

## Learn Type, Learn to Flex, Save Your Career

by Carol A. Linden



**Carol A. Linden**, MBTI Master Practitioner, speaker, author, consultant; past APTI president, current APTI Board member, has served APTI since 1998. ENFP preferences. After 26 years in a software company, she learned the importance of flexing at work, including speaking the language of those around her who were not like her. “Type saved my sanity in corporate America and made my career possible.” I love this topic.

### Which One of These is *Not* Like the Others

As a big picture person and a *warm and fuzzy people* person, I was definitely *not like the others* at an IT company where I worked for many years. I was very frustrated after a few years in my tech writing career. I seemed stuck and not getting work that inspired me.

Then, I found David Keirsey’s book, *Please Understand Me II*, where I learned about type theory and Temperaments. For the first time in my life, I felt seen and understood for who I truly was. It was life-changing for me.

First, I felt affirmed. I was not alone. There were others like me, though not in large numbers in the general population. Keirsey seemed to know a lot about me, and he understood where I was coming from. I wasn’t an *odd duck* – I was a *rare bird*. What a relief that was!

Keirsey also helped me see that I was a mystery to *most* of the people in the IT company. I worked with a lot of detail-oriented people who were analytical, thought in a linear way, and spoke in tangible terms. I needed to *flex* if I was going to be successful with them.

I’m going to share with you three ways that I learned to apply type theory at work. These realizations saved my sanity and gave me a chance at an interesting career. Type is not just theory. Type is alive in you and in the people around you. If you take the trouble to learn about it and apply it, your time at work can be much more rewarding. I’m living proof: It truly is worth the effort.

## **Type Application #1: Speak their language.**

I realized I needed to speak the *language of my IT colleagues* if I wanted to be perceived as worthy of their trust. I learned to speak in a more linear way, a more logical way, and in concrete terms. It seemed to me as though I spoke French and most of my colleagues spoke German. I had to learn to speak “German.” Thanks to psychological type and Temperaments, *I did!*

Keirsey helped me realize that I spoke in conceptual, non-specific ways. To people who use more concrete language, I was not specific enough. How can someone who isn’t concrete and specific gain the trust of people who *live in concrete and specific*? The answer is, you can’t.

I understood that when I went into a meeting room, I *needed to flex and speak* like most of my colleagues instead of what came naturally to me. Doing that repeatedly and consistently, over time—and not too long at that—*the miracle occurred*. When I spoke *their language*, I was understood. And I sounded like someone who could plan a project, lead a team and meet deadlines. I talked in ways that they interpreted as worthy of trust.

I learned to speak in a more linear way, too. I’m naturally a brainstormer. I use my intuition to come up with new ideas and make connections that have nothing linear about them. Let’s face it, I could sound *all over the place* to more linear-minded colleagues. I learned to rein in my brainstorming, reserve it for when the group was brainstorming intentionally, and then speak in more detailed, specific language in a logical, linear way. That’s what most of my colleagues did and that’s what they needed *from me*.

Oh, there’s a time and a place for brainstorming and being *all over the place*. That kind of creativity can be very valuable at work, but at the wrong time and place, brainstorming can be off-putting to your more linear colleagues. How are they going to trust you if you sound *all over the place*? The answer is, they’re not.

By flexing from my big picture, conceptual brainstorming style into more linear, logical, specific language, I was able to connect. I came to be seen as trustworthy. I was given more meaningful, interesting work that let me use my natural talents and skills. I cannot overstate how instrumental this was to my success. It wasn’t about money. I discovered the real reason to learn to communicate effectively with others at work is that it meant I didn’t get stuck in a boring, dead-end job. I was recognized as trustworthy and capable. My advice: Just go for speaking and behaving in ways that show others that you’re capable and trustworthy first—the money will follow.

## **Type Application #2: Read the room, match their style.**

I was extraverted and a bit, hmm, shall we say, *effusive and expressive*? I was also more “warm and fuzzy.” Think about the IT people you know. They tend to be more introverted in nature and less expressive. To get information from a software developer, I’d make an appointment. When I walked into their office, I read the body language and saw the quiet demeanor and solemn look on the guy’s face. My full-blown extraverted, expressive self could easily bowl that person right over. I intentionally softened my voice, spoke more slowly, and paused after I asked a question to let the person think before he responded.

My extraverted self *thinks out loud*. Seriously, that’s not just an expression; it’s a real thing. My more introverted colleagues tend to mull and collect their thoughts before speaking. (What a concept, thinks my extraverted self.) I needed to *give them space and time* to think before responding. I need to not bowl them over with my natural fast-paced talking and my expressiveness and enthusiasm. Yes, all of those things about me have their place, just not in the office of an introverted, soft-spoken software developer.

If you’re an extravert going to meet with an introvert, here’s another tip, send them information ahead of time. Give them time to mull. They’ll be more comfortable and probably have more information to give you in return. Just saying.

Now, my colleagues in technical support were more likely to be extraverted and expressive like me. (In my data, 50% of my technical support colleagues were extraverted.) I could be my *unvarnished self* with them. It actually helped me develop rapport with them. But bowling over an introverted colleague does not create rapport and does not help you get the information you need from them.

So, read the room. Tone yourself down, or speak up more, as needed for the situation. I need to tone it down. My more introverted colleagues probably would benefit by taking a deep breath and jumping into the conversation before they’re really comfortable about it. We both need to flex. Just in different ways.

### **Type Application #3: Pressure-Prompted or Early-Starting?**

I learned about the Pressure-Prompted/Early-Starting dichotomy from the MBTI Step II Interpretive Report. I found, however, that even my students who hadn’t taken the instrument could relate to this aspect of themselves readily.

People who are naturally pressure-prompted don’t get the energy to *do* anything until there is some *pressure*. For people who are *not* pressure-prompted, these colleagues look like they’re procrastinating. But, and this is important, they are *not procrastinating*. They literally cannot find the energy to tackle something until some pressure is on.

HINT: help your pressure-prompted colleagues. Don’t give them one big deadline, six months down the road. You could be setting both of you up for a trainwreck. Here’s the magic word:

*milestones*. When projects, or even just tasks, have *milestones*, a pressure-prompted person gets the uplift in energy to get cracking.

One of my students shared in class, “I was put on a task force in April that wasn’t going to be producing results until October. I told them, “I’m out of here. See you in August.” Now, luckily, she was in a work situation that had that kind of freedom. But also luckily, she *knew* herself. She would be bored and unmotivated for months and more useful to the task force closer to the deadline.

I, on the other hand, am naturally early-starting. I start early because I want to leave wiggle room in case things go wrong that need time to sort out. Now, imagine someone like me, and maybe like you, working with a pressure-prompted colleague or entire team. It makes me squirm just thinking about it! Working with colleagues who, from *my perspective*, wait until the *last minute*, can be genuinely anxiety-provoking for me.

Let’s pause and think about this. I’m going to ask you a *trick question*:

***“Who is right and who is wrong in this situation?”***

(You can hear the Jeopardy theme music, can’t you?) Remember, this is a trick question. No one is wrong. No one. We have to be conscious of these differences and work out ways to work together *without making anyone wrong*.

***No one has to be doing something wrong for everyone to be upset, unhappy, and generally ticked off. Seriously, no one.***

So, if no one is wrong, what do we do? First of all, stop making the other person wrong.

**Early-starting colleagues:** stop calling your pressure-prompted colleagues *procrastinators*. Stop criticizing them because you’re uncomfortable, maybe even anxious. Their inability to get the energy to start on something before it feels necessary to them is *real*. They’re not being difficult. It’s truly hard for them. Instead of judging them, help them get the energy they need to get cracking. Remember that magic word I mentioned—*milestones*. Create milestones. Help them get the uplift in energy to work on the task or project.

**Pressure-prompted colleagues:** stop discounting the discomfort and genuine anxiety you may be causing your early-starting colleagues. Life is hard, work is hard, you don’t need colleagues making things harder. Really. We need to trust each other at work. Realize that your pressure-prompted behaviors can be really hard on others and can cause them to not trust you. Their anxiety is real. Have some compassion about that instead of dismissing them.

Then, help yourself out by creating your own milestones if you aren't getting them. And, when what you are working on affects only *you*, be as pressure-prompted as you want. When it impacts others, do the adult thing—think of others, reel in your behavior that can cause others to be anxious and not trust you. Behaving in ways that make others not trust you can come with a big price tag.

### **The Long and the Short of It**

I actually think I could write a book on this topic. It's hard to stop here, but I don't want to overwhelm you. What I've shared is only the tip of the iceberg. There are so many more ways for you to apply knowledge of psychological type at work. So, go to workshops, read books, find *trustworthy* websites, join APTI. Learn about how you can make things work out better for you in the workplace. And, as Otto Kroeger would say, "Happy Typewatching to you!"