Would You Like to Get Along With Difficult People? Pick a Number

by Karen Talley

At the Happy Flower Nursery School, Rose complains that her co-teacher Lilly never puts anything away in the storage cabinets or folds the blankets neatly after nap. Lilly’s gripe is that Rose is so preoccupied with things being done a certain way that she can’t be spontaneous by changing plans and following the interests of the children. In another classroom, lead teacher Daisy feels that the children should be doing more creative and unusual art projects like “toilet plunger painting” which fuels co-teacher Violet’s concern that such projects might be tacit permission to play with unsanitary plungers at home.

Working closely with others often gives rise to these and other types of conflicts as each of us is driven by different and usually conflicting preoccupations and concerns. Often directors are caught in the middle of such disagreements, which, if not nipped in the bud, can escalate into all out blight!

What’s a director to do? One option is to explore the tenets of a 3,000 year old 9-sided star-shaped paradigm known as the Enneagram (see figure). This personality inventory purports that early in life all children need to feel safe and to cope with family situations. As a consequence, they develop an over-riding strategy based on the relationship between their natural talents and abilities and their personal circumstances. As we in our field will not be surprised, early childhood experiences play a key role in this development. The list outlines the over-riding personal concerns or themes that mark the childhood of each of us.

As a child, each number feels the following overriding pressure:

1. I must be perfect
2. I must help others
3. I must keep busy
4. I need to be different
5. I need to know more
6. I must feel safe
7. I need to find adventure
8. I must be strong
9. I must be agreeable

In this system of nine different personality types, each type experiences an operational comfort level accompanied by a tendency to reject options that fall outside it. The term comes from the Greek words Ennea, or nine and Gram, or drawing. Each point on the star connects to two others which indicate where one might go under stress or security.

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KEY: > means “reacts like a”

When relaxed: 1>7, 7>5, 5>8, 8>2, 2>4, 4>1, 3>6, 6>9, 9>3
When stressed: 1>4, 4>2, 2>8, 8>5, 5>7, 7>1, 3>9, 9>6, 6>3
Each type can also have what are known as “wings.” A wing is a tendency an individual might have toward a number on either side of her basic number. A “3” (Achiever) primarily wants to accomplish things, but may prefer to help others in the process, giving her a “2” wing. She might also pride herself in finding unique ways of achieving, giving her a “4” wing.

Each Type Has a Sub-type or “Center” Based on a “Driver”

2s, 3s, and 4s are Heart/Feeling centered with an “Image” driver

2s desire a loving image

3s want a socially acceptable image

4s need an image to be original/different

5s, 6s, and 7s are Head/Thinking centered with a “Fear” driver

5s seek safety in knowledge

6s seek relief by relating to authority

7s attempt to avoid fear

8s, 9s, and 1s are Gut/Instinct centered with an “Anger” driver

8s express anger

9s deny anger

1s repress anger

As outlined in Box A, we all have different frames of reference. Without knowledge of some of those differences, one might have the greatest of intentions and totally miss the mark in relating to significant others at work or home. By motivating others from within their most familiar frame of reference, communication avenues can open with little resistance establishing trust, harmony, and accord.

During interpersonal experiences such as those at Little Flower, teachers interface with each other resulting in possible outcomes ranging from success to disaster. Levels of understanding and willingness to employ the concepts of this model can significantly impact such experiences. A “1” (Paragon) like Rose can be critical of a “7” (Adventurer) like Lilly who gets easily distracted and just wants to have fun. Or she could help Lilly find fun, creative ways to be more organized and reduce clutter. A Type “6” (Guardian) like Violet often fears the drive of the Type “4” (Individualist) Daisy to be different. A positive option for Daisy would be to reassure the fears of Violet by committing to a thorough orientation of the children to the proper use of plungers.

Let’s look briefly at a related system. Many are familiar with the Myers/Briggs Personality Inventory. This
Box A — Enneatypes Summary

**Type One** — “The Paragon” — The principled, idealistic type.

“Ones” are conscientious and ethical with a strong sense of right and wrong. They are teachers, crusaders, and advocates for change, always striving to improve things but afraid of making a mistake. Well-organized, orderly, and fastidious, they try to maintain high standards but can slip into being critical and perfectionistic. They may have problems with resentment and impatience.

*At Their Best:* They are wise, responsible, thorough, dependable, discerning, noble, and morally heroic.

**Type Two** — “The Helper” — The caring, interpersonal type.

“Twos” are empathetic, sincere, and warm-hearted. They are friendly, generous, and self-sacrificing but can also be sentimental, flattering, and people-pleasing. They are well-meaning and driven to be close to others but can be overly accommodating and manipulative. They typically have problems with possessiveness, insecurity, and acknowledging their own needs and feelings.

*At Their Best:* They are unselfish, adaptable, cheerful, insightful, agreeable, optimistic, and altruistic.

**Type Three** — “The Achiever” — The adaptable, success-oriented type.

“Threes” are self-assured, action-oriented, and charming. Ambitious, competent, determined, and energetic, they can also be status-conscious and highly driven for advancement. They are diplomatic, poised, optimistic, and industrious, but can also be defensive and overly concerned with what others think of them. They typically have problems with workaholism, impatience, and competitiveness.

*At Their Best:* They are efficient, hard-working, self-accepting, authentic role models who inspire others.

**Type Four** — “The Individualist” — The introspective, romantic type.

“Fours” are self-aware, sensitive, and articulate. They are emotionally honest, creative, and personal, but can also be moody and self-conscious. Withholding themselves from others due to feeling vulnerable and defective, they can sometimes feel disdainful and exempt from ordinary ways of living. They typically have problems with melancholy, self-indulgence, and self-pity.

*At Their Best:* They are inspired and highly creative, able to renew themselves and transform their experiences.

**Type Five** — “The Investigator” — The perceptive, cerebral type.

“Fives” are alert, insightful, and curious. They are able to concentrate and focus on developing complex ideas and skills. Independent, innovative, and inventive, they can also become preoccupied with their thoughts and imaginary constructs. They may become detached, yet high-strung and intense. They typically have problems with eccentricity, nihilism, and isolation.

*At Their Best:* They are visionary pioneers, often ahead of their time and able to see the world in entirely new ways.

**Type Six** — “The Guardian” — The committed, security-oriented type.

“Sixes” are reliable, hard-working, responsible, and trustworthy. Excellent “troubleshooters,” they foresee problems and foster cooperation but can also become defensive and anxious. They are natural detectives who are security and safety conscious. They can be cautious and indecisive, yet also reactive, defiant, and rebellious. They typically have problems with self-doubt and suspicion.

*At Their Best:* They are internally stable and self-reliant, courageously championing themselves and others.

**Type Seven** — “The Adventurer” — The busy, productive type.

“Sevens” are extroverted, optimistic, versatile, and spontaneous. Playful, high-spirited, and practical, they can also misapply their many talents becoming over-extended, scattered, and undisciplined. They constantly seek new and exciting experiences, but can become distracted and exhausted by staying on the go. They typically have problems with commitment, impatience, and impulsiveness.

*At Their Best:* They focus their talents on worthwhile goals becoming appreciative, joyous, and satisfied.

**Type Eight** — “The Challenger” — The powerful, aggressive type.

“Eights” are self-confident, strong, and assertive. Protective, resourceful, straight-talking, and decisive, but can also be ego-centric and domineering. Their need to control their environment can result in action and productivity, but in relationships they are sometimes confrontational and intimidating. They are generous and supportive of those for whom they care, but they can be angry, vengeful, and excessive.

*At Their Best:* They use their strength to improve others’ lives, becoming heroic, magnanimous, and inspiring.

**Type Nine** — “The Peacemaker” — The easy-going, self-effacing type.

“Nines” are accepting, trusting, and stable. They are usually creative, optimistic, and supportive but can also be too willing to go along with others to keep the peace. They want everything to go smoothly, without conflict; but they can also tend to be deceitful, complacent, and in denial, simplifying problems and minimizing anything upsetting. They typically have problems with inertia, procrastination, and stubbornness.

*At Their Best:* They are indomitable and all-embracing, able to bring people together and heal conflicts.
resource looks at four dimensions that eventually lead to 16 basic personality types.

Introvert/Extrovert (I/E) relates to how we get our energy — through internal relationships or through external relationships

Sensing/Intuiting (S/N) relates to how we gather information — from our five senses or from impressions, hunches, and insights

Thinking/Feeling (T/F) relates to how we make decisions — by thoughts or by feelings

Perceiving/Judging (P/J) relates to how we organize our life and relate to the world — through structure and planning or through flexibility and spontaneity

The Enneagram looks at what is even more at the core of human nature, namely how we are motivated. In any situation, each of us has a predominant preoccupation and concern that drives our energy. This reality first crystallized for me while taking an aerobics class a few years ago. One member of the group was always commenting on “heart rate,” expounding on the latest research on it. And each time, I would say to myself — “Why is she so concerned about heart rate? I just want to get the routine down.” The more I thought about this, I began to realize that perhaps others in the group have yet other reasons for being motivated to come. Some might have been there to lose weight, others to meet new people, and our leader probably wanted everyone to be comfortable with the routine. Whose motivation was best? Obviously, no one’s, as each motivation is specific to particular needs and circumstances.

Discovering our own type can be a bit tricky as most of us have characteristics of several, if not all the types. One type for each of us, however, is predominant and more automatic than the others; and through some self-reflection it will eventually reveal itself. We are all multifaceted. No two people have the same personality, even twins can be very different, yet we still have many things in common. As a result, we have all experienced the ENERGY of each of the points on the Enneagram at some time or another. We have tapped into “9” energy to keep the peace, “8” energy to lead, and “2” energy to help others, making it difficult to type ourselves.

There are many resources, including some excellent web pages that can be helpful in discovering one’s “Type.” (see references). The experience of self-discovery is often fraught with mixed feelings such as denial, concern, confusion, and relief. What often eventually emerges is a sense of comfort in the realization that “I’m not the only one that feels and thinks the way I do.” As is apparent in Box A, each type has its up and downsides. Where we fall on

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the scale of options available to each of us within our type is predominantly determined by our emotional maturity level. An immature “9” can stuff her anger to the point of total annihilation, resulting in self-sabotage and denial with passive aggressive manipulation, deceit, and sarcasm. Human development is on a continuum, so as we mature, we seek to adjust the “survival strategy” that served us well in childhood, but which has now become obsolete.

Once we become open to self-reflection, we begin to look at the dark side of our personalities and how we might be able to soften the edges which cause us and others so much discomfort. Our intention becomes to learn how to reach the higher side of our personalities so that we may more fully enjoy our relationships and love ourselves. We thus try to stretch beyond our type and seek new avenues for self-discovery and actualization. In this process each type seeks a personal objective:

1s to be more light-hearted and less idealistic

2s to be more aware of personal needs and less responsible for other’s feelings

3s to be more patient and less driven

4s to be more accepting and less extreme

5s to be more self-expressive and less detached

6s to be more spontaneous and less skeptical

7s to be more stable and less pleasure driven

8s to be more able to let go and less controlling

9s to be more assertive and less in denial

There is value in developing an understanding of ourselves and others which provides us with an awareness of our patterns of behavior, freeing us to see the world from different perspectives. To develop more of one’s “7” nature can be fun, the “9” part of us can help us to relax more, take breaks and be more comfortable to be around, the “3” part can help to be more task oriented and to the point. The Enneagram is a great tool to enjoy your work and have a great time with the children, learning new strategies to teach and develop strengths outside your familiar ways of working.

Important considerations when determining someone’s “type.”

- It is best to take into account all aspects of a personality. First impressions aren’t always genuine as “type” is not based just on what people do or say, but also how they feel.
- Be intuitive and regard eye contact and body language such as clenched teeth or forced smile as insights.

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### Personality Types

#### Why Different Enneagram Types are in Early Childhood Education

**Type One**
“I will be appreciated.”

**Type Two**
“I want to do what’s right.”

**Type Three**
“I’ll accomplish something.”

**Type Four**
“It’s an opportunity for me to be creative.”

**Type Five**
“It’s a great source of information and research.”

**Type Six**
“I can make things safe.”

**Type Seven**
“It will be an adventure.”

**Type Eight**
“I can lead others.”

**Type Nine**
“I’ll help others to get along.”

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### How to Relate to Each Type

**Type One**
- Acknowledge their achievements
- Value their advice
- Encourage them to be more light-hearted

**Type Two**
- Appreciate them
- Take an interest in their personal life
- Suggest rather than criticize

**Type Three**
- Don’t interrupt them while they work
- Give honest feedback
- Praise their efforts

**Type Four**
- Give them compliments
- Be supportive in their struggles
- Don’t tell them they are overreacting

**Type Five**
- Speak briefly, be straightforward
- Give them time to process
- Don’t be forceful

**Type Six**
- Don’t judge their concerns
- Reassure them
- Work things through together

**Type Seven**
- Give them affection and freedom
- Accept their style
- Don’t tell them what to do

**Type Eight**
- Be confident, strong, and direct
- Give them space
- Don’t take their assertiveness personally

**Type Nine**
- Don’t pressure them
- Discuss rather than confront
- Listen until they finish speaking
Look for consistency between actions and words. Is there follow-through or excuses?

It is important to consider people outside of “special situations” as we all rely on the same response choices under certain conditions (many people cry during a sad movie, but they are not all “4s”).

Be cautious about quickly trying to put someone “in a box.” It takes a lot of study and dedication to this framework before you can adequately ascertain your own, let alone someone else’s, “type.”

The Enneagram is an excellent tool for clarifying differences and working on mutually acceptable solutions. By acknowledging and accepting our own quirks, we can see the humor in our conflicts and move past gridlock to solution finding. An understanding of this system can be empowering as it opens us up for harmony and communication. We develop compassion and avenues for two-way

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**Advantages for Early Childhood Professionals**

The Enneagram System:

- Provides an understanding of ourselves which helps in coping with personal challenges, recognizing the cause of conflicts in order to round ourselves out while respecting our individuality.

- Offers an understanding of others which help us in tolerating their perspectives, attitudes, and choices. As we in early childhood develop these skills, we can better communicate, relate to, and motivate others.

- Gives an understanding of time management issues and reasons for differing approaches.

- Assists in the formulation of training and development programs.

- Guides in consideration of balance in classroom teams.

- Helps in all relationships by developing more tolerance and forgiveness, as well as better coping strategies and a broader perspective.

- Fosters support of the strengths of others and patience with their limitations.

- Encourages new ways to teach and develop strengths outside familiar ways of working.
discourse. Through a basic understanding of each type, teachers, directors, and other relevant adults can pursue effective options for forging a more harmonious working environment. As we each gain an understanding of our own type as well as those of the significant adults in our lives, we are better equipped to tolerate and even celebrate the differences which once tested our patience.

**Bibliography**

**Web pages**
- [www.enneagramcentral.com](http://www.enneagramcentral.com) *(free test)*
- [www.enneagram.net](http://www.enneagram.net)
- [www.enneagraminstitute.com](http://www.enneagraminstitute.com)
- [http://hometown.aol.com/herbphear/myhomepage/index.html](http://hometown.aol.com/herbphear/myhomepage/index.html)
- [http://prosperity.com/enneagram](http://prosperity.com/enneagram)

**Books**


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**Staff Development Opportunities**

Allow time for each staff member to read this article and go online to take a free test to determine his/her type at [www.enneagramcentral.com](http://www.enneagramcentral.com) or [www.duniho.com/fergus/enneagram/test/](http://www.duniho.com/fergus/enneagram/test/).

At a subsequent staff meeting, ask staff members to wear a name tag with their number on it. (For fun, they may want to dress in a way or wear a hat that is a clue to their number and others can guess.)

Various, possible activities such as those below could follow:

- **Have each person think of someone in his/her life . . .**
  - who has been a “challenge” — this should be someone who has obvious characteristics of one of the types. It may even be someone in the room! Ask each person to write the Enneatype number (no names) on a sticky note and a suggestion on what that person could do to get along better with others.
  - who has been a “joy” — this should be someone who has obvious characteristics of one of the types. It may be many people in the room! Ask each person to write the Enneatype number (no names) on a sticky note and the reason why that person is so appreciated.

- Have one person collect the sticky notes; post the suggestions on a wall or chart paper, corresponding to the appropriate number. Have another person then read off the ideas grouped by number. Ask the participants for further thoughts or concerns.

- **Have teachers sit together according to “Enneatype.”**
  - Ask each group to brainstorm a list of how others can better get along with them, what they need from them, or how they prefer to be appreciated and report back their common suggestions to the whole group.
  - Have the group brainstorm positive and negative words that describe their personalities. The final list should consist of only words to which everyone in the group can agree. Report back.
  - Ask “typemates” to generate a list of common interests, attitudes, concerns, and values shared by everyone in the group. Where don’t they agree? Share and discuss.
  - Ask individuals to think about what they like about their own “Enneatype” and write individual thoughts on separate sticky notes. Group the notes on a wall or chart paper according to type, share and discuss.

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