

Helping a team to improve its effectiveness

An everyday story of working folk

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The background

Hannah Brown manages a team of three highly competent product development specialists, Phil, Clare and Rob. She had high expectations of them based on their skills and experience, and she is frustrated that the team is not gelling in the way she anticipated.

Yesterday, at a progress meeting with the team, Rob made an impassioned case for progressing in a direction with which Phil disagreed. At first, Phil fell silent, then he attacked Rob, describing his stance as unethical, which upset and surprised everyone. Clare, meanwhile, had yet another idea which she wanted to pursue, so she was impatient with the men for arguing over a solution she felt was not fully developed. Hannah pulled them back on track, but finds them increasingly draining, and is nervous about meeting the team's target date for completing their prototype. Her problem, as she tells her HR Manager, Shyama, is in getting them to work more effectively together.

The clues in personality and style

When people clash, a mutual understanding of the similarities and differences in personality, and hence behaviours and responses, within a team can go a long way towards improving effectiveness.

Twentieth century research into personality eventually identified five specific personality traits (the Big Five) which could be used to structure almost all of the myriad factors identified by a whole host of researchers. There are small variations in emphasis between the various models put forward.

For example, Brand, in 1984, classified the five dimensions as:

- **Will** including independence, sociability, self-sufficiency and autonomy
- **Energy** including extroversion and assertiveness
- **Affection** including tough-mindedness, trust and openness
- **Conscience** including **control**, conformity and conventionality
- **Neuroticism** including **emotionality**, anxiety and over-sensitivity.¹

This model, along with meticulous research into a range of others, informed the development by psychologist Norman L. Buckley of Facet5™, the tool described in this article. Other tools exist for working with interpersonal conflict. For example, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument is also based on the Big Five factors. The conflict resolution elements of both instruments have in turn been partly inspired by Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid², which describes managerial style on a quadrant with 'concern for production' and 'concern for people' on its two axes.

¹ With thanks to Consulting Tools (www.consultingtools.com) for research material and illustrations.

² Blake, RR & Mouton, JS (1964 & 1978), "The New Managerial Grid", Houston, Gulf Publishing.

Unravelling the issues in Hannah's team

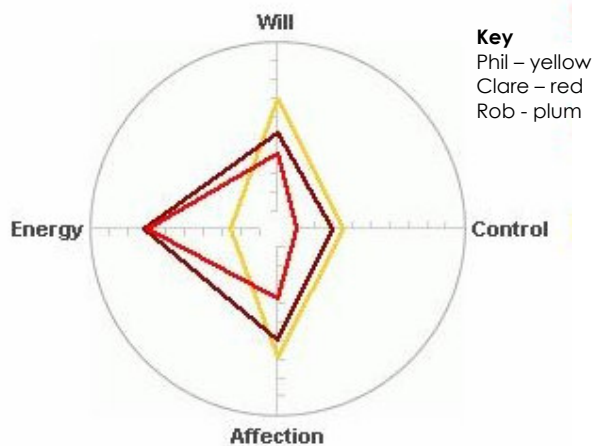


FIGURE 1: COMPARING PROFILES

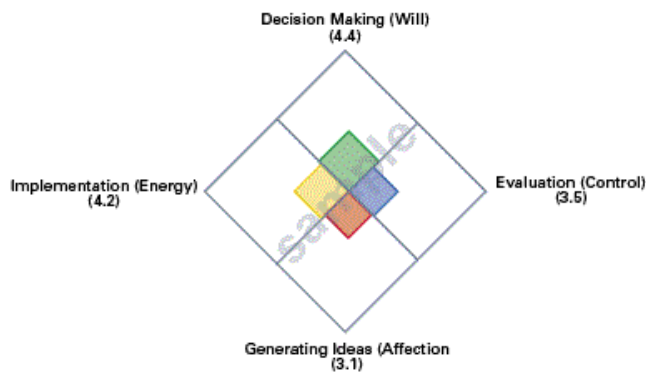


FIGURE 2: WORK STYLES

The 5 Orientations

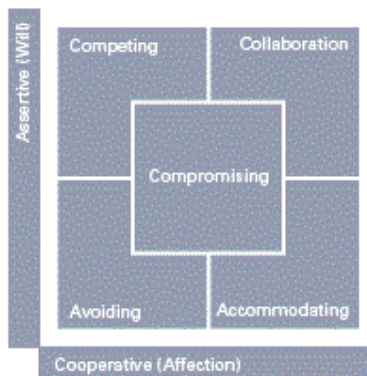


FIGURE 3: REACHING AGREEMENT

In a carefully planned workshop, using Facet 5 Teamscape™ the team gains an understanding of their personality and style differences, raising their awareness of how they work and relate. They can use this awareness, and a greater knowledge of each-other, to fine-tune their interactions.

I give three broad-brush examples here: comparing three profiles (figure 1), examining differences in work style implied by the profiles (figure 2) and orientation to reaching agreement (figure 3). (Figs 2 & 3 do not relate to our case study).

Figure 1 is calibrated to show low scores in the centre and higher scores on the outside of the circle. Facet 5 also measures Emotionality (which relates to Brand's Neuroticism factor). This has not been discussed here, but it does act as a lens, exaggerating (high scores) or dampening (low scores) the impact of the other factors.

Figure 1 shows up immediate differences between the relatively extrovert Clare and Rob, and the more introverted Phil. This helps them to understand his apparent aloofness, and him to understand their high enthusiasm. Clare's low Control score, together with her extroversion, give a clue to her tendency to rush off after new ideas. Normally I would include Hannah's profile too, but I have stuck to three for clarity.

Figure 2 takes a typical work cycle (generating ideas, evaluating them, making a decision and implementing it) shows how scores on the Affection, Control, Will and Energy scales reflect the sort of contribution that might be expected at each stage.

For example, in generating ideas, someone with a low affection score tends towards practicalities and keeping things on track. Both Rob and Phil, by contrast, would be more keen to explore possibilities, and to take everyone's ideas into account, however off the wall.

When it comes to evaluating ideas, people with high control scores, who are detail-focused and systematic, come into their own, but can irritate those with low control scores, who 'don't do' detail and want to move on.

At the decision-making stage, high-will scorers will be decisive, and the more reflective low-will scorers may feel 'bounced' (to borrow from Eeyore).

At the implementation stage, extroverts will tend towards getting their hands dirty and trying things out, while introverts will take a more cautious, reflective approach, often to the irritation of their extrovert colleagues – another potential sticking point for Rob, Clare and Phil.

Figure 3 illustrates how scores on the Will and Affection scales indicate approaches to solving disputes and reaching agreement. These scales are very similar to those of the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument. Each individual's scores will produce a unique point on the quadrant, and they can be visually compared. Additionally, preferred tactics in dealing with conflict (derived from Energy and Control scores) infer how much individuals will tend to stick to the rules (high control) or use them flexibly or only when they suit (low control).

Summary

There are many approaches to building teams. The benefit offered by using personality profiling tools lies in raising each team member's awareness and appreciation of their colleagues, and provides a foundation for more effective team working.

Biographical information

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