

Behaviour Vs Personality

Or, the Car Looks Fabulous, but the Engine is Unreliable

Its human nature, we are all guilty of making judgments about a person based on personality. Psychologists call this, *Implicit Personality Theory*, or *First Impression Error*. Ever hear yourself or others making statements along these lines?

“Mike is so compulsive about details; he's probably an accountant”.

“Mary's house is perfect. Even magazines on the coffee table are placed so the spines are aligned. You can tell she is an architect”.

“A friendly, persuasive guy like Ian should be in sales. No one can say no to him”.

Using this simplistic logic, outgoing, assertive people should be steered toward careers in sales, entertainment, motivational speaking etc. The quiet, introverted people should be tucked into cubicles focused on data entry, far away from customers, clients, and the rest of the world.

Here's the flaw in this logic. Humans are social beings. Consequently, we veer toward outgoing people. Extroverts have the edge, being considered lively and fun to be around. Extroverts are described as having "fun personalities." By comparison, staid and detail-oriented people suffer from a statement like, "She's a great person, but not much personality."

So, we classify people as having "great personalities" and "zero personalities." Each of you can recognise a boss, co-worker, friend or family member who fits one of these personality classifications. Are these descriptions accurate? Well,

that depends on who is making the judgment - what does it really mean when people talk about personality?

As psychologist we define personality as – *“The overall combination of characteristics that capture the unique nature of a person as that person reacts & interacts with others (Wood 98)”*

One individual may be outgoing, creative, and excitable while another is reserved, organised, and calm. Something happens when the quiet person is made to speak up and the assertive person is tamed. Can people easily change something as hard-wired as personality?

The short answer is, no. Changes like the ones just described reflect behavioural adjustments rather than personality changes. Behaviour reflects how a person reacts to specifics such as problems, people, pace of environment, and procedures. A willing and able person can easily modify and adapt his or her behaviour. Not so with personality.

The overwhelming scientific consensus is that personalities rarely change after adolescence, and if change does occur, it happens slowly, or because of a major life threatening event. Let's take this into the workplace.

You recently hired a salesperson that steadfastly refuses to work your database and call prospects and clients. You "diagnose" call reluctance and invest thousands of dollars in training, provide coaching and phone scripts, and add sales incentives. The result, maybe, just maybe, the short-term behaviour will change.

In time, one of two things will happen. Either the basic innate personality will come forward or the salesperson will experience burnout from the effort of modifying his/her basic behaviour for forty (or more) hours a week.

Think of workplace behaviour as the design of the car – what it looks like. Not all car designs are a dead giveaway to what's under the bonnet. Many managers base hiring and succession planning decisions on the “look of the car”, that is, observed behaviour. Take away style and presentation and you get the essence of the person - his or her personality.

This is a significant problem. All job applicants have access to information on how to ace an interview – I addressed this a couple of weeks ago. The successful applicants know how to "dress and present." Personality testing saves managers the expense, heartache and embarrassment of hiring a "great personality" only to find out the applicant has a "problem personality".

Personality tests based on the five-factor model help hiring managers determine who a person really is and how that person will fit an environment, a team, or a job.

One five-factor test, Prevue, helps separate achievers from doers, risk-takers from risk aversion, outgoing from reserved, and relaxed from easily excitable. It helps identify those individuals who adapt to, or lead change, who display leadership or sales ability, and who are likely to benefit from coaching and development.

When looking to build an organisation of people with the "right stuff," think personality. Volumes of empirical research prove this is the best approach. Think about that last person you had to let go (or in today's environment, managed out) – I bet you hired on knowledge, skill and experience, but terminated on personality and/or mental ability – what's under the bonnet.

Rob McKay is Director of AssessSystems, an Auckland based consultancy of organisational psychologists that specialise in employee assessment for

*selection, development and performance management. He can be reached at 09
424 6030 – www.assess.co.nz*