Practical Business Applications of the MBTI Myers-Briggs Personality Type Model

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Entire 2 - 3 day workshops can be devoted to specific practical applications of personality type. Leadership, team-building, career planning, time management, problem-solving are a few topics that come to mind. Attempting to capsule even one of these important "applications of type" topics in an article would result in an overview that wouldn't accomplish much but be an advertisement for enrolling in a specialized workshop!

So what I thought I'd attempt here is a more personal digest of what I've found helpful in Myers-Briggs to my various business and professional practices. Over my forty year career, I've logged some substantial tours of duty in management training and in counseling/coaching. Yet I am by nature a better doer than I am a teacher. I enjoy being "on the field, in the action" more than being on the sidelines as a a coach or trainer. My present occupation involves both roles, with a primary emphasis on the former. So this is a look at Type from what continues to be relevant now as a business practitioner whose opportunities to teach people about Personality Type come along infrequently and then only in bits and pieces.

Human Nature - teaching and practice

Prior to learning about Myers-Briggs in my mid-forties, I had considerable hands-on work experience plus training in applied psychology and human relations - both at the graduate level and in numerous post graduate workshops and courses. I even taught some management programs on human relations, employee motivation, conflict resolution, and the lot. For fifteen years prior to my introduction to the MBTI, my work, on a day-day basis, was heavily involved in labor relations and "employee problems."

Sometime after arriving at the state of being a seasoned labor relations guy, I realized much of what I learned in school and in early management education about human nature wasn't being applied in my actual dealing with people.

My understanding of people existed in parallel universes: in one was the academic/education model of human nature and in the other was my evolving understanding from the school of hard knocks.

Two Faces - Two Natures

In working with people - managers, employees, union officials - I found people frequently had more than one side to their nature. The old saw applied that "once you get to know someone" you found yourself reworking your mental model of who this person is. I learned to look for that "other" person that sometimes lurked beneath the exterior I initially interacted with.

The Myers-Briggs MBTI model gave a meaningful structure to this experience. I discovered what I had been experiencing with people was the interplay and sometimes the cycling of the **extraverted** and **introverted**sides of their personality. This sharpened understanding now helps me see that both natures are real and a part of the whole of the person (Prior to this insight my tendency was to characterize one as the "real" person and the other as veneer or false).

Most often these two sides to a personality reflect opposite ends of the Myers-Briggs dichotomy. A person whose **Feeling** nature is **extraverted** will typically **introvert** their **Thinking.** More than once I've been caught off guard by a friendly, hospitable ISFJ (xxFJs extravert feeling) who situationally becomes quite logical, detached, and tough minded (read **Thinking** nature at work**).** The old "iron hand in the velvet glove" phenomena! Make no mistake. Both sides of this personality are real and while **Feeling** overall is preferred, there is a logical side.

A couple of my close ENFP associates have caught me in a different form of "gotcha" on this Thinking/Feeling coexistence. These types are characterized by **introverted Feeling**. Being sociable folks, their Feeling values are usually apparent. Yet frequently in public dialogue their **extraverted Thinking** is quite active - particularly when talking with others they perceive as logical

thinkers. So in a discussion involving a problem or decision situation, "Logical Sally" or "Logical Fred" is engaged in an energized discussion that is well reasoned and generally ends in some sort of logical conclusion. But hold on. Later on, in the quiet of introverted reflection, "Feeling Sally" or "Feeling Fred" ends up reversing the decision or changing the course previously laid out. Does this mean that ENFPs really don't want their decisions or plans to be logical? No, they want both - yet if a dialogue doesn't provide proper opportunity to incorporate whatever might come from their Feeling side, you may find them later changing their mind and reversing field. Logical, makes sense, eh?

So as you become interested in Type and become somewhat proficient in "typing" others, watch out for the danger of stereotyping. Remember: **F**eeling types have a **T**hinking nature, **S**ensing types **I**ntuit, etc. Preference does not mean absence of its opposite.

You would do well to understand and have some mastery of all of the "languages" of the 4 polarities represented by the Myers-Briggs dichotomies: E & I, S & N, T & F, J & P. Situationally you'll find yourself flexing among these different languages - sometimes with the same person in a short space of time.

Know Thyself . . . First

Many people attracted to Myers-Briggs see it as a means of categorizing and understanding others. While that benefit certainly exists - on paper, I have found it difficult to implement in practice. At best "typing" others is a tentative hypothesis that requires constant revisiting. And since there are variations within a given MBTI type (no two people within a type are truly identical), assumptions can be

dangerous.

How Myers-Briggs can best equip you to better understand and relate to others begins at home - getting a better handle on yourself, your type and

how you are similar or different from others who share your type. What are your particular tendencies within the dichotomies that define type? What is your dominant preference? What characteristics best define how you use the eight preferences? What preferences are your blind spots . . . what are your weaknesses?

One of the most attractive features of the Myers-Briggs philosophy is the valuing of differences. It rejects the notion of conventional psychology that tends to push us all towards some sort of golden mean. Implicit in this valuing of differences is that all of us have areas of vulnerability. Whatever is our strength is naturally counterbalanced by an opposite - the other side of the coin. This duality or yin and yang principle is so strong that it can hide our weakness within the shadow of our strengths.

Someone who is quite proficient at logical dialogue and critical, objective analysis, may be poorly equipped to express empathy and give credence to the intangible expression of feelings. In fact, interjecting "feelings" into a rational and objective analysis tends to blow the circuit breakers of a logical thinker! Sometimes the debate on a particular issue between a clear Thinking preference person and a clear Feeling preference person are equivalent to two ships passing in the night. Despite all the words tossed back and forth there really isn't any communication. Each is simply unable to walk in the other person's shoes.

Is reaching across this gulf feasible? It is difficult and takes effort. A logical thinker can "develop" empathy and sensitivity without losing valuable rational powers. It's the old knowing "when to hold and when to fold" - when to trust your faithful thinking power and when to set it aside and be open to its opposite.

You start down this road toward more artful self-management and relationships with others by understanding yourself. Wasn't it Stephen Covey who said "seek first to understand?" Well apply that to yourself first. Next I

would advise cultivating some relationships with folks whose strengths complement your weaknesses. From them you can learn a lot.

If you are looking for a **tool** to help you along in this process, I'd recommend the MBTI Step II, which identifies 20 facets. While there are loads of personality inventories that identify what may or may not be your traits, the Step II is invaluable because it is tied to the Myers-Briggs model of valuing differences instead of identifying good and bad traits.

(**"Click here" for a summary of the traits or characteristics** that have been identified - via extensive psychometric research - as correlates of the 8 type preferences. . . . Incidentally a number of these characteristics also closely correlate with the Big 5 personality constructs outlined by McCrae & Costa, 1989).

Problem Solving & Planning Strategies

The four MBTI polarities can be incorporated into effective problem-solving, planning, and decision-making.

For most of us, our career and life situation gets structured in a way that allows us to function within our boxes. Clear Feeling and Intuitive preference people with an interest in law generally don't become prosecutors and probably don't acquire many friends with a "law and order" personality. While some may be comfortable in a particular box for a lifetime, others intersect more than once with a need to stretch - to get outside their box to successfully manage a situation. Those times require accessing one or more of the opposite of our four preferences.

When we are acting as part of a group of people to solve problems, make plans, or make decisions, there is great value in employing a strategy that allows us to touch upon all the key perspectives that just happen to be defined by the Myers-Briggs dichotomies. This is especially appropriate when the members of a planning or problem-solving group represent a diversity of preferences. I submit, for example, that it is not ethically correct for a group

of *extraverted* preference people to employ a process that prevents those with an *introverted* preference from being involved in a way that fits their preference. You might as well just say to that person: you don't matter, your input is not important.

Well what if your group is quite alike type-wise, is it OK to fail to touch several bases? From my experience, doing so can be particularly dangerous. A group of type-similar people can function as **clones,** naturally reinforcing one anther's biases and blind spots. This can lead to courageously and confidently marching in unison over a cliff and into the sea!

By the way, we can get caught acting like lemmings even in very small group situations - like marriage partners who are two peas in a pod or two good friends who finish one anther's sentences. Beware, as Pogo observed, "We have met the enemy and he is us!"

Ok, you're convinced, so how do you do it?

Become acquainted with the major characteristics of the type preferences (E & I, S & N, T & F, and J & P) as they relate to planning, problem-solving, and decision-making. Chart what would be your "normal" decision, planning or problem-solving process and see which of these preferences your process typically engages. Example. If your preferences are I, S, T, & J ask "how does my preference for each of these impact the process I use to plan, problem-solve, or make decisions?"

Typically someone with ISTJ preferences would naturally employ processes that involve a good deal of independent, logical, and structured analysis - having things well worked out before presenting to others for their input or reaction. Yet in working or relating with certain other types of people, this natural style could spell problems. They may expect a more spontaneous, deal-with-it-right-now approach.

Whatever your preference set, it inherently involves certain blind spots to other perspectives and can create interpersonal problems when others expect a different type of involvement with you. Therefore, you would do well to examine the opposite preferences and the way these opposites would employ a different process. In our ISTJ example, seek to understand and appreciate how ENF&P would alter the problem-solving, planning or decision-making process. Strive to find ways you can incorporate these opposites into your routines - **without** destroying what you believe is the heart of how you are effective.

Hiring & Staffing Process

Organizations operating under the influence of human resource policies and practices typically use job descriptions and hiring specifications as an aid in making hiring decisions. These tools were developed and refined from the 1920s through the 1940s, during the period of "scientific management" and "industrial psychology." Since that time they have been further shaped but not essentially altered.

Embedded within these practices is a view of human nature at odds with the Myers-Briggs/Jung insights. Under the "trait psychology" models that colored our understanding of human nature during the development of modern management, people came in combinations of major traits. The challenge was to discover which particular combinations were best for a given job, write them into the specifications, and then begin the recruitment process to find the individuals who best fit that prescription. This approach ignored the natural polarities of equally desirable (but different) characteristics produced by the type dichotomies.

This trait psychology model of human nature did not understand that qualities like "critical thinking" and "being a loyal team player" tend not to coexist in the same personality. Likewise, it failed to appreciate the "oppositeness" of "being well organized" and being "adaptive and spontaneous." This flawed

model left us wide open to defining human specifications on paper that didn't exist in the real world. Additionally, this inaccurate understanding of human nature blinded us to the tradeoffs inherent in any specification. When we put a high premium on well developed "critical thinking," there is likely to be a downside in that such a person will not be the type who easily brings divergent viewpoints together and smoothes over interpersonal differences among people. While there are those who operate in the middle ground, flexing between such polarities, they are like generalists who tend not to be as proficient as the true specialist.

Becoming aware of the natural trait polarities (including the 20 pairs identified by the Step II instrument), allows hiring specifications to be analyzed and amended to insure they are "real world" and that the tradeoffs inherent in them are either not relevant to the job at hand or are approached with a realistic acceptance that some downside must come along with the benefit we seek.

Managing the Cloning Dilemma

While understanding Myers-Briggs can lead to writing more accurate and real world hiring specifications, doing this alone retains vestiges of the old understanding of human nature.

The process of writing a specification says that we endeavor to have clones in a particular job classification. Few of us have actually witnessed such a brave new world in practice because we've just not been good enough to reliably recruit people who exactly meet our specifications. (I hasten to add that add that one reason is that some of the specs are inherently contradictory). Yet the goal of having clones in a job needs to be squarely addressed. Is this really what we want, is it desirable?

When devising hiring specifications, we need to ask ourselves some key questions. 1. Are there effective practitioners of this job who bring different combinations of strengths to the table? Or are the demands of this job such

that only a very narrow range of people can perform it with success? 2. If this job operates as a member of team, is the best team a collection of essentially the same kinds of people - with the same strengths and same weaknesses? Or are there some benefits of having diversity - with some complimentary strengths?

My own experience comes down on the side of diversity - within limits. For some jobs, it may be quite appropriate to have a narrower range of of differences. Yet even where the case for cloning is strongest, there are cogent arguments for loosening up a bit. One is that different personalities bring energy to a department or team that otherwise would exist in a stagnant environment. What a dull place a department of clones. Secondly, we live in a very dynamic changing world. Having a broader collection of perspectives among a given group of practitioners helps us better adapt to changes. Whatever are the new demands, having a diverse group means that it is more likely some in our group will be well equipped to meet these new challenges. Thirdly, there is an element of "group think" that creeps into a cloned team or department. The classic business example is the "old" IBM who became so good at recruiting and nurturing clones they created massive blind spots in their corporate vision, missing important business opportunities and failing to adapt to their changing business environment.

What we need to define for jobs are sets of alternative specifications. Seek to draw a profile of at least 3 different kinds of people who could make a good contribution to this job. Not only will this open up the recruitment process to a broader range of potentially "good" applicants, it will help craft the examination of each candidate to assess the potential tradeoffs of whatever strengths are presented.

Defining and Understanding Customer Diversity

In marketing and market research, we seek to identify the "character" of our customer, resulting in a profile that is the equivalent of a job specification. Springing from this is a prescription of practices geared to this definition.

I frequently find that the small business owners and managers I work with in my Internet business consulting fall into one of two traps in understanding their customers. Lacking persuasive evidence to the contrary, they assume their customers' minds and attitudes pretty much mirror their own. If they avoid this trap, they may fall into the second one which is believing that "the customer" has certain characteristics, habits, and desires. The result is the same, a tacit assumption that in all the important ways to their business their core customers are clones of one another. This leads to executing a business plan that fails to recognize the diversity of the customer base.

An understanding of type can help broaden these definitions to cover the different ways people perceive, different ways they make decisions, different styles of relating to the external world, and different learning styles. While defining a core customer may continue to have value, segmenting that customer understanding to include additional types of customers will enhance the ability of the business to connect with and better serve more people.

The Old Ways Die Hard

The impact of the old scientific management/engineering model of human nature has impacted much more than the human resources profession. It has significantly impacted and impaired public education through the educational bureaucracy failing to understand that "normal" brains come in radically different forms with different needs and learning styles. Those who get caught in the sieve of their unidimensional "best practices" teaching model are channeled into special education classes or left to drop out of school when the opportunity presents. Despite the massive investments in education, legions are being left out of the education process. (For one example of how an understanding of personality type can make a difference in education, see Jane Kise' article on "Problem Students")

Another example is health research that often fail to consider possible correlations between personality type and disease and disease promoting

behaviors. I recall recently hearing a report of a long term study of nurses that found a propensity to be afflicted with certain types of disease. The study implied that there is something about the nursing environment that is linked to these diseases. A link not explored was the fact that the nursing profession appeals to certain personality types and thus there exists a potential disease correlation with personality type.

Everywhere one looks it is possible to find examples of long-held and honored practices that are based on concepts of human nature formed in the first half of the previous century.

The notions of natural "norms" for human behavior and environmental determinism persuade us to see "education" in its many forms as the solution for a broad range of problems. Yet accumulating scientific evidence from neuro-psychology and the Myers-Briggs model urge a new paradigm based on the insight of our inherent diversity and the significant degree our genetic makeup determines our personality and behavior.

- Diversity is the norm: there are at least 16 types of minds. From a pragmatic perspective, systems and practices need to recognize several kinds of "normal" brains, each hardwired somewhat differently.
- At least 50% of all personality variation is biologically determined. This biological role adds a moral imperative to respect a measure of cognitive diversity, making systems and practices open to this diversity in the way we demand openness to racial diversity.
- While much of personality variation is inborn - there remains great opportunity for psychological growth . . . along different paths. Instead of a box with limits, the 16 Types can be seen as 16 different paths to growth. Systems that recognize and nurture these different paths will succeed in energizing and enabling a broader segment of the population.

We are going through a period of discovering the limitations of our time-honored tools of educating, influencing, molding, and shaping others. We are discovering how this new paradigm impacts our lives - professionally and personally. We are being forced to adapt and learn new ways of perceiving, new ways of judging, and new ways of managing.