

# Shell Enhances Team Performance and Cross-Cultural Understanding Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® Instrument



## A Case Study of Shell Australia

### CASE STUDY AT A GLANCE

#### BUSINESS OVERVIEW

Shell is a major global energy organisation which has operated in Australia since 1901 and employs approximately 3,000 people in Australia. Shell finds, develops and supplies about one-third of Australia's petroleum requirements to over 50,000 customers.

#### CHALLENGE

To enable members of a multi-cultural oil refinery team to achieve stronger engagement and affiliation and improved performance. The challenge involved addressing factors influencing the effectiveness of the team, including misunderstandings arising from differences of communication styles, decision-making preferences and cultural background. The team required an engaging learning framework, which would enable them to develop an agreed set of goals to improve team interactions and performance.

#### SOLUTION

The team participated in a process involving individualised assessment and feedback of their MBTI® profiles, an experiential workshop designed to address team interactions and agreed approaches for communicating, managing conflict and utilising diversity within the team to achieve business objectives.

#### RESULTS

The team gained insight into their strengths and addressed the challenges they identified through the process. Trust increased between team members, enabling them to make constructive use of personality type differences within the team and improve the performance and efficiency of the team, resulting in tangible dollar savings.

### MEETING THE LEARNING CHALLENGE AT SHELL

Rob Hart is all too aware of the challenge of achieving optimum performance with work teams comprising people from diverse backgrounds. As manager of Shell's learning division in Australia and the Oceania region, Rob is engaged by managers and their teams to conduct development programs and interventions that not only improve individual and team effectiveness but also have an impact on the bottom line in a measurable way. He states, 'Our organisation is truly global and a fascinating environment in which to operate as a Learning and Development professional. Almost 75% of our consulting work focuses on investigations into team dynamics'.

As a global organisation, Shell employs over 104,000 people in 110 countries from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, personalities and skills. On any given assignment Rob can be working on-site at an oil refinery with highly technically skilled operational staff, and on another occasion in a corporate office with 'white collar' professionals. Moreover, like most organisational development specialists he needs to be flexible in the solutions he offers, as occasionally he encounters a lack of enthusiasm or resistance from groups who may view him as another 'head office-based consultant'.

Rob was presented with some of these challenges on a recent assignment when asked by the team leader of an oil refinery maintenance planning team to improve the team's ability to work together. Rob explains, 'The team leader was determined to create stronger engagement, affiliation and cultural understanding around behaviours, communication styles and thinking preferences in his team of eight skilled maintenance and reliability engineers'.

He adds, 'The team focuses on ensuring that safe and efficient maintenance procedures are carried out in a highly technical, safety-focussed and process-driven refinery work culture. Much of the work is carried out on an individual basis, with team members rarely working on a single project as a collective. Instead, they are deployed to specific zones in the refinery to work alongside a range of different department supervisors and staff'.

He further explains, 'The team demographic also provided some interesting dynamics. The team had a range of generational differences, including Baby Boomers and Gen X/Y and cultural groups from Asia, America and Australia'. With such concentrated diversity within a relatively small team, Rob needed to facilitate a high-impact intervention that would meet a broad range of learning styles and engage an audience that, as he

describes, ‘traditionally dislike non-technical or, as colloquially termed, fluffy, touchy-feely courses’.

Rob designed a multi-faceted intervention, including meeting individually with each team member and facilitating a team-based workshop. A key factor for success with the assignment was also finding a tool that would quickly engage the team members and, as Rob says, ‘create an informal and approachable atmosphere’ to permit learning by each person. Rob decided to use the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® (MBTI®) instrument in the program. As he says, ‘The MBTI is highly regarded as a diagnostic tool for team environments and effectively assists project team in recognising each other’s attributes in constructive ways. The vast majority of team interventions at Shell utilise MBTI profiling’.

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—Rob Hart,  
Learning Division Manager  
Shell Australia

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The MBTI instrument, developed by Isabel Briggs Myers and Katharine Briggs, measures innate personality preferences described by Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung. The instrument reflects a person’s preferred ways of directing their attention and energy (Extraversion–Introversion), taking in information (Sensing–Intuition), decision making (Thinking–Feeling) and managing their time (Judging–Perceiving). Sixteen unique personality types result from combinations of these four sets of preferences. The MBTI tool has been utilised by organisations worldwide for over forty years to help individuals and teams learn about themselves, their leader(s) and how the team can draw on differences in constructive ways to produce team success (Hirsh et al., 2003).

Rob elaborates on his experiences: ‘Having worked across the world with Shell, I have experienced the MBTI tool in a range of scenarios. HR professionals have used the tool to help new employees assimilate into virtual teams, and line managers have utilised MBTI profiles to create a more inclusive environment, where staff are encouraged to embrace and leverage the different thinking styles in the group’.

Rob summarises his reasons for integrating the MBTI instrument into the program with the oil refinery team:

- ‘The team leader had, on a previous occasion, experienced the MBTI instrument. He viewed the tool to be credible and was comfortable using it with his team.
- As the MBTI instrument has been scientifically validated, it increased the acceptance by individuals in the group, who needed to be persuaded of the facts, mechanics and validity behind the tool.
- It offers neutral and non-confrontational language for the group to utilise and understand—therefore building a common platform to reduce ambiguity and misunderstandings, which commonly occur in such a diverse team.
- Using the exercises based on the four preference dichotomies measured by the MBTI tool in the team workshop allowed for a real-time activity of problem solving, communication and debrief of the differing approaches to essentially the same set of information.
- Unlike a range of other profiling tools, the MBTI tool is a holistic approach to personality type, therefore benefiting the individual with a greater understanding of family members, clients and contacts outside the immediate work team. This offered an additional selling point to convince the more cynical team members and stakeholders of the value of the tool.
- Ideas and themes explored using the MBTI tool could also be leveraged for future refresher and advanced sessions covering how personality type can be used to understand and manage stress or apply alternative problem-solving approaches’.

## THE TEAM INTERVENTION

Setting the scene for the team was crucial to gain their cooperation and achieve the desired outcomes of the program. Rob notes, ‘The work culture of the team was very much a technical blue-collar environment, where a requirement to become more aware of behaviour and communication styles could clearly have presented some discomfort for the group’.

To address this potential concern, Rob conducted an initial teleconference with the team to explain the context, purpose and desired outcomes of the exercise and how the MBTI instrument would be used as part of the intervention. Following this briefing, the team were invited to complete the MBTI assessment online. Participants were also presented with a short list of key questions designed to give Rob insight into each participant’s perceptions of the team’s dynamics. Rob explains, ‘I wanted to hear the “truth as I see it in the team” from each participant’.

Rob’s analysis of the team’s feedback identified the common positive aspects and challenges of working in the team. Positives identified by the team included ‘Pride in

what we do, variety of tasks; willingness to help; diversity of culture, style and expertise; and the work ethic, commitment and solution-focussed approach of the team’.

In contrast, the areas identified for development were ‘A lack of clarity and misinterpretation of communication; impatience under pressure; expression of individual frustrations; not enough time given to understand different perspectives or diversity; a lack of awareness and understanding of how peers prefer to receive and give feedback; addressing perceptions of cultural stereotypes; reducing a “them versus us” attitude between some Shell staff and external contractors; and language barriers leading to misunderstandings’.

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Rob next conducted face-to-face debriefs with each participant to verify their MBTI assessment results and ‘to get each person thinking about examples of how their type preferences show through in their daily lives’. To aid understanding, Rob provided each participant with a copy of Isabel Myers’ *Introduction to Type*® booklet and utilised *Looking at Type*™, by Earle C. Page, with the participants in the debriefing sessions.

‘The face-to-face debriefs were conducted within the team’s work environment, meaning that I had to remove the usual corporate suit and wear the appropriate boiler suit, gloves, hard hat, boots and eye goggles to enter the refinery. This allowed the participants to feel more comfortable with receiving their briefing. A large part of the event’s success ultimately hinged on the pre-workshop relationship and trust building with participants’. With the insights he obtained from the debriefing sessions, Rob was ready to move to the next phase of the program.

**BRINGING IT TOGETHER IN THE TEAM**

‘The team workshop began with a segment examining cultural differences, from a non-personality perspective. This introductory section involved the team considering what the terms ‘culture’ and ‘values’ meant to them as individuals and as a group.’ Rob explains, ‘The perspectives were highly diverse, with a variety of norms, values and

expectations being shared relating to communication protocols, manner and tone of voice, body language and level of comfort to challenge authority figures’. The group explored different cultural perspectives held by individuals in the group, with each person constructing his or her own ‘cultural mirror’ to ascertain where the differences occurred between team members. ‘The exercise raised some profoundly useful realisations for a number of staff around their perspective versus that of another culture. The cultural exercise also broke the ice, enabling the afternoon discussion about the MBTI results to be less confronting as trust had been built amongst the team’.

The workshop session then focused on exploring the MBTI assessment results of the team. Rob mapped the personality types within the team (see Figure 1). As a certified MBTI practitioner, Rob helped the team identify their collective strengths and diagnose their common blind spots. Years of application in team building demonstrates that all MBTI personality types have unique talents to offer a team as well as challenges to overcome (Hirsh et al., 2003).

Researchers and practitioners have consistently found that personality type theory and the MBTI instrument offer insights and a framework for making predictions about how people and teams will behave. The more similar the personality types on a team, the more readily the team members will understand each other. While such teams are likely to reach decisions quickly, they are more likely to make errors due to inadequate representation of divergent viewpoints provided by personality types not represented or under-represented in the team. Conversely, teams comprising many different personality types may be slower to make decisions or have higher levels of conflict. However, these teams are likely to make better decisions if all different viewpoints are covered (McCaulley, 1975).

**WORKING WITH THE TEAM MBTI® RESULTS**

Rob identified the majority MBTI preferences of the refinery team to be Introversion (I), Sensing (S), Thinking (T) and Judging (J). With this knowledge team members were more aware of what they were likely to favour and what they may overlook. Rob explains, ‘It was identified that the group could be in danger of developing an overly task-focussed approach, often missing “pleasantries” and confirmation of understanding instructions’.

ISTJ x 4	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ x 1
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
ESTP x 2	ESFP	ENFP x 1	ENTP x 1
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ

Figure 1. Team Data

Rob assisted team members in exploring the potential blind spots using their MBTI results. ‘They identified risks of focussing only on ideas that appear obviously feasible and immediately rejecting other potentially valid ideas,

emphasising efficiency above inclusion and consultation, creating a sense of exclusion for some team members, and a lack of recognition for alternative non-traditional contributions by individuals', he explains.

'To assist with strengthening understanding and developing connections of individual type and team type, the participants were asked to discuss with a colleague who had at least one or two preferences different from their own, how "opposites" could maximise effectiveness. This involved the participants flexibly using their own personality style to challenge one-dimensional or habitual thinking patterns'. Rob also helped link the team's MBTI results to persistent issues or challenges they were facing by introducing Isabel Myers' problem-solving model (Myers, 1998; see Figure 2). This helped the team determine whether they were overlooking alternative and potentially useful ways of solving problems. Rob adds, 'During the final section of the workshop, team members were encouraged to actively work together to brainstorm, problem-solve and allocate actions and tasks to improve their communication and decision making, using their new-found skills from the MBTI tool and cultural awareness activities'.

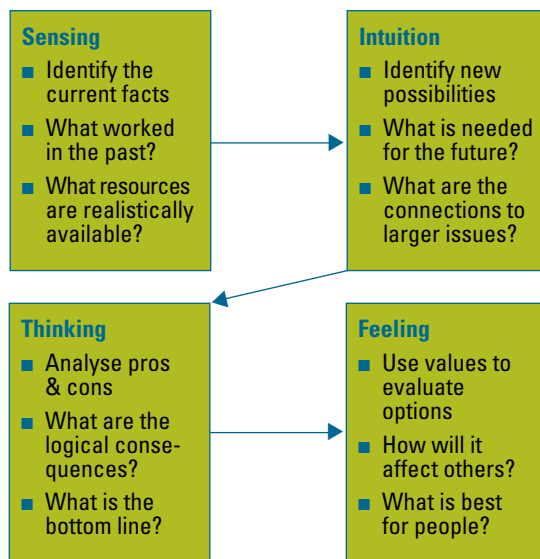


Figure 2. Type Decision-Making Model

Adapted from *Introduction to Type® and Decision Making* (Hirsh & Hirsh, 2007).

## CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

Some of the underlying causes of conflict within the team were also addressed during the program. The low representation of some personality preferences in the team indicated where potential conflict could arise.

Rob says, 'As only one person in the team indicated a preference for Feeling, the group came to the realisation they were relying on the opposite Thinking preference, which was held by the majority of the team. The result of relying on the Thinking approach would be a communication and decision making style which could be perceived as blunt or overly direct by some team members and particularly by certain cultural groups'. This was illustrated

in Rob's description of a discussion between two participants of different personality types, one with preferences for ESTP and the other ENFP. Rob relays the discussion.

**ESTP participant:** *Conflict, yeah—I just kick something and yell it how it is...you know? My version of 'tell it how it is'. I want people to see I care about the issue and I therefore seem to be annoyed by their inability to deliver a promise or action, that's why I get excited.*

**ENFP participant:** *Yeah, but that approach just switches me and some others off. You come across as boorish and difficult; nobody wants to challenge or offer ideas, as you're just seen as dismissive.*

Rob discovered the team continued to apply their learning from the MBTI® instrument long after the workshop. 'Further examples of ongoing effectiveness were demonstrated as people with a preference for Introversion (I) realised the necessity to pair with people who prefer Extraversion (E) and receive mentoring in how to effectively present information to E customers, who were seeking engagement. The introverted participants had previously been less comfortable presenting to customers and preferred working alone or on tasks focussing on reflective activities'.

Rob offers some further examples from the team workshop, 'Those with a preference for Intuition (N) took on the role of devil's advocate to challenge traditional views of those with the opposite Sensing (S) preference and therefore seek what the team leader highlighted as a varied approach to dealing with common issues'. On the issue of working with procedures, Rob adds, 'Those with a preference for Judging (J) remained highly valued in the team, as the processes, reliance on systems and accuracy for the refinery maintenance schedules are paramount. Those with a preference for Perceiving (P) were able to assert their need for flexibility by acting as a sounding board for their opposites when a new process or measure evolved into implementation stage'. As a result of the openness generated from the experience, Rob found that issues relating to cultural differences, particularly between the leader and some team members, could be addressed without participants losing face.

## REAL OUTCOMES

The program resulted in the team achieving multiple practical changes and improvements. Most notably, the team developed a consolidated way of undertaking and completing their work by devising agreed 'work orders'. Rob states, 'The value in completing the exercise will lead to a reduction in misunderstandings of job scope, removal of silos, enhanced communication, reduction in re-worked/duplicated tasks, scope creep and costs'. He also notes, 'The team leader commented that the completed exercise had united the team and was a significant win for maintenance'.

Rob adds that since the program the team continues to make improvements. 'They are currently working towards the implementation of the consolidated work orders, communicating the process to internal clients and seeing cost savings from reduced duplicate work and wasted time'. The impact on the team has also translated into improvements for the bottom line. Rob summarises

by saying, 'A tangible dollar figure of savings has been identified as a result of the team opening up their perceptions of each other from personality preferences, cultural and team dynamic aspects'. This is good news for the refinery team and good news for Rob as he prepares to tackle his next challenge at Shell.

## REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

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