

# SUMMARY SURROUNDED BY IDIOTS

THOMAS ERIKSON



# **Summary of “Surrounded by Idiots” by Thomas Erikson**

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Learn about the four main personality types and how to communicate effectively with each of them.

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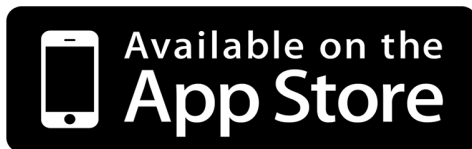


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# Introduction

As a kid, did you ever watch the classic Disney movie Lion King? If you did, then you probably can't forget the character of Scar or the perfectly-timed sarcasm of the moment when-- in his lair with his pack of shrieking hyenas-- he overdramatically sighs, "I'm surrounded by idiots!" I bring up this example, of course, because many of us feel that way at work.

Sometimes, we can't help envisioning our co-workers as those bumbling, giggling hyenas as we wonder what on earth is wrong with them and why anybody would do something that way.

But the truth is that it might be more about perception than we think. As weird as it sounds, it might not be that our co-workers are simply idiots; rather, we might just have conflicting personality types which lead to us being baffled by their behavior (and vice versa!) Erikson demonstrates that these personality types can be broken down into four categories which look like this: Dominant/Red, Inspiring/Yellow, Stable/Green, and Analytical/Blue. And over the course of the next few chapters, we're going to take a look at these personality types and how they impact human behavior.

## Red and Yellow Personalities

If you're preparing to deliver a presentation, what factors influence its design? You might be aiming for cold, hard facts, for example, or statistics that demonstrate your company's success. You might want to add compelling graphics, a color scheme that's pleasant to look at, or some humorous gifs that will keep your audience engaged through the power of laughter. At the end, perhaps, you'll tie it all together with a call to action that tells your audience exactly what you want them to do with the powerful information you've just given them. Now, what's wrong with that picture? At first glance, you might be tempted to say, "Nothing! That's a solid presentation!" And that's true-- except for the fact that this presentation fails to consider the differences in your listeners' personality types.

This element is crucial because a room full of clients can all come away with totally different interpretations of the message you just delivered. And that's completely determined by personality differences. So, if you want to learn how to truly connect with your audience-- whoever they may be-- and really be successful in communication, then it's time to learn about personality types and how our personalities impact the way we listen, process information, and interact. And we're going to start by taking a look at the first two types: red and yellow. Now, if you-- like me-- went through a childhood phase of being interested in Greek mythology, you might be intrigued to know that the classification of personality types used in this book actually goes all the way back to the 5th Century BC and was invented by the famous Greek philosopher Hippocrates!

As a result, these classifications are characterized by some pretty nifty-- but antiquated-- terminology that Hippocrates originally used. For example, Red personality types fall under the categorization "Choleric," meaning ill-tempered or unstable. Although the word is now considered obsolete, it stems from the word cholera, which is also a disease. Those who suffered with this illness in Hippocrates' day were undoubtedly ill-tempered and

prone to displays of excess emotion, so the word eventually caught on as a personality descriptor as well.

However, that doesn't mean people with Red personality types are simply loose cannons by definition; rather, they might be characterized by strong wills, ambition, and a readiness to speak their minds. Reds are also going to be the dominant personalities, the ones willing to take charge in any situation and make tough decisions, even when they're unpopular. To give us a better contextualization of Reds, the author notes that famous people with Red personalities include leaders like Steve Jobs, Margaret Thatcher, and Barack Obama. This example goes to show us that Reds might be difficult sometimes, but that doesn't mean they're bad! Instead, they're powerful personalities who can get things done, and that's a pretty good character trait.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, you have Yellows. Think of Yellow personalities as that bubbly girl you went to high-school with, the guy you know who can sell anything to anyone, or that one friend who can manage to put a positive spin on anything. Described as "sanguine" by Hippocrates (fun fact: this is an old word for people who are always optimistic, even when the chips are down), Yellow personalities are unfailingly chirpy, kind, and cheerful. They've also never met a stranger and anyone who's met them knows they are physically incapable of being quiet. Although this might be annoying to some personality types, a Yellow personality's good qualities always outweigh their frustrating ones because they're consistently positive and supportive.

## Greens and Blues

Last but not least, we have our final two personality types: greens and blues. Not only are they wildly different from the personalities we discussed in the earlier chapter, they're also very different from each other. For example, where Reds are dominant and like to take charge and Yellows like to keep everything happy and light, Greens prefer a more even keel. Referred to by Hippocrates as "the phlegmatic temperament," Greens are stable but stubborn.

They prefer to cultivate a calm and comfortable environment and, as a result, are resistant to any changes which might challenge that. This means that they're also highly unlikely to seek a role in the spotlight, preferring to go with the flow instead. While their reluctance to take risks might frustrate Reds and Yellows, a Green's qualities make them an ideal team player, support partner, and attentive friend. Their tendency to listen more than they talk can also help to balance out the overly-chatty Yellows.

Blues, on the other hand, are similar in some regards but vastly different than others. Although they, like Greens, prefer a more stable environment, Blues are the original members of the "glass half empty" club. That's why they're literally called Blues (or "melancholic personalities," according to Hippocrates). Although Blues might make the rest of us think of Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh, people with this personality type prefer to think of themselves as being more realistic about the world than others. Thus, as a result, they might tend to be more depressed. Blues are also more likely to struggle with anxiety and this can impact their performance at work. For example, they might obsess so much over every little detail of a project that they take forever or feel like it's never good enough to turn in.

These personality types are also quieter and more introverted, so it's unlikely that they'll offer their opinion unless it's explicitly requested. For brash Reds and vibrant Yellows, many of these traits might be infuriating, as both these personality types are bolder and more apt to take charge in



any given situation. But that doesn't mean that any one personality type is better or more important than another and it doesn't mean that we should avoid working with those who are different from us. Instead, we can develop our understanding of each personality type so we can learn how to get along. To further our understanding, we can start by following one strategy the author recommends. Since these personalities are color-coded, Erikson suggests using those colors to give ourselves some handy visual stimuli.

So, imagine that all these colors are in a grid, kind of like posts on your Instagram profile. The top two pictures are just solid colors: Blue and Red from left to right, and directly beneath them, you have Green and Yellow respectively. This structure is helpful because it offers us a visual representation of how these personality types differ and complement each other. For example, from our brief analysis of Red and Blue, we can see that both of these personality types are goal-oriented and they prioritize accomplishments, like solving problems or completing a task. So, even though they might differ in their core attitudes or approaches to life, they do share some common traits. Likewise, Green and Yellow differ in many ways, but they tend to be more socially aware than their Red and Blue counterparts, prioritizing people over problems. And finally, it's not hard to see that Blue and Green are more reserved personalities while Red and Yellow are bolder, even if they tend to express it differently.

Now that we've identified the four core types of personalities, we can dig a little deeper and investigate the nuances that shape each and every one of us. Because you have only to consider yourself and your own traits to understand that people can rarely be summed up by only one personality type. Instead, all of us are a mix of a few different qualities; it's perfectly possible to be a bubbly, cheerful Yellow and also possess some traits more common to the dominant Red. These nuances make us who we are; they determine what jobs we're best suited for and the types of friends and partners we gravitate toward. And in the next chapter, we'll take a closer look at the common blends of personalities and how they impact our lives.

## When Personalities Collide

As we've briefly seen in the previous chapters, it's no secret that personality differences can lead to clashes. When people are as different as Reds and Blues, for example, it's hardly surprising that misunderstandings can arise, causing people to feel as though it's impossible to work together. That's why breaking down misconceptions is key to creating a more inclusive environment. So, how can we learn to stop misunderstanding others? Erikson suggests that the first step is to learn more about each personality's traits so we can understand what they are and are not. For example, to a more reserved Blue, a Yellow's chattiness might be perceived as annoying or attention-seeking. As a result of this misunderstanding, a Blue might develop resentment towards a Yellow colleague, feeling that they always try to monopolize the conversation or dominate others.

From the Yellow's perspective, however, they're simply being their friendly selves, always ready with an idea, a funny anecdote, or a smile. They don't see anything wrong with being confident and speaking up and they're likely to be confused by a Blue's reticence, perhaps mistaking it for rudeness, hostility, or a lack of personality. And because Yellows are always overflowing with ideas, they might expect others to communicate the way they do-- by quickly interjecting-- without understanding why a Blue feels the need to be given time, space, and a literal invitation to share their thoughts. As a result, a Yellow who works closely with Blues might quickly arrive at the conclusion that they're surrounded by idiots. But of course, this perception is simply a misunderstanding or an inability to see the valuable qualities a Blue brings to the table.

Likewise, Blues might fail to recognize Yellows for the gifted communicators they are. This misunderstanding can cause people to place an unhealthy emphasis on each other's differences when, instead, a Yellow should appreciate the Blue's realism and attention to detail-- two things Yellows often lack!-- while Blue's should acknowledge that their Yellow

counterparts can be an asset when it comes to speaking up, taking charge, and handling social situations.

## It's Always the Quiet Ones

The stereotype of quiet people being creepy, weird, or losers has always been around-- anybody ever watch Carrie?-- and it creates unnecessary stigma for Blue and Green personality types to this day. For example, because Reds and Yellows are both confident and quick to speak their minds, they might misinterpret a Green co-worker's natural shyness as being aloof, secretive, or even suspicious. Likewise, Blues are commonly mislabeled as dull, depressing, or pessimistic. Unsurprisingly, these unfortunate biases can generate mistrust and conflict among colleagues. But the good news is that it doesn't have to be that way!

In fact, with a little extra understanding, you can discover that (fun fact!) Greens are the most common personality type in the world and that's actually a good thing because they're excellent team players. In fact, Green personality types tend to be much better at collaboration than Reds and Yellows, both of whom can be perceived as pushy or overly quick to promote their own agendas. And even though Greens might be quiet and conflict-avoidant, they're also fiercely loyal and eager to put the needs of others before their own. However, as with every other personality type, those positive qualities come with a few traits you need to watch out for so you can work together in harmony.

For example, although Reds and Yellows are unlikely to prioritize routine, for a Green, stability equals happiness. In fact, you can pretty much guarantee that your Green co-worker has a carefully constructed routine that they depend on for a sense of happiness and security throughout their workday. So, if you've noticed that your colleague has a habit of always eating her breakfast at the same time or in the same order, don't barge in to tell her your pitch for the upcoming meeting right then. Instead, give her some time to finish her routine and understand that the patience you practice right now will give you both a better day and working relationship in the long run.

But while it might be easy to respect a co-worker's preference for adhering to her routine, more frustration might arise if a Green is reluctant to embrace a new idea, take a risk, or experiment with a different way of doing things. That's because their inherent desire for stability and sameness often causes Greens to resist change and this can be exasperating for other personality types. However, that doesn't mean that people with Green personalities are impossible to work with and that they're incapable of change. Rather, it might simply mean that you need to communicate with your co-worker and address the concerns that are important to them instead of operating only from a Red perspective and dismissing their concerns or coming at it from a Yellow's perspective and simply telling them everything will be okay.

Now that we've addressed the common misconceptions that haunt Greens, it's time to take a look at our last personality type and examine what people misunderstand about Blues. As we've discussed in the earlier chapters, the Blue personality's natural "glass half empty" outlook may cause others to perceive them as being a downer or similarly suspicious because of their quiet nature. And because Blues and Reds share a tendency to be more comfortable with problems than people, others may see this combination of traits as being indicative of insensitivity, self-centeredness, or aloofness. Extroverted Yellows may be particularly predisposed to this assumption because they often struggle to understand why others prefer to be quiet and keep to themselves.

But fortunately, this problem can be solved by practicing just a little bit of understanding. The same is true of other issues which may arise when working with detail-oriented blues. Although Reds-- who place high emphasis on efficiency-- and Yellows-- who aren't known for their attention to detail-- might be frustrated by a Blue's insistence on checking every little thing, it can be helpful to understand that Blues are perfectionists and highly detail-oriented. They pride themselves on taking a "slow and steady wins the race" approach and ensuring that they've double-checked details to confirm that everything is done properly. It might be annoying to other

personality types, but try to remember where your Blue colleague is coming from and appreciate the fact that they care so much about doing a good job.

# How to Communicate Effectively

Now that we've discussed the differences between each personality type, you've probably already figured out the primary point of this chapter: each personality type communicates differently. Understanding this is crucial because once you unlock the secret to successful communication with each personality type, you'll be an unstoppable force for establishing great relationships both in your personal and professional life. So, let's take a look at what you can do, especially when it comes to tricky situations like giving constructive criticism. Many of us are sensitive when it comes to getting feedback, whether it's on a project at work or our treatment of a partner, and the tension can escalate quickly if that criticism isn't delivered in an appropriately tactful way. It can be even tougher if you use the wrong strategies for someone's personality type. So, here's what you can do to succeed.

It might ease your mind to know that, in some ways, Reds are the easiest people to communicate with. Because they prioritize problem-solving and efficiency, they'll appreciate a direct approach that doesn't involve flattering them or attempting to tip-toe around their feelings. While you should always remember to be tactful, a Red will respect you for getting right to the point and being prepared with concrete examples of the problem you'd like to discuss. This can be a little tricky if you're not a Red personality yourself, so be prepared to be firm and assertive and don't let them intimidate you. Because Reds are an inherently dominant personality, it's likely that they may try to talk over you or use your hesitation as an excuse to insist that you're in the wrong. Knowing this in advance can help you prepare the right attitude for combatting that.

Yellows, however, require a totally different approach. When delivering constructive criticism to a Yellow, you don't want to come across as heavy-handed or be as direct as you might with a Red. Instead, strive to keep things light; start with a joke, perhaps, and don't be afraid to start by engaging in pleasant small-talk. Because people with a Yellow personality

prefer a more light-hearted approach, they're more likely to be receptive and at ease under these circumstances. If you try to approach them in the same spirit you'd use with a Red, you're likely to be met with resistance and hurt feelings.

However, Reds and Yellows do share one commonality when it comes to tough conversations and that is the need to be prepared with specific talking points. Where a Red may try to invalidate your argument unless you're armed with solid proof, a Yellow might-- unintentionally-- steer you off topic simply by virtue of their chatty nature. Because Yellows are highly gifted with gab and known for going off tangents, it's easy to leave a conversation with the feeling that you never got to your original point. So, if you want to avoid that, be prepared with a list of talking points-- whether in your head or on paper-- that you can return to to keep the conversation on track.

And lastly, Erikson suggests a tip that can come in handy when dealing with any and all personality types: make sure you both discuss and agree on the takeaway from this meeting. This is a great step for ensuring clear communication between both parties because it removes all room for misunderstandings. You might even suggest that you both write down what you've agreed to-- especially if this involves a major change to a project or office policy-- as this can be particularly helpful for chronically forgetful Yellows.



# Final Summary

Often, it's easy to think that we're surrounded by idiots. However, as Erikson demonstrates, this is actually the result of misunderstanding others' personality types. But once we devote some time to understanding how others communicate and process information, we can clear up these misperceptions and improve our communication as well! The first step is to identify the four main personality types-- which are categorized by colors-- and their traits.

Red personalities are known for being dominant and ambitious while their Yellow counterparts are bubbly, chatty, and positive. By contrast, however, people with Green personalities are quiet, analytical, and prioritize stability over everything else. This gives them a great deal in common with the last personality type, Blues, who are reserved, introspective, and detail-oriented, even if they do tend towards a pessimistic worldview.

Understanding how each personality type thinks-- and what they value in life-- can help you collaborate and communicate effectively while minimizing frustration.



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