

SHARON COHEN

# Cracking the Communications Ice

By Kenneth R. Kramm and Deborah A. Kramm

*At your next seminar or workshop, cut a clear channel through behavioral styles with this icebreaker.*

Have you ever felt the frozen reserve of an unfamiliar audience? Picture a seminar group coldly staring back at you as you deliver your opening remarks. Instead of opening a channel of communication, the group's glazed-over looks freeze you in mid-joke. Your intended icebreaker hasn't even put a crack in the behavioral ice of the audience.

As the seminar leader, you need a no-fail way to start the flow of the session, an effective icebreaker that will defrost the audience and set the direction of the training or presentation. In our seminars, we use an innovative warm-up exercise to initiate animated discussion and attentive audience participation. Originally developed by Mary Ellyn Voden, director of education for the Children's Museum of Houston, the exercise will show you how to cut a clear channel of communication with your audiences by having them reveal their natural behavioral styles.

## The tip of the icebreaker

As participants enter the seminar room, we introduce ourselves and ask them to make name tags. We also ask them to select four words they would use to describe themselves. On the name-tag table are 20 piles of brightly colored slips of paper the size of index cards. A word is printed on each. The

choices comprise a validated group of key behavioral attributes, and include such words as *friendly, competitive, blunt, open, curious, logical, orga-*

*nized, informal*, and so forth. The words (or "behavioral flags") are arranged into four color groups (see Figure 1):

## What's Below the Surface?

The following questions and answers about behavioral styles may help you decide how to use the word-selection icebreaker.

### *Can I use different descriptors? Which words are best?*

Yes, by all means, select words that fit your topic, model, or any distinguishing characteristics of your program. We've seen variations of this approach used in situations ranging from community-involvement workshops by nonprofit organizations to top-management briefings by accounting firms. Participants usually select words they use regularly. Another approach is to select words used in a particular model, theory, or instrument that you plan to discuss or use later in the program.

Two cautions: Avoid raising "red flags" that may anger or antagonize the group, and avoid using words unfamiliar to the group.

### *Are different colors significant?*

Yes, much of the published information on behavioral styles is color coded. "Warm" colors such as red are often associated with emotion. "Cool" colors such as blue are associated with logic.

That does not mean that a particular color causes or induces a behavioral style, but that authors

often denote behavioral styles with specific colors. The meaning of a specific color depends on the behavioral model being used. For example, in *Six Thinking Hats*, Edward DeBono uses colored hats to represent different behavioral styles:

- white—facts and figures;
- red—emotions and feelings;
- black—a tendency to evaluate and to play devil's advocate;
- yellow—speculation and vision;
- green—creativity and lateral thinking;
- blue—a need to control and monitor.

### *Does the icebreaker replace the use of behavioral style instruments?*

No, it complements whatever behavioral style instrument is being used. It is a quick and highly adaptable overview device. If you plan to talk about behavioral styles later in the training, simply tell the participants they will be learning more about themselves later.

### *The icebreaker seems most appropriate for management-development and communication-skills training. Would it work for technical training?*

Yes, it helps define participant learning styles and gets things started on a fun note.

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- pink for people-oriented, "feeling" adjectives;
- yellow for "big-picture," creative adjectives;
- green for systematic, detail-oriented adjectives;
- blue for administrative, bottom-line adjectives.

Participants usually start joking about their selections and invariably ask if they can take more than four

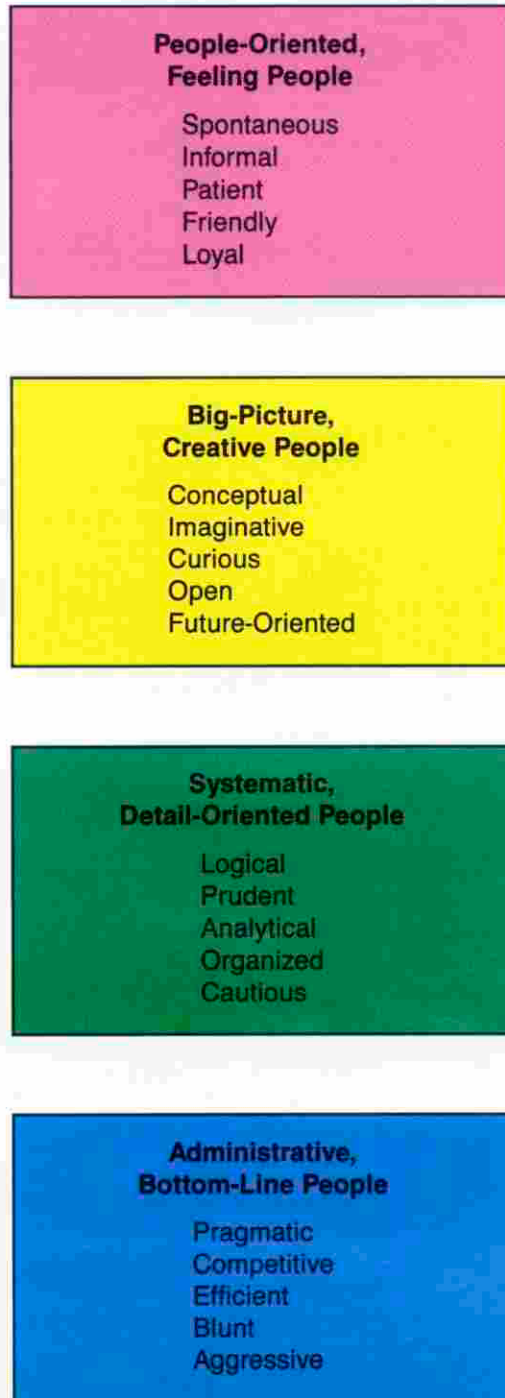
words. We say no; for this activity they are restricted to four, although they can choose the same word more than once if it is particularly descriptive. We ask them to staple or tape their selections to their name tags in any fashion they like. (We are also wearing four descriptive words on our name tags.)

People who choose words like *imaginative*, *curious*, *open*, or *spontaneous* often attach their words in unu-

sual ways—upside down, sideways, or perhaps in a fan on one side of the name tag. In contrast, those who choose words like *logical*, *organized*, or *cautious* often assemble their words neatly on one side of their name tags. The initial selection of words and name-tag making takes about 10 minutes. The subsequent discussion can go on as long as the leaders wish, depending on the size of the group.

After everyone has taken a seat, we say something like "We're excited to see so many *friendly*, *open*, and *curious* people this morning." As we talk, we look directly at specific people in the audience who are wearing those words. Open chuckles result. Then we explain the purpose of the seminar or class and a bit about our experiences, using the words we selected for our own name tags: "My role today is to help guide the discussion on

**Figure 1 — Behavioral styles grouped by orientations**



**Speaking in the other  
person's vernacular is an  
easy way to get a  
conversation flowing**

(topic of course) in a *friendly* and *organized* manner so that we can look at new concepts that will be important in (purpose of course)."

In the next step, the participants introduce themselves. They usually follow the leaders' lead, listing their expectations and needs for the course, using the behavioral flags they have selected.

### Mimicking behavioral flags

Two important principles of effective training are that the leaders be the active agents in the learning process, and that they be well-informed guides, not talking textbooks. That means they must know the audience and be able to adapt quickly to individual behavioral styles.

Also important is the ability to pace the participants' communication styles to facilitate two-way interaction during the training. Most people find that they hit it off instantly with some people, but have difficulty communicating with others. People communicate in different ways, and your chances of having a genuine dialogue with a person are greatly enhanced if you subtly

mimic his or her words and style of speaking.

For example, if someone tends to use such words as *creative*, *future*, and *concept*, you should ask such questions as "How do you feel about the basic concept underlying that approach?" If the person uses words like *logical*, *organized*, and *factual*, you should say something like "Based on

your analysis, how would you evaluate the relevance of the facts I've presented?"

Speaking in the other person's vernacular is an easy way to get a conversation flowing.

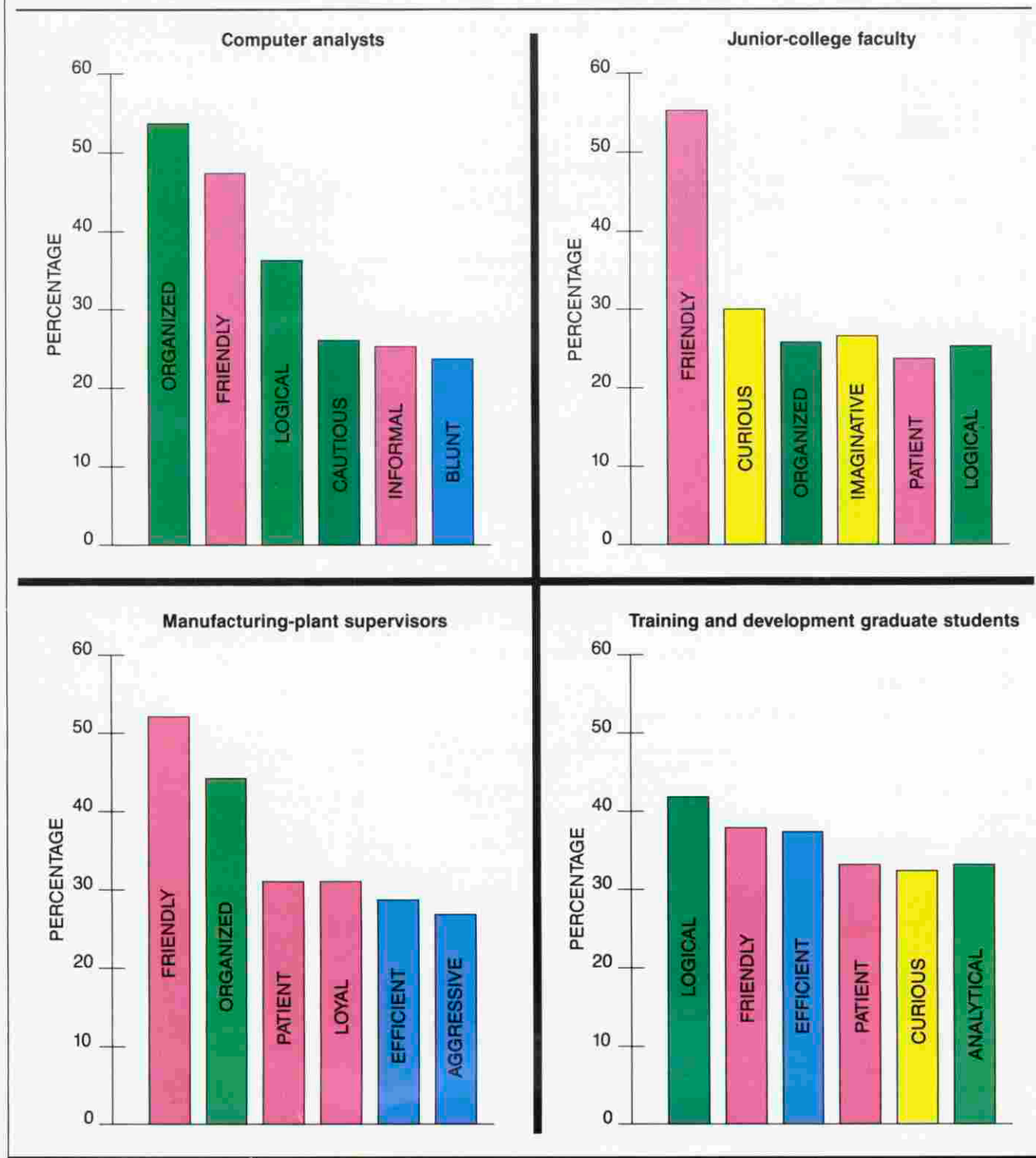
### Is the icebreaker seaworthy?

We've successfully tested our ice-breaking exercise as a means of kick-

ing off many classes and seminars. In all cases, the icebreaker easily opened channels of communication.

Figure 2 presents the results of a word-selection exercise we conducted on a group of 56 computer analysts, 91 junior-college faculty members, 34 manufacturing supervisors, and 24 training and development graduate students.

Figure 2 — Frequency of top six words selected by different training audiences



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In their word selections, more than half the computer analysts selected *organized*, and nearly as many selected *friendly*. The words *logical*, *cautious*, *informal*, and *blunt* followed. Most of the chosen words were printed on pink, green, or blue paper, indicating the group's strong orientations toward systems, people, and administrative operations.

The junior-college faculty were markedly different in their word selections. Fifty-seven percent picked *friendly*, followed by *curious*, *organized*, *imaginative*, *patient*, and *logical*. Several of those words appeared on yellow paper, indicating the college faculty were creative and interested in the "big picture."

The manufacturing-plant supervisors also had a unique profile. More than half selected *friendly*, followed by *organized*, *patient*, *loyal*, *efficient*, and *aggressive*. The last three behavioral flags were uniquely important to the supervisors.

Training and development graduate students at the University of Houston showed the widest disparity. Their choices indicated a blend of behavioral styles, which seems appropriate, as

most trainers use a blend of systems to interact effectively with diverse audiences. Indeed, ASTD's *Reference Guide to Professional Training Roles and Competencies* describes intellectual versatility as the most important competency for trainers.

### Meltdown

The described exercise is only one way of opening communications channels in preparation for a course. But it is an effective tool for breaking through the communications iceberg and putting an audience at ease.

One benefit of word selection is that it provides a quick approach to understanding basic behavioral styles by identifying the group's common characteristics right away. Once individual needs and group trends are apparent, leaders can adapt their own training and communications styles. Try the icebreaker alone or adapt it to a model of your choice at your next seminar, workshop, or briefing.

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