

8 Personality

Text

Personality and organization

Personality is the relatively stable set of psychological attributes that distinguish one person from another. A long-standing debate among psychologists – often expressed as ‘nature versus nurture’ – concerns the extent to which personality attributes are inherited from our parents (the ‘nature’ argument) or shaped by our environment (the ‘nurture’ argument). In reality, both biological and environmental factors play important roles in determining our personalities. Managers should strive to understand basic personality attributes and how they can affect people’s behaviour in organizational situations, not to mention their perceptions of and attitudes towards the organization.

The ‘big five’ personality traits

Psychologists have identified literally thousands of personality traits and dimensions that differentiate one person from another. But in recent years, researchers have identified five fundamental personality traits that are especially relevant to organizations. These traits are now commonly called the ‘big five’ personality traits.

Agreeableness refers to a person’s ability to get along with others. Agreeableness causes some people to be gentle, co-operative, forgiving, understanding and good-natured in their dealings with others. But lack of it results in others being irritable, short-tempered, unco-operative and generally antagonistic toward other people. Researchers have not yet fully investigated the effects of agreeableness, but it seems likely that highly agreeable people are better at developing good working relationships with co-workers, subordinates and higher-level managers, whereas less agreeable people are not likely to have particularly good working relationships with customers, suppliers and other key organizational constituents.

Conscientiousness refers to the number of goals on which a person focuses. People who focus on relatively few goals at one time are likely to be organized, systematic, careful, thorough, responsible and self-disciplined; they tend to focus on a small number of goals at one time. Others, however, tend to pursue a wider array of goals, and, as a result, tend to be more disorganized, careless and irresponsible, as well as less thorough and self-disciplined. Research has found that more conscientious people tend to be higher performers than less conscientious people in a variety of different jobs. This pattern seems logical, of course, since conscientious people take their jobs seriously and approach their jobs in a highly responsible fashion.

The third of the ‘big five’ personality dimensions is **neuroticism**. People who are relatively more neurotic tend to experience unpleasant emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression and feelings of vulnerability more often than do people who are relatively less neurotic. People who are less neurotic are relatively poised, calm, resilient and secure; people who are relatively more neurotic are more excitable, insecure, reactive and

subject to extreme mood swings. People with less neuroticism might be expected to better handle job stress, pressure and tension. Their stability might also lead them to be seen as being more reliable than their less-stable counterparts.

Extroversion reflects a person's comfort level with relationships. Extroverts are sociable, talkative, assertive and open to establishing new relationships. Introverts are much less sociable, talkative and assertive, and more reluctant to begin new relationships. Research suggests that extroverts tend to be higher overall job performers than introverts, and that they are more likely to be attracted to jobs based on personal relationships, such as sales and marketing positions.

Finally, **openness** reflects a person's rigidity of beliefs and range of interests. People with high levels of openness are willing to listen to new ideas and to change their own ideas, beliefs and attitudes in response to new information. They also tend to have broad interests and to be curious, imaginative and creative. On the other hand, people with low levels of openness tend to be less receptive to new ideas and less willing to change their minds. Further, they tend to have fewer and narrower interests and to be less curious and creative. People with more openness might be expected to be better performers due to their flexibility and the likelihood that they will be better accepted by others in the organization. Openness may also encompass a person's willingness to accept change; people with high levels of openness may be more receptive to change, whereas people with little openness may resist change.

The 'big five' framework continues to attract the attention of both researchers and managers. The potential value of this framework is that it encompasses an integrated set of traits that appear to be valid predictors of certain behaviours in certain situations. Thus, managers who can both understand the framework and assess these traits in their employees are in a good position to understand how and why they behave as they do. On the other hand, managers must be careful to not overestimate their ability to assess the 'big five' traits in others. Even assessment using the most rigorous and valid measures is likely to be somewhat imprecise. Another limitation of the 'big five' framework is that it is primarily based on research conducted in the United States. Thus, its generalizability to other cultures presents unanswered questions. Even within the United States, a variety of other factors and traits are also likely to affect behaviour in organizations.

The Myers-Briggs framework

Another interesting approach to understanding personalities in organizations is the Myers-Briggs framework. This framework, based on the classical work of Carl Jung, differentiates people in terms of four general dimensions: sensing, intuiting, judging and perceiving. Higher and lower positions in each of the dimensions are used to classify people into one of 16 different personality categories.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a popular questionnaire some organizations use to assess personality types. Indeed, it is among the most popular selection instruments used today, with as many as two million people taking it each year. Research suggests that the MBTI is a useful method for determining communication styles and interaction preferences. In terms of personality attributes, however, questions exist about both the validity and stability of the MBTI.

Emotional intelligence

The concept of emotional intelligence has been identified in recent years and provides some interesting insights into personality. Emotional intelligence, or EQ, refers to the extent to which people are self-aware, can manage their emotions, can motivate themselves, express empathy for others, and possess social skills. (EQ is used to parallel the traditional term IQ, which stands for ‘intelligence quotient’.) These various dimensions can be described as follows:

- *Self-awareness* This is the basis for the other components. It refers to a person’s capacity for being aware of how they are feeling. In general, more self-awareness allows a person to more effectively guide their own life and behaviour.
- *Managing emotions* This refers to a person’s capacities to balance anxiety, fear and anger so that they do not overly interfere with getting things accomplished.
- *Motivating oneself* This dimension refers to a person’s ability to remain optimistic and to continue striving in the face of setbacks, barriers and failure.
- *Empathy* This refers to a person’s ability to understand how others are feeling, even without being explicitly told.
- *Social skills* This refers to a person’s ability to get along with others and to establish positive relationships.

Preliminary research suggests that people with high EQs may perform better than others, especially in jobs that require a high degree of interpersonal interaction and that involve influencing or directing the work of others. Moreover, EQ appears to be something that isn’t biologically based, but instead can be developed.

Other personality traits at work

Besides these complex models of personality, several other specific personality traits are also likely to influence behaviour in organizations. Among the most important are locus of control, authoritarianism, self-esteem and risk propensity.

Locus of control is the extent to which people believe that their behaviour has a real effect on what happens to them. Some people, for example, believe that if they work hard, they will succeed. They may also believe that people who fail do so because they lack ability or motivation. People who believe that they are in control of their own lives are said to have an internal locus of control. Other people think that fate, chance, luck or other people’s behaviour determines what happens to them. For example, an employee who fails to get a promotion may attribute that failure to a politically motivated boss or just bad luck, rather than to her or his own lack of skills or poor performance record. People who think that forces beyond their control dictate what happens to them are said to have an external locus of control.

Another important performance characteristic is **authoritarianism**, the extent to which a person believes that power and status differences are appropriate within hierarchical systems such as organizations. For example, a person who is highly authoritarian may accept directives or orders from someone with more authority purely because the other person is ‘the boss’. On the other hand, a person who is not highly authoritarian, although he or she may still carry out reasonable directives from the boss, is more likely to question things, express disagreement with the boss, and even refuse to carry out orders if they are for some reason objectionable.

A highly authoritarian manager may be relatively autocratic and demanding, and highly authoritarian subordinates are more likely to accept this behaviour from their leader. On the other hand, a less authoritarian manager may allow subordinates a bigger role in making decisions, and less authoritarian subordinates might respond more positively to this behaviour.

Self-esteem is the extent to which a person believes that he or she is a worthwhile and deserving individual. A person with high self-esteem is more likely to seek higher status jobs, be more confident in his or her ability to achieve higher levels of performance, and derive greater intrinsic satisfaction from his or her accomplishments. In contrast, a person with less self-esteem may be more content to remain in a lower-level job, be less confident of his or her ability, and focus more on extrinsic rewards (extrinsic rewards are tangible and observable rewards like a pay check, job promotion and so forth). Among the major personality dimensions, self-esteem is the one that has been most widely studied in different countries around the world. Although more research is clearly needed, the published evidence suggests that self-esteem as a personality trait does indeed exist in a variety of countries and that its role in organizations is reasonably important across different cultures.

Risk propensity is the degree to which a person is willing to take chances and make risky decisions. A manager with a high risk propensity, for example, might experiment with new ideas and gamble on new products. Such a manager might also lead the organization in new and different directions. This manager might be a catalyst for innovation, or on the other hand, might jeopardize the continued well-being of the organization if the risky decisions prove to be bad ones. A manager with low risk propensity might lead an organization to stagnation and excessive conservatism, or might help the organization successfully weather turbulent and unpredictable times by maintaining stability and calm. Thus, the potential consequences of a manager's risk propensity depend heavily on the organization's environment.

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