Blue Sky

Which are you?
Mindex shows how your thinking style can help you get your ideas across better, understand others, and have more influence.

Red Earth

By Karl Albrecht

By all indications,

President Lyndon Johnson's cognitive style—his characteristic way of processing ideas—was quite different from that of Robert S. McNamara, his secretary of defense. And both of those men apparently arranged their mental furniture very differently from how General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff did. Johnson's other advisors, such as McGeorge Bundy, had their own characteristic processing patterns. Those differences in thought process—largely unconscious and unrecognized—may have had more to do with the outcome of America's adventure in Vietnam than politics, military strategy, or the dogged determination of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

Johnson, a Red Earth thinker (a category I'll define shortly), had a primary thinking pattern that was right-brained and concrete, or "intuitive," as some people like to oversimplify it. Not a great fan of details, facts and figures, or theoretical propositions, Johnson was a leader who trusted his visceral signals. McNamara, in sharp contrast, was a Blue Sky thinker, meaning that his mental home base was left-brained and abstract—that of an egghead, architect, organizer, planner. He was widely perceived as cerebral, analytical, emotionally detached, and highly structured in his thought processes.

Wheeler, the military man, was almost certainly a Blue Earth, or left-brained and concrete processor. He was a leader who valued decisive actions and concrete results, backed by logical arguments. Bundy, perhaps less distinctive in his mental style, was probably a Red Sky, a right-brained and abstract thinker who valued the grand design and conceptual-hypothetical reflection.

Now, imagine putting all four of those thinkers in the same room and asking them to decide these questions: Can the war in Vietnam be won? Should the American government continue to pursue the conflict, considering the rising ca-sualties, costs, and bitter domestic opposition? One can imagine the difficulty in getting four or more leaders with such different thinking styles to achieve a consensus on that complex issue. Worse, according to McNamara's memoir *In Retrospect*, those four men never once got together in the same room at the same time to deal comprehensively with the decision. Johnson's radial management style—one issue, one person, one conversation—meant that he was always reacting to the viewpoint of whoever was the last person in his office. McNamara and Wheeler, with different thinking styles, had a strained relationship. Each of them presented Johnson with a different frame of reference, articulated in a different way. Similar differences among Johnson's other advisors worked against the development of any durable consensus.

How we think

For more than 20 years, I've been studying the minds of leaders and a lot of other people. I've sought to understand how they absorb information, what they accept and what they reject, how they form the most important concepts that drive their behavior, how they deal with ambiguity and complexity, the reach of their imagination, how they decide, how they change their minds, and what it takes to persuade them. From measuring and studying thousands of profiles, I've concluded that their thought patterns, and differences in patterns, tell us more about human behavior than virtually any other assessment mechanisms we've developed.

I've discovered, for example, that most of the differences we've been taught to label as "personality conflicts" are actually differences in the way people construct their mental worlds. I've learned that there is such a thing as communication stress, which is the anxiety—sometimes leading to anger and even violence—people feel when they cannot make themselves understood with people who have different processing styles. I've learned that there are many ways of knowing and that each of them deserves respect for its unique value.

I've also learned that it's possible to estimate a person's thinking style in the course of a five-minute conversation, and how to look for other cues and clues that can serve to refine that estimation. And, most important, I've learned the value of getting outside the box of my own preferred thinking style and expressing ideas in ways that people with other styles can process more readily.

Let's sort out the Reds and Blues, Earths and Skies, and see how thinking styles can be defined, analyzed, and put to practical use. Your thinking style is your characteristic way of processing ideas, of making meaning out of your experience. It's the way you take in information, learn, organize your thoughts, form your views and opinions, apply your values, solve problems, make decisions, buy, sell, persuade, lead, manage, plan, and express yourself to others.

Two dimensions of cognition

Though our thinking styles involve a variety of different dimensions, two key variables can serve as a foundation for describing and analyzing our primary thought patterns.

One dimension describes the *structure* of thought—left-brained versus right-brained. The other dimension describes the *content* of thought—concrete experience versus abstract conceptualization. Those two dimensions, joined together, give us four distinct combinations, as well as variations between the extremes. Other kinds of preferences can modulate the effects of the four basic styles or patterns.
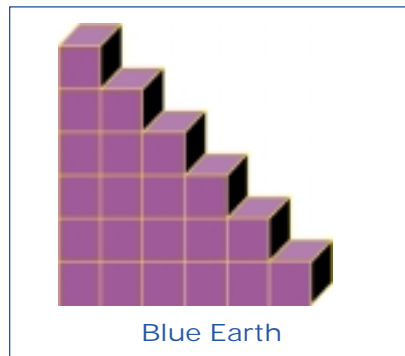
This four-style model emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a sequel to some unusual brain research conducted mostly at CalTech by Roger Sperry, Joseph Bogen, and others. The relatively recent discovery that the two hemispheres of the human

The Mindex Model

Abstract Concepts	Blue Sky	Red Sky
Concrete Experience	Blue Earth	Red Earth
	Left Brained	**Right Brained**

brain are set up to process data in two distinctly different ways, or modes of cognition, led to the corroboration of common sense: Different people really do have different preferred patterns for processing ideas.

I began working with this model of thinking styles about 1982, particularly in devising a measurement profile instrument, gathering profile data, and introducing the concept of thinking styles in my work with executives and organizations. I felt that the model might be more widely accepted than it had been if it were expressed less in biological terminology (the medical language of brain structure) and more in everyday street language. To make the theory more accessible, I settled on the use of a few familiar metaphors. Identifying the left-brained versus the right-brained spectrum with a range of colors (blue for left-brained and red for right-brained), and the metaphors of earth and sky for the concrete, versus abstract, dimension, I found that most people quickly grasped the basic premise of the model, which I named Mindex.

Let's take a closer look at the primary thinking styles through the window of this metaphorical model. The four main combinations of left-brain concrete, right-brain concrete, left-brain abstract, and right-brain abstract translate into the metaphorical names Blue Earth, Red Earth, Blue Sky, and Red Sky.

First, let's remember that everybody uses all four of these thinking modes, not just one. The brain can shift rapidly from one mode to another, and frequently combines them according to the demands of the task at hand. However, most people tend to adopt a home base style early in life, the primary mode they tend to use in most of their dealings with their environment. Some people are highly mobile and able to shift from one mode to another; others are less mobile and have more difficulty mode-switching. People who can't budge from their primary thinking styles may be hindered in some situations, not only in communicating, but also in doing the kinds of thinking and problem solving that need to be done.

The late Ned Herrmann, one of the pioneers in the application of cognitive styles in creativity training, observed, "Hemispheric dominance seems to be the human condition. We need to learn to adapt to these differences, and even capitalize on them."

What color is your mind?

Probably the most common of the Mindex patterns is Red Earth. A Red Earth person is apt to be intuitive, people-oriented, and inclined towards direct experience. He or she tends to make decisions based on overall impressions rather than individual facts or figures. Red Earth likes to see the outcomes of his or her efforts in concrete, tangible, recognizable form. This person has little interest in technical explanations, theories, or elaborate logical processes. To Red Earth people, feelings are data. Their feelings in a situation, and the apparent feelings of others, are just as important as any other facts. You tend to find a high proportion of Red Earths in such people professions as sales, social work, nursing, teaching, counseling, and training.

The Blue Earth person is one who values structure, order, logic, and bottom-line results. Blue Earth enjoys organizing things, solving problems logically, and doing work that involves facts, figures, and attention to detail. These people tend to be comfortable with linear, procedural thinking. Fields that tend to attract Blue Earths are accounting, some kinds of computer programming, and some kinds of engineering.

The Red Sky person likes the big picture and is more concerned with the what than the how. Red Sky tends to enjoy entrepreneurial ventures, networking with other people to accomplish big goals, and toying with global concepts and possibilities. Red Sky people tend to be drawn toward fields or activities that reward conceptual or entrepreneurial thinking, but that don't demand a great deal of theoretical knowledge or detail work. Some Red Skys are keenly interested in mystical or spiritual concepts. Some visual artists tend toward the Red Sky pattern, but it doesn't seem to be the single defining pattern for all artistic people.

Mindex Profile

● 1003 Men   ● 988 Women
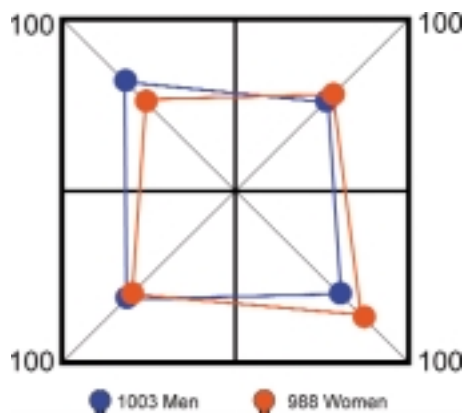
The Blue Sky person is a theoretician or professor. He or she values abstract ideas, logical reasoning, and relational thinking. Blue Skys also enjoy looking at the big picture, but are more inclined to organize problems conceptually, create

The 20 Mindex Model Dimensions

Red Earth
Blue Earth
Red Sky
Blue Sky
Kinesthetic Mode
Visual Mode
Auditory Mode
Time Orientation
Detail Orientation
Technical Orientation
Goal Orientation
Tolerance for Ambiguity
Opinion Flexibility
Semantic Flexibility
Positive Orientation
Sense of Humor
Investigative Orientation
Resistance to Enculturation
Idea Fluency
Logical Fluency

theories, and work out systematic solutions. You tend to find a high proportion of Blue Sky people in the academic arena and in such pursuits as architecture, systems engineering, economics, and strategic planning. The Blue Sky thinker likes to draw diagrams and models, such as the one in the figure.

With regard to learning preferences, Blue Sky thinkers, and to some extent Blue Earths, tend to be inductive learners. They tend to prefer to start at the conceptual level, often with some kind of comprehensive framework, and then explore various detailed aspects of the subject, keeping their developing knowledge organized into an accessible framework. Red thinkers, and in particular Red Earths, tend to favor inductive learning, which begins with individual elements and experiences and gradually assembles them into an overall comprehension.

Note that this is an egalitarian and appreciative model. There is no best style. If someone you're dealing with doesn't think the same way you do, neither of you needs to be fixed. The other person isn't wrong, just different. By understanding the differences and learning to adapt to them, the two of you can reach a state of resonance, a compatible condition of intellectual and psychological rapport.
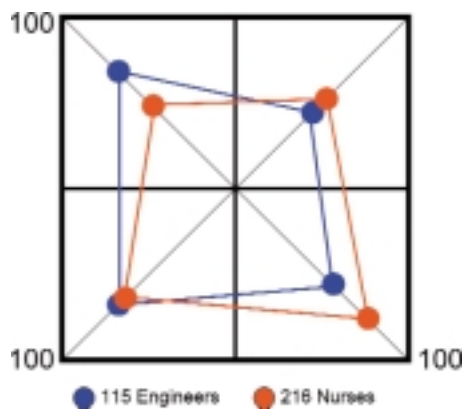
The profile I work with uses the four primary modes, plus 16 supporting scales, such as sensory mode preference (kinesthetic, visual, or auditory); structure preference; and such factors as semantic flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, resistance to enculturation, logical fluency, and idea fluency. The 20 factors together provide a rich portrait of a person's mental landscape.

Laurie Nadel, a Mindex trainer and professor of psychology at New York University, often describes the four primary patterns in terms of a computer software analogy. "I tell people," she

Mindex Profile

● 115 Engineers   ● 216 Nurses

says, "that the four Mindex patterns are like software programs running in different windows on your computer screen. Each one represents a particular type of program, or way of processing data, in your mind. You can multitask between these various patterns at will."

Are the differences real?

One of the first questions that pop up in the study of thinking styles is, Do differences in these cognitive profiles tell us anything about differences in people? Consider the comparison (opposite page) of the composite (averaged) Mindex scores of 1003 men and 988 women.

Note that the women who answered the profile reported themselves as slightly preferring both red patterns, Red Earth and Red Sky. The men's scores were somewhat skewed towards both blue patterns. That result tends to match many people's impressions of the different way men and women think.

Also interesting is the question of whether different occupations are consistently associated with

particular cognitive profiles.

In comparing the composite patterns of 115 engineers to 216 nurses (left), it's clear that the nurses think they rely more heavily on the Red Earth pattern than any other, while the engineers tend towards Blue Earth and Blue Sky. Neither is surprising. In these samples, all but a few of the nurses were women and all but a few of the engineers were men, reflecting overall population patterns.

And, while we're at it, we might as well review a composite profile for trainers (below), represented by 272 trainers from various English-speaking countries. This composite suggests that a majority of trainers lean toward the Red Earth pattern, which again isn't particularly surprising. Trainers tend to show a similar profile to public school teachers.

Mindex in practice
Here are some of the ways we can put our knowledge of thinking styles to use.
Your own learning. How would understanding your own thinking style enable you to approach a learning expe-

Mindex Profile

● 115 Engineers   ● 272 Trainers

rience, such as attending a seminar, studying a subject on your own, or having someone coach and teach you? Might your favorite mode of thinking and learning be more effective for some learning experiences and less effective for others? Can you stretch beyond your habitual patterns and challenge yourself to learn and think in new and less familiar ways?

Training design. Would you want to design a training program differently if it were aimed at engineers than at nurses? How might you vary the treatment of conceptual, experiential, and procedural information? How might you expect the participants to behave in a group learning situation, how would they tend to engage the subject matter, and what parts of the program might resonate more strongly with one or the other? Incidentally, how might your own thinking style influence the choices you make in creating a training design? In that respect, I often hear trainers declare, "People don't want theories. They want concrete, practical information they can use." The fact is that some people do indeed want theories. Some people enjoy absorbing abstract ideas, models, and conceptual frameworks—some Blue Sky people, for example. Could the anti-theory advocates be projecting their own thinking and learning preferences onto everybody else? The "hats and horns" training designs work well for some learners, and not so well for others.

Counseling and coaching. Would you want to approach the experience of coaching an executive, a manager, or a professional expert in a way that matches his or her primary thinking pattern? Would you use different explanatory strategies and different strategies for self-insight with a Blue Earth person than with a Red Sky person? How would you help a manager come to terms with the differences between his
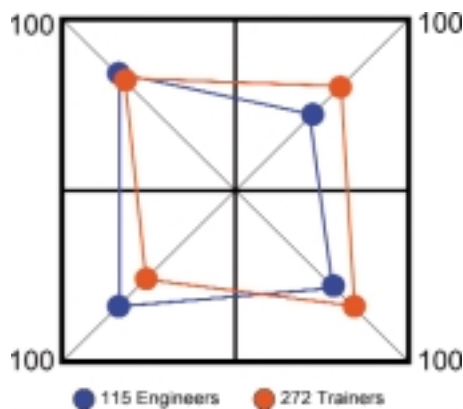
or her thinking style and the styles of various staff members? How could a relationship counselor work effectively with a couple who has differing thinking styles, in which there'd actually be three people's patterns involved in the discussion? How can educators help children with varying cognitive styles manage their own learning experiences?

Teambuilding. In what way might you use the Mindex model to help members of a team understand their individual thinking styles and to capitalize on all of the various styles represented by the members? How can knowledge of thinking styles enable team leaders and team members to make use of the total brain power they have at their disposal? How do the different styles affect the way a team articulates issues, assesses problems, uses information, considers options, and arrives at consensus?

Leadership development. How can knowledge of thinking styles help executives, managers, and ad-hoc leaders provide skillful leadership—capitalizing on the available brain power; articulating vision, mission, and direction; and helping others arrive at solutions? How do cognitive differences affect the rapport between a leader and group members?

Personal skills development. How can you use a thinking style profile to help people understand themselves better, diagnose difficulties they might be having in communicating with others, improve their personal and professional relationships, and expand their capacity to learn? How can highly technical people learn to explain technical subjects to the civilian population by appealing to their modes of processing? How can you improve the quality of your personal relationships by appreciating and valuing others' ways of knowing?

Persuasion. Most of us tend to present our ideas or arguments in the language of our own favorite thinking styles, usually without consciously adjusting to the preferred patterns of others. In a sense, we spend most of our lives talking to ourselves, unconsciously projecting our own cognitive preferences into our mental models of other people. Your own convincers may be quite different from those of the person you're trying to persuade or sell to. A Red Earth sales rep, for example, might sell successfully to other Red Earths, but might fail miserably trying to sell to a Blue Sky.

Do executives and team leaders unconsciously tend to favor the views and opinions of staff whose thinking styles match their own?

Detecting styles

One of the most important application skills in using this special knowledge of thinking styles is the ability to estimate a person's primary style by picking up on various conversational cues. Each of us telegraphs, usually unconsciously, the basic organizing patterns we use in processing ideas. You don't have to get someone to fill out a profile questionnaire to discover how he or she thinks.

One easy way to read a person's thinking style is to ask an open-ended question that doesn't invite any particular way of answering. Then listen for the choices that person makes in translating his or her inner experience into a verbal description. For example, you might ask What do you think caused this problem (or issue) we're facing? Or, How do you believe we should approach this opportunity?

If the person begins with an elaborate conceptual or factual preamble, such as the historical events leading up to the present situation, and connects the discussion to various other issues and solutions (the timeline structure), you're probably listening to a Blue Sky. If the answer starts with the here and now—people, experiences, actions, feelings, and self-references, you're probably hearing a Red Earth explanation.

If you hear a concrete, specific set of facts and assertions, usually leading to a concrete conclusion and possibly a recommended set of steps for a solution, he or she is likely a Blue Earth. If the person speaking goes out into the ozone, with sweeping conceptual statements and references to the grand design or big picture, and expresses his or her view in philosophical or inspirational language, that person is probably a Red Sky.

You will often hear a combination of those conversational cues, which could indicate a person who tends to blend two or more modes, or at least one who isn't strongly attached to any one mode. Common sense tells us that pronounced thinking preferences tend to show up as pronounced conversational cues. A shortage of strong cues may indicate a less-pronounced set of preferences. It's a good idea to keep your estimate of another person's thinking style on probation so that you remain open to new insights about how he or she thinks and are less likely to react to anyone stereotypically or categorically. The important thing is to remain open and curious about how other people think, and to use that knowledge to promote better understanding and cooperation.

Getting through

Mindex can offer possibilities for engineering greater understanding between people. Another primary application skill, equally important as the skill of reading others' thinking styles, is the ability to get through to people who have styles other than one's own. Think of explaining something to someone with a contrasting style as a matter of finding that style in your own brain and putting it to use. All of us have all four of the primary Mindex styles—Red Earth, Blue Earth, Red Sky, and Blue Sky—available to us. If you're primarily a Red Earth and trying to present your

How to Communicate With the Different Styles

Blue Sky

Do:

1. Talk in terms of the "big picture"—the grand design.
2. Draw diagrams to illustrate your ideas.
3. Show how everything fits together.
4. Explain your case logically and systematically.
5. Emphasize the attractiveness of your logical rationale.

Don't:

1. Get stuck in the details.
2. Wander off into other subjects or irrelevant concerns.
3. Argue from philosophical or metaphysical appeals.
4. Build your case on hunches or speculative information.
5. Overuse emotion-oriented terminology.

Red Sky

Do:

1. Deal with the "big picture"—the grand design.
2. Give inspiration to your case; make it come alive.
3. Offer a philosophical justification for your proposal.
4. Tie everything together to show how your idea can work.
5. Generalize skillfully.

Don't:

1. Get stuck in the details.
2. Overuse facts and figures.
3. Overwhelm the person with logical structures or systems.
4. Make it "cold-blooded"; do make it human and exciting.
5. Use clichés or "pat" slogans; do make it original.

Blue Earth

Do:

1. Talk in terms of concrete action.
2. Explain the "bottom line" first; then present your case.
3. Keep it organized; stick closely to the point.
4. Use logic to support your case; explain your rationale.
5. Present your facts in a well-thought-out sequence.

Don't:

1. Explain theories or make generalizations.
2. Wander from the point or bring up confusing information.
3. Try to cover two or three topics in the same conversation.
4. Try to rely on emotional or philosophical appeals.
5. Use fuzzy or imprecise terms.

Red Earth

Do:

1. Talk in terms of concrete action.
2. Give examples to illustrate what you mean.
3. Deal with what's real, not hypothetical cases.
4. Put feeling into the conversation; make it human.
5. Emphasize the practicality of your proposal.

Don't:

1. Use words or terms that are too abstract.
2. Generalize too much; do stick to the point.
3. Overload the person with too many facts and figures.
4. Overwhelm the person with too much logic.
5. Waste time explaining theories; do make it practical.

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ideas to a Blue Sky boss or client, start by finding the Blue Sky part of yourself. You can even train yourself to talk like a Blue Sky. Use the vocabulary of logic, sequences, timelines, systematic relationships, connections, architectural thinking, and planning. Draw diagrams to illustrate and connect your key points.

If you're primarily a Blue Earth and trying to connect with a Red Sky, find the Red Sky part of yourself. Find the common wavelength in terms of high-level concepts, hypothetical possibilities, philosophical arguments, and novel points of view.

In short, impersonate the kind of pattern you're trying to connect with. With attention and practice, it's possible to tune in to another person's mental wavelength—quickly and easily. There are some specific conversational techniques and strategies for connecting with each of the primary styles.

Beyond the basic patterns of Red Earth, Blue Earth, Red Sky, and Blue Sky, there is a wealth of other possibilities for understanding ourselves and others, and for managing the exchange of meaning. For example, a person's sensory mode preference—kinesthetic, visual, or auditory representation of sensory experience—influences his or her use of the four primary patterns. A person who strongly prefers visual information and likes to work with mental pictures may understand you more easily if you present your ideas visually—such as with diagrams, sketches, and photographs—or at least with visually referenced figures of speech. People with a high auditory preference may absorb information better if you tell it to them personally rather than on paper. People with kinesthetic preferences may learn better through physical, tactile involvement with the subject matter, if that's possible and appropriate.

In addition, a person's structure preference—the extent to which he or she values certainty, rules and procedures, predictability, and orderliness—may strongly influence his or her openness to new ideas and information. A related Mindex dimension, tolerance for ambiguity, indicates a person's capacity to deal with change, complexity, and problems without easy solutions. A person with an extreme need for structure and order, combined with a low tolerance for ambiguity, may find new ideas and the prospect of change stressful and threatening. A person with a high tolerance for ambiguity may tend to accept new ideas and points of view more readily.

Another interesting Mindex dimension is resistance to enculturation, a concept that Abraham Maslow considered key to the capacity for self-actualization. It involves a high level of consciousness of the cultural messages and social programming constantly bombarding us from all directions within a particular cultural field—either a national or ethnic culture, an organizational culture, or a culture defined by some particular community of interest. Ernest Hemingway had a simpler, less elegant expression for resistance to enculturation: "crap detecting."

We may not be able to read the *content* of minds—yet—but we can certainly read the *structure* of minds. By making use of these important findings, we can value and appreciate the differences that make us unique. **TD**

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