GETTING A HANDLE ON COMMUNICATION STYLES & SYSTEMS
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In 1970, Paul Orfalea took out a $5,000 loan and set up shop in an old hamburger stand near the University of California where he sold school supplies and made copies for students. Orfalea quickly realized that typical communication styles wouldn't work for him. His personal struggles with dyslexia, learning difficulties and poor mechanical abilities made him face facts: he couldn't even run the equipment that he bought for his store.

In order to succeed in business, he had to develop a communication system which would provide him quick and constant feedback from both his employees and his customers. He succeeded at that task so well that by 1997 Kinko's had more than 850 stores in the United States and abroad.

Had Paul Orfalea not personalized his communication system his would not be one of the great success stories and someone else would be providing that service. Much of the conflict in our lives can be explained by one simple yet dismal fact: We don't have a good understanding of communication styles or systems. Pat yourself on the back if you are taking time to learn more about them because you're on the leading edge of a fast moving trend in business – how to communicate with employees and customers.

Organizational conflict does not center around personalities; it centers around information and communication. Therefore, it's helpful to be familiar with some communication tools you can use to:

1) Understand styles of communication
2) Create systems for sharing information

Communication styles: There are several assessment tools that help determine personality styles, communication styles and styles for handling conflict. One of the values in these tools is that they help depersonalize the conflict. Recognizing an individual's style will help you understand that they aren't trying to be difficult. They simply need different information or more information than you do. They aren't ignoring you, they're just focused on their task. They understand what has to be done, they just function at a different speed or go at a task in a different way.

Understanding that people have different styles helps resolve team conflict when the information is used appropriately. In fact, diversity in styles and systems boost team productivity. It can be helpful to have someone who is focused on the task, someone else who takes care of the relationships in order to accomplish those tasks, someone who sees the big picture and someone who can make sure the details are identified and accomplished.

There may be people on a team who easily move from one style to another and adapt to what is needed for the situation at hand. Others may find it more difficult to move outside their own paradigm. Recognizing the diversity in ourselves and others helps us be more flexible. The more flexible we are, the more skilled we become at handling difficult situations.

Communication system: A communication system allows everyone to understand who needs to know what. Having a good system for internal communication makes organizing possible – it saves time, increases productivity and efficiency and creates a climate of trust and teamwork. An organizational chart helps establish those channels of communication. Many such charts have a top to bottom structure. Although

this is the most common type of chart, it doesn't necessarily need to look that way. Many very effective female leaders put themselves in the middle of things – they see it as a circular system. Sally Helgesen, in her book The Web of Inclusion says, "Women are eager to be in the center of things and don't like being alone at the top. Her power and authority come from connection to the people around her, rather than distance from those below her."

Regardless of how your organizational chart looks, it will be helpful, in determining how your communication system functions to ask this question: Who needs what information in order to be effective in their work?

You could create a system that identifies the following: **Responsibility:** Who is accountable for carrying out the action? **Authority:** Who needs to approve the action or who can reject it? **Delegation:** Are there others to whom parts of the action have been delegated? **Support:** Are there others who provide supporting information or resources? **Integration:** In order to integrate the results, who must be informed of outcomes/decisions/actions but does not necessarily influence them? **Expertise:** Who provides expertise, input or advice?

The size of your company will help determine how information flows. But never assume that because you're small you can skip answering these questions or going through this process.