

The difference between behaviour and personality

A critical difference between behaviour and personality is that your personality is essentially fixed at an early age and after that you can't really change it. Given that we live in an age of continuous and rapid change, unless the job you are in remains completely static you're in trouble. Until quite recently it has been accepted that personality is basically established somewhere around the age of five. The precise age has been the subject of discussion. However, a major study published by Caspi et al. in 2003 showed that the personalities of a thousand children (a sample size that makes the conclusions of the study fairly robust) tested at age three and then re-tested 20 years later had not changed. You are what you are by the age of three and it doesn't change after that. The Chinese have known this for centuries. There is an old Chinese saying: 'Age three determines age eighty'. Perhaps if the researchers had known this they could have been saved 20 years of work.

But although you are what you are and you can't change your personality, you can change what you do. The major determinant of performance is behaviour. Personality gets the headlines because people would like to find a secret key to success that does not require work and effort. Stephen Covey, in his best-selling *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, remarks that 'The glitter of the Personality Ethic, the massive appeal, is that there is some quick and easy way to achieve quality of life . . . without going through the natural process of work and growth that makes it possible'. The reason that the idea of classifying people by personality types is so attractive is because it means that instead of having to deal with an almost infinite array of differences we only have to deal with a small number. The assumption is that if you fall into a particular personality type you will behave just like everyone else who is that type. It's really not that different from astrology. And as far as predicting or determining performance is concerned, it's about as effective.

Personality is a poor predictor of performance

Personality is simply another word for characteristics. People's personalities can be described, in everyday language, by words like friendly, open, adaptable, pessimistic, creative, dominating, flexible, inquisitive, shy, optimistic, conscientious, outgoing, etc. These characteristics describe the general demeanour of an individual — how he or she tends to be perceived by others (at least some of the time). But general characteristics don't predict behaviour very well. We do different things when we are faced with different situations, regardless of what our basic personality may be.

You probably find it difficult to accept that personality is a poor predictor of performance — in spite of the example of the highly different personalities of Richard Branson, Darwin Smith and AG. Lafley, which had no discernable effect on their ability to lead and manage at the highest level of competence. One of the reasons we find it hard to accept personality is a poor predictor of performance is that we are constantly bombarded with all kinds of information to the contrary. About four million people a year complete the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, one of the most widely used personality tests in the world

They must think it's worth their while to do it. And lots of influential people in companies must think it's useful because 89 of the Fortune 100 companies use it. There's an excellent chance you've completed a Myers-Briggs or some other personality inventory at some stage in your career.

The proponents of personality tests claim that they make people more sensitive to how they behave, and how other people behave and the result is therefore greater work effectiveness. However, in their book *In the Mind's Eye: Enhancing human performance*, Daniel Druckman and Robert Bjork, two eminent psychologists, comment that 'Unfortunately, neither the gains in sensitivity nor the impact of those gains on performance have been documented by research'. Annie Murphy Paul, author of *The Cult of Personality*, is equally blunt: 'There is scant evidence that [personality test] results are useful in determining managerial effectiveness, helping to build teams, providing career counselling, or enhancing insight into self or other'.

The definitive research into the relationship between personality and behaviour was conducted by Stanford professor Walter Mischel. Studying the correlation between personality tests and people's actual behaviour, he found that less than 10 percent of the variance in a person's behaviour is explained by personality. The driver of people's behaviour, he observed, is in fact the situations in which they find themselves — and most importantly, that their behaviour changes as the situation changes.

This is the heart of the issue. Nobody likes to fail, so we do what we think will make us succeed. You change your behaviour depending on the situation with which you are faced. But in spite of the fact that we know this to be true, we would prefer to believe, as Stephen Covey observes, 'that there is some quick and easy way to achieve quality of life without going through the natural process of work and growth that makes it possible'. We want to believe that there is a simple way of categorizing people. Descriptions of personality types are excellent subjects for what psychologists term 'projection': that is, projecting one's feelings, beliefs, attitudes, etc. onto something.

The classic experiment that proved that this is exactly what happens was conducted by Bertram Forer. He gave a group of individuals a personality test and then handed them back their results — ostensibly the results from the test, but in fact randomized astrological forecasts from a book he had bought at a nearby news-stand. When he asked the individuals how accurate they found their profiles, on a scale of 0 (poor) to 5 (perfect), 40 percent gave a perfect 5 and the average score for the group was 4.2.

Personality is a very poor predictor of performance because people are actually highly adaptable and far more flexible than personality typing gives them credit for. Personality tests cannot and do not predict how people will act in a variety of roles or situations. Nor are they able to predict how behaviour changes over time. These are the immutable facts.