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How to Properly Use a Personality Assessment

By Rich Thompson

Despite, or perhaps because of, its insight and ubiquity, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator instrument - the world's most widely used personality assessment - is sometimes misused by individuals and organizations. Proper use of the instrument results in expanding vision and opportunity, while misuse can result in pigeonholing and exclusion.

Based on Carl Jung's theory of personality type, the Myers-Briggs assessment sheds light on the environments, situations and tasks that individuals of 16 unique personality types are likely to find stimulating, challenging, fulfilling, etc. Understanding core preferences - both one's own and those of others - provides insight into motivations, natural strengths, potential areas for growth and style differences and lays a foundation for team building, conflict resolution, career development and numerous other talent management functions.

Misconception: It's a personality test.

The truth: The term "test" connotes right or wrong answers, better or worse scores, passing or failing - none of which applies to Jung's theory or the Myers-Briggs assessment. Careful attention was paid to this issue in naming the instrument, which is referred to as an "indicator" rather than a "test." This value-neutral approach to personality expands, rather than limits, the assessment's usage possibilities. While pigeonholing stymies development, understanding personality type reveals new opportunities.

Misconception: It can be used to identify people's weaknesses.

The truth: The Myers-Briggs assessment does provide a basis for identifying potential "blind spots" for the 16 personality types, so why not use the assessment to pinpoint weaknesses? The fact that one tends to rely more on one preference in a dichotomous pair does not mean that he or she can't or doesn't use the opposite preference. Many successful individuals have overcome their blind spots by developing their ability to use both preferences effectively.

Misconception: It predicts behavior.

The truth: The assessment suggests "predisposition" but not "predetermination." Rather than boxing them in, learning about type empowers individuals to make more informed career and life choices based on a clear understanding of their tendencies and inclinations.

Misconception: It measures personality traits.

The truth: Though the terms "trait" and "type" are often viewed as synonymous, they describe quite different theoretical concepts. Trait theory holds that behaviors - for example, sociability - are quantifiable, meaning they come in different levels, amounts or degrees that can be measured. The trait concept may be more quickly grasped, as Western cultures in particular teach us from an early age to evaluate the world and ourselves by measurement - How tall? How fast? How smart?

Type theory, on the other hand, holds that each individual naturally relies more on one preference than the other in four pairs of opposites - Introversion and Extraversion, Sensing and Intuition, Thinking and Feeling, and Judging and Perceiving. The Myers-Briggs instrument sorts for these preferences but does not measure them. The results reflect how clearly a person casts his or her vote for each preference. The instrument doesn't measure "how much" or "how well," as do most trait-based constructs, but instead indicates how clear one is about his or her preferences: slightly clear, moderately clear, very clear or not clear.

Misconception: It can be used to identify "bad apples."

The truth: It's intended to identify valuable differences between normal, healthy people, not to identify abnormal personalities or assess morality.

Misconception: It can be used to assemble a "dream team" of personalities.

The truth: While highly valuable in team-building applications, it's not an appropriate tool for determining who does and doesn't belong on a team or for any other screening use. Effective use of the instrument enables team members to better understand themselves and one another, thereby improving team communication and cohesion and fostering an environment that enables everyone to contribute his or her best.

Misconception: It can be used to identify future leaders by matching personality types of past great leaders.

The truth: In reality, there is no such thing as a "leadership type." Effective leaders emerge from all 16 types, and all bring unique perspectives and value to leadership positions. The Myers-Briggs instrument is extremely valuable in leadership development, as it enables individuals to more fully grasp why they think and act the way they do and to better understand and appreciate the strengths and styles of the people around them. The leader who is knowledgeable about personality type will be better able to avoid misunderstandings and be open to new ideas and viewpoints that will aid in taking the organization to new heights.

Rich Thompson manages CPP's research team, leading the company's research efforts in the United States and worldwide and providing strategic input on cross-functional product development efforts. Thompson earned his master's and Ph.D. in psychology, with minors in management, from Texas Tech University. Thompson has an extensive background in developing surveys and assessments, used both for organizational information gathering as well as in predictive research.