

THE AWARE LEADER MONTHLY

April 2008

I cannot say whether things will get better if we change; what I can say is they must change if they are to get better.

George C. Lichtenberg
18th century scientist and satirist.



April 2008 Change

Richard Metheny

"The Ugly Duckling" tells the story of a young swan ostracized by his fellow barnyard fowl because of his perceived homeliness. To his delight (and to the surprise of others), he matures into a graceful swan, the most beautiful bird of all. We may have a cult of the ugly duckling. We devour stories of personal transformation. Take a look at the popular reality TV show, Biggest Loser. Before our eyes we see transformation. Not only do people lose weight they make radical, personal shifts in

their outlook on life and themselves.

Psychologists have long believed that major personality shifts are impossible. Alfred Adler thought personality was fixed at age six and Carl Jung proposed it was fixed in one's thirty's. An often-cited view is that personality is fixed in early adulthood.

Recently I met with a new client, Derek. One of the purposes of the meeting with to discuss a battery of personality assessments he had completed.

One of the assessments, the Hogan Development Survey, measures behavioral tendencies that could derail a person's career success. Derek had a number of potential derailers. When presented with this information he responded, "Well, that's just who I am, people can't change who they really are, can they?" As our discussion progressed it became clear that he was saying to me that at this stage of his life his personality was fixed, so "now what do I do?"

Personality researchers have begun looking more closely at the smaller ways we can and do change. Research published in the May 2003 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology did find that changes do occur in middle adulthood. In the study, “average levels of personality traits changed gradually but systematically throughout the lifespan, sometimes even more after age 30 than before.”

These changes appear to be unconscious, or should I say they were not the result of focused attention to change. One of my clients is in a very visible role for a multi-billion dollar company. Her colleagues would be surprised to learn that she was painfully shy as a young adult. She describes avoiding other students at the mall because she was afraid they would have no idea who she was. Inherently introverted she realized early on in her career that her reticence would prove disastrous in the corporate world. So she learned to be outgoing. She still has an introverted temperament but her behavior is consistently extraverted. She gets anxious in big crowds and company events for which she requires “down-time” to reenergize.

Deeply understanding your personality and how it relates to your success, the success of your team and the organization, is important. Understanding how change is made is equally important.

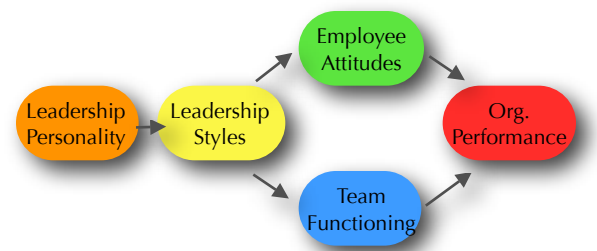
Learning more about our employees', peers', bosses', and customers' personalities can inform us on how to more effectively interact with them for specific situations.

Is Understanding Personality Important?

Why is this question important? Well, there is considerable evidence that personality has an impact on organizational performance. Peterson, Smith, Martorana, and Owens (2003) used the data from CEOs of 17 large corporations (e.g., Coca Cola, Disney, Xerox, CBS, General Motors, Chrysler) to show that personality affects the dynamics and culture of the top management team. Correlations were found for most hypothesized relationships between personality and various aspects of team functioning (e.g. cohesiveness, corruption, risk tolerance). In addition the characteristics of top management are substantially correlated with business outcomes such as income and sales growth, return on investments, and return on assets.

A definitive, meta-analysis using 198,514 employees in 7939 business units (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes, 2002) shows five important things:

- ★ The personalities of managers directly influence employee satisfaction
- ★ When employee satisfaction is high, positive business outcomes exist
- ★ When employee satisfaction is low, negative business outcomes exist
- ★ The link between leadership and unit performance is mediated by staff morale
- ★ People don't quit their organizations, they quit their boss



Also they learned that employee engagement and satisfaction correlate with a business-unit performance (turnover, customer loyalty and financial performance). So personality matters as seen in the graphic below.

This graphic implies that leadership personality influences behavior, the leader's behaviors and others. Great news and back to one of my paradigms – know the personality, predict the behavior. Measure an employee's, or potential employee's personality, and you can predict performance. Too simple, yes? Yes!

As stated above personality influences behavior but it does not say that personality determines behavior. Research indicates that the personality predicts 20% of behavior.

As I continued my study I read research conducted by Kenrick et al, in 1990 that showed that a personality trait shows up only in a situation where it is relevant. For example,

anxiety may show up as a predictor in some situations, and not others. This leads me to believe that situations affect different people in different ways. Some situations allow expression of personality; others provoke a narrower range of behavior. Thus,

Behavior = personality + situation

Of course, this implies that the more stable the situation the more predictable personality is of behavior.

Highly predictable, consistent work situations are rare for senior leaders; perhaps the opposite is true.

So how does this inform us as leaders and/or coaches? Keen awareness of our personality traits and what traits emerge in different situations will help us be more effective leaders and coaches. Learning more about our employees', peers', bosses', and customers' personalities can inform us on how to more effectively interact with them for specific situations.

Personality and situations are important to understand. This new insight may help you as a leader/coach. What it can do for you is to create deeper listening to hear what situations are most influenced by specific traits, yours and others, and to assist your employees, peers, bosses, and customers in developing strategies to address these situations. You may do this intuitively; by moving this thinking into your consciousness you will much more attentive.

Can Personality Change?

As Derek reacted to his personality assessment results with angst and concession, we too can react similarly when significant people in our lives ask us to change. I find our actions around personality paradoxical. During the time we date our future spouse we learn to love some personality traits, tolerate some and despise others. Sometimes, even with a preponderance of evidence, we marry our spouse knowing they may have "deal-breaker" personality traits. We hope that these traits will dissipate with time or, for the most optimistic, that we will help our partners change. Deep down inside we seem to hold onto the belief that personality is not fixed – at least as it relates to others. When it comes to us we are quick to reply "that's just the way I am" or a disarming "whatever."

Maybe it is just the way we are. Personality traits teachers observe in elementary school children may predict healthy—and unhealthy—behavior among adults decades later, according to a study published in the January 2006 issue of *Health Psychology* (Vol. 25, No. 1). This research implies that unaddressed

personality traits in early childhood can lead to unhealthy adult behaviors. It does not answer our question.

As the research discussed previously seemed to indicate personality does change – gradually – as we mature.

Unfortunately we do not work in a gradually changing world. We must change and/or adapt quickly. This leads me to urge us to focus on understanding personality, and situations, to be more aware of how we may act or respond, and not worry so much about changing who we are. Focus on desired behavior and how to change behavior. Learn lessons from neuroscience.

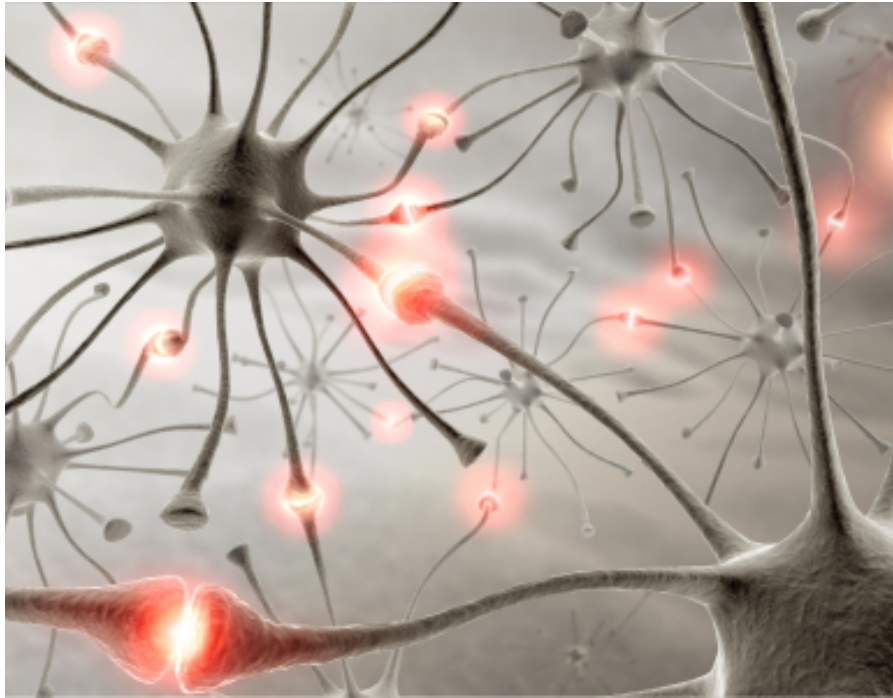
David Rock, author of *Quiet Leadership* and Jeffrey Schwartz, a research psychiatrist at the School of Medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles report in *Strategy+Business* that scientists have "gained a new, far more accurate view of human nature and behavior change because of the integration of psychology (the study of the human mind and human behavior) and neuroscience (the study of the anatomy and physiology of the brain). As a result, researchers have found hitherto unseen neural connections in the living human brain. Advanced computer analysis of these connections has helped

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Health Psychology



researchers develop an increasing body of theoretical work linking the brain (the physical organ) with the mind (the human consciousness that thinks, feels, acts, and perceives)."



Here is the pivotal finding with important implications:

Concentrating attention on your mental experience, whether a thought, an insight, a picture in your mind's eye, or a fear maintains the brain state arising in association with that experience. Over time, paying enough attention to any specific brain connection keeps the relevant circuitry open and dynamically alive. These circuits can then eventually become not just chemical links but stable, physical changes in the brain's structure.

Cognitive scientists have known for 20 years that the brain is capable of significant internal change in response to environmental changes, a dramatic finding when it was first made. We now also know that the brain changes as a function of where an individual puts his or her attention. The power is in the focus.

Attention continually reshapes the patterns of the brain. Among the implications: People who practice a specialty every day literally think differently, through different sets of connections, than do people who don't practice the specialty. In business, professionals in different functions — finance, operations, legal, research and development, marketing, design, and human resources — have physiological differences that prevent them from seeing the world the same way.

What does this mean on a practical level?

To effect lasting change focusing on the problem only ingrains it in the mind. Based on what we know now the focus should be on the new behavior. The process begins by painting a broad picture of the goal. Then you should picture the new behaviors in your mind, and in the process develop energizing new mental maps that have the potential to become hardwired circuitry. You would then get focus your attention on your own insights, by facilitating

discussions and activities that point toward the goal. After that, the job would be to regularly provide "gentle reminders" for yourself so that the new behavioral maps become the dominant pathways along which information, ideas, and energy flow. Catch yourself when you get sidetracked and gently bring yourself back. The power truly is in the focus, and in the attention that is paid.

Perhaps you are thinking, "This all sounds too easy. Is the answer to all the challenges of change just to focus on solutions instead of problems and keep focused on my insights?" Apparently, that's what the brain wants. And some of the most successful management change practices have this type of principle ingrained in them. Solutions require us to know our personality traits and how best to understand situations so we behave, or act on our solutions, effectively.

Perhaps you may not change from being an introvert to being an extravert but you will develop behaviors and strategies to increase your effectiveness – if you FOCUS.

As Cherie Smith, CFO of Cannon Solutions, stated, "I do believe people can change if they are personally aware that they need to change and are committed to do so. Without those 2 components, I believe people are destined to remain the same."



It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power.

Alan Cohen,
Chicken Soup for the Soul

Next Month: What Do We Need to Know About Our Personality?

Suggested Reading

1. **Quiet Leadership** by David Rock
2. **“The Neuroscience of Leadership”**
3. **Dangerous Opportunity: Making Change Work** by Chris Musselwhite with Randall JonesAlbert Ellis, A Guide To Rational Loving, 1975

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“The Neuroscience of Leadership”