels Active Pace and Methodical Pace may also be useful. The horizontal dimension is thought to reflect the priorities of a person. Some people have People-Focused priorities on relationships and feelings, and others have Logic-Focused priorities on facts, reason, and ideas.

## Current Research on DiSC® Dimensions Continued

Labels like Bold, Logical, or Careful may be appealing for audiences who are very concrete and practical minded. These labels are easily associated with observable behaviors. Be mindful, however, that these labels may produce some negative reactions from participants. For example, some participants may misinterpret labels to mean that high “S” or “i” individuals are not logical in their thinking. Facilitators must be careful to explain that the labels represent tendencies and priorities but not skills or abilities. For instance, although high “S” or “i” individuals can (and do) act very logically while high “i” or “D” individuals can (and do) act carefully, these are simply not their highest priorities.

Other labels may be most appropriate for didactic purposes. Labels like Assertive/Unassertive help to explain important differences among the DiSC® types, but they may not be suitable for general audiences because they have negative associations. These labels may, however, be suitable for an impersonal, theoretical discussion of DiSC, when no one is personally invested in the labels used. Furthermore, labels like Tough Minded/Tender Minded may be useful in an academic setting as these terms are frequently cited in academic psychological literature. They probably have limited appeal, however, for a lay audience.

General considerations when choosing labels to use with a group:

- What negative associations will a participant have with the labels attached to his or her style?
- Will participants feel hurt that they lack the attributes associated with other types?
- Are the labels too abstract or conceptual for the audience?
- Do labels represent strengths for each style rather than the absence of a positive quality?
- Do the labels explain aspects of the DiSC styles that are most relevant for the intervention (e.g., conflict management, theory, behavioral adaptation)?

## WHAT WOULD MARSTON SAY?

Careful readers of William Marston’s work will realize that he never conceptualized the DiSC dimensions into a four-quadrant model. Marston saw the “D,” “i,” “S,” and “C” emotions and behaviors as part of a dynamic model. Here is Marston writing in 1930:

*An emotion is the consciousness of an attitude toward an object or person. The attitude may be of alliance or antagonism; and it may make the person feel inferior or superior to the stimulus which causes the attitude. There is much more to an emotion than there is to a simple feeling such as pleasantness or unpleasantness.*

*To experience an emotion, a person must feel either antagonism or acceptance toward the object or person arousing it, and he must also either wish to control the object, or wish to have the object control him. Thus, a simple emotion is a combination of an attitude of superiority or inferiority and an attitude of rejection or acceptance.*

**What Would Marston Say?** *Continued*

How might Marston reconcile his work with our familiar factor analytic-based model? He might look at the vertical axis and label it “Motor Response to Stimulus.” He would be thinking about motor responses associated with each primary emotion and say that “D’s” and “i’s” would choose to increase the strength of their emotional response and physical presence in response to a stimulus (more actively assert) and “C’s” and “S’s” would tend to decrease the strength of their emotional response and physical presence in response to a stimulus (more yielding).

In considering the horizontal axis, Marston might use the label “Emotional Reaction to Stimulus.” He would be speaking about emotional responses associated with each primary emotion and say that “D’s” and “C’s” experience a novel stimulus as “antagonistic.” Something new is experienced as potentially conflicting with a “D’s” sense of control or a “C’s” sense of order. As a result, they challenge, question, test, and apply logic so this novel stimulus will feel in greater harmony. “I’s” and “S’s” tend to experience a novel stimulus in “alliance” with their emotions. Their first response tends to be receptive and accommodating to the stimulus as a way of assimilating it into their emotional world.

If we applied Marston’s labels to the four-quadrant model, it might look something like this:

