

What is the relationship between Personality and Performance?

from trait to state models of leadership ©

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On Personality and Performance

Much has been written in the organisational psychology literature on examining the relationship between personality and performance. Implicit in this research literature is the assumption that trait rather than state is predictive and constituent of successful performance. The rationale assumes that personality is stable and so certain types of personality are better suited for work performance than others.

Personality Types and types of Personality

The most famous personality test in the organisational literature is the Myer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI is based upon Jungian personality typologies that can be characterised in relatively stable dichotomous polarities. These include Extraversion (E) or Intraversion (I); Sensing (S) or Intuition (N), Thinking (T) or Feeling (F), and Judging (J) or Perceiving (P). There is 16 combinations of personality types on the MBTI. It is argued that your profile gives some understanding of your personality and hence leadership style and performance. There are some assumptions that need to be examined in understanding the MBTI and how it is used.

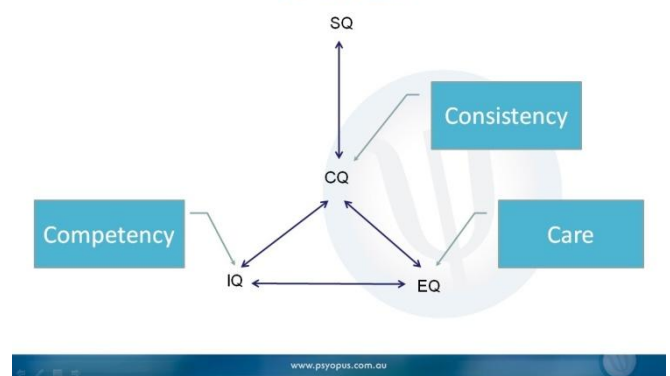
Firstly the MBTI assumes that respondent's personality are bimodal in distribution. That is some people fall on one side of the type (Extraversion) and others on the other (Intraversion). This makes intuitive sense but unfortunately the psychometrics do not bear this out. What is most likely is a normal distribution between the two extremes of type. That is, most people do not fall into artificially inflated bimodal extremes (Stricker & Ross, 1964). If this being the case, it is likely that the MBTI lacks 'discriminate validity' which is the ability to discriminate between personality types in any meaningful sense.

Often the MBTI is used 'an an excuse and not an explanation' of performance. For example people with

higher tendency towards 'introversion' are perceived as lacking initiative and passion in their work. What is actually going on often is the cultural value of rewarding extraverted behaviour as opposed to more considered emotionally regulated introverted styles. Often these associations of personality and performance are socially constructed (Jacques, 1996). For example in Western cultures the saying "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" is promoted while the Eastern notion of emotional restraint which says "the loudest duck is the first to lose his head" is not. Often leadership literature is predominantly written and researched by the most extraverted culture on the planet – the United States of America. So which is right then, do extraverted or introverted personalities or any other type perform better? Well it depends - in highly extraverted cultures, emotional restraint is often perceived as a lack of trust.

Simplifying Albrecht's model (2002), Trust could be placed into three aspects – Competence, Care and Consistency of behaviour.

The psychology of trust



Following the figure above one could characterise competency as using the faculties of cognitive intelligence (IQ) while Care engages aspects of emotional intelligence (EQ). Consistency of behaviour best engages collective intelligence (CQ) since it requires others to notice whether you follow through with your competence of and care for a particular action. Often introverted personalities are perceived from those with higher expressed emotion to lack emotional engagement or passion in their activities at work. In short it may appear to others that they don't care. The failure of perception here is often a cognitive bias towards more extraverted personality characteristics in the world of work performance. In other words, their emotions are not worn on their sleeves and so are

perceived as either withholding their true feelings about things or not emotionally engaged at all. It is likely that these 'attributions' are errors of social bias in favour of extraverted behaviour. While some literature supports evidence that extraverted behaviours leads to better work performance, other researchers argue that this is a 'leadership attribution error' where we tend to over attribute success to the 'salient behaviour' of the leader and not the 'latent conditions' of the team that gave rise to the performance in the first place (Hackman, 2012).

The big five personality factors and leadership performance – what does the research say?

The literature indicates that type based tests are not that predictive of performance when compared to the dimensional based personality tests (Cost., et al, 2002) – this is probably because bimodal based personality tests (like the MBTI) scoop out the variance needed to actually predict performance – in other words they are too simplistic as measures and descriptors of human personality. Meta-analytic studies (that is studies of studies) reveal a common five factor model of personality known in the literature as OCEAN (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism). While some researchers have found some association with extraversion and transformational leadership these correlates are rather weak (Bono & Judge, 2004). Consistently what appears to be predictive of leadership performance are characteristics of what researchers call 'urgency' which is the readiness to make decisions, 'emotional stability' which is resistance to stress and tolerance to uncertainty, and 'conscientiousness' which is the ability to follow things through (Hogan et al., 1994). Notice that these are more *characteristics* of personality rather than type. For example it is possible that both extraverted and introverted people can possess these characteristics regardless of an interior or exterior typology. It appears that the MBTI serves a simplifying function of explaining personality rather than a predictive function of accounting for performance and outcomes.

From causes to conditions – leaning the right ladder against the right wall

We often forget that leadership and what it means could be more conditionally based rather than causally driven. In other words, it is possible to recognise that leadership and personality is often bound "...in this *great man* leadership theory, leaders appeal to our specific ethnic,

religious, cultural, political, or national characteristics" (Marsiglia, 2005). It is little wonder that traits that fall into the extraverted spectrum privilege modern understandings of the relationship between personality and performance?

Bass and Stogdill back in 1990 noted:

"Personality theorists tended to regard leadership as a one-way effect: Leaders possess qualities that differentiate them from followers. But these theorists did not acknowledge the extent to which leaders and followers have interactive effects by determining which qualities of followers are of consequence in a situation. (p. 12)"

When interactive effects are taken into account, suddenly leadership and personality type becomes exponentially complex. This leads to the question as to whether we should continue to direct our time and energy towards 'trait' based theories of leadership performance rather than the state that gives right the conditions for performance? Some organisational psychology researchers think so and appeal for us to move from causes to conditions. For example Hackman (2012) argues for the notion of 'equifinality', that is multiple leadership styles can be employed which under the right conditions will still achieve the same outcome (ie, equifinality). This means that leaders should enable the right conditions for performance as opposed to displaying the right personality type. It appears that this is a more sensible solution to leadership since a 100 years of research in personality and performance concludes that while there is some association with personality and performance the affect is small and may not 'in the end' really matter.

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