

You're so predictable...

Personality matters – and its effects can be predicted. Professor Ivan Robertson explains how aspects of personality affect outcomes at work

Your personality plays a big role in determining how you behave. Few people would argue with this statement because we all have an intuitive sense that if someone consistently behaves in certain ways (whether good or bad) it is, at least in part, because of their underlying personality.

Beyond this general understanding, thinking about the effect that personality has on behaviour has always been the domain of psychologists and, in extreme cases, psychiatrists. But leaders and managers are ultimately responsible for the behaviour of their staff in the workplace, so it's actually beneficial for them to understand something about how aspects of personality affect outcomes at work. Every day, we encounter the behavioural outcomes of myriad different personalities and the surprising fact is that much of this is predictable based on the personality characteristics of those involved.

Psychologists' understanding of personality has really developed over the past 25 years. Today, most large organisations use personality assessment as part of the selection, placement and development of staff. There is also a large body of research evidence that proves that personality assessment can predict work performance (Robertson and Kinder, 1993).



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The clear implication here is that variation in work performance can be explained in part by employees' personalities. But what do I actually mean by personality? In everyday conversation, the word is used to mean a loose collection of attributes that add up to what a person is like. However, psychologists have more systematic ways of describing personality – the most commonly accepted of which is the five-factor model (FFM).

The FFM puts forward five key elements of personality that are applicable to everyone. This is not to imply that we all have the same personality, but that we all have different preferences for the behaviour associated with each of the five factors. In fact, when the different factors are combined each person has a more or less unique combination of preferences and therefore a unique personality. The factors that make up the FFM are as follows:

- Openness to experience – capacity for emotion, adventure, exploring unusual ideas, imagination and curiosity.
- Conscientiousness – self-discipline, acting dutifully and aiming for achievement; planned rather than spontaneous behaviour.
- Extraversion – energy, positive emotions; the tendency to seek stimulation and the company of others.
- Agreeableness – compassionate and cooperative rather than suspicious and antagonistic towards others.
- Neuroticism – a tendency to experience negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, depression or vulnerability; sometimes called emotional instability.

Most recruiters tend to look for people who are at the positive end of the continuum for each factor in the FFM. So, generally speaking, employers want people who are:

- Confident and outgoing (high extraversion)
- Emotionally stable (low neuroticism)
- Reliable and accurate (high conscientiousness)
- Innovative and intellectually curious (high openness to experience)
- Naturally collaborative and compassionate (high agreeableness).

It's easy to see why recruiters tend to use this set of attributes as a template for selecting high quality candidates. However, individual personalities seldom conform neatly with this ideal – so, for example, a confident and outgoing person (high extraversion) may also be quite unreliable and careless (low conscientiousness).

The public sector, like all sectors, is filled with a range of different personalities that interact each day in pursuit of common outcomes. When people experience difficulties in working together person-

ality is often at the root of the problems – also true when people get on like a house on fire. At the top of organisations, leaders have a responsibility for providing a clear vision and setting goals, but how comfortable they are with the various aspects of leadership and how they go about leading will depend a lot on their underlying personality.

Leaders who are naturally collaborative and compassionate may find it easy to involve people and show concern for them, but they will also find it harder to be tough and fair when unpopular decisions are needed.

At this level, personality is particularly important because in leaders it is combined with the power to make things happen. The most effective leaders are able to manage their own personalities so that the organisation gets the best from their natural style and is protected from the negative aspects of their make-up. The current focus on corporate governance in the public sector is a result of an historical lack of organisational control over “big personalities” in senior roles. The problems associated with such personalities are not necessarily easy to fix. This is partly because the very traits and behaviour that enable people to be successful, influence others and rise through an organisation may also be the basis of the antisocial behaviour that can derail organisations.

In fact, much time in organisations is spent focusing on these issues and often significant risks are exposed. After some of the high-profile examples of poor corporate governance, many organisations have now designed processes to moderate and control the influence of personality and ensure that organisations are run in a fair and ethical manner. However, the whole enterprise is likely to be much more successful if senior people understand and take responsibility for their own behaviour.

Leaders and managers can benefit from understanding the behavioural implications of different types of personality. Traditionally, this kind of thinking has been restricted to HR or external consultants, but I would encourage anyone responsible for managing or leading staff to learn more about the link between personality and behaviour. If these ideas are applied sensibly and in the context of your objectives it can have a dramatic effect on individual, team and organisational performance – impacting bottom-line measures such as retention and productivity.

• Next month Ivan Robertson will continue the discussion on the importance of personality by looking at what happens when darker personality traits and psychopathic tendencies are displayed in the workplace.