(Photo by Sgt. Alexandra Hulett, Viper Combat Camera–USAREUR)

Soldiers of 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, provide security during a movement-to-contact drill 11 August 2015 while participating in exercise Allied Spirit II at the U.S. Army's Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. Personality factors often influence the manner individuals respond to changes in their environment.

Moving Beyond the MBTI

The Big Five and Leader Development

Stephen J. Gerras, PhD, and Leonard Wong, PhD

In the recent past, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) has been the staple of self-awareness for Army leaders (and often their spouses) across the entire spectrum of professional military education ranging from the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy to the U.S. Army War College. For the rare few who might not be acquainted with Myers-Briggs, the MBTI assesses four pairs of opposing preferences that are said to be inborn and value-neutral to form a person's four-letter personality type.[1] The instrument determines a preference for either extraversion (E) or introversion (I), sensing (S) or intuition (N), thinking (T) or feeling (F), and judging (J) or perceiving (P). Individuals are categorized into one of sixteen different personality types, such as an ISTJ or ENFP, based on the preferences.

Over the course of several decades, the MBTI became the military's preeminent instrument for providing insight into oneself and others as its use spread throughout the Army. Its popularity was evident in a 1990 study conducted by the National Research Council (NRC) at the Army War College. In the study,

nearly all students surveyed believed that "the MBTI made them more aware of themselves and others, with 74 percent indicating that it caused them to change their behavior relating to others."[2] Despite the glowing reviews, and the high regard the MBTI seemed to command, the NRC report surprisingly noted that the use of the MBTI was "troublesome" and concluded that "the popularity of this instrument is not coincident with supportive research results."[3] In other words, while the beloved MBTI is often accepted and acclaimed throughout the Army, there is no scientific foundation justifying its popularity.

It may be of some consolation that the Army is not alone in this peculiar situation. After all, eighty-nine of the *Fortune* 100 companies also use the MBTI even though research consistently shows that its reliability and validity are on par with tarot cards, horoscopes, and fortune cookies.[4] But why is the MBTI so enduring, especially in the Army, if its effectiveness is so lacking? One of the main reasons for the popularity of the MBTI is that its use is often one of the rare occasions when Army leaders can make a serious attempt at self-awareness. The MBTI is usually administered in a nonthreatening school environment; Army leaders are buffered from the frenetic operational tempo that discourages most personal reflection. Even though research has shown that the MBTI is of little value in leader development, its administration may be one of the few institutionalized opportunities in the Army for self-awareness.[5]

Another factor contributing to the popularity of the MBTI is that it is refreshingly upbeat. There is no shame in being more feeling than thinking, and no matter how one answers the MBTI questions, none of the sixteen personality types will ever suggest that an Army leader has toxic tendencies. Finally, the MBTI may be popular because of the Barnum effect.[6] The Barnum effect, named after American showman P.T. Barnum, suggests that individuals will find personal meaning in statements that could apply to a broad range of people. Because the MBTI's cheerful personality descriptions are vague and general, there is a tendency to view the personal feedback as highly accurate even though the descriptions could apply to just about anybody.

In spite of its shortcomings, the MBTI manages to persist in popularity in today's U.S. military. It is still administered at the Army War College and senior leaders still trot it out as a leader development asset. For example, Rear Adm. Margaret Klein, the secretary of defense's senior advisor for military professionalism, recently suggested that the MBTI might be a potential tool in the prevention of senior leader ethical transgressions.[7] This continued affinity toward the less than optimal MBTI points to the critical need for some sort of personality assessment in the development of military leaders. The good news is that an alternative assessment—one that is both scientifically grounded and suitable for leader development—exists and is gaining attention.

The Big Five

After half a century of scientific studies, most psychologists today believe that there are five broad personality traits that consistently emerge when analyzing human personality. These five factors—often referred to as the "Big Five"—are able to describe an individual's personality with each factor addressing a specific and unique aspect. The five factors together form a combination of qualities or characteristics that make up a person's distinctive character or personality.[8] The Big Five factors can be represented by the acronym OCEAN:

Openness encompasses curiosity, creativity, and imagination. It includes subtraits such as aesthetics, feelings, and ideas. Open people enjoy new restaurants, love to travel, and regularly reconsider their values. Low openness people, on the other hand, tend to prefer the familiar, appreciate a routine, and are usually more conservative.

Conscientiousness is centered on impulse control and conformity. It is reflected in competence, self-discipline, and order. A high conscientiousness person is confident, well-organized, and driven. People who score low on conscientiousness tend to be easygoing, untroubled when things are not tidy, and less goal-oriented.

Extraversion is marked by energetic engagement with the external world. Army leaders classified as introverts with the MBTI are often surprised to receive moderate to high extraversion scores with the Big Five. This is unsurprising, since there are many Army leaders who prefer to be quiet, but when required, will take charge and be assertive.

Agreeableness reflects a concern for social harmony. It includes trust, altruism, and tender-mindedness. Individuals high in agreeableness are less inclined to

retaliate when treated unfairly and believe that people are generally good. People low in agreeableness tend to be more antagonistic, guarded, and cynical.

Neuroticism relates to one's tolerance to stress. It includes anxiety, self-consciousness, and depression. People high in neuroticism become tense under pressure, easily discouraged, and worry a lot. People low in neuroticism are calm, hopeful, and less likely to be rattled. Some psychologists use the expression *emotional stability* instead of neuroticism to avoid confusion with Sigmund Freud's concept of neurosis.

While the Big Five can provide valuable insights for self-awareness, they also constitute a robust vehicle for leader development based on extensive studies examining the consequences and implications of personality. Here is a sampling of the research findings revealed in the Big Five literature:

- Studies using military samples show that successful leaders tend to exhibit low neuroticism, high extraversion, and high conscientiousness.[9]
- Openness is a significant predictor of strategic thinking capability in senior leaders.[10] Interestingly, students at the Army War College tend to score lower in openness than the general U.S. population. Those students selected for brigade command score even lower than the overall Army War College average.[11]
- A high score in neuroticism tends to negate the positive effects of all other traits on psychological resiliency.[12]
- Studies found that people with high extraversion tend to be noticed and assert themselves, making them highly likely to emerge as a leader.[13]
- Some studies report that agreeable people, when placed in leadership positions, are more effective leaders, possibly through their emphasis on creating a fair environment.[14]
- Teams with no members who are low in conscientiousness report less conflict, better communication, and more workload sharing. A team will actively support a team member who is low in intelligence, but will tend to ignore a low conscientiousness member.[15]

The Army and the Big Five

With a formidable research foundation behind it, the Big Five offers potentially significant benefits for leader development in the Army. To establish a baseline of self-awareness, Big Five assessments could be integrated into the leadership curriculum in the Advanced Leader Course for noncommissioned officers or the Basic Officer Leadership Course for the officer corps. Because as much as 50 percent of a person's personality could be inherited and personalities are extremely difficult to change once reaching adulthood, a Big Five self-assessment would emphasize identifying those aspects of leaders' personalities that they should accentuate (or overcome) to develop into more effective leaders in the future.[16] Increasing self-awareness, not attempting personality change, should be the focus. Additionally, it is probably prudent to restrict the use of the Big Five to self-awareness as opposed to screening or selection since it is possible for a person to manipulate the factor scores through disingenuous responses to questions in the instrument.

(Photo by Sgt. James Avery, 16th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Soldiers assigned to Team Eagle, Task Force 2-7 Infantry, consult the technical manual for their M1126 Stryker infantry carrier vehicle while performing preventive maintenance checks and services after a nearly 130-kilometer convoy from Rukla to Pabrade, Lithuania, 1 May 2015. There is a robust link between a leader's personality and leader effectiveness, especially in fast-paced, demanding situations.

Compared to the MBTI, the Big Five is a relatively simple and frugal approach to self-awareness. Because the Myers-Briggs instrument is a commercial product, its use incurs a cost for both the MBTI instrument and its administration by people certified by the corporation holding the copyright. The Big Five personality factors, on the other hand, can be measured in a variety of ways to include online versions that are both public domain (free) and anonymous. Versions exist that range from an incredibly short, not-too-specific ten-question assessment to more detailed surveys with a hundred or more questions. Many versions of the Big Five come with average scores of other sample populations to aid in the interpretation of the results.

The MBTI has done an admirable job in introducing self-awareness and self-reflection to the Army. The time has come, however, for the Army to move beyond the MBTI and adopt an approach to self-awareness that is scientifically established and conducive to leader development. The Big Five personality factors fulfill that requirement. It is now up to the Army to take full advantage of this potent leader development tool.

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Notes

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