Analyze This: Can Personality Theory Help You Lead Your Unit?

The better you understand how your group processes information and makes decisions, the better you can build new strengths.

THE LINEAR, buttoned-down finance department, the flaky creative group, the geeky IT unit: we commonly think of departments as having distinctive characteristics. Now some managers, in an effort to identify the levers they can use to wring better performance out of their units, are using individual personality tests to describe the group as a whole.

The best known of these tests is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which is based on the personality theory of the 20th-century Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. The MBTI maps an individual's personality preferences along these dimensions:

- Extraversion–Introversion
- Sensing–Intuitive
- Thinking–Feeling
- Judging–Perceiving

Combining a person's preferences in each of these four dimensions results in what is known as a psychological type. Thus, you may have heard someone describe a unit as being a "classic ESTJ"—that is, Extraverted, Sensing, Thinking, and Judging (more about these descriptors in a minute).

Although the MBTI has long been a valuable tool for helping individuals understand their and their colleagues' differences in work style, applying the test to a group of people is tricky. Nevertheless, the conceptual framework underlying the MBTI can be a valuable starting point for managing change. The broad-brush picture of your unit's strengths and weaknesses that this framework affords helps you move beyond the illusory search for the "perfect" unit personality. You begin to focus instead on how to make the best use of your group members' individual preferences and how to structure group interactions to bridge the chasms in their sometimes divergent ways of perceiving and processing information.

An appreciation of the unique strengths associated with psychological type helps leaders set forth a vision of the well-rounded, multiskilled organization that today's competitive environment requires. "The task is not to

> **The risk with personality labels: they can be used to justify staying stuck in an organizational rut.**

change an organization into its opposite—something that would be impossible to do anyway," writes change expert William Bridges in his bestseller *The Character of Organizations.* "Rather, the task is to develop the undeveloped capacity of the organization so that it can choose between what it does easily and naturally and what it has learned to do with some difficulty," thereby enabling it to take advantage of whichever capacities work best for the situation at hand.

Applying personality theory to groups: the limitations

"Taxonomies of personality give you only an illusion of understanding," says Edgar H. Schein, one of the most respected experts in the field of organizational behavior. "They suggest some of the differences across organizations, but end up being useless because they are so general."

Schein, professor emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management and author of *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide,* continues: "Even categories such as 'entrepreneurial culture' and 'commodity culture,' which I've used myself, only give you a broad label that may be useful to a researcher trying to differentiate among large numbers of organizations—but they don't help a practicing manager understand a particular organization."

Jeff Wetzler, a consultant with the Monitor Group, an international professional services firm based in Cambridge, Mass., shares Schein's skepticism. "Do I think there is such a thing as organizational personality?" he asks. "Yes, in the sense that different organizations clearly have different identities or cultures. But the real question is, How well does the construct of organizational personality help an organization promote strategic change? As a lever for change, giving an organization a static personality label probably could create more obstacles than opportunities."

Because personality labels imply unchangeable characteristics, they can lead to a kind of organizational determinism: the very act of labeling may be used to justify staying stuck in an organizational rut.

Explains Wetzler: "The risk is that the label can divert managers from tackling the hard work of change by providing an excuse for dysfunctional behavior: 'We lost that contract because they just didn't appreciate that we are an intuitive company, and they wanted too much detail.'"

Because personality tests can't give you much of a handle on the particularities of your group's interactions, don't try to

use the MBTI to determine a psychological type for your group as a whole. Instead, use the Myers-Briggs conceptual framework to get a bead on individual members' basic psychological orientations. That information can help you perform a kind of gap analysis of your team's strengths and weaknesses—and from there, you can design your managerial interventions to help expand the group's range of skills.

Understanding how your group processes information and makes decisions

In *The Character of Organizations,* Bridges categorizes organizational cultures using the MBTI's four dimensions, each of which has two "psychologically opposed" preferences. He describes each pair of preferences as a response to a question about motivation, information processing, or decision making:

■ **What's the source of your organization's energy?** Extraverted organizations look outward, creating strategies that are driven by market forces or customer needs, whereas an Introverted organization typically looks inward, organizing its strategy around its internal core competencies or its leader's values.

■ **How does your organization take in information?** Is it Sensing, that is, attuned to the concrete details and tried-and-true realities of the business? Or is it Intuitive, that is, more interested in the big picture, possibilities, and a sense of what lies beneath the obvious?

■ **How does your organization make decisions?** Does it process information in Thinking mode, that is, using objective principles and logical analysis? Or does it use a Feeling orientation, in which decisions are based primarily on the personal values of the people involved?

■ **How does your organization deal with the external environment?** Judging organizations prefer to reach

closure and thus put great store in firm decisions. Perceiving organizations give greater weight to discussion, flexibility, and the ability to gather additional information. Bridges illustrates the contrast between the two orientations with this example. "Part

> *Jung's concept of a well-functioning individual—someone who has learned many ways of processing information and making decisions— applies equally well to groups.*

of the perennial conflict between the line functions and the support staff in big organizations is that the former have a strong Judging orientation, while the latter are often Perceiving," writes Bridges. "The support organizations tend to have more reflective missions and emphasize situational complexity, while those of the operating groups emphasize action and would happily settle for a quick-and-dirty solution to the organization's problems."

Applying the theory to build a well-rounded unit

There's no one "best" preference or set of preferences. Rather, each tendency in each of the MBTI's four dimensions has intrinsic strengths. Prospering in today's global economy, however, seems to require companies to be able to call upon all these strengths at one time or another. To achieve this overall bench strength, observe Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap in *When Sparks Fly,* you often have to create work teams that are as diverse as possible in their approach to analyzing data and solving problems.

Jung's concept of a well-functioning individual—someone who has learned many ways of processing information and making decisions— applies equally well to groups. The more adept a unit or company is at bringing the strengths of all the preferences to bear on the competitive reali-

ties, the better its performance will be. But there is a tradeoff here: it takes longer to meld such heterogeneous people into a cohesive unit— members' varying perspectives and approaches lead to more frequent misunderstandings and conflict—and even once it has that cohesion, the group may take longer to reach a decision than a more homogeneous team would.

The four diagnostic questions listed earlier are not to be used to pigeonhole units but to guide a process of dialectical integration. Knowing individual members' psychological type, group leaders can manage members' polar opposite preferences so that they complement or round out one another. The result is an improvement in the skills associated with the unit's or group's non-dominant preferences, as for example, when a largely Sensing group learns how take advantage of the skills of its lone Intuitive member.

Thus:

■ *Extraverted* groups can learn to develop their capacity to take cues from inside the organization and allow more time for reflection before implementing change. Example: The R&D department of a high-tech firm that focuses on what it is most skilled at without matching those skills to what the market needs. As a result, the firm continues to improve the performance and functionality of its product without realizing that its customers don't care about the additional functionality. A possible remedy: the introduction of an empathic design process that allows the R&D department to see how customers actually use the product.

■ Conversely, *Introverted* groups can learn to pay more attention to markets, ask for more input from outside stakeholders, and keep all stakeholders in the loop. For example, a small start-up, hyper-responsive to market swings,

that moves away from its signature strengths too quickly might try to map its core capabilities in detail, so that it is better able to choose market opportunities that play to its core.

- *Sensing* units can learn to give more credence to big-picture, holistic thinking and nurture innovative ideas. For instance, the by-the-numbers management team of a regional community bank—facing the entry of national banks into the market, the introduction of a spate of new financial products, and the demise of the personal

> **Leaders play a crucial role in helping a team strengthen its underdeveloped preferences. They need to model the inclusion and integration of all perspectives.**

approach to banking—finds itself losing ground. Holding regular brainstorming sessions and intentionally scanning the competitive environment to find the most innovative ideas to incorporate into the bank's operations might help the team get ahead of the curve in this rapidly changing business.

- At the other end of the continuum, *Intuitive* groups can learn how to pay more attention to facts, communicate with greater specificity, and give more serious consideration to the practical implications of creative ideas. Thus, a highly imaginative but loosely managed nonprofit think tank that seems to be spinning its wheels might gain more traction by instituting formal procedures for monitoring costs and deadlines and for weighing potential projects against available resources.

- *Thinking* teams can learn to notice what inspires people to perform at high levels, factor people's values into their decision-making criteria, and in general pay more attention to the human side of the enterprise.

- *Feeling* teams, on the other hand, can improve their ability to "clarify their principles so that compassion does not destroy fairness and every individual situation does not send the decision-making process back to Go," writes Bridges.

- *Judging* organizations can learn to avoid jumping to conclusions or acting prematurely.

- And *Perceiving* organizations can create more structure so that that they don't have to reinvent the wheel each time they build a product or face a new challenge.

In the final analysis, Bridges writes, it's "the capacity to maintain a tension" between apparently opposite characteristics "that represents organizational health."

Modeling the integration

Leaders play a crucial role in helping a team strengthen its underdeveloped preferences, says Catherine Fitzgerald, a Bethesda, Md.–based psychologist who is the coeditor of *Executive Coaching: Practices and Perspectives.* "It can make a big difference when leaders articulate—and then model— the inclusion and integration of all perspectives. Leaders who want to create a high-performing organization need to send a consistent message that the organization places a genuine value on both sides of each pair of opposites (for instance, Sensing and Intuition).

"Thus, a leader might indicate a commitment to being both very realistic and practical, while at the same time being as visionary and innovative as possible. The leader might also stress the importance of creating an environment in which both staff and customers are treated in ways that are both fair and kind—and that are very responsive to the needs of individuals. Showing deep respect at all times for all voices—and insisting that others also show such respect—is invaluable behavior for a leader."

"In order to improve a group's performance, you must ask questions about the specific forces that cause it to act as it does," says Wetzler. Among those key questions: What is driving the difference between what we need to be doing and what we are doing now? What are the unstated beliefs that drive our behavior?

As you ask these questions about your team or unit, the MBTI's conceptual framework for understanding the polarities inherent in psychological type can guide the discovery process.

Once you understand how your group processes information and makes decisions and where it draws its energy from, you can begin to expand the repertoire of skills and aptitudes that it brings to bear on a particular problem. ❖

---

*Psychologist **Kathleen Jordan,** Ph.D., is an organizational consultant and executive coach based in Brookline, Mass. She can be reached at MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu*

RESOURCES

The Character of Organizations: Using Personality Type in Organization Development
by William Bridges
Davies-Black • 2000

Executive Coaching: Practices and Perspectives
ed. by Catherine Fitzgerald and Jennifer Garvey Berger
Davies-Black • 2002

The Age of Paradox
by Charles Handy
Harvard Business School Press • 1995

When Sparks Fly: Igniting Creativity in Groups
by Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap
Harvard Business School Press • 1999

The Corporate Culture Survival Guide
by Edgar H. Schein
Jossey-Bass • 1999