

An OCEAN of Personality

How does our personality affect dialogue with others? ©

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The Big 5 and Conversation with others

In Paper 16 we looked at the dimensionality of the Big 5 Personality Factors known in psychological research to explain much about how we see and operate in the world. These factors are described as *Openness*, *Conscientiousness*, *Extraversion*, *Agreeableness* and *Neuroticism* or OCEAN for short. In this brief paper we won't explore the dimensionality of the Big 5 (this is explained in Paper 17), we will explore how these personality traits may affect our dialogue with others especially in teams and organisations.

There is reasonably strong evidence that displaying certain personality traits will have an impact on career success throughout a person's life span. When researchers measured "success" as both intrinsic success (job satisfaction) and extrinsic success such as income and occupational status; the general findings were that *Conscientiousness* positively predicted intrinsic and extrinsic career success, while *Neuroticism* negatively predicted extrinsic success (Judge et.al, 1999). This means to some respect, that our personalities matter when engaging with life and our ability to live it successfully.

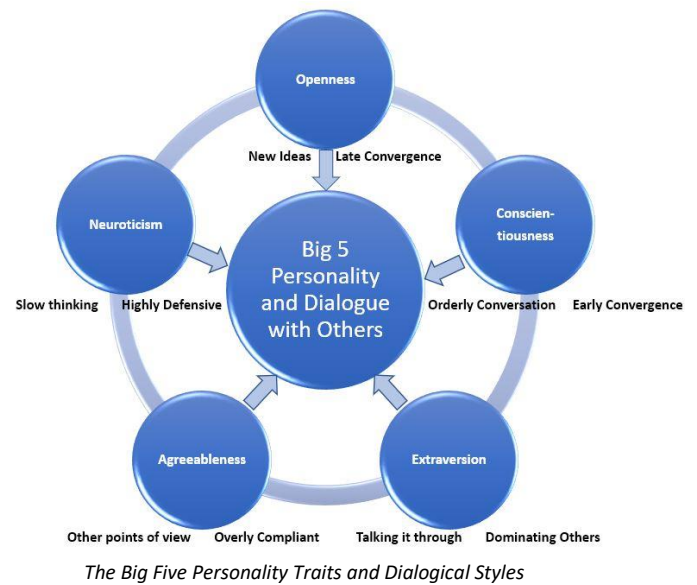
The Big 5 and Dialogical Styles

It is possible to consider that different personality traits affect how we engage in dialogue with others. Since our personality style tends to be the glasses through which we see the world, it is possible to expect that we engage with others in dialogue through these lenses. The intention here is to go through each of the Big 5 Personality types and trace an outline of how each trait may emphasise one style of dialogue over another. Knowing how personalities shape our understanding and response to the world can be helpful when working in teams. Let's imagine a round table discussion with 5 people in a team with strong tendencies in each of the big 5 – ready?

Openness – new ideas but late to converge

John in our team has high trait openness, he loves to explore new ideas and is open to new suggestions and angles on a problem. He is attracted not only to the logic of an argument but its aesthetics. He is strongly attracted to the beauty of an argument, the potential of different solutions and the wide range of possibilities that could be explored in a given situation. What excites John is innovation and new ideas, he accepts that not all of them will be implemented or indeed that none will, but what is important is that the conversation explored "new ground" and opened up the space to explore "further possibilities." What John doesn't prefer is quick decisions that haven't been explored "all the way down or through." John may not be quick to converge on decisions and pivot from diversity

and dialogue to convergence and commitment. He feels that these decisions may be too restrictive.



Conscientiousness – orderly conversation and early convergence

Mary is a no-nonsense kind of person. She prefers to be well briefed before a meeting with a strong and well ordered agenda. Mary does not like engaging in "frivolous conversation" and that the purpose of any meeting is "to get to the outcome." Mary is highly focussed when engaging in conversation and tends to do her homework on the topic. She prizes rational logical conversations that "stay on topic" and has little patience for what seems to be rambling chit chat and pleasantries. She prefers to be on time for a meeting and to finish on time and to achieve clear orderly progressive decisions. Sometimes with very complex problems, Mary gets frustrated and likes to close down the conversation by making quick and decisive decisions on behalf of everyone. She is cautious of "crazy ideas" and prefers to look at what worked in the past and use "best practice examples" and case studies from other industries. She has little patience for those who come unprepared for a meeting and those who prefer to think on their feet without backing it up with evidence. Others in the team find her a little too abrupt and focused on one idea at a time.

Extraversion – talking it through and dominating others

Greg enjoys a good conversation – any conversation. He can be heard talking loudly in the lunch room laughing and joking about all manner of things. As long as the conversation is light, has a good positive feeling to it and where possible he can be the centre of attention all the better. Greg's tone tends to be gregarious and very talkative. When he is onto something he may even fly into a monologue in the hope that the audience in front of him can watch his ideas cohere into a wonderful piece of analysis as his speech become more animated and excitable. What Greg may not notice about himself is that he tends to get bored with other slower lower toned deliberations on the topic presented. Greg tends to turn off when the mood tends to drop down into a thoughtful hush. Greg also tends to get a little

impatient with those who wish to take an idea away and mull over it for a while. For Greg, the ideas and solutions are self evident and if others are only able to listen to him talk through the ideas he so eloquently articulated at length, then the solution would become clear and shared by all. Sometimes Greg is willing to take the conversation elsewhere from the topic at hand, especially if the topic does not excite him or worst still “brings him down.” If the mood shifts too low, Greg feels the need to land a joke right in the middle of the conversation to lift the spirits of the team – he fears that serious and sober topics may bring everyone down into a place a helpless resignation.

Agreeableness – other points of view and overly compliant

Martha is a very pleasant and polite person. It is often thought that Martha has never said a bad word about anyone in the team. While others like to gossip (especially Greg), Martha prefers to keep her council to herself. When she is forced to give an opinion about a work colleague, she is often very thoughtful and tries to argue a different side of the story being presented. Martha is often very considerate and helpful of others, she enjoys helping others and making sure they are comfortable before proceeding in difficult conversations. Martha makes sure that no one feels unsafe and would like sometimes to speak on behalf of others she feels do not feel safe to speak. In many cases she keeps quiet when conversations become heated and tends to look for a compromise between warring parties. Martha takes pride in telling the team how different members see a given problem. She is always very thoughtful and polite before proceeding and ensures that if she is speaking on behalf of someone else that she is not taking any liberty beyond their point of view. Sometimes other members of the team are not sure what Martha’s point of view actually is, since she tends to go with the consensus of the group. Other members occasionally distrust Martha because they don’t know where Martha actually stands. Martha is happiest when everyone is getting along and there is no major conflict between the team members both within meetings and in the general office environment. Sometimes when a pressured decision is required, Martha will make it as long as it stops people from arguing all the time, she believes that conflict gets them nowhere and prefers a harmonious team culture at all times. However, when she makes these decisions, some team members feel that Martha becomes rather prickly afterwards; it is as though she would do anything for the sake of peace.

Neuroticism – withdrawal and volatility

Paula is said to be the most sensitive person in the team. She is constantly on guard with others in the team and likes where possible to avoid conflict. When she can’t avoid speaking in team meetings, her face becomes flushed and her voice gets quieter to the point that people can’t hear him speak, especially Greg, who often asks Paula to speak up. This frustrates Paula no end, and she tends to stammer over her words and gets stuck on certain points because she hasn’t made herself clear. Paula would often

take long comprehensive notes in meetings and re-read them as others in the team do the lion share of the talking. She prefers to take her notes with her after meetings and mull over the implications of the conversations had by the team. Paula feels very uncomfortable in making quick decisions and likes to think things through on her own before she is comfortable. Sometimes Paula can be overly concerned about what others think of her in the team and will only speak when absolutely necessary. She is terrified of saying the wrong thing or appearing stupid when often she knows a lot about the topic being discussed. Paula hates “round robins” where everyone is asked to put their point of view across to the team. She hates being the centre of attention and feels this form of meeting style catches her out before she has really formulated her reasons for presenting a certain argument. When she does speak, she often laughs about herself and puts herself down with small self-deprecating statements like “I’m a bit of a clutz on this topic, but for what it’s worth” Paula is very self conscious about what others think about her and can get upset quickly if someone criticises her work – she tends to take most things personally and has trouble separating what was said to her and her personal feelings about herself.

The character of our teams

These examples were deliberately made *in extremis* to highlight how different personality traits may affect how people see and act in the world. While some change managers may argue that you can create the perfect team by locking down only high trait conscientious people, you can run the risk of making a team too homogenous that may create unintended consequences. For example, a team full of high trait conscientiousness low trait agreeable personnel, may quickly deteriorate in all out competitive warfare. Or a small organisation populated with only high trait openness people may not get anything meaningfully done, but always engage in wonderful explorative conversations. We may need greater diversity in our teams (especially at the beginning of problem exploration) than we think. High trait agreeable people like Martha may be able to mediate highly combative and argumentative members in her team. Indeed, someone like Paula although highly neurotic may consider issues that “fast thinkers” like Greg have never considered let alone stopped to think as important. What matters most is not the character of individuals but the character of our teams that ensures sustained peak performance. We may need to consider the aggregate of our personality traits than individual differences to get the best out of our teams. Maybe describing the aggregate personality of our teams across the Big 5 could be more helpful than individual profiles – it would at least be an insightful exercise for team development.

References:

Judge, T.A. Higgins, C.A. Thoresen, C.J & Barrick, M.R. (1999): The big five personality traits, general mental ability, and career success across the life span Personnel Psychology; 52, 3, 621-652.