You say one thing, but they hear another

Unlocking personality insights to get your message across

Communication is a constant in our working lives. We spend most of our time at work talking to people, building relationships and pushing agendas. The messages we communicate, and how well we do it, help define our effectiveness—and good communication has been shown to have a direct impact on business results.

Most individuals and managers aspire to enhance their communication skills, but all too often an unconscious approach leads to communication breakdowns. How many of these communication breakdowns come from a mismatch between what we say, and what other people hear when we say it?

This paper proposes that an awareness of individual differences is the best place to start communicating better. Why? Because it offers an insight into how messages might be received by different personality types.

By understanding the needs of different audiences, it is possible to adapt delivery, appeal to people of all types, and get the message across clearly—just as it was intended.

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Introduction

Effective communication is vital. In its absence, very little can be achieved. This is not just the case in business, but in almost everything that we do.

We interact every day with people, on many different levels and in a vast array of contexts. It is easy not to consider the impact of our communication style on others, and the follow-on effects of this.

Messages transmitted by one speaker can be received in an unintended way. To navigate successfully through social interactions, it is necessary to master a more sophisticated type of communication—one that accounts for differences in personality, outlook and approach in others, rather than one that 'defaults' to our natural style.

By considering these factors, individuals can greatly enhance their effectiveness as employees, managers or leaders.

Effective **internal communication** within an organization allows that business to excel, regardless of the industry it operates in. In the past, communication within organizations consisted mainly of face-to-face interaction, with occasional written missives. However, in the modern workplace, people communicate with each other through a wide range of additional modes and media: email, social networking, conference calls and SMS, to name a few.

This makes it even more important to understand and appreciate how individual differences in communication style can enhance or hinder our ability to get the message across.

Why effective communication matters

Business results

It is difficult to estimate the business impact of poor communication. However, human capital consulting firm Watson Wyatt Worldwide conducted some research using data collected in April and May 2009 from 328 organizations that collectively represent five million employees in various regions around the world.

One of the key findings published in their 2009/2010 Communication ROI Report was:

> **Effective employee communication is a leading indicator of financial performance and a driver of employee engagement. Companies that are highly effective communicators had 47 percent higher total returns to shareholders over the last five years compared with firms that are the least effective communicators.**

This shows that ineffective communication can have a very large impact on business performance. Very few, if any, leaders and senior managers would disagree with this.

What often start off as communication issues between individuals can have huge follow-on effects at the team and organizational level, which ultimately lead to wasted time, effort and resources, missed business opportunities, and poor performance/results.

Companies that are highly effective communicators had 47 percent higher total returns to shareholders

Follow-on effects of poor communication

Ineffective communication clearly impacts on business performance and there are many ways this can happen. These directly (or indirectly) affect bottom-line performance at an organizational level, but are often actually experienced at the individual level. They include:

- Ineffective working relationships
- Lack of trust
- Conflict
- Lack of direction and prioritization
- Indecision, or poor decisions

- Missed customer opportunities
- Lack of motivation, low morale
- Stress

Looking at these effects, it's clear that as well as the critical impact on business performance, there will be implications for individuals in terms of their engagement and psychological well-being.

This further emphasizes the importance of effective communication.

The two-way street

Communication is a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding. Participants not only exchange information, but also create and share meaning.

It's a mistake to think of communication as a one-way process where information is imparted to others who passively listen and receive it.

While there is a place for this kind of 'transactional' transfer of information, there is more frequently a need for information to be 'shared' with others who then interact with it. This is where communication becomes more of a two-way process. It relies on listening to and understanding others' perspectives, and then sharing information in a way that encourages people to listen, and to really 'hear' what you are trying to convey.

There are three critical areas that should be considered.

Three critical areas

- It's often as much about how a person says something as it is about what they say
- A person's communication style can have a huge impact on their effectiveness, whether they are an employee, a manager, a consultant or in any other role
- A person's individual perspective of what is important may not match the needs and values of those among their audience.

What you say—and what they hear

How many people really consider how their natural ways of interacting impact the effectiveness of how they convey messages to others?

It is very easy to assume that people want to hear what you have to say in the way that you want to say it. However, communicating effectively with all types of people means presenting different kinds and amounts of information in different ways.

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There are many factors that can reduce communication effectiveness. These include:

- Lack of context—what lies behind the communication, and how important is the message?
- Lack of clarity and/or precision—is the message clear, concise and accurate?
- Lack of opportunities for questions/clarification—are there ways for the recipients to clarify their understanding?
- Unnecessary complexity—is the message over-complicated?
- Unnecessary use of jargon—is the message accessible to the recipients?
- Failure to understand 'local' meaning—how are recipients interpreting the message as it applies to them?

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it does offer a useful starting point for thinking about what effective communication looks like. All of these issues can be addressed by gaining an awareness of their importance, and through communication training and practise.

Understanding personality differences

The final point—where 'local' meaning can warp and dilute the intended message—is one that requires particular attention.

A lack of understanding of individual personality differences can make it difficult to predict how particular audience members will interpret the messages being communicated to them.

Everyone subconsciously applies filters when listening and trying to make sense of what others are saying to them—e.g. "What does this message mean for me?" This is one of the strongest filters and is partly responsible for how different people can interpret the same information in entirely different ways.

Take the example of an announcement of a company restructure. The company can do everything possible to ensure the consistency of the message conveyed to all employees.

However, while the announcement may be devastating for some, it may be seen in a far more positive light by others. For some it may represent redundancy, while for others it could signal an opportunity for career progression. The message

sent out to everyone was the same, but the interpretations of it differed considerably.

When sharing information, most people recognize that they should communicate in a way that encourages people to listen.

What makes this difficult is that there is potentially an audience full of different people, who all want to hear and listen to different things. What can be done to overcome this?
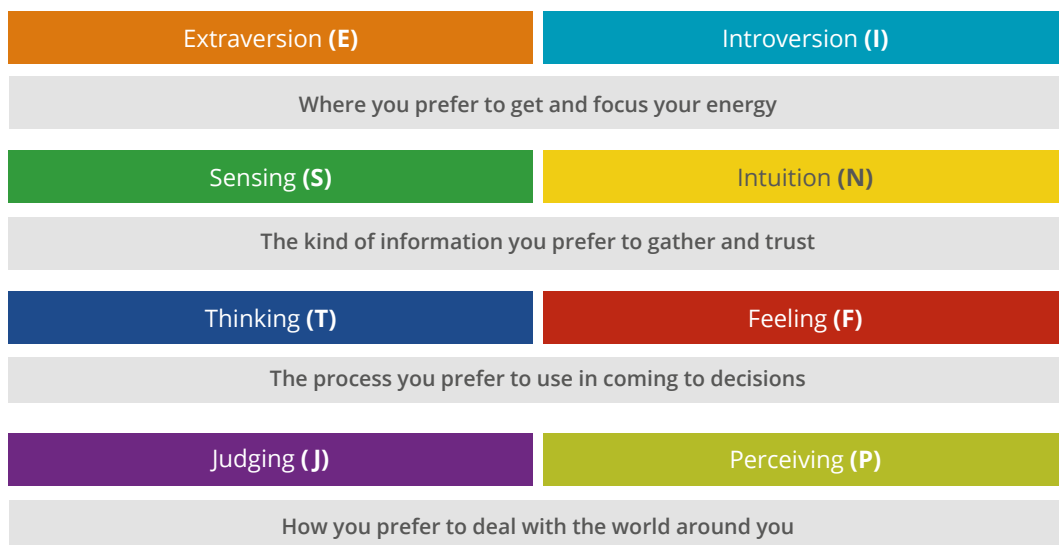
Getting the message across—to everyone

We all take in and evaluate information differently, and we deal with the external world in unique ways. If we recognize and appreciate differences, we can learn to tailor our communication so that it appeals to the multiple types of audience we might be addressing.

One way of doing this is to present the information in different ways.

The MBTI® tool summarizes personality differences in an accessible way. It can be used to help people become more aware of and adapt their communication style. See the next page for examples of how to adapt messages for audience members with different preferences.

The MBTI preference pairs

Extraversion (E)	Introversion (I)
Where you prefer to get and focus your energy	

Sensing (S)	Intuition (N)
The kind of information you prefer to gather and trust	

Thinking (T)	Feeling (F)
The process you prefer to use in coming to decisions	

Judging (J)	Perceiving (P)
How you prefer to deal with the world around you	

Extraversion

Make sure the message allows **opportunities for discussion**. Otherwise they may find it hard to fully engage with the message.

Introversion

Make sure the message allows **time to reflect** before people are asked to respond. Otherwise they may feel uncomfortable contributing their thoughts.

Sensing

Make sure the message includes **facts and details** that are relevant to their current situation. Otherwise they may see the proposals as unrealistic and impractical.

Intuition

Make sure the message focuses on the **broader implications** of a situation. Otherwise they may become bored or impatient with details.

Thinking

Make sure the message outlines the **rationale behind actions** and decisions. Otherwise they may question the logic that has been applied.

Feeling

Make sure the message conveys an understanding of the **personal impacts** of actions and decisions. Otherwise they may feel that only the bottom line has been considered, and not the people involved.

Judging

Make sure the message appears **focused and action-oriented**. Otherwise they may feel that it is unclear and unstructured.

Perceiving

Make sure the message leaves some **room for flexibility**. Otherwise they may feel that the options are unnecessarily limited.

An audience-focused approach may come naturally to experienced communicators who have learned (or been taught) the keys to effective communication.

However, even with the most experienced communicators, using the MBTI assessment as a framework for thinking about individual differences should not be underestimated. The beauty of it is its simplicity.

Tailoring communication style to ensure that both ends of each preference pair are catered for is a useful starting point for ensuring a message will be heard by a diverse audience.

In other situations, when people are communicating with each other on a one-to-one basis, it may be more appropriate for the message to be tailored to the particular needs of the recipient.

By knowing more about the needs associated with their personality, you can ensure that you 'press the right buttons' when communicating with them.

The MBTI framework can raise awareness of what comes most naturally to someone. This is likely to be a person's default style. The opposite style is likely to be their blind spot.

Conclusion

Whatever you need to communicate, whoever you speak to and however you do it, interactions can always be enhanced by taking the time to understand the needs of the people you are interacting with. When people are attuned to these individual differences, they can more effectively share their opinions, understand other perspectives, solve problems, and resolve difficulties.

Bibliography

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About The Myers-Briggs Company

In our fast-changing world, your edge lies in harnessing 100 percent of your talent – whether you're at work, home, college, or anywhere in between. Your success and sense of fulfilment aren't just about what you know and what you can do, they hinge on your relationships and interactions with others.

The Myers-Briggs Company empowers individuals to be the best versions of themselves by enriching self-awareness and their understanding of others. We help organizations around the world improve teamwork and collaboration, develop inspirational leaders, foster diversity, and solve their most complex people challenges.

As a Certified B Corporation®, The Myers-Briggs Company is a force for good. Our powerfully practical solutions are grounded in a deep understanding of the significant social and technological trends that affect people and organizations.

With over 60 years in assessment development and publishing, and over 30 years of consultancy and training expertise, a global network of offices, partners and certified independent consultants in 115 countries, products in 29 languages, and experience working with 88 of the Fortune 100 companies, we're ready to help you succeed.

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