

Temperament Theory—Dr. David West Keirsey

by Dr. Eve Delunas



Eve Delunas, Ph.D. has been applying Temperament Theory and Psychological Type Theory to catalyze positive changes for over forty years. She is recognized internationally for her work on the relationship between personality and dysfunctional behavior, as presented in her book, *Survival Games Personalities Play*. Her newest book, *New Science, New Brain, New You*, is a do-it-yourself guidebook for moving out of "survival mode" and opening to your greatest potential. Eve's current project is her weekly podcast, *The Abundance Zone*. She offers tips and tools for increasing self-love, reprogramming old ways of feeling and thinking, raising your vibration, and attracting more of what you desire into your life. For more information, visit: theabundancezone.net.

It was 1978, and a self-published book called "*Please Understand Me*" by David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates took the world by storm, surpassing well over one million in sales in just a few short years without a dollar spent on advertising. To what can we attribute this overwhelming success?

Please Understand Me (PUM) provided readers with a shorthand for appreciating themselves and others, understanding how and why people differ, and improving relationships with spouses, children, friends, and coworkers. That shorthand was an introduction to the four Temperaments.

Dr. David Keirsey was a psychologist, professor, and researcher. He was captivated by the work of Ernst Kretschmer while pursuing his doctorate in psychology. Kretschmer, a German psychologist who was a contemporary of C. G. Jung, had identified four Temperaments that exhibited distinctly different patterns of behavior. Keirsey later discovered that these same four patterns had been observed in humans for more than 2000 years, going back to the ancient Greeks.

Some years after becoming acquainted with Kretschmer's model, Keirsey happened upon Isabel Briggs Myers' written descriptions of the 16 psychological type patterns. In a sudden flash of insight, Keirsey realized that by grouping the 16 types as NFs, NTs, SPs, and SJs, Myers' descriptions correlated directly with the four Temperament patterns described by Kretschmer and others.

Keirsey spent his life studying, researching, and refining his model of the four Temperament patterns in both children and adults. Rather than focusing on the internal cognitions and emotions of type dynamics, Keirsey held a strong belief in the value of “watching people’s feet” as a way of understanding them.

This approach is underlined in Keirsey’s 1998 book *Please Understand Me II: Temperament, Character, Intelligence*, which provides detailed explanations of how each of the 16 psychological types is driven by their Temperament preferences.

Since the publication of the original PUM in 1978, temperament theory has been used on its own or as an excellent complement to psychological type theory. One could argue that Keirsey’s best-selling books helped popularize and spread Myers’ work on psychological type even more widely.

We can delve deeper into understanding self and others by using both type and Temperaments together. While type on its own is useful, the Temperament model gives an additional perspective that helps us see why people behave as they do, how they are driven by their core values, and what we can do to create positive relationships with those who are different than we are. In a world that has become increasingly polarized with an “us versus them” mentality, this information can be helpful in replacing negative judgements we may hold about others with appreciation, understanding and compassion.

What Determines Your Temperament?

According to Keirsey, the four temperaments have different core needs and values which drive their behavior. Before discussing the patterns and themes of each of the temperaments, there are a few things to keep in mind about this model.

First, although people with the same temperament preferences share the same fundamental needs and values, there are countless ways in which we may go about satisfying our needs and acting upon our values. In other words, there is endless variation among people of a particular temperament.

Second, the needs and values of a particular temperament are NOT mutually exclusive. It’s possible to say that everyone shares some of the needs, if not all, from all four of the temperaments. Our temperament preference is determined based upon which needs are at the TOP of our list. And that is determined by what we DO.

For example, we might value freedom and variety along with stability and security, but as we go through life, situations force us to choose between the two. Perhaps we have an opportunity to embark on an exciting adventure, replete with many risks and unknowns. Do we say, “yes,” or instead do we decide it is best to remain safe with the tried and true? It

is at these intersection points in our lives when we reveal our true colors—those needs and values that are most important to us.

Third, there is no one right way to be or “best” Temperament type. The beauty of this model is its emphasis on the ways in which we all benefit from our unique differences. Our world is greatly enriched by the varying perspectives, remarkable talents and skills, and valued contributions made by each of the four Temperament groups.

An Overview of the Four Temperaments

The Improviser Temperament

Improvisers (also called Artisans) are driven by the need to be free to act on their impulses in the moment and to make an impact—to be seen as impressive. These individuals value excitement, variety, challenge, stimulation, and adventure. They are the most present-focused of all of the types, and do not tend to dwell on the past. Improvisers are optimistic and unlikely to hold grudges. They enjoy taking risks, and being spontaneous, and dislike being constrained by rules and restrictions. They become easily bored when faced with monotonous tasks or long, drawn-out explanations.

Improvisers tend to be good at using tools and instruments of every kind, whether a potter’s wheel, guitar, bulldozer, or scalpel. They often demonstrate feats of courage and are willing to challenge the status quo. Their keen perceptiveness of their surroundings and their action orientation are great advantages in times of crisis, when they are often at their best. They are adaptable, and great at improvising when needed, making them excellent problem-solvers and gifted performers.

Many Improvisers are dancers, musicians, authors, visual artists, graphic artists, and composers. They often work in the entertainment, airline, sports and construction industries, in emergency services, in sales and marketing, and in entrepreneurial ventures.

The Stabilizer Temperament

Stabilizers (also called Guardians) are driven by a hunger to belong, to be needed, and to maintain stability. They believe in learning from the past and being well-prepared for whatever the future may bring. Stabilizers have a strong sense of responsibility and tend to be generous in offering a hand to help those in need. You can count on them to be there when the going gets tough, sacrificing their own comfort and wellbeing to assist others and expecting nothing in return.

Stabilizers respect rules and expect others to do the same. They are risk-averse and prone to exercise caution and deliberation prior to taking action. Stabilizers excel in logistics and are remarkable in their ability to track and follow through on complicated plans involving hundreds of details, without error.

Stabilizers often work in environments where their attention to detail, accuracy, skillful planning, and accountability are highly valued, such as in law offices, accountancy firms, banks, title companies, government agencies, and the military. Stabilizers also enjoy careers in education, medicine, social work, and the ministry, where they assist others in learning, growing, and living happier, healthier lives.

The Theorist Temperament

Theorists (also called Rationals) are motivated by an internal drive to increase their levels of competency, mastery, and knowledge. Regardless of what they have achieved, they continue to strive to outdo themselves. Theorists are independent thinkers who place a high value on autonomy and efficiency. To a Theorist, rules and standard operating procedures are made to be questioned. They enjoy engaging in critical analysis and deriving their own conclusions. They are big-picture thinkers who welcome new theories and ideas that challenge the status quo.

Theorists delight in addressing very complicated problems that others consider impossible to solve and in coming up with a detailed strategy to resolve them. These individuals are masterful at designing new, complex systems in the fields of mathematics, science, and technology.

Theorists are researchers, inventors and designers who are responsible for advances in medicine, agriculture, communications, transportation, engineering, and countless other fields. We have them to thank for computers, the internet, mobile phones, and Artificial Intelligence. Not surprisingly, we find Theorists working on research and design teams in organizations that are on the cutting edge in science and technology. They are also attracted to careers as university professors, architects, authors, and organizational development specialists.

The Catalyst Temperament

Catalysts (also called Idealists) strive to express their highest potential in this lifetime. They are seekers who prefer to choose a life path that is meaningful and aligns with a greater purpose for their lives. Catalysts add meaning to their lives by engaging in activities like writing, teaching, mentoring, and counseling to inspire others and to help them develop and grow into their best selves. They are naturally gifted in expressing empathy and compassion and in listening deeply to gain an understanding of another's cares and

concerns. Catalysts have an insatiable appetite to understand people in general, and themselves in particular, and are drawn to theories of psychology and spirituality that explain why people think, feel, and behave as they do.

In organizations, Catalysts focus on the people first and foremost. They honor the uniqueness of each individual and naturally recognize and draw forth each person's special gifts with genuine praise and encouragement. More than any of the other temperaments, Catalysts tend to have a keen awareness of the organizational climate and the skills to invite enthusiasm and stimulate excitement for new projects.

Catalysts excel at creating harmony and cooperation at home and in the workplace. They build bridges of understanding and acceptance between people in their work as psychologists, counselors, marriage and family therapists, writers, organizational trainers, consultants, K-12 teachers, university professors, and life coaches.

How Can Temperament Theory Improve Your Life?

Appreciate Yourself More

We are not taught to love and appreciate ourselves. Rather, we are trained to focus on our weaknesses and judge ourselves harshly where we find ourselves lacking, where we do not match up to others. Knowledge of your temperament preferences can make you aware of your unique strengths, help you grow in self-acceptance, and enable you to treat yourself with greater self-compassion when you mess up (as we all inevitably do!).

Find Work That is a “Good Fit”

Many people are unhappy with their careers because they are mismatched in their jobs. When your job is a good match to your temperament, you are likely to thrive. Understanding your temperament can help you choose work or other activities that enable you to get your core needs met and to utilize your natural gifts.

Consider the Improviser who joined the Army to jump out of airplanes (like you see on the commercials) and finds herself sitting at a desk in a dark corner all day long doing boring paperwork. This is not an activity that meets the Improviser's needs for action, freedom, variety, or excitement, or allows her to shine by utilizing her greatest strengths. Quite the contrary—the Improviser is unlikely to perform well in this situation. What's more, the organization fails to benefit from the individual's greatest assets!

Imagine the Stabilizer whose job description changes from week to week along with office policies and procedures. Again, one can imagine how utterly frustrating this would be for

someone who longs for stability and clearly defined role expectations in his or her work environment. This individual is also unlikely to be performing at his best under the circumstances.

Too often people like the two described above, who are mismatched in the workplace and performing poorly, blame themselves for “not being good enough.” But that is not the problem. Put them in a job in which they use their strengths, a job that is in alignment with their needs and values, and watch them soar!

Find New Solutions for Overcoming Life’s Challenges

Perhaps you are a teacher with a child who doesn’t quite “fit in” in your traditional classroom. Or maybe you are one year into your marriage and finding that you and your spouse have some “sore spots” that are causing arguments and creating distress. Or maybe in your new role as a team leader in your workplace, you are finding it difficult to effectively manage one or more of your team members.

When we understand the basic motivations and values of those who are different from us, often the lightbulbs go on and we suddenly “see” ourselves and our relationships from a new perspective. Where before we felt “stuck” and frustrated, we now can identify new, viable options for dealing with a troubling situation.

Different temperaments respond to different ways of parenting, teaching, relating, and leading. When we flex our ways of dealing with others based upon who *they* are, we find that we become more effective in our roles. When we speak the language of a given temperament, they are more likely to receive our message and respond favorably.

With knowledge of temperament, people’s behavior makes sense, where before we were scratching our heads. Rather than being frustrated or taking things personally in our interactions with others, we become more tolerant and understanding when people are just being themselves.

David Keirsey was certainly on to something, when he named his book, *Please Understand Me*. You will be amazed at the positive difference it can make in your relationships when you view yourself and others through the lenses of the Temperament model.

Understand Different Ways We Respond to Stress

According to Keirsey, each temperament is stressed by different circumstances, and for different reasons. What’s more, each temperament responds to extreme stress in different ways. Our responses to stress are the ways in which we attempt to survive an onslaught of life’s difficulties.

In the book, *Survival Games Personalities Play*, Dr. Eve Delunas refers to these stress-related behaviors as *survival strategies*. While Improvisers use the strategy of *Blackmail*, Stabilizers employ *Complain*, Theorist use *Robot* or *Avoidance*, and Catalysts use the *Masquerade* Strategy.

Each of these survival strategies responds best to different counseling methods, which are described in detail in the book.

For More Information

Here are some resources on Temperament:

Books:

Berens, Linda. *Understanding Yourself and Others: An Introduction to the 4 Temperaments—3.0*. Huntington Beach, CA: Telos Publications, 2006.

Delunas, Eve. *Survival Games Personalities Play*. Big Sur, CA: SunInk Publications, 1992.

Fairhurst, Alice and Lisa Fairhurst. *Effective Teaching, Effective Learning*. Palo Alto: Davies-Black Publishing, 1995.

Keirse, David. *Please Understand Me II*. Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis Book Company, 1998.

Nardi, Dario. *Discovering Your Uniqueness: For Career and Relationship Success*. Huntington Beach: Telos Publications, 1999.

Stothart, Catherine. *Motivation: The Ultimate Guide to Leading Your Team*. London: Routledge, 2023.

Nash, Susan. *Let's Split the Difference*. Marlow, UK: EM-Power (UK) Ltd. 2009.

Websites:

www.interstrength.org Look under "Resources" for a wealth of material on Temperaments and Interaction Styles™.

Card Sort:

The Type Trilogy by Susan Nash and Sue Blair. Available from www.typeacademy.co.uk or www.personalitypuzzles.com

These can be used to help individuals identify and/or verify their "best fit" temperaments and four-letter types. Highly recommended.