

Understanding Personality Differences—

How to Improve Your Relationships with the MBTI

by Sharon Conti, PhD with Marta Wilson, PhD

One aspect of organizational life appears inescapable: there are people with whom we just can't seem to get along. When people anger or irritate us, we find ourselves wondering, "Why would anyone say such a thing?" Or, "Why can't they just be quiet for once?" Or, "Don't they care about what we're trying to accomplish?" We tend to call these problems "personality differences" and declare them to be unsolvable. Then, we do our best to keep our distance from those unsavory characters!

In our work as leadership consultants, we've heard hundreds of people complain about the "personality differences" they have with coworkers (and with family too). And, we have plenty of our own memories of coworkers we did not understand and did our best to avoid. We find ourselves listening to peoples' experiences — and noticing our own — with fascination. Many accounts are dreadful, dramatic, and seemingly hopeless. The one truth we've come to see in all these stories is that people are different.

Our differences are often a major source of conflict, especially in close quarters such as workplaces. Why do differences cause conflict? One reason is the way we make sense of differences. Each of us uses our own tendencies as a reference point for understanding the behavior of others. For example, if I am a sociable and gregarious person and I am working with someone who has very little to say to me, I try to make sense of that from my perspective. In this case, I may think to myself, "Well, if I were acting like that, it would be because I really disliked the other person...because if I liked them, I'd be talking to them." After deciding they must not like me, I decide I sure as heck don't like them! And once I don't like them, they pick up on my feelings and start to feel the same way about me. And so, a "personality difference" is born.

While it is true that people are diverse, the real source of conflict is the meaning we give to those differences. Differences do not have to cause conflict. Once we understand how differences make sense and are predictable, we can use that information to understand people better. As a result, our buttons get pushed less and less. The personality differences are still there, but our interpretation of them changes. Instead of giving negative meaning to behavior that is different than ours or that we don't like, we start to understand how the behavior makes sense from another's perspective.

One framework that is helpful in understanding personality differences is the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI is a personality inventory based on the findings of Swiss psychologist and anthropologist Carl Jung. Jung was interested in major trends and insights about normal personalities. The MBTI is non-judgmental and allows people to understand their personality preferences, particularly with respect to energy source, information gathering, decision making, and lifestyle patterns.

Over forty years of research and development have demonstrated the reliability and validity of the MBTI. Some five million people complete this instrument every year, making it the most popular personality tool in the world. The MBTI determines preferences on four dimensions:

- **Introversion – Extraversion:** (I or E) describes where people prefer to focus their attention and get their energy — the outer world of people and activity or their inner world of ideas and experiences
- **Sensing – Intuition:** (S or N) describes how people prefer to take in information — focused on what is real and actual or on patterns and meanings in data
- **Thinking – Feeling:** (T or F) describes how people prefer to make decisions — based on logical analysis or guided by concern for their impact on others
- **Judging – Perceiving:** (J or P) describes how people prefer their daily life — planned and orderly or flexible and spontaneous

Combinations of these preferences result in sixteen distinct personality types each with their own characteristics and strengths. When we hear people talking about their "personality type," they are frequently referring to their MBTI profile.

Introversion and Extraversion

The first dimension of the MBTI describes where we focus our attention and get our energy. There are two preferences: introversion and extraversion. People who have a preference

for introversion get their energy from inside themselves; through reflection, thinking, and being alone. People with a preference for extraversion are energized by other people and activity going on outside themselves.

At work, it's easiest to see this difference in meetings.

People who have a preference for introversion may not speak as much or be as outspoken. They tend to be very deliberate when they speak, having thought out their ideas silently first. Introverts may have a hard time being heard, as they generally find it harder to break into fast-moving conversations. People with a preference for extraversion are quick to offer new ideas and in general talk more. They tend to think out loud, and they enjoy brainstorming and other group sessions.

This difference can cause serious misunderstandings because the way we perceive others is influenced by our own preferences. That is, our own preferences become a lens that we use to evaluate others. For example, because extraverts are outwardly focused, they may perceive the inward and less outspoken introverts as not contributing, not being committed, not paying attention, being disloyal, or not supporting the group. On the other hand, introverts may see extraverts as loud, too talkative, speaking without thinking, and rude because they tend to interrupt.

Recommendations

Often, we don't know whether team members score as introverts or extraverts on the MBTI. However, we really don't need to know. Our own observations and understanding of personality are enough to help us manage differences more effectively. When co-workers seem extraverted, allow them time to talk and think out loud, preferably in groups. When co-workers seem introverted, allow them time to think about topics before discussions or meetings. For example, a detailed agenda or email summary provided in advance can help those with introverted tendencies formulate their thoughts. Another helpful tool for meetings is to use a round-robin style where the facilitator requests input from each person in the room. This helps introverts, preferably if done toward the end of the meeting, by creating space for them to think first, then jump in.

Sensing and Intuitive

The next set of preferences is sensing and intuition. These preferences describe how we prefer to take in and process information. They are perhaps the most difficult preferences to see and appreciate, yet they tend to cause the most conflict and misunderstandings at work.

Sensors prefer to process information from a detail-oriented, bottom-up approach. People with this preference like and remember facts. They prefer things explained at a detail level. Their thinking is bottom-up. In contrast, people with a preference for intuition have a top-down, big-picture perspective. They are more abstract and theoretical, and they do not have as much ability or interest in remembering facts

and details. They tend to focus more at a high level, seeing connections and relationships.

One reason there is so much conflict between sensors and intuitives is the top-down/bottom-up difference. Because the two types prefer to give and receive information differently, they may have no idea what the other is talking about! For example, if an intuitive is explaining something, he will generally start with the most big-picture level, and then work down into more detail only as needed. If a sensor is listening, he may not follow the discussion since he understands best when the details are presented first. Lack of communication also happens when sensors start at the detail level and intuitives don't have the big picture level framework they need to understand.

Not understanding each other is bad enough, but as we've said, this lack of communication can result in misunderstandings and conflict. When people don't understand each other, they may attribute that to incorrect and negative reasons. For example, we may conclude that the other person is acting maliciously by deliberately withholding the information we need, or even that the other person is an idiot!

Recommendations

Again, we don't often know whether team members score sensing or intuitive on the MBTI, but we can guess. Our own observations and understanding of personality help us manage these differences. Particularly when it comes to sensing and intuition, a good understanding of our own preferences is valuable. When such differences result in misunderstandings and communication difficulties, a sensing/intuition analysis can be very helpful. If you are the one who is having difficulty understanding, ask the other person to try to explain based on your preferences. For example if you are intuitive, ask if a high-level summary can be presented first, before any details. Or, if you are sensing, ask if the background and all the steps leading up to any conclusions can be presented first. Keep in mind that if people struggle explaining things the way you request, it is probably because that is not how they think. It can be very hard to switch gears and change styles. A little patience goes a long way.

What about if you are the person communicating, and it is not going well? Perhaps you are presenting and the audience is asking many seemingly off-topic questions. If so, it may be that audience members have preferences that differ from the way your presentation is designed. Using the guideline of "audience + purpose = design," try refocusing opposite your preference. If you are sensing, try to postpone presenting details and background information, and instead spend more time on the overview of the project and where it fits within an overall framework. If you are intuitive, try to give a detailed, sequential history and background, before working up to a larger perspective. It is helpful to prepare these as backup slides in advance, so you are ready to switch gears at any time.

Thinking and Feeling

The third set of preferences, thinking and feeling, describes how a person prefers to make decisions. People with a preference for thinking prefer an objective, analytical, and fair approach to decision making. Those with a preference for feeling are much more interested in harmony and making each person happy.

This difference in preferences even affects us at a physiological level: people with a preference for feeling show more emotion. For example, when they are angry, their voice might quiver more or their hands might shake more. When they're sad, their eyes might tear up more. It's not that they experience more emotion than thinkers, but the emotion produces a stronger physical reaction in their bodies.

As usual, conflict arises in the different ways people with these two preferences perceive each other. Thinkers tend to believe feelers are too emotional and biased, which can be perceived as inappropriate at work. On the other hand, feelers tend to be hurt and offended by the thinking-style behavior we often see in busy organizations. People with a preference for thinking (especially introverted thinkers) might not be as conscientious about polite niceties that feelers find very important...such as saying hello, saying thank you, and engaging in cursory small – talk (e.g., How's your family?).

As a thinker myself, I was shocked to find out how important those things are to the feelers with whom I work. If I have a very stressful day, my tendency might be to be a bit more crisp and to drop a few of the niceties and to try to be as productive as possible. But after studying the MBTI, I've come to understand that curt behavior can have a very detrimental impact on my relationships with people whose preference is feeling.

Recommendations

Thinkers should consider their perspectives on social niceties at work. Because there are people different from you, who find everyday harmony to be critical for their work happiness, you may want to increase the attention and energy you give to these behaviors. Greeting people you pass in the hall, saying good morning and good night, remembering birthdays, saying please and thank you consistently – these all go a long way to improve the work environment for those around you.

Feelers should try to give others the benefit of the doubt when they see behavior that appears rude or inconsiderate. It could be that a person with a strong preference for thinking is not aware of the impact he or she is having. Also, try explaining your positions using more objective analysis. You may find this is effective when you interact with thinkers, and gives you greater flexibility when tailoring your approach.

Judging and Perceiving

The last set of preferences describes how people prefer their daily lives. People with a preference for judging enjoy having a planned approach to life. They tend to be well-organized and like to have a schedule. They like to make decisions, come to closure, and carry on. People with a preference for perceiving prefer a much more spontaneous and flexible approach to life. They like to keep their options open and don't rush to make decisions.

The difference between judging and perceiving can even be observed in the opinions people have. Strong judges tend to make strong, opinionated statements and generally see things as black and white, or right and wrong. Strong perceivers tend to make more tentative less opinionated statements, and see both sides of an issue. At work, these different styles in decision making tend to cause conflict. People with a preference for judging like to make decisions as fast as possible, while people with a preference for perceiving tend to hold off making decisions until they feel a decision is actually required, all the while gathering more information and considering more options. So, judges may feel that perceivers are procrastinating, while perceivers might think that judges are making decisions prematurely.

Recommendations

Judges should consider allowing time for a variety of opinions and options to be considered. You don't have to settle for the first good idea when others would appreciate exploring the topic more. Perceivers can try to settle on something and live with it awhile before redesigning it. If you have to make changes after something has been decided, understand that changing direction may be easier on you than others, so be understanding. In an ideal world, perceivers would keep judges from making premature decisions, while judges would keep perceivers from analysis paralysis.

Self Assessment

The diagram below summarizes the eight MBTI preferences. To conduct a quick self assessment of your own preferences, ask yourself the four questions listed in column one. For example, if your answer to question number one is, "In," then you may have a preference for introversion.

Question	Answer	Preference
1. Where do I prefer to focus and get my energy?	In	Introvert (I)
	Out	Extrovert (E)
2. How do I prefer to get and discuss information?	Details	Sensors (S)
	Concepts	Intuitive (N)

3. On what do I prefer to make decisions?	Analysis	Thinking (T)
	Others' Feelings	Feeling (F)
4. How do I prefer the day-to-day?	Structured	Judging (J)
	Flexible	Perceiving (P)

Conclusion

There are no right or wrong answers on the MBTI and no assumed “right” way to be. Preferences exist, and the MBTI simply assists people in clarifying their preferences. This allows individuals to grow in their own self-understanding and relate more effectively to others. While it is probably true that we will always find it easier to get along with some folks better than others, that doesn't mean all conflicts are unavoidable. There is help for the “personality difference” epidemic we see today in organizations and families. Though people really are different, and most of us intuitively believe that, we still struggle to interpret the meaning of those differences when we don't have a framework. Taking advantage of personality instruments such as the MBTI can help us interpret others' behavior more accurately and to understand it from their perspective. Instruments such as the MBTI remind us that our preferences are never an excuse for behaving inappropriately with our friends, family, and co-workers. Using the MBTI can also encourage us to stretch continuously so we can be nimble and adapt as needed to any situation, regardless of our preferences. This kind of understanding and inspiration have a remarkable way of leading to true tolerance and a better appreciation for the diversity of preferences that exist in all of our lives.

RESOURCES

I'm Not Crazy I'm Just Not You: The Real Meaning of the 16 Personality Types by Roger R. Pearman and Sarah C. Albritton

Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type by Isabel Briggs Myers with Peter B. Myers

Hard Wired Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Personality to Become a New Millennium Leader by Roger R. Pearman

Life Types: Understand Yourself and Make the Most of Who You Are by Sandra Krebs Hirsh & Jean Kummerow

Love Types: Discover Your Romantic Style and Find Your Soul

Mate by Alexander Avila

Please Understand Me: Character & Temperament Types by David Keirse and Marilyn Bates

Please Understand Me II: Temperament Character Intelligence by David Keirse

Reinventing Yourself: Life Planning After 50 Using the Strong and the MBTI by Sandra Davis and Bill Handschin

Type Talk: The 16 Personality Types That Determine How We Live, Love, and Work by Otto Kroeger with Janet M. Thuesen

Type Talk at Work: How the 16 Personality Types Determine Your Success on the Job by Otto Kroeger with Janet M. Thuesen

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