

TOOLS OF THE TRADE



In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she looks at the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

One of the most widely-used personality tests in the world is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a psychological assessment system developed by a mother and daughter team of psychologists some 60 years ago and based on the work of psychiatrist Carl Jung.

The MBTI® asks the subject to answer a series of 'forced choice' questions, where each choice identifies one of four paired traits.

The test takes about 20 minutes and, at the end, the subject is presented with a precise, multi-dimensional summary of his personality, classifying it into types based on four bi-polar dimensions:

- **Extraversion-Introversion (E-I)**
 - Energises either from being with people (E) or being solitary (I)
- **Sensing-Intuition (S-N)**
 - Gathers information directly through data and detail (S) or indirectly through relationships and possibilities (N)
- **Thinking-Feeling (T-F)**
 - Makes decisions based on objective logic (T) or subjective feeling (F)
- **Judging-Perceiving (J-P)**
 - Likes to plan and organise in order to know what lies ahead (J) or prefers flexibility and being open to options (P).

Cross-referencing these four categories results in 16 personality

	sensing		intuitive	
judging	ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
perceiving	ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
perceiving	ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
judging	ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ
	thinking		feeling	
	introvert		extrovert	

types, illustrated in the diagram at the bottom of the page.

Where MBTI differs from some personality tests is that it does not portray some traits as more desirable than others; the cross referencing of the questioning system mirrors the positive approach that we use in coaching, regarding all traits as valid and enabling subjects to identify which emerge most strongly without imposing any judgment or comparison with other people.

This is referred to as 'type dynamics' and works like this:

For each question, you choose your strongest preference – the *dominant function*. The next strongest preference is the *auxiliary function*, the next the *tertiary* and the fourth, which is the least strong, may be called the *inferior function*.

The traits people show to the outside world can be very different to the alignment in their inner worlds. MBTI® helps to clarify the gap and ease the contradictions that people experience in their inner and outer lives.

A key part of MBTI® is that preferences can, and do, change and new ones may emerge. It is absolutely crucial that subjects understand this to avoid the possibility of the process resulting in self-limiting beliefs (explored in more detail on the next page), and to see that they have a choice of which traits to develop or reduce. When it is used in this way, MBTI® can be an enlightening transformational tool.

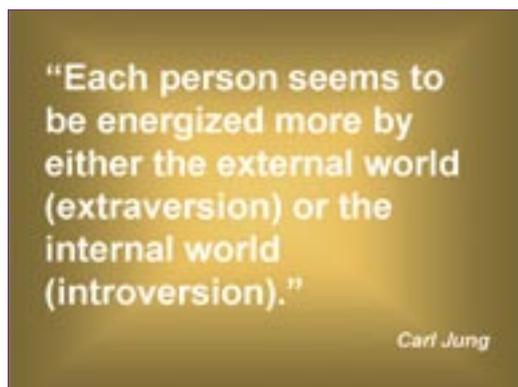
It can enable people to recognise a part of their psychological make-up that they might never have understood before. For example, imagine a man who lives a people-filled life, perhaps being at the head of an organisation, chairing meetings and performing as a speaker; he seems, to himself and to others, to be excelling at something that comes naturally to him and that he enjoys, yet finds

that he regularly suffers extreme exhaustion that only time spent alone can alleviate.

Seeing that others in his position seem to revel in being surrounded by people and not need this time alone, he might feel that he is failing somehow in comparison to his peers.

The MBTI® definition of the difference between an extravert and an introvert, based on the work of Jung, is that the former recharge their energy through being with people while the latter recharge by being alone.

So the test may reveal to our subject that, in spite of his talent with people, at heart he is an



introvert so he needs time alone to recharge his batteries.

He can then give himself permission to do this and build time for it into his schedule, while continuing to make the most of all of his talents.

The MBTI® questions can provide a fertile ground for uncovering new insights in the ‘R’ part of the coaching GROW model – clarifying the current Reality of a coachee’s position. Caution is required here to ensure that the results do not limit the person by introducing labels which become self-limiting beliefs. It is hard enough to break down these patterns without having them reinforced, which would go against the whole ethos of coaching in terms of enabling people to fulfil their potential.

For example, in the case of our public leader, if the test had been administered at an early stage in his life, before he developed his leadership skills, he might never have developed those skills, believing that he was not ‘that type’ of person. A further risk is that, once aware of the reason for his exhaustion, this leader may find it more difficult to summon up the energy required for the assertiveness that his current public role requires.

Executives today often describe themselves to me by way of introduction as, say, an INTP, or an ESTJ, and it is sometimes offered as a means of justifying or excusing a way of behaviour – a *‘this is how I am so no point in trying to change’* attitude.

This use of MBTI® runs against the intentions of the model, yet it happens with surprising frequency and could arguably be seen as the organisational version of the *‘I’m a Virgo so I have to be tidy’* horoscope personality typing.

Despite its popularity, there has been no quantifiable research to show whether the results of MBTI® testing are beneficial or otherwise to participants, and this is the case with most psychometric tools. A great deal of the effect is down to the practitioner, who must help the participant gain constructive learning from it. Some coaches use the results of the process to guide them in choosing what questions to ask during their coaching sessions.

There is a risk from the organisation’s point of view that candidates may fake their answers to appear more suited to a certain job. Whether it is possible to achieve the desired effect by doing this is a moot point, but it will certainly distort the result.

The executives mentioned above who share their MBTI® type within the first few minutes of being introduced may well feel they have something to gain by

answering the questions in a way that will give them the MBTI® type most likely to win them a job or promotion.

Then again, from a coaching point of view, there might be a benefit here to the coachee – it is like setting a goal and imagining you have already achieved it, a recognised technique in performance coaching and sports goal setting.

Whatever the pros and cons, as this tool is almost universally used in large organisations it makes sense for coaches to become familiar with it in order to coach executives through the process in a way that will deliver the maximum possible benefit. ■

Further reading

- 1 <http://www.myersbriggs.org>
- 2 Briggs Myers I Introduction to Type Oxford Psychologists Press 2000
- 3 Krebs Hirsh S, Kummerow J M Introduction to Type and Organisations Oxford Psychologists Press 1990

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