
Personality Variables in Management Development Interventions

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Personality variables constitute an important, but often overlooked, element of management development interventions. Typically, the management development intervention begins with a problem or a "presenting issue". Whether the issue is to be tackled by an internal member of the management development staff or an external consultant, the assignment begins, at least initially, with an acceptance of the client's perspective. Then, through a variety of formal and informal means, the internal or external consultant recasts the issues, often by sorting fact from belief and symptom from cause. Slowly, a new perspective emerges, which reinforces or reshapes the presenting issue.

The consultant's reconceptualization of the presenting issue reflects a diagnostic process which considers not only the elements of the problem but also the context and relationships in which the presenting issue arises. This sensitivity to both factual and contextual dimensions is essential to anticipatory testing, where the consultant projects the impact of alternative solutions on affected constituents[1]. Also, such testing allows the consultant to identify the range of feasible solutions which are acceptable to the client organization. In the words of Wright and Harper[2, p. 105] "Consultants are faced with a curious two-pronged dilemma: On the one hand, they are to solve problems; on the other, they must be sensitive to what recommendations the client organization will tolerate".

Resolution of this dilemma is made more complex when permission is needed to enter into some territories[3] and by defences commonly found in organizations. These defences serve to place some topics "off-limits" and not subject to discussion within the organization. As Argyris[4, p. 27] outlined:

The logic is to:

1. Craft messages that contain inconsistencies.
2. Act as if the messages are not inconsistent.
3. Make the ambiguity and inconsistency in the message undiscussable.
4. Make the undiscussability of the undiscussable also undiscussable.

Thus, the framework in which management development consultants must operate is often a multifaceted conundrum: in conducting a diagnostic evaluation of the situation, they must define the problem or issue while being sensitive to the context in which it occurs. Then a solution must be identified and subjected to anticipatory testing so that it resolves the problem in a way that will be

tolerated by the organization. And, throughout the entire process, they are apt to encounter potential issues, problems and solutions that are not discussable and whose undiscussability also is not discussable[4].

Within these often perplexing limitations, few topics are more undiscussable among groups of managers than the issue of how their personalities interact. And yet, when the objective of the intervention is to go beyond the myth of a management team[4] and actually create a greater sense of teamwork, personalities are the primary contextual variables and often the central issues that must be addressed[5]. But, to the extent that they are undiscussable, and that the consultant is limited to solutions which are tolerable to the organization, euphemisms such as “interaction patterns” or “communication channels” are addressed as if they are separate from the interactors and communicators and their personalities. As Mintzberg[6, p. 119] observed; “. . .we may be able to learn much of interest by studying the effect that the personality and style of the incumbent have on the work performed. Unfortunately, little evidence has been produced so far”.

Whether a traditional needs assessment or diagnostic approach is used, the typical problem-oriented focus sometimes overlooks the issue of personality, which can be a dominant-variable in shaping the context in which the problem occurs. The consultant may become so involved in the managers’ perceptions that the impact of personalities and their interplay among those affected is not considered, or considered but not discussable. Even the decision maker’s willingness to permit an intervention by the consultant may hinge on the interplay of *their* personalities. Recognizing that personality variables play an important role in most team-building interventions, this article describes management development interventions in which personality variables were the central focus of the engagement.

Personality Frameworks

Because behaviour depends heavily on cognitive representations of experience, “identical environmental consequences can have different behavioral effects depending on beliefs about why they occur”[7, p. 166]. In other words, one’s psychological type, or personality, influences the way one perceives and interprets the world and thereby influences one’s performance[8]. Moreover, personality has an impact on the learning of varied roles expected of senior managers during their careers, as outlined by the Team Management Model developed by Margerison[9], the Learning Cycle Theory developed by Kolb[10], and the Learning Styles Questionnaire developed by Honey and Mumford[11].

Jung’s[12, p. 12] theory of psychological types uses three dimensions to identify cognitive style, which he viewed as: (1) how individuals approach life; (2) the way they become aware of the world; and (3) the way they reach conclusions about the world. In the first dimension, “extroverts” focus on the world around them, while “introverts” focus on the inner world of ideas. In the second dimension, people who use the five senses are “sensing” types, while those who rely on intuition are “intuiting” types. In the third dimension, those who reach decisions through ideas are “thinking” types, while those who rely on emotions are “feeling” types.

According to Jung, individuals tend to prefer one of the two cognitive functions in each of these three categories and, through use, the preferred functions become stronger. Characteristic attitudes, traits and behaviours develop, and a psychological “type” becomes evident[12, p. 13]. A person’s psychological type indicates his or her way of perceiving and interpreting the world.

Jung’s theory of psychological type makes three basic assumptions: first, both one’s past experience and one’s expectations about the future influence one’s behaviour and personality; second, individuals are capable of constant and creative development; and third, personality is an open system which is receptive to inputs and exchanges. Based on these three assumptions, Jung said that personality — or a subsystem, such as behaviour — can change as a result of inputs and interactions with the external environment, especially the influences of other people[13].

Based wholly on Jungian theory, Briggs began, in the 1920s, independent research about personality differences. The research was completed by her daughter, who published the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) in 1942. In designing the instrument, Myers and Briggs assumed that much apparently random variation in human behaviour is actually orderly and consistent with basic differences in the way people prefer to use perception and judgement[14]. In addition to further developing Jung’s three dimensions of extroversion-introversion (E or I), sensing-intuition (S or N) and thinking-feeling (T or F), Myers and Briggs added a further dimension, judging-perceiving (J or P), which identified one’s attitude towards the outer world[15, pp. 9-10]. People who reach conclusions about individuals and events are “judging” types (J) while those who keep options open and “take everything in” are “perceiving” (P). The MBTI measures an individual’s preference in all four scales, and these preferences indicate the person’s psychological type [15, p. 10]. Sixteen types exist in the MBTI analysis; for example, a person may be identified as ENTJ, ISTP, ESFP, INFJ, or 12 other possible combinations.

Regarding the validity of the MBTI, Blaylock and Rees[16] stated that the MBTI provides an enduring conception of cognitive style. Huber[17] found the MBTI more effective than other instruments in measuring differences between individuals, and said that it is an appropriate instrument for understanding and working with others. Comparisons between the MBTI and the Gray-Wheelwright Psychological Type Indicator, which also assesses Jungian typology, showed that the MBTI’s psychometric properties are more firmly established[18]. According to McCauley[19], the MBTI’s value lies in its unique compilations of occupational, social and educational life preference and success profiles of specific MBTI types.

The MBTI types are meaningful in that they identify individuals’ psychological types, or ways of making sense out of experience. Through these different types, identified by the 16 combinations of preferences within four categories, individual behaviour differences may become understandable. Through the MBTI, Myers and Briggs wanted to help people to “expect specific personality differences” and “cope with the people and the differences in a constructive way”[15, p 1]. Major employers today use psychological assessment “. . . to measure the individual characteristics. . . related to educational and occupational

choice, to the learning of such choices, and to adjustment to or success in them''[20]. It is in the same spirit of identifying preferences that we have used the MBTI as part of a management development intervention as outside consultants to corporations.

Case Studies

In two separate corporations, the MBTI was used in several ways. First, by learning the MBTI type of the executives, the consultant was able to present data in ways which matched their styles. Second, identifying the MBTI types of each of the managers and staff within various departments enabled the consultant to communicate effectively with each individual. Third, it became apparent to the consultant that the differences in MBTI types were at the heart of several departmental or team problems and increased the intensity of other problems. Identification of personalities through the MBTI helped the consultants to propose their interventions more effectively, establish rapport with everyone in the department or on the team, identify the nature of problems more rapidly and increase the number of possible solutions.

Company A

Company A is a large diversified firm in south-west USA. The consultant worked separately with various departments and divisions at different times. The most interesting, however, was the executive group of 15: the new president; several vice-presidents, some of whom also were in charge of divisions; and a number of senior managers. The presenting issues were lack of trust within the executive team, conflicts among certain members and low morale within the corporation. The consultant's initial proposal was to increase teamwork among the executives. The consultant had individual needs-assessment interviews with each executive, and at the end of the interview asked each executive to fill out the MBTI instrument within the following week and to mail it to the consultant. The consultant scored and interpreted each instrument on receipt. The first step of the consultant's intervention was the presentation, to the group as a whole, of MBTI results and of various implications of the results.

The president's communication and management styles appeared, to the consultant, to differ greatly from those of the rest of the group. It became apparent that certain members of the executive group were wary of the new president. In addition, a few individuals within the group had intense conflicts with each other over certain issues, although they got along well in other areas. Administration of the MBTI revealed the following.

Everyone except the president was a 'J' (judging) in the last category of the MBTI. This meant that everyone but he valued structure, closure and time orientation. As the lone 'P' (perceiving), the president was the only one who operated in a relatively unpredictable way, tended to leave issues and decisions 'hanging', and focused on the project instead of on the time-frame. The consultant hypothesized that these three differences between the president and the other executives were the source of most of the problems between the new president and the group. As further investigation later revealed, this hypothesis was accurate: the negative perceptions and interactions between

the president and the group were caused at least in part by one of these three differences.

The process of identifying these differences in terms of personality and communication styles helped to alleviate some of the antagonisms and resentment felt within the group. In terms of behaviours and other steps to resolve practical problems that came from these differences, the consultant made the following recommendations: that the executives look to the president only for ideas, rather than expect him to set time-frames or meet deadlines; and that schedules and deadlines be made the responsibility of one of the executives, depending on which project was involved.

While several executives were able to follow these steps with little problem, others required time and conscious effort to adjust their expectations. To the degree that these steps were followed, they effectively reduced time-related tensions within the group.

- Of the 15 members of the group, 12 were ‘E’s’ (extroverts) in the first MBTI category. The president and two vice-presidents were ‘I’s’ (introverts). Interestingly, these two vice-presidents were the ones who had the most conflicts with others within the group. Once again, the consultants hypothesized that the difference between the president and most of the group would contribute to the problems between them. In addition, the consultant hypothesized that the difference between these two vice-presidents and the rest of the group would be a factor in their interpersonal conflicts. Further, the consultant hypothesized that these two vice-presidents would be closer to, or more on the side of, the president than were the rest of the group. Further investigation verified all three hypotheses.

Again, understanding the differences in terms of personality and communication styles through individual and group discussions helped to reduce the hostility within the group. The consultant recommended that:

- when the ‘E’s’ wanted input from the ‘I’s’ and felt frustrated because none was forthcoming, the ‘E’s’ take the responsibility of asking the ‘I’s’ for it;
- the ‘I’s’ go out of their way to initiate conversation and input;
- the ‘I’s’ spread themselves around, instead of sitting together, during meetings; and
- the president, in particular, acknowledge others’ comments and initiate his own.

While the executives agreed that these changes would help, behaviours did not change significantly enough to evaluate any outcomes.

- In the second MBTI category, the president and two different vice-presidents were ‘N’s’ (intuitive), while the other 12 members were ‘S’s’ (sensing). This meant, to the consultants, that three group members had visions of the big picture and of possibilities (both negative and positive) for the future. The other 12 members focused on details

and the status quo. The consultant hypothesized that these differences would lead to conflicts in the areas of planning and the company's future direction, and that the president and the two "N" vice-presidents would be allies regarding these issues. Further investigation confirmed these hypotheses.

The consultant recommended that:

- discussions intentionally be divided into two specific parts: details regarding the status quo, and perspective on possible risks and opportunities;
- the "S's" structure the first part of the discussion, and that "N's" structure the second; and
- after both parts are addressed, discussion concentrates on practical, detailed ways to minimize the risks, address the opportunities and/or maintain the status quo.

The executive group followed this structure for a while and reported less conflict and more creativity than in the past.

- Everyone in the group was a "T" (thinking) in the third MBTI category. This meant that the entire group based their decisions on logical, rational analysis and that no one used "F" (feeling) methods of emotions or personal values. Initially, the group was "proud" of its "reasonable" orientation. The consultant pointed out, however, that company morale had been a major item of concern to this group, and suggested that because the executives were so rational, no one in the group considered nor showed concerns for the ways in which their decisions affected employees and employees' families. While the group did not address or resolve this issue, they later acknowledged that their polarized position contributed to the morale problem.

This issue was not addressed by the group. Nevertheless, the consultant's recommendations were that:

- at meeting, one executive represent the "F" side and challenge decisions according to how employees and their families would be affected by the decisions; and
- the executives "rotate" taking this role at meetings.

In this corporation, the MBTI instrument served as a means through which personality issues could be identified, discussed and "explained" in non-threatening ways. The instrument helped the consultant to present expertise and opinions in ways which would be more acceptable to each individual. In addition, the instrument saved time and added to the consultant's credibility by providing clues to likely areas of conflict.

Company B

Company B is a nationwide insurance corporation. At the time of the consulting intervention, the firm was undergoing a merger. Again, the consultant intervened

in several divisions and departments, but the most interesting project involved a newly-promoted senior vice-president (VP). The VP wanted to build teamwork in a recently-merged division which, until then, had consisted of three independent organizations in separate geographical areas. Although numerous problems existed, answers to the consultant's anonymous questionnaires indicated that division staff members' major concern was lack of trust among the three segments of the new division.

The consultant's role, initially, was to help to establish rapport and trust between the VP and the newly-merged division staff. MBTI instruments were distributed to the VP and the staff members, all of whom mailed the instruments to the consultant. Results were presented to the group as a whole. Administration of the MBTI revealed the following.

- In the third category of the MBTI — the category which indicates decision-making preferences — the newly-promoted senior VP was in the middle between "T" (thinking) and "F" (feeling). This "middle-of-the-road" position enabled the senior VP to be flexible, sometimes basing a decision on the rational, analytical aspects of a situation and sometimes basing it on emotions and personal values. While this middle position sometimes means that a person is unpredictable in that category, in this case the flexibility proved valuable in facilitating co-operation between the newly-merged staff and the senior VP, and between the newly-merged division and the rest of the corporation. This flexibility was important because the staff were divided nearly in half between "T's" and "F's". In addition, while the staff in this division had a great number of "F's", the corporation as a whole, particularly at the upper management level, was likely to consist mostly of "T's". The senior VP's ability to work well with both orientations, therefore, was helpful. The consultant hypothesized that the senior VP's flexibility would enhance trust or, at least, would not add to the trust problem. Based on follow-up work, it appears that this hypothesis was correct.
- Many of the division staff members were "J's" (judging) in the fourth MBTI category, and the senior VP was a "P" (perceiving). The consultant hypothesized that this difference could complicate the trust issue, because the "J's" could see the "P" as lacking in follow-through, being unpredictable or failing to reach closure. Later investigation showed that in anticipation of this problem, the senior VP took special care to follow through in a timely fashion. In addition, other "P" traits — creativity and an ability to see numerous options — were emphasized. The division members reacted positively to these steps.
- The senior VP was an "E" (extrovert) in the first MBTI category, as were many of the division staff. The consultant hypothesized that not only would this similarity increase the likelihood of effective communication between the senior VP and the staff, but that trust among staff members could also be enhanced by the extroverts' tendencies to discuss issues openly. Later follow-up indicated that both forms of trust did, in fact, increase.

Although no recommendations were required for Company B, the MBTI was a useful tool, in both corporations, in helping the consultant to identify likely areas of strengths and weaknesses, ways to communicate effectively with various individuals and ways to help the organization members work together and communicate. Consideration of personality as a variable, and use of the MBTI to identify personality types, enhanced the consultant's credibility and effectiveness.

Discussion

Although interventions based on personalities have a limited range of applications, these two case studies suggest that such interventions can serve as a basis for identifying and resolving personality-based barriers to the improvement of interpersonal communications and team building. The insights of the MBTI give consultants a better way to relate to individual members of the clients' teams and, thus, increase the consultants' effectiveness in developing a team-building strategy. Of potentially greater value to the client organization, personality-related insights can lead directly to specific behavioural recommendations for team members to follow during their day-to-day interactions, as best illustrated by case study A.

For any team — but, perhaps, particularly new teams or those undergoing major changes — the use of the MBTI forces attention on the processes used by members to relate to one another. Not only does this approach highlight the contextual nature of the groups' goal-oriented behaviour, but this process orientation moves interpersonal communications and their underlying personality variables into the arena of discussable topics. Reducing the existence of undiscussable topics would seem to serve as an antecedent to integrity, justice, intention and related characteristics of trust[5, pp. 116-17].

Limited case studies are not the foundations upon which rigorous, scientific conclusions can be reached. Nevertheless, they point in directions where further research is needed. Although extensive work has been done in the MBTI constructs[12,14-16,19] and it is widely applied by such organizations as AT&T, Citicorp, Exxon, GE, Honeywell, 3M and others, its use has been primarily in management development programmes to help executives to understand themselves better[21, p. 74]. Our belief is that it is an underutilized tool for consultant-based management development interventions, not only as a means of clarifying consultant-client relationships, but also because it holds the promise of leaving behind lasting insights and behavioural prescriptions which can further team effectiveness. What remains unclear, and should be subject to longitudinal research, is whether these insights result in lasting behavioural changes or are little more than another example of the Hawthorne effect. Before- and after-measures of intra-group trust would offer a more reliable understanding of whether testing and subsequent workshops with executives actually prime the cycle of trust[5, pp. 116-17].

Perhaps the most intriguing research question is whether certain combinations or mixes of personality types among the executive team are more or less effective. Though fraught with methodological complexities in designing such

a study, huge, global organizations are seldom the fiefdoms of a single strong ruler, but are instead a carefully orchestrated symphony of executive talents. How well those talents mesh is, undoubtedly, influenced strongly by the personalities of the team — and it is the performance of these high-level teams which will undoubtedly shape the performance of the wealth-creating engines we call organizations.

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