



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

July 2010 – Issue 39

Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to Enhance Workplace Communication

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The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), based on the work of Carl Jung, assesses how individuals prefer to get rejuvenated (through extraverted or introverted activities), to perceive and process information (through details or the overview), to make decisions and communicate (through attention to principles or to people needs), and to manage time and possibilities (by flowing with time or desiring closure). While an individual can be skilled in all four preference pairs, one preference in each pair comes far more naturally and easily. Taking the inventory produces a four-letter type that reflects the individual's preferences in each pair.

Many people gain self-insight from their MBTI results; however, they often fail to see how to bridge the differences between their types and those of other people. For example, as an actuary, you may be confused, if not offended, when your marketing teammate looks glassy-eyed when you describe actuarial facts. Of course, these details are not in your teammate's area of expertise; but, additionally, he or she is likely to be an "Intuitive," a big-picture, visionary type, while you are likely to be a "Sensor," a master of details. If you knew how to bridge these differences, you might get your teammate's atten-

tion by introducing a compelling vision, rather than leading with a grocery list of facts and figures.

Let's look at how to apply knowledge of the preference pairs to communicate more effectively with those from other preferences.

INTROVERSION/EXTRAVERSION

If you get re-energized and rejuvenated by your inner world of ideas and reflections more than by the outer world of people and activities, you are more likely to be introverted than extraverted. Introverts think through ideas and problems before sharing them, whereas extraverts are often likely to talk in order to think. Extraverts prefer to act rather than reflect, and find Introverts too slow in thinking through decisions, whereas Introverts believe Extraverts act prematurely.

Introverts communicating with Extraverts should:

1. Focus on actions to be taken
2. Focus on results
3. Communicate verbally with enthusiasm
4. Emphasize action over deliberation



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Extraverts communicating with Introverts should:

1. Communicate a well-thought-through idea or plan
2. Build in time for Introverts to reflect before deciding
3. Communicate in written form rather than orally
4. Allow airtime for Introverts who wait for silence to speak

SENSING/INTUITION

Sensors prefer facts to ideas, view obstacles as problems to solve rather as conundrums to explore, prefer “tried-and-true” solutions rather than new ones, and prefer action to conception of ideas. Actuaries tend toward being Sensors, given their strengths in working precisely with facts and details.

In contrast, Intuitives prefer new ideas and options to predictable solutions, favor innovation over practicality, and enjoy visioning and theorizing more than implementing. It should be no surprise that this preference pair, Sensing - Intuition, experiences more conflict with each other than any other preference pair. For example, imagine an Intuitive marketer enthusiastically pushing her not-fully-researched ideas on the Sensing actuary who wants to run the numbers before having a discussion. She experiences the actuary as a “naysayer,” while the actuary finds her analysis thin at best.

Sensors communicating with Intuitives should:

1. Start with an overarching description of the issue or challenge rather than the relevant details
2. Allow room for creative exploration before moving to facts
3. Describe the overall goal and strategies before moving to tactics
4. Explain the desired outcomes and related challenges of a project

Intuitives communicating with Sensors should:

1. Clearly identify the problem they are trying to solve

2. Share relevant facts and details
3. Reduce risk factors or required changes
4. Describe successful applications of the desired strategies

THINKING/FEELING

Thinkers make decisions from an objective viewpoint, thoroughly analyzing the relevant issues. They tend to question ideas and solutions before accepting them. Questioning and debating tends to be their initial reaction to most ideas. Given their focus on the task rather than the people involved, they are often perceived as impersonal. Directness and succinctness is critical to them—“beating around the bush” or indulging in painstaking details are turnoffs.

In contrast, Feelers focus more on values and people than on the task itself. Since interpersonal harmony is a central value for Feelers, they will focus on commonalities before discussing differences that require negotiation. Feelers can perceive Thinkers’ direct stance as abrupt and their debate-like nature as disconcerting.

Thinkers communicating with Feelers should:

1. Be descriptive rather than judgmental
2. Use empathy by imagining the other’s perspective
3. Start with a concern for what is important to people
4. Consider a decision’s impact on the people who carry it out
5. Start with the positives rather than the negatives

Feelers communicating with Thinkers should:

1. Discuss the costs and benefits of the issues
2. Identify the issue clearly, the principles involved, and potential solutions, as well as their strengths and weaknesses
3. Take a stand and make their case succinctly
4. Be willing to engage in debate without taking it personally

JUDGING-PERCEIVING

Judgers prefer closure and organization to looseness and spontaneity; relax after completing their work (which means not a lot of relaxing!), and use lists and calendars to manage their time. Perceivers value the management of time far less and prefer room to be spontaneous and change direction. They enjoy brainstorming and exploring new possibilities far more than decision-making itself.

Judgers communicating with Perceivers should:

1. Allow Perceivers flexibility around “how” they meet their goals
2. Allow sufficient time for brainstorming
3. Realize there are often far more “right” solutions than their own
4. Consider multiple options before pressing for closure
5. Understand that over-directing Perceivers will lead to their resistance

Perceivers communicating with Judgers should:

1. Understand that frequent or last-minute changes adversely affect Judgers
2. Take Judgers’ deadlines seriously and “to the minute”
3. Balance brainstorming with analysis and decision-making
4. Reopen decisions only when new data significantly impacts the decision
5. Take a clear stand

Like any other assessment instrument, the MBTI provides one lens among many for understanding personality and behavior. This particular lens offers powerful applications for enhancing workplace communication and teamwork. When delivering information in a style sensitive to the receiver (rather than to the deliverer), individuals can be far more effective communicators. Many worry that they cannot leverage these strategies since they don’t know their colleagues’ or customers’ MBTI type. If that is

the case, they can make their best guess, and if those strategies are ineffective, they will know why and be able to make use of another set of strategies. ●

Liz Berney, Ph.D., runs Berney Associates, an organization development and training firm specializing in working with teams and training in leadership, change management and conflict resolution. Her “Team Application to MBTI” toolkit helps teams agree upon specific actions to enhance team communication and effectiveness. You can read her article, “The Co-Creation of Conflict” in Yes You Can! offered by Insight Publishing. For more information, go to www.berneyassoc.com.

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