



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Gutenberg Invented Type - But Not This Kind!

Have you ever been watching a movie and realized there was a character actor on the screen you had seen a “million” times but you couldn’t recall his name? There are hundreds of actors and actresses in show business who have made lifetime careers of playing themselves—being predictable. In other words, being typecast!

The term “typecasting” has a negative connotation. It implies that a person fits a sort of “mold.” There are positive “types” and there are negative “types.” For example, a young man who shows a lot of courage in the face of a combat situation is often referred to as being a “John Wayne.” Someone who hits a home run in a baseball game is called “Babe Ruth.” On the other hand, if you call someone a “bozo,” you are not implying they are funny but rather as being a buffoon.

Typecasting is a sort of mental shorthand for placing human beings into categories where they can be dealt with quickly. However, in the context of most of our organizations, we do not have the luxury of placing people in categories for which they will remain forever. The people we work with—our superiors, our peers, and our subordinates—do have definite personality types and the manner in which we interact with them has a great deal to do with our success in managing and leading organizations.

Over the last several years there has been an increased emphasis on understanding human behavior in the managerial context. Many people credit this new thrust to the Japanese concept of Theory Z. Others feel it is an outgrowth of the “touchy-feely” era of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Regardless of the roots of the management theory, the concept of personality types has been around for quite some time. One of the most prevailing types of personality classification systems is referred to as the “Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator.” Often referred to by the acronym “MBTI,” this instrument is based on Jungian psychology and essentially provides a framework to identify personality types based on e different dimensions; Introversion, Extroversion, Sensing, Intuition, Thinking, Feeling, Perception, and Judgment.

The MBTI has been used quite successfully in the fire service, primarily as a result of its utilization at the National Fire Academy. There the MBTI has been used as a mechanism for identifying personality types as they interact in a variety of role-playing and exercise activities. The use of the instrument has been further enhanced by students who attended the fire academy and have utilized the methodology in conducting research projects within their own fire departments.

You might be asking at this point “So what?” So there are types and everybody has one. What value is that information to you as a fire officer or to your organization? Does classifying personality have anything to do with putting fires out? Does understanding personality have anything to do with managing and leading people?



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Well, the answer to that is “Yes—to the fourth power!” And, you don’t even have to be an expert on the MBTI in order to understand the reasons why the affirmative vote. Very simply stated, the more you understand about what makes a person think, act, behave, or react to any given set of circumstances, the more likely you are to be able to utilize that person in a more effective manner.

In actuality, every human being possesses all eight of these dimensions in his personality. That is to say, a person is both introverted and extroverted at the same time. One of these two behavioral traits will tend to be more dominant, thereby controlling or developing certain personality traits. Individuals who fall on either end of the spectrum tend to exhibit behaviors that become highly predictable and, therefore, useful in determining relationships effectiveness in an organization.

Before we go too much further with this explanation, it might be desirable to point out that almost anybody can get a basic understanding of personality type by reading a book readily available from most commercial book stores, “Please Understand Me,” by Ken Kiersey. This simple paperback breaks the Jungian philosophy down to a very simple set of instructions. It will not make a psychologist out of anybody, but it will give some insight into the distinction between the various personality types.

But, let’s go back to our example. As one might expect, the individual who has a high degree of introversion tends to be internally oriented. That is, they are very secure to function within the realm of their own minds and do not feel necessarily compelled to explain themselves to the outside world. On the other hand, extroverts tend to relate more to the world of people and acts. Introversion—internal; extroversion—external.

That’s pretty simple, right? Well, if you were looking for someone to take on a responsibility that required a great deal of public speaking, it is highly possible that an extrovert would have an affinity for that sort of task much more than an introvert. This is not to say that some introverts cannot develop effective speaking styles, because they do. But, if one is looking for someone to fit naturally into an environment, the extrovert usually feels more comfortable verbalizing and acting out the various scenarios.

There is a corollary relationship for all eight of the dimensions. For example, sensing people tend to be very pragmatic and down-to-earth types who measure, calculate, analyze, and structure things. Intuitives tend to be more global in their thinking and rely a great deal upon instinctive decision making. Intuitives tend to make good long-range planners whereas sensors tend to be very effective with nuts and bolts.

The thinker tends to be led by his thought processes and is very analytical and mentally organized. The feeler tends to respond to the emotional impact of events. Thinkers, therefore, tend to be very effective



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in dealing with projects and programs where they are manipulating things; feelers tend to be more effective in programs dealing with people.

The distinction between judgers and perceivers is a little more subtle than the other descriptions. The judging type tends to be quick to come to conclusions and to decide the rightness or wrongness of the given set of circumstances. The perceivers tend to want to collect all the information possible before arriving at a conclusion. Judging types, therefore, might be extremely effective in working in situations such as inspections in the field, dealing with specific sets of circumstances requiring judgments and decisions with limited deadlines. Perceivers, on the other hand, may be more effective in dealing with constantly changing, dynamic situations. The perceiving type might take longer to make the decision and is more likely to weigh many options and alternatives before arriving at any specific conclusion.

You have probably figured out by now that, with the use of these eight dimensions, a person can have sixteen possible combinations. One could be an INTJ or an ESFP. And, guess what the obvious implications are of mixing types in organizations? That's right! There is often conflict between individuals with different personality types. A strong introvert can literally be driven to the wall by wild-eyed, bushy-tailed extroverts. While the strong I likes quiet, solitude and a mental respite, an extreme E wants everything to be party-time. In the case of personality types, opposites do not attract. Instead, they tend to repel—if not rebel—against one another.

How many times in an organization have you heard a chief officer say, "I just don't know where that guy is coming from?" They are not speaking in reference to a geographical location but rather to the mental frame of reference that causes conflict in the way the individuals deal with decisions or the work environment. For example, a strong ISTJ may appear to the outside world to be relatively, if not extremely, reserved, cold, and calculating. A strong ESFP may take on the imagery of a teddy bear that wants to please most of the people most of the time. You put the two together and the result is often catastrophic.

Interestingly enough, some limited studies have been done on the fire service that indicate the fire service, as a profession, tends to use a relatively limited number of types from the 16 possible combinations. Although an in-depth study has not been performed of the fire service to draw generalizations, there appears to be a strong tendency to recruit, select, and promote individuals who fall in the category of STJs.

One fire officer, familiar with MBTI, while discussing this topic stated there were strong reasons for this personality types emerging in our testing procedures. We are looking for people who can accept reality for what it is, who can analyze the situation and come to conclusions in life or death situations with a minimum amount of conflict in their minds. In a sense of the word, we tend to "clone" a certain type in the fire service due to the emergency nature of the operations.



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Unfortunately, this cloning effect was negative as agencies began to develop other organizational needs such as long-range planning, counseling skills, and improved interpersonal relationships.

As we indicated at the beginning of this article, everybody has a type. You have a type. So does everybody else working for you in your organization. And types are not like overcoats that may be taken off and exchanged for a new model each year. Most of us tend to be pretty much the same year after year, utilizing our strengths and weaknesses and interacting with one another.

As a command officer, the more you know about your own personality and the more you know about the array of other personalities, the more likely you are to be an effective leader and manager. To rephrase an old cliché, “Don’t do unto others as you would have done unto yourself—but do unto them as they would have done to them.” One does not have to compromise his own personality style in order to become effective in working with one that is not only different but almost in direct conflict.

Learning more about type merely adds another dimension to your skills as an effective officer. It gives you a new language. It gives you a new tool. And it helps to break down the barriers that have to be overcome in order to provide motivation and direction to our organizations.

Recently, I went into a friend’s office and there, on his desk, was a simple cardboard sign that said “ENTP spoken here.” Instantly I knew that I could communicate because I R 1, 2—R U 1, 2?