



Know Thyself: How Our Personality Traits Inform Our Leadership Style

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During the past few months, we have all faced challenges in different aspects of our lives. While some have adapted to new adversities with ease, responding quickly and leading the way with innovative new ideas, others have needed more time, observing and carefully contemplating a plan for the future. Some of us are somewhere in the middle. In times like these, a lot of observable behaviours come down to one thing: personality. Yet, despite our many different strengths and weaknesses, we can all look back in time and see things we would like to do differently. Where does this change process begin? Sometimes it starts with a more in-depth understanding of ourselves. Now more than ever, there is a strong need to draw upon our best qualities and understand our weaknesses. To understand our personality traits is one key to improving our response to stress, our communication strategies, and our leadership style.

Insights

- Personality typing tools can be useful in helping individuals, institutions and researchers understand personality type.
- Knowledge of your type can help you to better understand your own personality preferences as well as the preferences of others.
- As a result, individuals can come to appreciate personality differences within a group and understand how to adapt these preferences in different situations and to other personality types.
- Personality variations between medical specialities exist and have been used to create innovative ways in which personality types can be used to improve medical education and surgical training.
- Leveraging personality can help you better respond in times of crisis, become a more adaptive communicator, and develop your leadership skills.

Understanding Personality Types

Identifying personality type requires the use of a valid and reliable personality testing model and there are many that exist. A few examples are the Big Five Personality Traits or Five Factor Model, Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Despite their established validity and reliability, no personality model is perfect. The nature of the variations between people, the immense number of traits, and the many ways they combine to express themselves makes personality inherently difficult to identify. Nevertheless, they have the power to help institutions, researchers and individuals alike to develop a deeper understanding of personality; one that can help to guide personal and professional change, and build an awareness for what every personality type has to offer.

The MBTI was developed by Isabel Briggs-Myers and her mother, Katharine Cook Briggs, in the 1940's (1). It is based on the theory of psychological types first presented by Carl G. Jung in the 1920's; a theory that in essence, suggests variation in behaviour is actually quite predictable and due to basic differences in how individuals choose to use their perception and judgement (1). The goal of the MBTI was to make Jung's theory easier to understand and more applicable to everyday life (1). The MBTI classifies personality across four domains: favourite world, information perception, decision-making and structure. Each domain is dichotomous and individuals are classified as having a preference for one dichotomy or the other (Exhibit 1) (1).

Domain	Dichotomies	
Favourite world (E/I) The way you direct and receive energy	Extraversion Energised by interaction, and direct energy outward • People person • Likes working in groups • Knows a lot of people • Jumps into things without thinking things over	Introversion Energised by inner world, and direct energy inward • More reserved • Comfortable working alone likes to work independently • Spends a lot of time reflecting before taking action
Information perception (S/N) The way you take in information	Sensing Focus on reality observed through the senses • Looks to the bottom line • Starts with the facts then forms the big picture • Pays so much attention to facts that they sometimes miss new possibilities	iNtuition Focus on pattern, context and interrelationships • Reads between the lines • Sees the big picture first then looks to the facts • Thinks so much about new possibilities that they forget about making them a reality

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Decision making (T/F) The way you decide and come to conclusions	Thinking Decisions are based on objective, logical analysis • Notices inconsistencies • Looks for logical explanations and solutions • Makes decisions with their head and want to be fair • Telling the truth is more important than being tactful • Can miss the “people” part and be seen as too task oriented or uncaring thinking things over	Feeling Decisions are based on personal, subjective values • Looks for and expresses concern for what is important to others • Makes decisions with their heart and are compassionate • Being tactful is more important than the cold truth • Can miss the “hard truth” and be seen as too idealistic or indirect
Structure (J/P) The way you approach the outside world	Judging Like to make decisions and come to closure • Likes to have things decided • Task oriented; likes to make lists and plan ahead • Likes to get work done first before playing • Can be so focused on the goal that they miss new information	Perception Like to continue collecting information and exploring • Likes to remain open • Loose and casual; they keep planning to a minimum • Mixes work and play • Can be so focused on new information that they miss making a decision when needed

Exhibit 1. The four MBTI domains and their respective dichotomies or opposites (1).

“Although each of us can and does use all of the preferences at least some of the time, people typically find one in each pair more comfortable and natural than its opposite. Think of your choices as something like being right- or left-handed. Both hands are valuable and useful, but most people use the hand they favor naturally more often and become more adept with it. In the same way, your type preferences are choices between equally valuable and useful qualities.” (2)

MBTI (2020)

The descriptions under these four domains can crudely provide a 4-letter combination that forms the basis of behaviours and traits. Answering the questions may suggest an introverted, intuitive, feeling and perceiving (INFP) personality type. Note, however, that the most accurate assessments do come from answering the specific questions that make up the full MBTI

[create callout: The MBTI instrument can be taken online directly through the **Myers & Briggs Foundation** or through other adapted online versions. For example, **Truity** and **16 Personalities** both offer an adapted version of this instrument. Some versions of this instrument however, may not be the same validated instrument or may also use concepts from other models].

Like other models, the MBTI is helpful in identifying and understanding individual personality types and is also useful for gathering and analysing information about teams of people. Using personality information in this way can help groups to work together more efficiently and learn to appreciate personality differences (1).

Personality Traits in Medicine Specialties

In the area of medicine, researchers have examined personality traits in the context of medical education. A study by Ramachandran et al. (2020) found that about 30% of all MBTI studies have specifically examined the connection between personality type and specialty selection; an area that has so far demonstrated inconsistent results (3). For example, another study by Borge et al. (2002) found that although some loose connections existed between certain traits and specific medical specialties, overall, there was more variation within specialties than between them (4). While the idea of personality typing to help medical students narrow down their area of specialization is interesting and potentially useful, Borge et al. (2020) caution against the assertion that a specific personality type fits a certain specialty (4). Instead, Ramachandran et al. (2020) suggest that the MBTI may be more useful in other areas such as addressing biases in the admissions process, personalizing medical education and educational resources, teaching communication and leadership skills, increasing introspection and building an awareness of others, and providing burnout screening and support (3).

Other studies support the idea of using personality indicators to transform medical education, specifically surgical training. A study by Swanson et al. (2010) concluded that continuing to evolve surgical training is more important than ever as the specialty attracts a more “modern” type of trainee (5). The study found that while most practicing surgeons tended to demonstrate extroversion (E) (and the traditional surgical ESTJ personality type), the most common personality type of surgical residents tended towards introversion (I) instead (in general, the ISTJ personality type) (5). Another study by Chang et al. (2019) examined differences between junior doctors and attending physicians and found similar results (6). Findings suggest that both groups showed a preference for the sensing (S), thinking (T) and judging (J) traits, but attending physicians showed more polarised preferences for these traits compared to more junior physicians. The results suggest that perhaps career stage may also be strongly linked to the expression of specific personality traits.

“Communication is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing managers and leaders today. A leader's ability to communicate is key to their success. A good leader is able to communicate in a way that enhances understanding and aids employees in making good decisions...No matter how intelligent or confident a person is, if they lack effective communication skills it is highly unlikely that they will be successful as a leader.” (7)

Clack LA (2017)

Sometimes communicating with people who have vastly different communication preferences than us can be difficult. Knowing the preferences of your own personality, as well as understanding the preferences of others, can be useful in developing better communication strategies. Despite individual differences in preference, everyone has the potential to learn to use other preferences to communicate more effectively with others (2). It is not always possible to know the personality of the person you are communicating with, it is sometimes possible to pick up on small hints during a conversation. Of course, asking a patient, a colleague or an employee about their preferences directly is another way to go.

Start by asking yourself a few simple questions when identifying your own preferences and the preferences of those you are communicating with:

1. Talker or a thinker? Talkers tend to be more extroverted and look for more action focused responses. Thinkers on the other hand, demonstrate more introverted communication preferences and look for more time reflect (8).

E – Extroverted “Let's talk this over”	I – Introverted “I need to think about this”
• Talk face to face. • Discuss in groups, to allow interaction. • Express interest and enthusiasm. • Focus on action. • Be aware of their preference for an immediate response and quick feedback. • Be aware that they “think out loud”. • Entertain them socially while doing business.	• Communicate in writing first. • Discuss things one-on-one. • Listen, and allow space for a response. • Provide information ahead of time. • Allow time for reflection; don't expect an immediate decision. • Ensure that their valuable ideas aren't overlooked. • Conduct work in a work context; don't require them to attend social functions

2. Need facts or rely on intuition? Sensing personality types prefer to rely on facts and practical, detailed plans that emphasize tangible results. Intuitive types prefer to rely on intuition and big picture ideas that emphasize concepts, ideas, and innovation (8).

S – Sensing “Just the facts, please”	N – Intuitive “I can see it all now”
• Keep communication clear, explicit and practical; don't use abstract language. • Check their understanding of what you are saying. • Present practical, detailed plans, not concepts. • Provide concrete examples to prove that ideas will work. • Present information sequentially. • Emphasise immediate, tangible results. • Be aware that they may not find change exciting	• Give a big picture overview first. • Emphasise concepts, ideas, and innovation. • Take a long term, future oriented perspective. • Be willing to brainstorm outside the box ideas. • Allow them to share their ideas and dreams. • Provide facts and details only as necessary. • Help link their ideas to a realistic plan.

3. Focused on using logic or addressing feelings? Thinking types put logic before emotions and are therefore calm and objective. Feeling personality types do the opposite. They the feelings of others before other things and These types are people focused and prefer to connect with people and ensure everyone feels validated (8).

T – Thinking “Is this logical?”

- Get straight to the point.
- Be calm, objective and demonstrate your competence.
- Be concise, cogent and logical.
- Present pros and cons.
- Use logical, not emotional, arguments.
- Focus on tasks and objectives, not only people.
- Give frank feedback, not only positive comments.
- Don't take criticisms or challenges personally

F – Feeling “Will anyone be hurt?”

- Begin with areas of agreement; connect first, challenge later.
- Create a warm, friendly, positive atmosphere.
- Use personal anecdotes to create connections.
- Focus on the impacts of decisions on people, not only on tasks and objectives.
- Acknowledge the validity of feelings and values.
- Avoid critiquing and evaluating while listening.
- Avoid competition; aim for win-win situations.

4. Decisive or a consensus builder? Judging types draw conclusions quickly and are often organized, punctual and to the point. Perceiving types on the other hand, prefer to remain open to new information and opportunities and take their time through the process of making decisions (8).

J – Judging “Just do something”

- Be punctual.
- Be well organised in your presentation, with a clear plan which is followed.
- Don't present too many options; prioritise.
- Be decisive; draw conclusions quickly.
- Expect a quick decision from them.
- Stick to schedules, deadlines and timetables.
- Provide clear expectations.
- Avoid last-minute surprises or changes.

P – Perceiving “Just wait and see”

- Present things in tentative, draft form.
- Describe situations rather than evaluate them; let them draw the conclusions.
- Give them a number of options.
- Allow time for discussion and exploration.
- Don't force an immediate decision.
- Be open to new information and opportunities.
- Be aware that you may need to follow up.

“A crisis is an excellent time to recognize and rely on the traits that you (and those around you) possess.” (9)

16 Personalities (2020)

Just as different personality types behave differently during everyday situations, each type will also respond differently during times of stress. Understanding your strengths and weaknesses during these defining moments can help you to strike a balance in your actions and decisions. Exhibit 2 shows the strengths and focus areas for various MBTI types (9).

Type	Strengths	Focus Areas
INFJ, INFP, ENFJ, ENFP	• Stay focused on immediate, tangible needs under stress • Help others balance their imaginations and focus on matters at hand. • Favor steady progress, which helps lessen impact of poor decisions. • Often show great dedication and grit	• May pursue more detached, technical solutions that overlook concern for people directly. Need to think about how to consider others when under stress.
INTJ INTP ENTJ ENTP	• An ability to handle change and adapt quickly to stressful circumstances • Focus less on the unknown and more on how to utilize available resources. • Very good at putting thought into action.	• Might not consider all consequences and this may also lead to a poor decision. Need to think more about the risks or engaging others with this strength of foresight.
ISTJ ISFJ ESTJ ESFJ	• Focused on the human aspects of a situation and sensing people's emotional states • Help maintain a certain dignity and quality of life, not just survival. • Are often very hopeful and positive	• Can be easily influenced by fear. Need to keep their own imaginations under control and use their mental agility to recognize unproductive internal feedback cycles in themselves and others. • Can have too much hope or too little hope. Need to focus on the comforting aspects of broader probabilities more than the worrying aspects of mere possibilities.

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ISTP,
ISFP,
ESTP,
ESFP

- Objectively evaluate situations and spread helpful information.
- Excel at separating fiction from fact
- Have a high comfort level with unpleasant things.

- Need to focus on teamwork and how they collaborate. They are often used to doing things in whatever way they think is best.
- Need to cut others some slack and recognize their own limits so they can become integral to the solution.

Exhibit 2. Strengths and focus areas of different MBTI types during times of crisis or stress (9).

Improve Leadership

“It is well-established that individuals with certain personality type preferences find some leadership activities easier than others. Yet we also know that effective leadership requires utilizing a wide range of behaviours – whether they are natural to us or not.” (10)

Psychometrics (2016)

For every leader, some behaviours and actions related to strength-based leadership (executing, influencing, relationship building, strategic thinking) come naturally, while others require greater effort. Exhibit 3 outlines the leadership style, contributions, common pitfalls and focus areas for different personality types (10). Personality types here are grouped based on functional pairs (individual preferences under the middle two domains: information perception and decision making) due to their importance and role in leadership.

Functional Pair	Leadership Style	Contributions	Common Pitfalls	Focus Areas
ST (sensing / thinking)	Task focused approach; dedicated to creating and abiding by policies and procedures	• Taking action and staying focused on objectives • Analyzing information and solving problems • Develop efficient procedures and policies • Applying their depth of knowledge and experience to challenges	• Operating too independently, and failing to involve others • Allowing day-to-day issues to get in the way of long-term planning • Being unaware of different needs of team members • Not sharing enough information with enough people	• Delegate more frequently; review which tasks/projects to keep versus what to give up • Find ways to connect with others beyond the task at hand • Take time to evaluate future opportunities • Be more open to change and innovative methods

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SF (sensing / feeling)	People-focused approach; strive to meet the immediate needs of others	● Building relationships and involving people ● Developing supportive and service-oriented work groups ● Meeting the immediate needs of others ● Taking a practical approach to problems	● Allowing daily issues to get in the way of long-term planning ● Not dealing with conflict ● Failing to explore alternative ideas and perspectives ● Not gathering enough input from others	● Step back from the tasks at hand to consider long-term implications ● Communicate the analytical and objective reasons for decisions ● Take more time to consider new approaches and look for new opportunities ● Learn how to give difficult feedback and manage conflict
NF (intuition / feeling)	People-focused approach; catalyzing people around long-term personal and organizational vision	● Inspiring and motivating others ● Coaching and developing people ● Identifying the future needs and potential of employees ● Being open to new opportunities	● Not dealing with conflict ● Allowing day-to-day issues to get in the way of long-term planning ● Overlooking practical issues that may hinder implementation of their vision	● Pay more attention to the necessary resources and implementation details required to implement global initiatives ● Learn to say “no,” and stand firm on things that are critical ● Communicate more details and implement action plans
NT (intuition / thinking)	Conceptual-focused approach; seeking long-term strategies that can be implemented to maximize deliverables	● Critical analysis of current methods ● Willingness to consider new ideas and try new approaches ● Implementing long-range plans	● Operating too independently, and failing to involve others ● Not sharing enough information with enough people ● Not gathering enough input from others	● Check back in on the decisions they make to ensure progress ● Seek out opportunities to personally connect with colleagues and subordinates ● Take time to gather more information and feedback from others ● State things in a simpler and clearer fashion ● Show appreciation for others' contributions

Exhibit 3. Leadership style, contributions, common pitfalls and focus areas for the different MBTI functional pairs (10).

Final Thoughts

Simply taking steps towards a better understanding of yourself can help pave the way for positive change. While the validity and reliability of the model is important, in the context of the individual, we need to focus on how we can use these insights to improve. This can be done by reflecting on how our personality can be a positive or negative influence in different situations in our lives. It is also important that we don't get boxed in and begin thinking that specific traits are better than others. While specific traits will be more helpful than others in specific situations, all personality types have something to offer and diversity in these types is vital. When we take an honest approach to determining personality and take the time to learn ways we can adapt, we will have the best chance of becoming better versions of ourselves; using more of our strengths and repackaging our weaknesses.

Contributors



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