Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

UNDERSTANDING YOUR PERSONALITY – THE MYERS-BRIGGS TYPE INDICATOR

The most widely used personality questionnaire in the world is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The MBTI was developed by two Americans, Katharine Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers, based on the psychological theories of Carl Jung. The questionnaire is a self-report instrument – that is, the respondent answers a number of questions about themselves. The underlying model proposes that each of us has an innate preference on four separate dimensions of personality. In her book *Introduction to Type* Isabel Myers summarises these four dimensions:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extraversion (E)</th>
<th>Introversion (I)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People who prefer Extraversion like to focus on the outer world of people and activity.</td>
<td>People who prefer Introversion like to focus on their own inner world of ideas and experiences.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensing (S)</th>
<th>Intuition (N)</th>
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<tr>
<td>People who prefer Sensing like to take in information that is real and tangible – what is actually happening.</td>
<td>People who prefer Intuition like to take in information by seeing the big picture, focusing on the relationships and connections between facts.</td>
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<th>Thinking (T)</th>
<th>Feeling (F)</th>
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<td>People who prefer to use Thinking in decision making like to look at the logical consequences of a choice or action.</td>
<td>People who prefer to use Feeling in decision making like to consider what is important to them and to others involved.</td>
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<th>Judging (J)</th>
<th>Perceiving (P)</th>
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<td>People who use their Judging process in the outer world like to live in a planned, orderly way, seeking to regulate and manage their lives.</td>
<td>People who prefer to use their Perceiving process in the outer world like to live in a flexible, spontaneous way, seeking to experience and understand life, rather than control it.</td>
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This leads to a four-letter description of an individual’s personality type – for instance, INTP or ESFJ. There are sixteen possible combinations, and the way in which the different dimensions of the MBTI combine is significant. In this chapter we will simply look at the four dimensions separately and won’t explore how the various dimensions interact with one another.
The Extravert – Introvert dimension

These two words – Extravert and Introvert – were coined originally by Carl Jung and have now entered everyday language, albeit not exactly as defined originally by Jung. The thesaurus on my laptop suggests that an extrovert – it doesn’t contain extravert – is an outgoing or gregarious person while an introvert is a shy person.

In the MBTI the Extravert – Introvert dimension refers to where someone gets their energy from and where they prefer to focus their attention. Extraverts are energised by being with other people whereas Introverts recharge their batteries, so to speak, by withdrawing into their inner world. As an illustration, returning after a busy day at work to find a party going on at their home, an Extravert is likely to feel energised whereas an Introvert would rather have a quiet soak in the bath.

Jung, Myers and Briggs state that each of the dimensions is one of Type rather than Trait. Each of us is born – they claim – as either an Extravert or an Introvert. As an analogy, Type states that you could be left handed or right handed but you can’t naturally be ambidextrous. They recognise that, through life experiences such as your upbringing or schooling or employment, you may develop facility with the other dimension, but this will require more effort than using your innate and natural preference. I myself don’t agree that each of the dimensions is one of Type rather than Trait. I think that people fall on some kind of continuum – perhaps a statistically normal distribution – from extremely gregarious Extraverts to folk somewhere in the middle to those who are very shy and Introverted.

Myers and Briggs are not claiming that preference on any of the dimensions is necessarily an indicator of ability. There are some highly socially skilled Introverts and some emotionally unintelligent Extraverts, for instance. But Introverts will find it takes more energy to interact with others than Extraverts do. As an illustration, I have a strong natural preference for Introvert. In my work, however, I frequently facilitate workshops where I need to engage in a lot of Extravert style behaviour. I feel more tired at the end of a workshop than if I were naturally more Extraverted. I hope, however, that I have learnt to carry out these behaviours well.

One way of caricaturing Extraverts and Introverts is that Extraverts speak first and maybe think later, whereas Introverts think first and maybe speak later. I once had an Extravert boss who frequently thought out loud. It took me some time to realise that he didn’t expect me to carry out all of the ideas he was talking about as he developed his views by vocalising them. An Introvert is likely to agree with the maxim: If you have nothing to say then say nothing. On the other hand, I knew one Extraverted director who reckoned that if you have nothing to say then it’s important to say it eloquently. His serious point here was that in some meetings it’s important to be seen as a player and you need to make a contribution early on. Unless you say something ridiculous, it probably doesn’t matter what you say so long as you appear confident.

In my work as a coach with individuals, I find that I introduce the Extravert – Introvert dimension mainly with Introverts and only occasionally with Extraverts. Being aware of their natural preference can enable an Introvert to modify their behaviour in meetings, for example. They may recognise that if they wait till they have fully
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thought through their position then the meeting will have moved on to another item and they have lost the chance to contribute. Hence they see the need to speak up sooner and more frequently in some situations. I myself use a couple of tactics to counter my own Introvert preference. I will, for example, signpost that I have a contribution to make by saying something along the lines of There are two points I’d like to make here. Or I give myself permission to come out with something that isn’t fully worked out by saying things such as I’d like to think out loud for a minute, or Let me play devil’s advocate.

As with the other dimensions of the MBTI, the model enables someone both to understand their own behaviour and to appreciate how other people behave. So, for example, an Extraverted team leader may see the need consciously to create opportunities in team meetings for the more Introverted people – or perhaps those who are less experienced or confident – to contribute their ideas. Awareness of the preferences of yourself and others on the Extravert – Introvert continuum can help you to communicate more effectively, to improve working relationships, to be more assertive, to manage others well, and to influence more successfully.

The Sensing – Intuition dimension

The Sensing – Intuition dimension refers to how people prefer to take in information and what kind of information they like to pay attention to. The words Sensing and Intuition may be misleading, and I prefer to talk about an S preference or an N preference. Note that N rather than I is used since Myers and Briggs use I to refer to Introversion.

People with an S preference like to see the detail and want information to be precise and accurate. When they look around a room they are likely to notice and remember lots of specific details of the items in the room. They focus on what is concrete, and are likely to value doing things as they were done before if this worked well.

However, someone with an N preference is happy with the big picture only, and may get bored if you give them too much detail. They may be more interested in patterns and meanings, and enjoy exploring possibilities. They may well value the abstract and theoretical rather than the concrete and practical. They like to do things in new ways, even if the old way worked well.

Awareness of your own and others’ preferences on the S – N dimension is very useful in communicating effectively. If your boss has an S preference, for example, you are likely to have to give them lots of detailed information when making a proposal. However, if your boss has an N preference, then you may be more influential if you describe the big picture and highlight the possibilities.
The Thinking – Feeling dimension

The third dimension of the MBTI reflects how people prefer to make decisions. Those with a Thinking or T preference use logic and analysis to work out what to do. They are able to take a detached standpoint and apply objective criteria or rules or principles to make a decision. They seek to understand cause and effect, or to weigh up costs and benefits. They like to be consistent in their decision making. They may also be good at spotting the flaws in the logic of other people’s proposals. At work they are likely to be task focused.

People at the other end of this continuum with a Feeling or F preference base their decisions on their values and convictions. They seem to be in the middle of the situation, focusing on how decisions will affect everyone involved. They seek to establish common ground, and hope to create harmony. They like to treat people as individuals, and fairness is more important than consistency. At work they may emphasise people rather than task.

As with the other dimensions, it can be useful to utilise both perspectives to make even better decisions. For example, in situations of organisational change, such as the merger of two departments, a T approach is useful in working out what will be a highly effective structure, while an F approach is needed to ensure that the people affected are treated with fairness and respect and hence are more likely to buy into the change.

The Judging – Perceiving dimension

The dimension of MBTI which I use most frequently with coaching clients after Extravert – Introvert is the fourth and final dimension, namely Judging – Perceiving. The words Judging and Perceiving may give a misleading impression – this dimension isn’t really about judgement or perception. Hence, it is often preferable to speak about a J preference and a P preference.

Someone with a J preference likes to work in a planned and orderly way. Faced with a task, they are likely to make a plan with milestones and deadlines. They may even create a contingency plan in case things don’t quite work out with their original plan. They hate last minute changes, and may become stressed by undue time pressure.

People with a P preference, on the other hand, like to keep options open and are comfortable simply going with the flow. When deadlines loom they are energised by last minute time pressures. They feel constrained by plans and dislike making a decision until they have to.

Once again I think that this dimension is a continuum rather than an either/or Type preference. I myself have a P preference but it took me several years to be confident that my self assessment was accurate and I think I am nearer the middle on this continuum. I have worked with colleagues who had an incredibly strong P preference, which I found frustrating at times. I have also worked with people whose strong J preference for planning in great detail struck me as pedantic and excessive. As my own confessions might indicate, differences on this dimension may well lead to conflict.
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Because of the complexity of life in modern organisations, people with a P preference often need to learn to work in a J style. For example, I learnt through experience in my early years in management development that if I wanted to run a course then I needed to arrange things well in advance. I had my own “Three P” model for organising courses, knowing that I had to arrange a venue (Place), call for nominations (Participants) and design the event (Programme). But my ability to work in a J style is a learnt behaviour, and you would be foolish, for example, to ask me to project manage the construction of a new office block. I can manage a timeline, but Gantt charts are just too detailed for my liking! This reflects both my P preference and also, as we considered above, my N preference.

Type Dynamics

The four dimensions explored above lead to a four-letter description of an individual’s personality type – for instance, my own Type preference is INTP. There are sixteen possible combinations, and the way in which the different dimensions of the MBTI combine is significant. In this chapter we have simply looked at the four dimensions separately and haven’t explored how the various dimensions interact with one another. If you’d like to know more about how this, a topic which is known as Type Dynamics, you might look at Linda Kirby’s book Introduction to Type Dynamics and Development.

Note that you need to be qualified to administer the MBTI. You can find out about training workshops to become qualified from the website of the business psychology consultancy OPP - see www.opp.eu.com.

Awareness and Responsibility

In the opening chapter we noted that one way of using the ideas in this book is, first, to consider how your awareness shifts as you reflect on the ideas and, second, to choose how you will behave differently in response to your raised awareness. The four dimensions of the MBTI are useful both in understanding and managing yourself and also in appreciating others and how you need to interact with them. In trying to understand other people, you inevitably have to make a judgement on their preferences on the dimensions of the MBTI and it can often be difficult to get this correct. Nevertheless, knowledge of your own Type and an appreciation of the preferences of the other person can be extremely helpful in being assertive, handling conflict, influencing, and managing people.

As an example, let’s return to the topic of Emotional Intelligence which we considered in the previous chapter. If you have an F rather than a T preference, you will more naturally consider the impact of change on other people, and you are likely to seek harmony when making a decision. Hence you need also to consider whether you are avoiding making tough but necessary choices, and perhaps force yourself to make a decision that feels unpleasant to you. On the other hand, if you have a T preference, your natural tendency will be to analyse the various factors in the situation and make a decision which is logical based on your analysis. You may need to make a conscious effort to consider what the various other people in the situation need, fear
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or hope for, and take their feelings into account as well as your own logical assessment of the facts of the matter.

To return to an example mentioned earlier, if your manager has an S preference, which means they value detail, then it will be important when putting forward an idea to give them the kind of detail that they require – and maybe lots of it. However, if your boss has an N preference, then they may be bored by the detail and you need to give them an overview which sets out the future possibilities that your idea opens up.

Awareness – of your own and of other’s preferences – coupled with a suitable response which reflects this awareness is more likely to lead to success.