

Personality tests and managerial decisions

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I had one of those jaw-dropping moments the other day. The moment where you are so stunned by what you hear that you wonder whether you are dreaming. What I heard was that a certain executive employs only people with a J on their Myers-Briggs profile as managers. Considering that half the population are not J's this excludes about every second person from his list. It is also hugely illegal and could result in his company facing litigation.

This prompted me to look at managerial decision-making and, more specifically, abdication of responsibility to something or someone else – in this case a personality profile. I will give some background on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® or MBTI® - and will then talk about the use, and abuse, of personality tests in a business setting.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®

The MBTI® is based on the work of Carl Jung and Katherine Briggs. Jung classified people as having four basic instincts and Briggs classified people in terms of their lifestyle. Briggs, with her daughter Isabel Briggs-Myers, combined their work with that of Jung and it resulted in the MBTI®. It consists of four streams of which the above-mentioned J and P is the fourth one. What I personally like about the streams is that the measurement indicates that one has a bit of both extremes and is never (or very seldom) either just one or the other. It doesn't box you into a corner.

The first stream looks at your source of energy and is probably the most known part of the MBTI®. It has extraverted (E) on the one end and introverted (I) on the other. Extraverts get energy from people and introverts lose energy to other people or get energy from inside themselves. Extraverts also talk to think and introverts think to talk.

The second stream deals with how you gather information. The sensing (S) type use facts and data or look at what has already happened and the intuitive (N) type look forward and are more figurative and random in their approach. S:N has a 3:1 split in the population.

The third stream is about decision-making. The thinking (T) type uses logic, objectivity and fairness to make decisions. The feeling (F) type is subjective and tends to make decisions based on emotions. There are equal numbers of thinking and feeling types in the population but women are more likely to be F and men T.

The last stream has to do with Katherine Briggs' look at lifestyle. The judging (J) type prefer life to be planned and the perceiving (P) type prefer life to be more spontaneous. And this is where our mentioned executive came in.

These four streams, and the resultant sixteen types, are personal preferences and not necessarily indicative of whether people keep to deadlines. (The sixteen types are ESTJ, ISTJ, ESTP, ISTP, ESFJ, ISFJ, ESFP, ISFP, ENTJ, INTJ, ENTP, INTP, ENFJ, INFJ, ENFP and INFP)

Who am I and who are you?

We must be the only species on the planet that cannot walk past a mirror without looking at ourselves and often with surprise. We are so often tempted and seduced to fill in silly questionnaires in magazines in the hope that it will give us an answer that we recognise ourselves in. We yearn for people to understand us fully. Personality assessments such as the MBTI® - and it is in my view one of the better ones - should serve the purpose of understanding self first. If you can understand yourself and how your preferences influence your decisions and choices then you can begin to understand how others might be similar or different to you. Personality tests are also wonderful tools to get teams to understand and respect one another if used as a framework to begin to understand the diversity we face on a daily basis.

In an ideal world we will take the time to get to know people in all their marvellous complexity and we will accept them unconditionally and work within their view of the world. Unfortunately it is not an ideal world and we are all rather prone to put people into neat little boxes that suit our own worldview. Personality tests can provide us with a guideline to understand people better. Within the context of the MBTI® it is useful to know that extraverts, the 3:1 majority, talk to think and that introverts think to talk. It is to assist us in understanding that the introvert who is talking about agenda item 3 when the rest are on agenda item 5 is not stupid but will not speak until their thinking is clarified; and that the extravert that seemingly changes his mind mid-sentence is

thinking out loud. In both cases having a clear agenda agreed to prior to the meeting will assist in getting the best from both.

It is not meant to give us the option of abdicating responsibility for our decision-making: "I actually like him but you know he is a P and therefore he will not work in this environment." Where-as the P in question might be a 45:55 J:P and the last J you appointed might be a 55:45 J:P and therefore will actually not be that much different from the one you decided not to employ. Your P might also have other attributes that you sorely need that the J might not have. The world is not simplistic it is complicated and we need to honour that complexity when we make decisions. That is why you are paid the big bucks. And if you think you are not being paid big bucks look at the average income in this country – that is if you can find accurate data, I couldn't. It is roughly a couple of thousand a month, and by couple I mean the traditional two or three. I am sure everyone reading this article earns more than that.

Coaching and personality profiles

As a coach, I use personality profiles when appropriate and sometimes it is not the best tool to use depending on the context and circumstances. I mention the introvert and extravert stream above and started with the J and P stream. I will use both to illustrate.

In a managerial settings – meaning many meetings and a lot of interaction with people on a daily basis – I will discuss with the introverts how they could plan their day to allow for time to recharge their batteries. Introverts lose energy to other people and depending on how strong their profile is can get very exhausted with all the interaction. An example would be when it is performance review time. This is usually done one-on-one and where-as the extraverts can do these sessions one after the other, the introverts should ideally have no more than say two and then take a break.

Extraverts can network and engage with people at lunchtime and introverts, if they have a busy 'people' day should rather go for a walk at lunchtime. The extraverts should learn to allow other people to speak and to not interrupt and the introverts often to speak up more, especially in meetings. It is often better for introverts to be well prepared for a meeting in advance in order to clarify their thinking before all the

talking starts. Extraverts should also prepare for a meeting but are much better at thinking out loud in a meeting.

This is a simplified explanation that assumes that I had already established that the introverts are losing energy due to that fact that they are introverts and not because they are desperately unhappy at work. I would make sure through use of a questioning process, and often the client observing for a while when they are tired or exhausted and when they have energy, what the cause could be before we look at strategies to combat it.

In a team setting, it is similar. The extraverts should pull the introverts into the conversation more and a team leader should ideally allow some quiet time in a discussion or meeting for the introverts to clarify their thoughts. I am focussing on the introverts more as they are the minority and often their contributions are not heard.

I started with the story about the executive and how he makes decisions based on a J or P profile. From a coaching perspective one needs to understand that these are preferences. P's can be very deadline driven and I know some J's who are not that good with deadlines, often because they have other personality traits that interfere. J's that are interested in many different subjects and projects often do not complete any of them because their energy had moved to the next project.

The P's in an organisational setting get frustrated with the lack of spontaneity and flexibility and from a coaching perspective need to learn how to manage that. An example would be that a J who has five things to do on a given day can plan it in detail down to exactly which hour each task will be scheduled. The P would be more comfortable planning how long each task would take and then walking in and deciding in the moment which one to do first. Both will get all five done by the end of the day.

Should the tasks require interaction with other people it obviously need to be scheduled more specifically. The P could then build in flexibility and spontaneity in other ways such a taking a different route home, having time over weekends that are not that scheduled, going to a movie on a whim, getting to the movie theatre and deciding to rather have dinner and so on.

In a group setting, it is valuable for J's to understand that the P's want some flexibility and for the P's to understand that the J's want things to be scheduled and defined. Both can then adapt to accommodate the other.

Any personality profiles can be used in a similar way: to assist with understanding behaviour, to decide whether to adapt or change some of it depending on the context and circumstances and then to plan what to do.

How do we make decisions?

Decision-making, whether it is to appoint or to promote someone, to give them added responsibility or a new task should take cognisance of several other factors, such as training, experience and willingness to learn.

Let me tell a story to illustrate my point. You have two candidates for a possible position. They are the same age, grew up in close proximity to one another, are the same race and have the same qualification. They therefore both fit your requirements. I have taken race and gender out of the decision. How do you choose? Should you dig deeper, you might find that their MBTI® profiles are different. Are you going to let this sway your decision? What about their ambition, their preferred way of learning, how they think?

The one that is more charismatic and engaging in the short interview with you might end up causing havoc in your department, as he might also be headstrong and argumentative. The one that is softer spoken and have a way with people might be an ideal candidate to assist with the transfer of knowledge in the department but might also be taken advantage of. Interestingly enough, in both cases this could be tweaked with coaching. You might be looking for someone that will ideally stay with the company a certain number of years and unless you ask questions to ascertain possible mobility linked to ambition you might find yourself interviewing potential candidates in a year's time again.

You should start by taking time to define what this position is about, have a clear job description and then decide what kind of qualification and experience you require. Only then should you look at fit with the current team and the required characteristics of the potential ideal candidate.

I listened to a lecture by Ricardo Semler about eighteen months ago where he was explaining the lengthy process Semco uses to appoint people. He stated that very few of us make a decision to get married after knowing someone for half-an-hour and yet we make decisions to employ people after half-an-hour. Most of us tend to spend more time in the office than we do at home. I would like to add that very few of us would make decisions about a life partner based on a single personality profile, how come we think it is appropriate in a work context?

Most companies have HR personnel that are well versed in the required processes and this is often overlooked or ignored. Managers cite time constraints and/or lack of technical knowledge on the HR practitioner's part for this oversight. Neither is valid. The job specification can be done jointly with the manager giving input in terms of technical expertise and the HR practitioner assisting in terms of role clarification and characteristics. Surely the time spent is worthwhile compared to a lawsuit or a bad match that then cause untold problems? HR practitioners sometimes tend to be overly complex in their use of behavioural language and their requirements and could also ease the process by guiding managers more.

I sometimes wonder why both parties are so reluctant to expand the boundaries of their known fields and get to know one another better. Maybe the personality assessments should be used to understand one another first before it is applied elsewhere.

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