

Tunings # 5

Hey, What's Your Conation?

Peggy D. Bennett, PhD

You may recognize the title of this piece as a play on words of the stereotypic conversation-starter, “What’s your sign?” The expectation, I suppose, of learning someone’s astrological sign was a way of finding out about his or her temperament, interests, and general orientation in life. Well, very possibly, the same could be true for finding out someone’s *conative style*.

When was the last time you felt annoyed or frustrated, not by what someone said, but by the way he or she *did* something? Considering that those with whom we live and work most closely may “do things” very differently from us, these differences can be a source of frustration, judgment, criticism, and nagging. So, what is that all about?

Think about your style of “doing”

Imagine that a bookshelf you ordered has just been delivered. As you begin to open the package, you read the dreaded words: Assembly Required. What happens next can tell a lot about how you approach *doing things*.

1. Do you begin by lining up all the screws and nuts, counting them, and matching what you have to what the instruction manual says you should have?
2. Do you begin by getting the tools and attaching the shelves, ignoring the instruction manual and using trial and error to immediately start assembling?
3. Do you sit and read the instruction manual beginning to end before you do anything else?
4. Do you call for assistance, to someone more knowledgeable and experienced than you, to help with this project?

If your drive to act is number 1 and your partner’s is number 2, you may experience some friction. In fact, many of us would rather not be involved in the project than be required to go against our instincts and follow someone else’s lead. The problem? Different styles of **conation**. Few of us have ever heard of conation, but this idea may be at the root of tension that grows between people who simply “do” things differently.

What is Conation?

In our psychology courses, we studied about **cognition** and learned that cognition explains how we think, how we come to know and understand. The ways in which we process information, the ways in which we situate new ideas, the ways in which we translate the unfamiliar into the familiar: these are all aspects of cognition. So, cognition is associated with how we *think* about people, ideas, and things.

Again from our psychology studies, we are aware that **affect** relates to our emotional reactions, perceptions, and orientations to stimuli that surround us. Affect is associated with how we *feel* about people, ideas, and things.

A third, much more recent designation for the ways in which we function is **conation**. *Conation describes the intent and effort of our personal actions*. Conation is associated with how we *act or behave* toward people, ideas, and things.

After a drunk driver ran into her stopped car, Kolbe spent months in rehabilitation from her serious injuries. She noticed that, as she tediously pursued her exercises and therapies, she maintained her own characteristic ways of doing things, her “orientation toward action.” According to Kolbe, she revived the idea of conation after it had largely been ignored in 20th century research. Kolbe spoke of Immanuel Kant identifying conation as “practical

reason' (the domain of action and the will) set apart from 'pure reason' (the intellect), or 'judgment' (the realm of feeling, pleasure, and pain)." (Kolbe, 1990, p. xiv)

Kolbe identified conation as putting thought into action. In some ways then, conation is the link that connects the cognitive (knowledge) and the affective (feeling) with the conative (action/behavior). The way in which we deliberate a move, plan an activity, or carry-out an idea all reveal what Kolbe has suggested is our conative style, our preferred mode of putting thought and feeling into action.

Kolbe suggested that, in general, we all fall into one of four categories of conation:

- Fact finder
- Follow thru
- Quick start
- Implementor

Are you a **Fact Finder**? If so, your natural instincts may be to collect facts, probe details, and filter and distill information. Sometimes too judicious and overly-cautious, you may be driven to participate in activities that define, calculate, formalize, and research; you are a gatherer of information.

Are you a **Follow Thru**? If so, you may be known for your abilities to organize, reform and adapt, to bring order and efficiency. You may best like accomplishing tasks that arrange, coordinate, and integrate; you tend to arrange and design things.

Are you a **Quick Start**? Quick Starts like to improvise, revise, and stabilize. If you tend to just jump in to a new project (risk-taking), to intuit and invent as you plan how you will do something, you may be in Quick Start mode; experimentation and spontaneity are your friends.

If you are an **Implementor**, you are ready to construct, renovate, and envision. Implementors are those we count on to "get the job done," to build, craft, form, and repair; you may be a hands-on master of mechanics and tactile problem-solving is important to you.

So, how can we use this information to better our lives? Imagine a committee or organization with no **Implementors**, with only **Quick Starts** as members; has this ever happened to you? What about those around you, with whom you live or work? Do you find yourself getting increasingly impatient with a **Fact-Finder** who just needs to "get on with it" and **Follow Thru**?

As you watch and think about your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors, your family, and yourself, consider how differently or similarly they do things compared to you: "What do you notice?"

Sources

Huitt, W. (1999). Conation as an important factor of mind. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University.

Kolbe, K. (1990). *The conative connection: Uncovering the link between who you are and how you perform*. New York: Addison-WesleyPublishing.