The Four Tendencies, by Gretchen Rubin

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How do you feel about New Year's resolutions, breaking rules, or keeping commitments to yourself? These might seem like simple questions, but your answers point to a personality type that defines why and how you take action.

The Four Tendencies explains the four very different personalities determining how we deal with external and internal expectations. Learn why your daughter won't do anything when you ask her to, why your spouse will go to the ends of the earth for you but can never seem to do anything for himself, and why your colleague asks too many questions at team meetings.

Book Summary of The Four Tendencies

Gretchen Rubin is a writer interested in human nature and patterns in human behavior, what actions we take and why we take them. Why do some people who are strong performers at work find it hard to keep themselves accountable to diet or exercise? Why do others seem to find it easy to do whatever they put their mind to?

Rubin mulled this over and had an epiphany. She designed a simple personality test based on one question: **how do you respond to expectations?** From people's answers to questions around this subject, she devised the Four Tendencies.

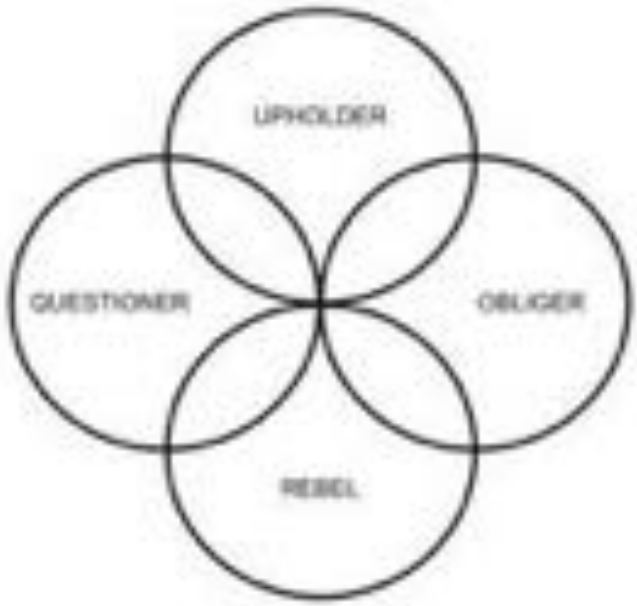
The Four Tendencies describe four different personality types based on response to expectations, both internal (the expectations you have for yourself) and external (the expectations other people have for you). Expectations are things we act on, or not. An

example of an internal expectation would be, “I want to be a famous writer” or “I need to clean my room.” External expectations would be more like, “my boss needs this report by Friday,” or “my mother wants me to dress more modestly.”

According to Rubin’s research and system, **these are the 4 tendencies: the Upholder, the Questioner, the Obliger, and the Rebel.** The way each tendency generally responds to internal and external expectations is:

- **Upholders meet all expectations, internal and external.**
- **Questioners meet internal expectations, but not external.**
- **Obligers meet external expectations, but not internal.**
- **Rebels resist all expectations.**

Because this is based on one simple consideration, **everyone falls pretty squarely into one tendency.** However, the Four Tendencies have some overlap, and can be illustrated this way:



As you can see from the diagram, **each tendency has two “tips” of other tendencies** -- Upholders can tip either Questioner or Obliger, and so on.

About Tendencies

People are certainly more complex than just how they respond to expectations, and **Rubin’s 4 tendencies only cover the scope of how you respond to expectations.**

Your tendency can't be changed: it's a part of your nature. All the tendencies have strengths and weaknesses, and no one tendency seems to be more successful or happier than the others. **The happiest, most successful people are the ones who can learn to work *with* their tendency instead of against it.** Any tendency can thrive in any career, given that they adapt the role to meet their strengths and weaknesses.

- 41% of people are Obligers
- 24% are Questioners
- 19% are Upholders
- 17% are Rebels

In this summary, we cover the four tendencies at a high level, discussing each one's strengths and weaknesses and how to interact with them. The full summary has far more detail on each tendency, tips on how to do better as your tendency, and strategies to interact with the tendency in different scenarios (your romantic partner, your children, your colleagues at work).

Upholders

Overview

Upholders readily respond to both external and internal expectations. They think expectations, in general, are important, and *enjoy* fulfilling both their own and others'. They appreciate balance between doing what other people expect of them and doing what they expect of themselves -- in the age of self-care, they've figured out how to take care of themselves without losing their productivity.

For example, if an upholder's their boss asks them to stay late to finish a project and they know it's important, they'll stay (fulfilling external expectations); but if they happen to have an eventthey signed up for months ago and are excited about, they'll most likely go to the lecture (fulfilling internal expectations), and work on the project later.

Strengths of Upholders

Upholders like schedules and routines, form habits easily, and don't make feel pressured or trapped by expectations -- **Upholders feel free, creative, and productive when they have expectations placed on them.** If there's an expectation, they'll fulfill it; if expectations conflict with one another, Upholders will figure out what expectation is most important to them, and prioritize that one first (they'd probably *still* try to fulfill the other expectation, if possible).

Upholders are good self-preservationists, for the most part. They take care of themselves and have good habits. Being able to fulfill their internal expectations on their own means they often lead satisfied lives, finding ways to be productive in their work and careers without sacrificing their personal values or getting burnt out from doing too many things for other people and not enough for themselves.

Weaknesses of Upholders

Upholders sometimes follow the rules even when it's better not to. Rubin (an Upholder herself) recounts waiting at a boat taxi stand that was clearly non-functioning when a taxi stand a few yards up the river was active, all because someone told her that's the taxi stand she should wait at. In a related weakness, Upholders generally have good habits, but can rigidly keep the habit far after it's necessary or good for them.

Upholders also aren't very adaptable or flexible in their schedules and routines. Because they have no difficulty meeting expectations, when other people *do* have difficulty, Upholders can be disdainful, impatient, or rude.

Dealing with Upholders

At work, upholders make great colleagues and bosses because they believe expectations are important. However, **occasionally an Upholder might need help prioritizing tasks and making priorities clear** -- since all expectations are important to them, they might not get to the right things first.

Upholders also occasionally need help *not* meeting expectations, when a different balance of expectations would make them happier. When arguing with them, play to their values: acknowledge the rules or expectations they're responding to, and make another priority more important than following that rule or meeting that expectation.

Questioners

Overview

Questioners readily respond to internal expectations, but not external expectations. They're committed to logic, information, and efficiency, and refuse arbitrary, inefficient, or illogical expectations. The Questioner responds best to her own internal expectations because she's already thought through these expectations and made sure they're justified, achievable, and logical.

External expectations need to be justified -- once they are, the Questioner will view them as internal expectations and will have little trouble fulfilling them. For example, a Questioner might get a text from her husband asking her to pick up lunch meat on her way home. If that's all the text says, the Questioner might not do it: her husband can pick up lunch meat if he really wants it, they have plenty of other food in the house. But if the husband texts that they need lunch meat because their daughter has two field trips that week and needs bagged lunches, the Questioner will do it: now it makes sense and has justification.

Strengths of Questioners

Once Questioners agree with the reasoning behind something, **they're self-directed and don't need supervision.** They meet justified expectations as easily as Upholders meet any expectations.

Questioners make great employees and partners because **they want to improve any process they're involved in to make it the most efficient and logical**, and they do thorough and exhaustive research to make the best decisions possible. Questioners want to live in a world where everything makes sense and is as efficient as possible -- they question endlessly in pursuit of that world.

Weaknesses of Questioners

However, their refusal to meet expectations without reason can sometimes lead to trouble, particularly in school. **Others often find their questions tiring and obstructive**, and feel like they raise needless questions and refuse to respect authority.

And, because of their relentless research and desire to make the best decision, **Questioners can also sometimes fall into analysis-paralysis**, where they become incapable of making a decision based on how much research they've done.

- Questioners and people around them can help them avoid analysis-paralysis by setting limits on research, giving deadlines, and finding people or sources they admire enough to follow their lead.

Dealing with Questioners

If you get annoyed by hearing too many questions from Questioners, help restrict their questioning by setting limits, guidelines, and deadlines for decisions. Remind yourself that **their questions aren't confrontationa**l -- Questioners *need* the answers they seek to do the work you want them to do.

Make sure to justify your own questions to Questioners, which will help them understand why you're asking.

Questioner spouses have some difficulty in relationships. If your spouse is a Questioner, remember that **the more justifications you give them, the more likely they'll be to do what you need them to do** -- *asking* them to do something is rarely enough to *get* them to do it.

Obligers

Overview

Obligers readily respond to external expectations, but not internal expectations. They meet deadlines and follow through for bosses, colleagues, spouses, and so on -- but **if there are no external expectations, Obligers almost always fail to complete the task, no matter how important it is to them.** Picture a high school track star who thrived when her team depended on her, but now finds it hard to run for her own sake, no matter how much she wants to.

Obligers are most likely to wish they were another tendency: since they are capable of meeting other people's expectations without problem, they view their inability to meet internal expectations as laziness or self-sacrifice, and they often can't figure out *why* they can't meet internal expectations.

Strengths of Obligers

Obligers are the "rock of the world" -- **everyone can depend on them.** They're most likely to contribute to home and work, and get along well with other tendencies. They keep the people around them very happy, for the most part.

Weaknesses of Obligers

Obligers simply cannot meet internal expectations unless they figure out sources of external accountability. **If they don't have any external accountability, they need to organize it for themselves.**

They can try various forms of accountability to find out what works for them, such as automated email reminders, to-do lists, or accountability partners or groups.
Because Obligers expend so much energy fulfilling others' expectations, they get easily burnt out. **If they get too burnt out or the expectations are so high they can't meet**

them, Obligers can go into *Obliger-Rebellion* mode, where they suddenly, without warning, refuse to meet any expectations: everything's fine until it absolutely isn't.

People around Obligers can help them avoid Obliger-Rebellion by setting up systems that encourage them to say no more often, helping them delegate tasks, pushing them to make time for themselves, and encouraging them to take breaks.

Dealing with Obligers

We know Obligers struggle with internal expectations, so **if they request accountability, find a way to give it to them, because they need it.**

Be wary of setting expectations for Obligers that are too high, or of accidentally setting expectations with offhand comments. They'll strive to follow the expectation, when it may not be all that important.

Rebels

Overview

Rebels resist *all* expectations, internal and external -- they do what they *want* to do. They value choice, freedom, and self-expression or identity, and enjoy bucking convention and expectation.

Picture a Rebel who wants to write of her own spontaneous desire. She can do it without a problem. But then her friends say they love her work and suggest she get an agent and publish. Suddenly there are *expectations* - people expect her to do certain things. The Rebel's internal conflict with expectations can cause her to purposely act counter to advice she receives, or to stop writing at all.

Strengths of Rebels

Rebels teach everyone else that we're "freer than we think": we can do what we want to, and the world will still turn. And Rebels with a cause can be incredibly useful -- they serve as the voice of dissent and an alternative to the status quo. (Shortform example: Most revolutionary leaders are probably Rebels: they take issue with the expectations of a particular power, and the more they're told they'll fail or that they shouldn't fight, the harder they pursue their goal.)

Weaknesses of Rebels

But that characteristic can backfire, too: **the harder you push a Rebel to do something, the harder they resist.**

But they frustrate themselves as well: Rebels are also second most likely to wish they had a different tendency. Demanding to be free is its own form of control. For example, Rebels refuse to let peer pressure sway their decisions -- but responding to peer pressure by doing the opposite is still allowing peer pressure to influence their actions.

Rebels don't like schedules or calendars, and if something's explicitly planned, they'll often cancel. They avoid repetitive tasks unless there are serious consequences for not doing them. For example, a lot of Rebels use automatic bill pay and, if they can afford it, services that do routine tasks.

Dealing with Rebels

They resist doing anything they're asked to do: if someone else has an expectation, they reject it. They resist anything that seems like an attempt to control their actions. The harder you push a Rebel, the harder they push back.

They want to do things on their own time, and frequently cause delays for other people. They also end up taking advantage of others: they know that if they don't do it, someone else usually will.

Rebels refuse labels, even accurate ones, and many find themselves changing jobs often to avoid being trapped in an identity. They'll even contradict themselves to avoid feeling pigeonholed.

Rebels can be very productive but usually if only allowed to do work in their own way, the less bossing and supervision they get the better. Some rebels do need structure to ignore and push against. Many rebels respond well to a challenge or a dare and thrive in an environment where they do their work in their own way.