

Between Collaboration and Competition: Junior Salespeople's Attitude in a Coercive Context

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The current business environment, the sales management and the negotiation literature arrive generally to the same consideration: everyone should be a collaborative/integrative negotiator, or a consultative or relationship oriented salesperson, the closest styles in sales. But in nowadays economy, is it still consistent to determine oneself as being collaborative *or* competitive? Out of this simplistic dichotomy, we would like to know how to take into account both relational concerns and performance achievement.

Based on a long range of research since the 60s, a negotiation style test has been realized with more than 400 junior salespeople during training sessions. In this communication, a first set of 180 questionnaires is analyzed¹. Results show how junior salespeople position themselves on a collaborative/competitive grid, and what biographical factors have got the main impact on their personal style in negotiation. Discussion suggests further research, and several ways to improve junior salespeople training.

COMPETITION VS. COLLABORATION IN NEGOTIATION.

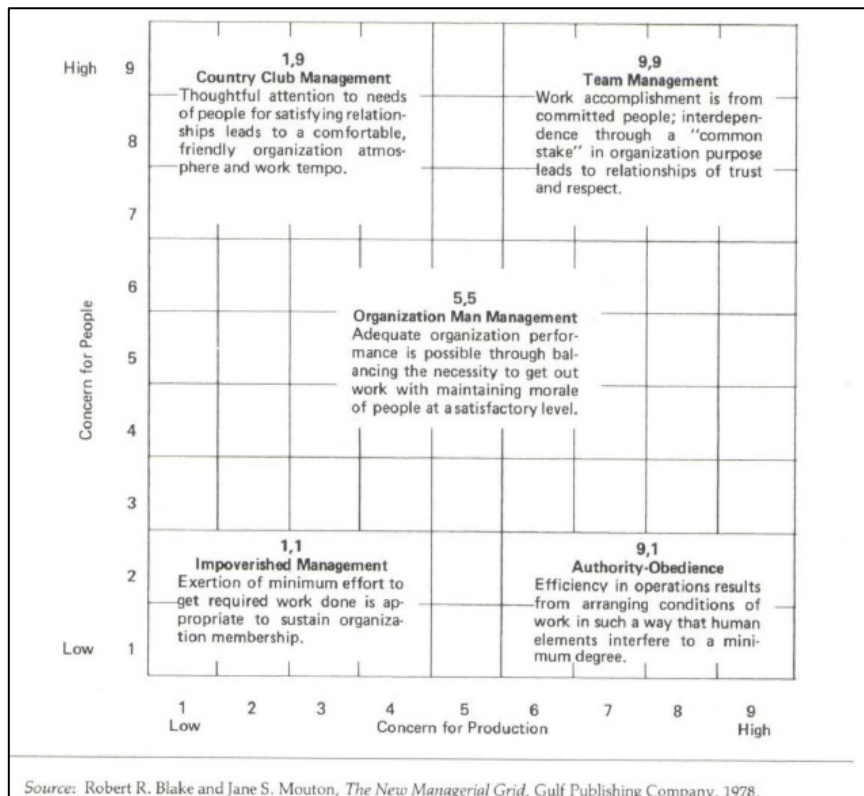
The historical basis: relationship vs. results

Early research on competitive/collaborative attitudes is available. Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1961, 1962, 1964, etc.) have developed that approach: they have worked on competition attitudes between individuals representing groups. They also have shown commonalities of the situations they explored with business competitive environments.

A review of the managerial/leadership grid they built helps us to understand how human attitudinal dimensions with two axes, representing our concern for people and for performance. Five positions are kept for the style analysis, from low to high position, and one average in the middle (Figure 1).

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Figure 1
The Managerial Grid, in one of its adapted version (Blake and Mouton, 1982)



The five styles can be named differently, depending the situation (management, negotiation, conflict management, etc.) in which they are used. Most of the time, the vocabulary used comes from the Leadership Grid. But sometimes, one may find contradictions between the terms used. The most famous grid is the *Leadership Grid*. Later in their research, Blake and Mouton have developed the *Conflict Management Grid*. The *Negotiation Grid* is named that way mainly by consultants and trainers in negotiation. The following table shows the labels used in each of them.

Table 1
Contextual labels of the five styles

LEADERSHIP GRID	CONFLICT MANAGEMENT GRID	NEGOTIATION GRID
(9,9) Team leader	(9,9) Collaborating	(9,9) Strategic negotiator
(9,1) Authoritarian	(9,1) Competing	(9,1) Competitive
(5,5) Middle-of-the-road	(5,5) Accommodating	(5,5) Consensual
(1,9) Country Club	(1,9) Compromising	(1,9) Collaborative
(1,1) Impoverished	(1,1) Avoiding	(1,1) Disengaged

In our case, we could use all of them. But the collaborative aspect, which is central in our analysis, can be interpreted as the style (9,9) or the style (1,9), depending the reference. Our final choice of the label, but more, of the position and style, follows the Conflict Management Grid, based on the descriptions given for each of the five styles:

- *Style (9,9) COLLABORATING*: it is supposed to give the best effectiveness to the negotiation style, if we take into consideration that one a negotiator has to pay a maximum attention both to the relationship and to the achievement. In that sense, the relationships shouldn't be only a way to achieve goals, but a real and important consideration. It is the original meaning of the latin word *co-labore*, "working together" for the same goal.
- *Style (9,1) COMPETING*: that position is globally understood as the "tough" way, in negotiation and in management. People using that behavior are known to be task and results oriented, and too few people and relationship oriented.
- *Style (5,5) ACCOMODATING*: that style corresponds to a "no-choice", or an average balance between people concerns and results concerns. It may appear as adaptive, and not much engaged personally or emotionally. Its difficulty is exactly that one: a negotiator who wouldn't like to be totally involved in negotiations.
- *Style (1,9) SOCIALIZING*: that style doesn't sound really "compromising", in our modern understanding. Finding a compromise means, in the negotiation literature, searching to find an average solution, not really satisfying but sufficient for a short range view. But it is oriented on the research of a solution. That style is focused on human aspects and relationship, and a minimum on solutions and results. This is why we prefer to name it "socializing", close to the original name, "country club".
- *Style (1,1) AVOIDING*: this style sounds to be consensual, in the sense that it does represent a behavior of avoidance, both of human aspects and efforts to obtain effective results. It may sometimes be understood as a way to analyze, with distance and a cold perception, what happens in complex negotiations, in particular. But most of people feel that this is rarely possible to achieve goals and develop trust and relationship with that kind of style.

Our main goal is to compare two effective styles among all: (9,1) COMPETING and (9,9) COLLABORATING. Both have got a high interest in results achievement, while their main difference is in the relationship aspect of negotiations.

The current perception of a negotiation approach

On the current context, it may appear totally natural to have very effective skills, both in human relationships, as a stable basis for a set of business negotiations, and in efforts and goal orientation, as salespeople and business negotiators are supposed to obtain tangible results. But the question is: don't we all have a natural preference? Or being a nice person, and being more interested in relationship, sometimes without good "utilitarian" results in a business context, or being a kind of "business warrior", sometimes rude with people but often achieving objectives?

Angelmar (1978) shows that negotiators very often balance between both aspects, that can be also expressed as a balance between promises and threats, rewards and punishments, positive and negative normative appeals, and the well-known distributive and integrative bargaining axis, from Walton & McKersie's dichotomy (1957).

At the same period, Axelrod asks how collaboration could emerge "in a world of egoists without central authority", which is the case in negotiation situations (1981). On the other hand, we all accept some collectively admitted norms, in our interactions (Axelrod, 1986). It

is the particular case of “being collaborative in negotiations”. And the social exchange theory argues on power vs. equity and dependency (Cook and Emerson, 1978).

Finally, a rational attitude, influenced by the modern society that promotes both human development and success in professional tasks, should suggest that we may be cooperative. It means that we may consider that this attitude provides us some benefits, but more competitive, if we believe that’s our interest. This is what some call the “Machiavellian intelligence”, specific to “political animals”, humans (Orbell and alii, 2004).

Salespeople’ attitude in a negotiation

There is a long range of works in sales management research on salespeople’ customer orientation, as a factor of customer trust and sales performance. The closest concept of the collaborative/integrative negotiation approach is the functional and relational salespeople’ customer orientation (Dubinski 80, Saxe and Weitz 82, Crosby et alii 90, etc.).

But nevertheless, strong and positive relationships between purchasers and sellers are known as a key factor for sustainable business performance, mutually shared (Homburg and alii, 2010). For example, Clopton (1984) shows that seller’s behavior influences the buyer’s behavior. A competitive bargaining behavior in particular, vs. an integrative one, has got more risk to affect the client’s behavior and outcomes.

As an example of such an approach, Dwyer and Walker (1981), studying attitudes towards profits and partners in unbalanced situations of power relationships, show that these contexts should drive more efficiency to negotiations, but with less predictability, and more difficulties for weaker negotiators. Cooperative attitudes are considered in few works on sales relationships, like Perdue and Summers (1991), for purchasers.

We could consider that sales approaches and attitudes are divided in relationship and consultative selling on one side, consistent with the integrative negotiation style, and in a more traditional selling approach, close to a competitive idea of business relationships, on the other side.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Our objective in that research can be summarized that way: there is a generalized trend to position oneself as a *collaborative negotiator*. But we believe that this declared approach can hide several sub-aspects. On one hand, we believe that most junior negotiators and salespeople genuinely position themselves as collaborative in an ideal business world. Then we suppose that, with some experience in negotiation, they may become more flexible and tend to pay more attention to relationship than to results.

This dichotomy made by experience is viewed in standard situations. What happen if salespeople face difficult negotiations, including more risks, more tensions, more difficulties to develop a mutually beneficial approach? Our belief is that they tend to use, in such cases their “second style”, which should correspond to a deep positioning for negotiators.

The use of this second style could depend on several factors: is it close or not from the first one? Is it consistent or contradictory to it, on the grid of styles?

Three hypotheses on junior negotiators' approach

These questions push us to finally focus on three hypotheses, presented in this communication.

The preferred negotiation style

Due to the globalized context in which everyone should be able to develop long-term relationships with clients, but to achieve demanding objectives at the same time, there is a trend, even for young salespeople, to try to position oneself as a good *collaborative negotiator*. This is consistent with the main approaches in sales, partnership selling and relationship selling.

Our first hypothesis is then:

Hypothesis 1 – Junior salespeople tend to be more collaborative (style 9.9) than competitive (style 9.1), in their dominant negotiation style.

Professional experience effect on the negotiation style

Once junior negotiators begin their professional life, and after several months of frequent practice, we can imagine that they have most of the time to follow organizational request, such as sales quotas achievement, client relationship development, etc. The principal difficulty could be that they may have some contradictory pressures: results or human relations? But, if we suppose that most of the companies employing such sales representatives at a master level ask them to maintain long range connections with clients, in order to obtain bigger deals, then they want them to approach the market with a collaborative style.

This is why our second hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 2 – The more they are experienced, the more they adopt a collaborative style (9.9).

The dominant and the secondary style

Out of a declared style in negotiation, and due to the fact that they will meet difficult and risky business situations, young negotiators will have to use their secondary style. We assume that, when the negotiations appear to become less effective than expected, negotiators change their approach. In that situation, they tend to use the closest style identified in their test. And because this is generated by a toughest situation, we believe that this is often a competitive style (9.1).

As a consequence, our third hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 3 – In case of a risky situation they tend to reinforce their competitive attitude (9.1) more than their relational attitude (1.9).

METHODOLOGY

The empirical part of that research has been realized during the last 6 years, in training sessions of “business negotiation”. A total of more than 400 participants in specialized master’s degree in Sales Management are recorded. We analyze only 180 of them in this communication, recorded from 2009 to 2012.

Table 2
Participants recorded on the period 2009-2012

YEAR	2009	2010	2011	2012
NUMBER	40	28	20	70

The questionnaire used covers six topics, following the original leadership grid developed by Blake and Mouton, in a simplified version adapted to a negotiation context (see appendix 1). We used the questionnaire very early in the first session. The goal of that procedure is to open them to the fact that there is no one way in approaching negotiations, but that they all have a personal style. At the same time, we do not want to influence them in the choice of an “ideal” style, often represented by the “win-win” approach, developed by Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981) and perceived as the most common explanation of the collaborative style.

The measures include biographical variables: year, age, gender, program, nationality, previous sales courses participation, previous work experience in sales (length and area), and previous experience in another field (length and area). We believe that respondents may be influenced by their existing knowledge in sales and/or negotiation, acquired in previous courses. In such a major of sales management, some students are almost total beginners, when others already have a deep background, and have a significant experience.

This is why we also take into account that experience, realized through internships in companies, from 3 to 18 months, and apprenticeship, which represents a whole year, 50% of their time, working for a firm.

After the test, results and their interpretation are discussed in groups, to understand why and how each style implies certain behaviors and outcomes.

The dependent variables come from a classification of items in 6 domains: argumentation, conviction, dynamism, conflict management, self-control and humor. Each item is classified from 5 (preferred choice, consistent with one’s personal attitude) to 1 (lowest choice) by the respondent.

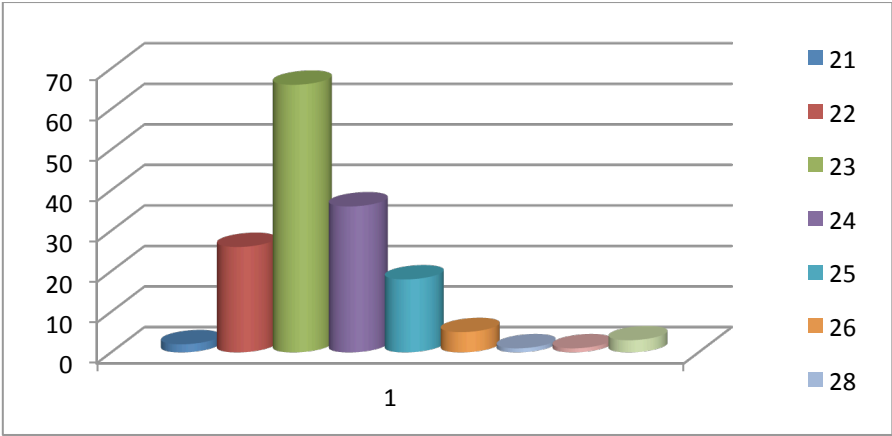
RESULTS

Characteristics of the respondents

From 180 participants, 158 provide a valid questionnaire. 38% are female, 62% male. 82.3% are French, when only 17.7% (11 respondents) come from 4 other countries. They are from 21 to 37 years old, with a mean of 23.7. The highest number is explained by the fact that some

students are professionals following the same major. Only 5 of them have more than 26 years old, as shown in the following figure.

Figure 2
Distribution of respondents by age.



Close to 2/3 have had previous courses in sales and have a sales experience, for an average length of one year (table 3). More than ¾ have had another experience. Male students go more in sales than women (66% vs. 58.3%), when more women (83.3% vs. 76.3%) have another professional experience. Professional areas where these experiences took place are as diverse as marketing, agro-food, distribution, bank, computers, cosmetics, logistics, automotive, etc. Only 3 of them have no experience at all.

Table 3
Previous sales courses and experience

	N	%	Mean	Std dev
Previous Sales Course	108	68,4%		
Sales Experience	100	63,3%		
(Months)	96		12,31	13,421
Other Experience	124	78,5%		
(Months)	114		12,77	16,540

The negotiation styles

The negotiation styles are analyzed through several measures. One is the score obtained for each style (table 4).

Table 4
Average score for each negotiation style

		V STYLE 9.9	V STYLE 9.1	V STYLE 5.5	V STYLE 1.9	V STYLE 1.1
N	Valid	157	157	157	157	157
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		22,86	16,36	20,81	19,52	10,49
Std dev		3,450	4,023	3,311	3,210	4,031
Variance		11,903	16,181	10,963	10,302	16,252
Minimum		12	8	12	10	6
Maximum		29	28	28	26	30

The dominant style is known by the highest score: as supposed, it is the style 9.9, with 23 points (closest full number). Due to that, this is a first way to verify our first hypothesis: *junior salespeople tend to give the highest score to the Collaborative way*. A bit more surprising, the second score is for the style 5.5, *Accommodating* (21 points). The *Socializing* style is the third (20 points). And the *Competitive* way obtains only 16 points, far from the three others. The score obtain by the style 1.1, *Avoiding*, is particularly low, as expected.

The second way to measure the styles is their ranking: due to the number of points given, each respondent has got a primary and a secondary style (table 5). We are able to know how many respondents chose one of them as their dominant and secondary style.

Table 5
Dominant negotiation style

		Population	Pourcentage
Valid	11	4	2,5
	19	19	12,1
	55	31	19,7
	91	10	6,4
	99	93	59,2
	Total	157	100,0

The *Collaborative* style (9.9) appears naturally as the largely dominant one (59.2% of respondents). It is followed from far by the *Accommodating* style (19.7%), the *Socializing* style (12.1%), and particularly low, the *Competitive* style (6.4%). The style 9.9 is preferred by 62.9% of men, but 53.3% of women. It is the reverse for the style 5.5: 25% of women choose it, for only 16.5% of men.

As each style may also be classified as the secondary one, we measure this ranking (table 6).

Table 6
Secondary negotiation style

		Population	Pourcentage
Valid	11	3	1,9
	19	42	26,8
	55	57	36,3
	91	19	12,1
	99	35	22,3
	Total	156	99,4
Missing		1	,6
Total		157	100,0

If junior negotiators change their dominant style for another one, it is first for its lower form on both axes, relationship and result orientation: the *Accommodating* style (36.3%). The following one is the *Socializing* style (26.8%). The *Collaborative* style is chosen as a secondary one by 22.3% of the participants who don't have it as their primary way. Here again, the *Competitive* style appears to be one of the least choices.

39% of women choose 5.5 as their secondary choice, 35.1% of men. And more men choose to *Socialize* more: 29.9% vs. 22%. Students with an existing sales experience tend to choose more the style 9.9 as their first: 61.6% vs. 55.2% for the inexperienced. But for their second choice, experienced students tend to become less *Accommodating* (31.6% vs. 44.8%) and more *Socializers* (30.6% vs. 20.7%) than inexperienced ones.

The gap between the dominant and the secondary style is an average of 3, going from 0 to 12 points.

DISCUSSION

The dominant negotiation style (H1)

We wanted to verify three points in this research. One is if young salespeople tend to be more collaborative than competitive. The second is if their experience could reinforce that trend. But, third point, if they feel that negotiations become more difficult, do they change their style for a more competitive one?

Our first hypothesis is supported by the previous results: a large proportion of our respondents position themselves as *Collaborative* negotiators. This is verified by the ranking of their dominant choice and by the score obtained.

But this first set of data shows a more surprising observation: the *Competitive* style is really not an attractive option for students in business sales. It is only the fourth choice over five, while the last one is most of the time considered as ineffective in negotiation. Finally, the "tough" style is their least choice among others. It sounds that they prefer to become less

demanding, both on their objectives and one human relationship, or to reinvest in the interpersonal aspects.

Factors influencing the dominant negotiation style (H2)

Our second hypothesis assumes that the more young salespeople cumulate experience, the more they tend to be *Collaborative* (9.9). Our analysis shows no direct impact of experience on that style. That hypothesis is not verified, but we have found other interesting influences.

We have analyzed the links between age, experience in sales, and experience in another area, as independent factors, on styles (scores and ranking) as dependent variables. The age influences styles 9.1 (*Competitive*) and 5.5 (*Accommodating*). If we split the population in two groups under/over the average age, 24 years old, the older respondents tend to be more competitive than younger ones (average score 17.45 vs. 15.61, t-test 2.882, ddl 155, p 0.005), but less accommodating (19.95 vs. 21.4, t-test 2.742, ddl 155, p 0.007). This influence on the *Accommodating* style is also confirmed by the fact to have an experience in sales: the respondents who have less than 12 months of experience tend to score more that style than the others (Anova, F 3.108, p 0.048; mean difference 1.412, p 0.015).

Such results teach us an unexpected point: junior salespeople don't become necessarily more *Collaborative* with experience, what would be consistent with a relational or partnership approach. Age and experience tend to push them to be more *Competitive* and less *Accommodating*.

Choice of the secondary negotiation style (H3)

Our third hypothesis is about the secondary style chosen by junior negotiators. The most surprising here is that they don't choose the *Competitive* style. Then hypothesis 3 is not verified. Meanwhile, they tend to act differently, depending their professional experience. In particular, the ones who have another experience than sales differentiate more their dominant and secondary choices. The variance is significantly different (F 4.792, p 0.03), with a superior gap if they have experience (3.39 vs. 2.45; t-test 2.198, ddl 86.7, p 0.031).

Analyzing the positions of the 5 styles with existing scores in this population, results show that some scores are opposed, but not necessarily as supposed. We observe two oppositions: both are on the transversal lines, as visible on the Blake and Mouton grid. Correlations analysis show that, on one hand, the stronger respondents score the styles 5.5 and 9.9, the less they give points to the style 1.1 (Pearson correlation -0.182, p 0.022 for 5.5 vs. 1.1; Pearson correlation -0.576, p 0.000 for 9.9 vs. 1.1). That relationship is not significant for the other styles. On the other hand, there is a negative relationship between the style 9.1 and both 5.5 and 1.9 (Pearson correlation -0.436, p 0.000 for 9.1 vs. 1.9; Pearson correlation -0.515, p 0.000 for 9.1 vs. 5.5).

We finally learn here that junior negotiators globally don't want to be more competitive if the situation requires a change in their style. The risk is that they tend to become less focused on results, as they choose as a secondary style the *Accommodating* or the *Socializing* ones. The ones who are ready to become more *Competitive* discriminate themselves: they tend to be more *Competitive* than their peers. And this style is in clear opposition with both the previous ones: maybe they are considered as "weak" in negotiations, by competitive negotiators.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This research shows three main points, dealing with junior salespersons' negotiation styles. Most of them want to be perceived as collaborative in negotiation. This is a declared positioning, because we couldn't observe their existing behaviors in series of real negotiations. We may assume that, most of the time, negotiators generally position themselves as collaborative. But is it the style they use in their practice? And is it necessarily the one that should be used in all kind of negotiations? We don't think so, for both questions. As this would be pretty interesting, we plan to mix that type of questionnaire and observed sales role play, in our future research, with junior salespeople and experienced salesforces.

The second point is that they probably have some difficulties to know how to handle risky negotiations. Because of their secondary choice, *Accommodating* or *Socializing* styles, they tend to be less demanding on their chances to achieve results. This is contradictory with the requirements of their job, and with the current economic situation. Probably the experience will help them on that aspect. But we didn't compare junior salespeople with senior ones, cumulating several years of practice. That consideration is a second option we will develop in our project.

The third point is an evident opposition between *Competitors* and *Socializers*. The old misunderstanding is not passed; it is still real, apparently. For that reason, negotiation and sales training programs could be more focused on the links between positive relationships and results achievement. Even if this is a strong aspect of sales research for years, junior negotiators don't feel that interdependency for their own negotiation style.

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APPENDIX 1

NEGOTIATION STYLE

The questionnaire has been used in French, the native language of the participants. It has been partially translated in English for this communication, only for the Aspect 1, "argumentation".

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

NAME:

PROGRAMME:

AGE:

GENDER: MALE FEMALE

NATIONALITY:

ALREADY FOLLOWED NEGOTIATION COURSES: YES NO

ALREADY HAVE AN EXPERIENCE IN NEGOTIATION: YES NO

 If YES, length: (in months).....

 If YES, area:

OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: YES NO

 If YES, length: (in months).....

 If YES, area:

TEST TO RECOGNISE YOUR NEGOTIATION STYLE

For each of the following aspects, read first the 5 phrases. Then you classify them from « 1 » to « 5 ». You give 5 points for the phrase that suits you the most, and 1 point for the one which is the farthest of your attitude. Then you attribute 4, 3 or 2 points to the last 3 phrases. You write the points in column A.

Col. A	Col. B	ASPECT 1 – Argumentation.
		I easily agree on my partner's arguments.
		I search a reasonable compromise between his and my arguments.
		I vigorously give arguments to value and help my arguments to be accepted.
		I give a great importance not to hurt my partner with an inappropriate assertion.
		I develop my point of view in a way to obtain a clear adhesion from my partner.

Col. A	Col. B	ASPECT 2 – Conviction.
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Col. A	Col. B	ASPECT 3 – Dynamism.
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Col. A	Col. B	ASPECT 4 – Conflict.
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Col. A	Col. B	ASPECT 5 – Self control.
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Col. A	Col. B	ASPECT 6 – Humor.
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CODING GRID: Now you have your personal classification in Column A. You write the following letters in Column B, respecting exactly the same order.

Aspect 1 Argumentation	Aspect 2 Conviction	Aspect 3 Dynamism	Aspect 4 Conflict	Aspect 5 Self control	Aspect 6 Humor
A	E	B	E	B	B
C	C	A	A	D	C
D	B	D	D	A	E
B	D	C	B	E	A
E	A	E	C	C	D

RESULTS: in each box of the following table, you can now write the score obtained for each item. Then you add the scores in each column.

Aspects	style 1.1 A	style 1.9 B	style 5.5 C	style 9.1 D	style 9.9 E
1 - Argumentation					
2 - Conviction					
3 - Dynamism					
4 - Conflict					
5 - Self control					
6 - Humor					
TOTAL					

Your dominant style obtains the higher score, with a maximum of 30 and a minimum of 6 for each style. Your « secondary » style is the second, in number of points. The lowest score represents generally the style you don't want to adopt.