

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS - STEP 7: PLANNING TO GET STUFF DONE

Do you meticulously plan your day, ticking off tasks one after the other with precision? Or do you start with a flexible outline, ready to pivot as the day unfolds? Perhaps you're somewhere in between, blending structure with spontaneity. Our approach to planning not only shapes our workday but also plays a pivotal role in teamwork and leadership dynamics. Yet, these varying styles can sometimes be a source of team tension and frustration.

Drawing from my own experiences, I navigate a middle path in planning. I like having a roadmap but I'm quick to adapt it to new priorities. This balanced stance often puts me at odds with colleagues on both ends of the planning spectrum. I've worked with those who, despite their best intentions, would miss deadlines, and others who meticulously planned every detail far in advance, leaving little room for flexibility. Interestingly, I suspect they found my approach equally challenging, labeling me as either too rigid or too laissez-faire, depending on their perspective.

However, I've learned to see these differences not as obstacles, but as opportunities to enhance team collaboration. And I'm eager to pass these insights on to you. Through a series of seven articles, I've explored various facets of collaboration and leadership, aiming to enrich your interactions with teammates, clients, and beyond. While this article was intended to conclude the series, stay tuned for next month's edition where I'll unveil some exciting new insights that promise to further empower your team.

The Seven Dimensions of Collaboration

The seven dimensions of collaboration is not a concept I created on my own. It is founded on research by Professor Erin Meyer, from INSEAD. In her amazing book, *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer highlights seven dimensions of collaboration that vary widely across cultures. The seven dimensions are:

1. How do we build trust? - Task based vs Relationship based trust
2. How do we communicate with each other - Low Context vs High Context Communication
3. What is expected from leaders? - Egalitarian Leadership vs Hierarchical Leadership
4. How do we want decisions to be made? - Consensual vs Top-Down Decisions
5. What do we do when we disagree? - Confrontational Discussion vs Avoiding Confrontation
6. How do we prefer to give and receive feedback? - Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback
7. What is our approach to planning and delivering results? - Linear Planning vs Flexible Planning

I fully recommend everyone read Erin Meyer's book, especially if you are ever working with someone from a different culture. But even if all your colleagues and customers are from the same country, there is a great deal of value in understanding the seven dimensions. Most people do not match the average cultural profile from their country. That is why I recommend trying to understand their individual preferences across the seven dimensions. By trying to understand their individual preferences, you will be able to form more productive relationships in your teams and more valuable relationships with your customers.

Dimension 7 - What is Our Approach to Planning and Delivering Results?

Our approach to planning dictates almost everything in our lives. It guides how we plan our days, prioritize our tasks, and adapt to unforeseen changes. This is also one of the most important things to align on as a team or when working with someone. It can be incredibly frustrating if you are expecting the other person to finish a task at a certain time, but they have prioritized something else. Similarly, it can also be frustrating if you want a colleague to quickly adapt their plans to accommodate a new situation, but they don't. Understanding how different people plan their work will go a long way in improving your ability to work together.

On one side of the spectrum are people with a more Linear approach to planning. These kinds of people believe that actions should be conducted in a sequential fashion (i.e., finishing one task before starting the next). Focusing on the task at hand is critical, and all interruptions are discouraged. When there is a deadline, these people stick to the schedule. The emphasis is on delivering results on time and with the expected quality. A negative aspect of this approach is that Linear Planning people often struggle to adapt to unexpected changes.

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On the other side of the planning spectrum are people with a more Flexible approach. These kinds of people believe that tasks and projects should be completed in a more fluid manner. Changes and interruptions are not seen as bad things, but rather an opportunity to adapt and improve. Multitasking is the normal mode for these people. Deadlines are considered suggestions, not things that are set in stone. A negative aspect of this approach is that Flexible people can sometimes miss some key deliverables because they have shifted their focus to something else. It is important to recognize that both approaches to planning have their strengths and weaknesses. The different approaches are not necessarily the problem, but big issues can arise when you are working with someone with a completely different approach. That is why we recommend everyone be clear on what approach to planning they prefer. While you might already have a good idea about your preference, there is an easy way to find out. Answer these four questions, and based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for a more Linear or Flexible approach to planning.

1) When working on something important, I prefer to have a detailed plan and series of checklists of things I need to get done.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2) I struggle to multitask, and so I prefer to focus on one task at a time, and if possible, finish that task without interruptions.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3) I expect that new information will arise or things will change, so I tend to create loose plans and deadlines. This allows me the flexibility to adapt to new situations.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
4) When deciding on which task or priority to work on, I focus on which is the most important and not on which has the nearest deadline.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preferred approach to Planning.	High Preference for Linear Planning	Slight Preference for Linear Planning	Mixed Preference	Slight Preference for Flexible Planning	High Preference for Flexible Planning

Collaborating With People with Differing Preferences for Delivering Results

It goes without saying that if both you and the other person have a Linear approach to planning, then collaborating will be easier. Similarly, if you both have a more Flexible approach, it won't bother you the same way if deadlines are missed. But what do you do if you prefer a more Flexible approach while the other person prefers a more Linear approach? Or what about the reverse? Don't worry ... effectively working with people with different approaches to planning is possible. All it takes is a willingness to try and adapt your style to meet their preferences.

What you should do if you prefer a more Linear approach, and the other person prefers a more Flexible approach:

- **Adopt a 'Big Picture' Perspective** - Working with diverse planning styles can be a challenge, but it's also an opportunity to enhance your team's outcomes. If you're more inclined towards Linear Planning, consider the value that a Flexible planner brings to the table, especially their knack for navigating changes effortlessly. Focus on overarching project goals and discuss how both planning styles can contribute to these targets. This approach not only fosters mutual understanding but also enriches the project's adaptability to unforeseen shifts.
- **Leverage the strengths of the Flexible approach** - In environments rife with change, a Flexible planner's ability to adapt to change is invaluable. Recognize scenarios where this trait shines – like during periods of rapid business evolution – where a rigid three-month plan would falter. Identifying and leveraging these situations demonstrates a strategic use of diverse strengths, ensuring your projects and your tasks have the best chance of success.
- **Schedule Regular Check-ins for Adjustments** - Merge the best of both the Linear and Flexible Planning styles by establishing regular check-ins. This strategy respects the need for structure, allowing for a periodic review of progress and the opportunity for necessary adjustments. It's a balanced approach that accommodates both the desire for a planned review process and the flexibility to adapt to new insights or project shifts.

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• **Co-Create a Hybrid Planning Model** - Together, develop a planning model that marries Linear and Flexible Planning elements. Set key milestones to satisfy the need for structure, while allowing the approach to achieving these milestones to remain adaptable. This hybrid model will serve as a bridge, ensuring alignment and fostering collaboration between your different planning preferences.

• **Incorporate flexibility into meeting agendas** - While Linear planners appreciate a structured meeting agenda, flexibility can enhance these discussions by addressing what's most pressing, not just what's first on the list. By sharing the agenda in advance and inviting input, you open the door to incorporating diverse viewpoints. Moreover, reserve a portion of the meeting for topics that arise spontaneously, ensuring all voices are heard and nothing critical is overlooked.

What you should do if you prefer a Flexible approach, and the other person prefers a more Linear approach:

• **Highlight the Benefits of Early Planning** - While you might naturally lean towards a more adaptable approach, take the time to understand and communicate the benefits of early planning stages in certain contexts, especially in scenarios where linear planning might mitigate risks or improve efficiency. Showing that you value the importance of structure in these cases can build trust.

• **Offer to Lead the Adaptation Process** - In projects where changes are inevitable, offer to take the lead on managing these changes within the framework of the Linear plan. This shows your commitment to the project's success while also respecting the other person's need for structure. It also positions you as the go-to person for navigating uncertainties, blending both planning styles effectively.

• **Provide Clear Communication on Changes** - When changes are necessary, provide clear, concise, and timely communication about what is changing, why it's changing, and how it impacts the overall plan. This respects the Linear planner's need for order and predictability, making the flexible approach less disruptive and more integrated into the project's progression.

• **Prioritize Meeting Efficiency** - Recognize that not all discussions fit within the timeframe of a team meeting. If a topic arises spontaneously, assess its urgency. Should it command immediate attention, by all means, address it. However, for less critical issues, propose a separate discussion. This strategy respects the meeting's structure (valued by those with a Linear Planning preference) while ensuring important issues are not overlooked. It's about finding the right balance between sticking to the plan and being responsive to new developments.

• **Proactively Plan Meetings** - Engage linear thinkers by sharing a meeting agenda in advance. Start by outlining key discussion points, then invite input via email for any additional topics team members wish to cover. This proactive approach does more than structure your meeting—it encourages thorough preparation and ensures all topics, especially those important to Linear planners, are ready for a productive discussion. It's a simple yet effective way to enhance meeting productivity and inclusivity.

Determine Your Team's Approach to Planning

While the other dimensions play important roles in collaborating with others, the dimension on planning is one of the most critical. Very few of us have jobs where we can act like a hermit, not relying on anyone else. Almost all of us work in teams with other colleagues. We rely on others to get things done, and they rely on us completing our tasks. For that reason, teams and even whole companies can be derailed if there are too many differences on how everyone views planning and how to accomplish tasks. Now that doesn't mean that you should ensure that everyone in your team is Linear, or Flexible, or even Mixed. In fact, having 100% of one type puts your team at risk, especially in situations where the opposite approach is more beneficial. Instead of trying to minimize your differences, you should embrace and explore those differences. As a team, talk about your differences, their strengths, and their weaknesses. Even though there is not an overall "ideal" approach to planning, there can be an "ideal" approach for your team. So, discuss your differences, and find out what works for you as a team.



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