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Personality Type in Leaders: What Works

Mike Nordbye is principal of Proven Strategies, a business and management development firm. Recognizing that companies and situations are unique, Mike adapts the best management and leadership strategies to produce measurable results quickly for his clients. Being sensitive to individual situations, Mike skillfully adapts the philosophy and theory of validated growth strategies into practical, easy to implement solutions that have both immediate and sustainable positive impact on the bottom line. His goal always is to see ideas and systems translated into realities.

Mike holds a Ph.D. in Adult Learning Strategies, an MBA and a Masters Degree in Organizational Behavior and Development. For the past 15 years Mike has been working one-on-one and with groups to create meaningful results over a broad range of industries. Clients describe him as being direct with a sense of humor that provides for a light touch combined with an innate ability to inspire and create confidence.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is one of the most frequently used self-report assessment tools in management and leadership development programs around the world. It is a way to provide information about a person's preferred way of behaving and can be beneficial for building self-awareness and ultimately emotional intelligence. It is used in leadership development, team-building, communications training and executive coaching.

Yet many who take it put it away in a drawer and don't remember their profile because they don't understand its' significance. Does it really matter to know that one is an "ESTJ" or an "INTJ?" The importance lies in the value of self-management based in heightened self-awareness, as well as in being able to understand others quickly and efficiently. Understanding and accepting fundamental differences in human behaviors is essential for people in organizations to work together well. Self-awareness is the cornerstone for developing emotional intelligence.

Psychologists have been trying to categorize behaviors and personality styles for centuries. In the early '30s the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung developed his theory of psychological types from his work in both developed and primitive societies, trying to find universal elements of human consciousness. Jung believed that all humans are born with certain mental and emotional possibilities and he identified two primary cognitive functions:

1. **A perceiving function:** The ability to gather, store and retrieve information by observing the world around them as well as their own memories and inner states
2. **A judging function:** The ability to reflect upon that information and to organize it in such a way as to understand it and to then make decisions

Jung saw that all humans have a natural impulse to relate meaningfully to the world and people through productive work and significant relationships. The way that they do this is through gathering information, processing it, and making decisions to act — through behaviors, thinking or speaking. He also believed that people have natural preferences and differences in the way they do these things.

In 1941, Isabel B. Myers and Katharine Briggs applied Jung's theory to developing an assessment instrument that would provide a structured, systematic way of recognizing these basic individual differences. Developed and refined over sixty years, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is also known as the MBTI. After taking the self-report questionnaire, a person is given a four-letter profile, representing preferences on four dimensions.

1. Is the person an E (Extraversion) or an I (Introversion): Does he or she prefer to direct their energy to and draw energy from the external world? Or does he or she prefer to direct their energy to and draw energy from the internal world?
2. Is the person an S (Sensing) or an N (Intuitive): Does he or she prefer to gather information through focus on what is actually present, the data available to the senses? Or does he or she gather information through Intuition, focusing on the connections and patterns between data?
3. Is the person a T (Thinking) or an F (Feeling): Does he or she prefer to organize and structure information and make decisions through logical, rational thinking? Or does he or she prefer to make decisions by a process of valuing the impact on people?
4. Is the person a J (Judging) or a P (Perceiving): Does he or she prefer to organize the external environment through order, structure and schedules (Judging)? Or does he or she prefer to keep the environment as

open and unstructured as possible to include more information, possibilities and spontaneity (Perceiving)?

How People Interact at Work

These basic human differences in ways of perceiving and processing information show up in work habits. The differences in styles can be the root cause of many interpersonal conflicts. A person who values data and focuses on what is actually present (S) will often seem too analytical and detail-oriented for a person who focuses on the big picture and uses intuition (N). A person who makes rational, logical decisions (T) may seem to be missing the boat by ignoring values and ideals, when seen through the perspective of a person who is an "F." "T's" can view "F's" as too emotional and illogical while "F's" can feel that "T's" are too task-oriented and uncaring.

One of the biggest sources of conflict over work habits shows up in differences on the fourth dimension, "J" and "P." A person whose style is a "J" will be an early starter, will organize their work with attention to deadlines, and may find it offensive when others are late or indecisive. On the other hand, many people prefer to keep their options open, allowing time for additional information. They will wait until the last minute before completing or deciding. The two different personalities can drive each other crazy in a work environment.

People who are extraverted may find that introverts are hard to read, and may even go so far as to judge them as aloof, uncaring, and even arrogant. Introverts may unfairly judge extraverts as being superficial, inconsistent, and insincere.

The value of doing any assessment lies in discovering one's own fundamental preferences and traits and how to use one's strengths, while at the same time diminishing the impact of weaknesses. Receiving professional feedback when results are presented should include exploring the concept that strengths can show up as a



liability under stress or fatigue. Thus, being an extravert is a real advantage for establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, but there are pitfalls. Too much time spent in interacting with others may deter one from spending necessary time analyzing and thinking things through, for example. There are things to be learned from others with the opposite behavior preference. In fact, one of the biggest benefits from learning about the MBTI and other assessment tools, is that it opens horizons into developing an understanding and appreciation of others not like one's self.

There is great value in learning about one's psychological preferences, how they differ from others in a team environment, and looking at balance. A person has the capacity to act in opposite ways than is their usual preference or habit. Working with an executive coach can help explore ways of achieving balance and exploring out-of-preference behaviors that might be beneficial.

Some studies suggest that as a person ages and matures, he or she is better able to explore and consider using behaviors that are out-of-preference. Thus, an executive who has focused on rational, logical decision-making throughout his or her career may decide at mid-life to incorporate values and explore feelings of stakeholders. An introverted executive may feel comfortable and secure enough at mid-life to begin to reach out to others and explore his or her extraverted tendencies. Working with an executive coach at mid-career on these issues can be very beneficial.

The Isolated Executive: Extraverted and Introverted Styles

When an executive moves up the hierarchal ladder in the organization, the promotion is often accompanied by an increasing sense of isolation and loneliness. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee coined the phrase "CEO disease" to describe the isolation of top executives in their book *Primal Leadership* (HBR Press, 2002). It refers to an information vacuum

around leaders created when people withhold important and sometimes unpleasant information.

Life is indeed lonely at the top. People may appear more reluctant to share information, staff members may be less forthcoming about emerging issues, and colleagues don't engage as openly in dialogue. Many executives struggle to make sense of this loneliness. It is also very important to look at the extraversion/introversion dynamic and how that contributes to a leader's isolation.

Extraverted leaders tend to make quick decisions and move into action, sometimes before enough time for reflection and analysis. They may think out loud, and share ideas without forethought, which may then be leaked or taken as decisions or policies. Introverted leaders may continue to reflect when it is time for action and their preference for internal processing may exclude others. Both types of leaders become isolated through externally created conditions and self-imposed ones. They either move toward isolation because their colleagues and staff pull away, or they remove themselves from the interactive field when problems arise. Knowledge of how the introversion/extraversion dynamic contributes to creating isolation can help.

Extraverted leaders are drawn to interact with the external world and to bounce ideas off people. They are likely to bring people together to explore issues. However, the extraverted executive may overwhelm and intimidate people, push ideas prematurely, and unintentionally reveal confidences. Then when ideas are leaked or taken as decisions rather than mere brainstorming possibilities, the executive feels betrayed. The extravert may then stop sharing information and imposes a cautious isolation. The extraverted executive finds this immensely difficult as he or she cuts off a vital source of inspiration and energy, because extraverts draw their intellectual vitality from interacting with the external environment.



For the introverted leader, isolation can also become extreme and no longer beneficial. While introverts seek out solitary time in order to process internally, this may cause others to perceive them as aloof, distant, unapproachable and even arrogant. When gathering information, the introvert needs to read, to analyze and reflect. Information is often preferred delivered in written form, rather than verbal. The introverted executive typically develops strategies for creating solitude even in the midst of busy organizational life. Thus, appointments may be difficult to get, meetings may be highly structured and organized, and there may be little room for spontaneous sharing and brainstorming. The introverted leader may be “hard to read.” Under stress, the introverted leader will disengage and retreat to quiet space, leaving others to wonder. This dynamic contributes to isolation, which recreates itself as others withdraw from interacting with the leader.

The introverted leader may be surprised when they discover that their natural style is so often misinterpreted. He or she can learn to involve others and to share information more frequently. The extraverted leader needs to understand how to continue to work with others without the dangers inherent in sharing information prematurely. Both psychological types can benefit from learning about and trying on out-of-preference behaviors. Working with a coach is highly recommended.

What Type Makes the Best Leader?

Thousands of reports on the MBTI types of leaders and managers illustrate that all types occupy leadership positions. All types can be effective leaders because all types are valuable and have important contributions to make. Understanding leaders' type preferences is useful for exploring strengths and potential weaknesses, for developing self-awareness and emotional intelligence and for understanding the impact of their behaviors on others.

The question usually arises, what type makes the best leader? All types can be

effective as well as ineffective. Studies of thousands of leaders and managers worldwide have shown some profile types to be more predominant, however. This is not to imply that these types make better managers, only that they are more predominant in leadership positions.

In one study of 26,477 persons in a Leadership Development Program at the Center for Creative Leadership, the following percentage frequencies were reported:

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|----|------|-------|
| 1. | ISTJ | 18.2% |
| 2. | ESTJ | 16.0% |
| 3. | ENTJ | 13.1% |
| 4. | INTJ | 10.5% |

Clearly, there is a majority and an overrepresentation of *Thinking* and *Judging* preferences among leaders and managers. The structure and values of most organizations favor logical and decisive behaviors. It may be that *Thinking* and *Judging* behaviors have become the accepted definition of what it means to lead and people with these preferences are seen as “leadership material.”

The major differences in type distributions of men and women in the general population are on the *Thinking-Feeling* dimension. In the U.S., about 65% of males prefer to use *Thinking* as their way of making decisions, while only about 35% of females report a preference for *Thinking*. Throughout the world, in other cultures, the pattern of males reporting a preference for *Thinking* is 20%+ higher than that of females (Kirby & Berger, 1996).

Women in management positions sometimes show a greater percentage of *Feeling* types than in male management groups, but typically *Thinking* is the preferred type for a majority of these women (McCauley, 1992).

The question, what type makes the best leader, cannot be answered. The only question that can be answered is which type is more predominant in leadership positions.



Resources for Personality Types in Leaders

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