

An OCEAN of Personality

How does personality affect team performance? ©

Dr Neil Preston

Organisational Psychologist - PsyOpus

Words matter with personality

As far back as 1884, Sir Francis Galton posited the *lexical hypothesis* that singular words that describe the characteristic of people's attitudes and behaviours could assist in describing the personality of people. A taxonomy of personality traits could be constructed by using words that describe the behaviours and disposition of people. This ushered in the psycholexical studies in the early 20th Century with a compendium of a large list of words (up to 18,000 terms!) that describe personality or behaviour. By the 1940's through the advent of the psychometric method of factor analysis, researchers like Cattell and Fiske were able to identify an underlying structure to these terms, extracting the first five-factor structure of personality. By the 1960's, Warren Norman was able to reduce the terms down to some 2800 words that formed the basis of Lewis Goldberg's explorations of the Big Five Personality traits.

An OCEAN of Personality

While there are many criticisms about the notions of personality traits, it is fairly well accepted through the use of both exploratory and confirmatory factor analytics techniques in psychology, that there are five reasonably stable personality structures. These are known as the big five described as *Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness* and *Neuroticism* or OCEAN for short.



The Big Five Personality Traits

Before we look at how they relate to team performance we need to have a little look at what the Big 5 say about the underlying personality structure of most people. Each of the five traits can be said to possess two wings or dyads that sit

underneath the larger trait descriptor. Let us have a little swim in the OCEAN of our personality, shall we?

Openness – attraction to experience and the intellect

Those who possess high trait openness tend to be attracted to either new experiences or new ideas or both. Those who possess these traits have a higher emphasis on aesthetics, emotions, adventure, unusual ideas and concepts and a variety of experiences. New ideas and experiences excite rather than make those with high O anxious and cautious. The shadow side of high O is the tendency to become bored; become overly emotional or overly abstract and conceptual. They may like an idea or object on an intuitive, intellectual or aesthetic basis and not necessarily a practical one.

Conscientiousness – industrious and orderly

Those strong in conscientiousness like order and like to get things done. They are more concrete in their thinking, orderly in their external world and see things through once they have set their minds on completing an activity. They are extremely focused, well organised and methodical often both in their thinking and behaviour. They tend to value reliability and consistency in both behaviour and thinking styles. They value an industrious spirit that focusses on outcomes and not necessarily enjoying the process in getting their – in other words they enjoy the destination not the journey. The shadow side of high C is their tendency towards conservatism and rule consciousness. They do not like rules changing underneath them, emergent or adaptive environments, and may be resistant to change if the goals are unclear or not fully articulated.

Extraversion – enthusiastic and assertive

Those who have high trait extraversion tend to be more talkative than others and enjoy and draw energy from social gatherings. On one wing they can display high enthusiasm and drive and display *surgency* which is a tendency to value high positive emotions. On the other wing, high E's can be very persuasive, domineering, assertive and attention seeking. Their shadow side tends to be resistant to other points of view, hold a distaste for low or reflective mood, and may become bored or restless when the tone of the environment does not encourage high social interaction. Very high extraverted types for example may not like spending too much time in a silent retreat in the walls of an enclosed monastery.

Agreeableness – compassion and politeness

High trait agreeableness tends to display itself in people who prefer to be cooperative with others, to see other points of view and consider the emotion and reaction of others as very important. Being helpful to others is highly sought after for those who are high in trait agreeableness. They tend towards the desire for peacemaking and may prefer to avoid disagreement or conflict with others, especially if this results in fractured or prickly relationships in the future. Being friendly and considerate is highly prized including following normative

rules of politeness and considerateness of others. The shadow side of high A's can be a simmering resentfulness of other who they perceive as being impolite or rude. They may also be perceived by others as being too passive, judgemental and righteous over other people's behaviour.

Neuroticism – withdrawal and volatility

Neuroticism concerns the emotional tone or response that people hold towards situations and others. Essentially the two wings of neuroticism speak of how people cope with emotional distress or valence. On one wing you could speak of the *internalises* and on the other the *externalises*. Those with high trait neuroticism may cope with high negative emotional valence by withdrawing from others. They may be prone to depressive moods and lower motivation with a tendency to catastrophise or over estimate the negative consequence of a situation or outcome. Those on the other wing express their negative emotional valence externally through mood swings, emotional outburst, volatility and at times violence. This externalising behaviour is another form of coping with overwhelming emotional responses. On the extreme ends of high N's there is a tendency to display poor emotional stability. Very low N could be perceived as too calm, flat and an uninspiring personality.



High neuroticism can overestimate poor outcomes

Does personality effect team performance?

In short yes it does, but we need to be careful where and how. Firstly, I am reluctant to take on an essentialist approach that says if you get the right personality mix in a team you will automatically get a great team outcome. This makes complex psychodynamics appear rather naively simplistic and I would caution you if you have any management guru who thinks this would be the case – either they are a clever salesman or have not read nor understand the literature on personality and team performance.

What we can say is that certain traits if elevated generally within a team tend to display better performance outcomes. What this means is that we need to elevate personality traits to the group level and not the individual level to understand their effects on team performance. This means that the unit of measurement is that of the team and not the individuals (Anderson, 2009). Could we say then there is a personality of a team rather than the personality of individuals summed?

Those teams who have elevated scores in *conscientiousness*, *agreeableness* and *openness to experience* tend to be positively related to team performance. In addition, where there was more diversity in extroversion and emotional stability these two also positively relates to team performance (Neuman, Wagner, & Christiansen, 1999). In other words, having a team that displayed a range of extroversion and emotional stability is good for team performance. It is possible that too much extraversion can lead to poor openness to other ideas and increased group think, and too much emotional stability may make the team mood too stale and boring.

Team performance can scale to complexity quicker than we think, when we consider all the personality traits present in those who make up the team. For example, do agreeable persons try to avoid creative conflict in a team while more extraverted people tend to want to dominate the conversation to convince others of their solutions. Could it be possible that more neurotic types wish to dominate a team's engagement with problems or avoid them altogether because the conflict is too overwhelming? Conflict management styles may be mediated by a myriad of competing personality types that add into the mix of what makes up team performance, and we haven't even started talking about individual and collective intelligence!

So how do we deal with personalities in a team?

Here's my humble advice as an organisational psychologist. I think we make a big mistake treating the team as individual personalities – this is the wrong level of analysis which could be too overwhelmingly complex to predict or assist. Assuming there is no obvious psychopathology in the team (see Papers 14 and 15 on Taming Toxic People), we are best to treat the team as a personality itself. In other words, we need to get a sense of the general characteristic of the team's tendencies and not any one individual within the team. We may need to step back from characterological expressions of individual personalities within a team and consider the conditions which surround the team that give rise to the propensity of certain characteristics to dominate over others. Instead of intervening at the personality level we may need to manage the boundary conditions that give permission for certain team norms to emerge or not – given the fluid nature of modern work teams we need to manage the conditions of team performance and not the causes of individual personalities.

References:

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