

TOOLBOX TALKS

A Quality Service Contractors Publication for Members

December 2016

Why Personality Matters in the Workplace



Building and cultivating relationships is an integral part of any career strategy. Whether you are a job seeker, manager or entrepreneur, you are in the relationship business. When it comes to building relationships you must start with self-knowledge, and that starts with personality.

The study of personality is fundamentally about asking: Who am I? I know it sounds cliché, but before you can effectively reach outward to others, you have to be able to look inward. The study of personality provides some great insights into how to do this.

Personality can be tough to define; from the four temperaments of Hippocrates (choleric, melancholic, sanguine, and phlegmatic) to Freud's theory of the unconscious there have been countless attempts at nailing down this highly abstract thing we call personality.

According to personality expert, Professor John Mayer, "personality is the organized, developing, system within the individual that represents the collective action of that individual's major psychological subsystems." In layman's terms, I like to think of personality as that inherent driver of how we act. It's that natural disposition we fall back on when all those other forces of the outside world are accounted for.

A great way to describe personality is to use a popular model called the Big Five.

The five factor model, more popularly known as the Big Five, is one of the most researched models of personality. The model provides a great overview of everyday personality and how it relates to the workplace. Compared to other models, the Big Five enjoys a fairly high level of academic consensus as well as empirical support. The theory being that there are five major trait categories that describe our personality. According to the Big Five, we all consistently fall somewhere along each of the following five continuums that I like to remember as OCEAN.

* **Openness to Experience:** At the open end, individuals are highly interested in experiencing new things and are flexible in their thinking, where at the opposite end, individuals are more closed minded and rigid in how they approach new experiences.

* **Conscientiousness:** Those who are high in conscientiousness tend to be diligent and dutiful in the way they approach work and life. Individuals who are lower on the conscientiousness scale tend to be big picture thinkers and less interested in the details of how things get done.

* **Extraversion/Introversion:** Probably the most recognizable personality trait is extraversion because it's easy to see. Extraverts are socially assertive and gain energy from performing for and interacting with others. Introverts draw energy from reflection and tend to prefer working alone or in small groups.



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* **Agreeableness:** This scale looks at the level of friendliness versus hostility that someone tends to display when interacting with others. Those high in agreeableness are more trusting and modest whereas those low in agreeableness are more suspicious and oppositional.

* **Neuroticism (Emotional Stability):** Those who are highly neurotic tend to be less stable and frequently demonstrate negative emotions. Those who are more emotionally stable are generally pleasant and tend to be resistant to stress.

When thinking about and observing personality I always caution people to keep two things in mind: behavior and intent.

Behavior vs. Personality: Behavior is what we observe in others as bystanders. We all learn about others and make attributions based on what we see. However, personality is not the only driver of behavior, there are always external forces operating to influence how we behave. Thus, we have to be careful about the attributions we make based on limited observations within certain contexts.

It is important to remember that we all have the ability to act counter to our preferences, which is often referred to as acting out of character. When trying to get a sense of someone, look for consistent behaviors as opposed to unusual behaviors.

Intent and Personality: A frequent complaint I hear from clients is that one of their colleagues is intentionally holding back and not asserting himself. In their mind, this person is actively going against the grain. The issue is not that the person is trying to be different than you; he/she is actually different from you! Understanding individual differences is critical in managing teams. Diversity of personality is often a key component to building a successful team. The trick is to understand how to harness the power of personality differences for success.

Understanding your own personality and the personalities of those around you is critical to success. Keep in mind personality is only one of many drivers of behavior, but it is one that is consistent over time. There are numerous personality assessments out there on the market, most of which are about as useful as taking the latest Cosmo quiz. Look for those that have some foundation in or strong overlap with the Big Five.



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