

Kay's Corner

PERSONALITY MEDIATING

Have you ever had a case that should have settled on the facts, but because of people-problems, ended in an impasse? That is like asking, “Have you ever dropped jelly-bread without it landing jelly side down?” This is not going to be about Murphy’s Law—or maybe it is. By definition mediation is facilitated communication between and among people, people with often very different personalities, not to mention values, cultural backgrounds, and intellects. Fortunately some very smart researchers have studied temperament and personality type theory for many years.

One of the smartest and best known was Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist. It was his work on personality preferences as genetically determined traits that caught the attention of behaviorists and clinical psychologists as a way to understand one cause of unhappiness and conflict in relationships. Although the instrument most widely used to determine personality type was not developed by Jung, it is entirely compatible with his theories.

The Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator is the most widely used psychological instrument in the world. It was developed over many years by a mother/daughter team, Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers. Their aim was to create a tool to validate and put to practical use Jung’s work on psychological types. After encountering his work in 1923 they began over two decades of “type watching.” During World War II Myers decided people could make more constructive use of differences if they knew about personality types. Myers began to create a paper and pencil questionnaire to assess type. Three decades of research on thousands of persons produced the current versions of the instrument.

I have used the MBTI for six years, with the help of a clinical psychologist, to train mediators. In 2002 I went through training myself to better understand and be able to explain to students that people communicate and make decisions differently because they *are* inherently different. Just as I was born right handed and others were born left handed, I have a personality type (ENTP), my husband has one (ISTJ), my friend has one (ENFJ), and *you* have one (????).

If you would like to know your own, you can now take a version of the MBTI (Step II-Q) on your computer and receive very quickly a twenty-two-page print out of your preferences and what they mean about your sources of energy, your way of gathering and processing data, and how you make decisions. That is the first step in Personality Mediating—KNOW THYSELF!

As a mediator I have this tool for facilitating communication, which gives me an insight into one aspect of conflict. When one party is garrulous and seems to get energy from the people in mediation, wants immediate feedback, and often “thinks out loud,” I can respond to that party’s needs specifically by answering questions quickly, giving recognition and appreciation frequently, and responding appropriately to that party’s preferences. This will keep that party’s energy high, even if the other party is not saying much, is apparently processing inwardly, and takes more time to answer a question than the garrulous participant. My sense would be that the talkative person is an Extravert (E) and the more reflective person is an Introvert (I). You can

understand this much without training in the MBTI. But you may not have a technique for helping *both* parties work as a team *with* you. If you were facilitating a dialogue between Robin Williams, as he behaved in the movies “Patch Adams” and “Good Morning Vietnam,” and Russell Crowe, as the Nobel scientist in “A Beautiful Mind,” you might want to give Russell more time alone to process and decide, while you took Robin aside (caucus) to process aloud with him the problem as he sees it. It also would help to keep Robin from continuing to talk and ask questions of Russell in the mistaken belief that either (a) Russell didn’t hear him or (b) is being stubborn and difficult. Robin could overwhelm Russell and prevent him from processing and deciding efficiently.

Once you understand that differences are not chosen, but inherited, you can help both parties see each other in a less combative way. Sometimes behavior *is* a choice, but often it is a trait that, like being left-handed, is just a preference. Left-handed persons can shake hands with, play tennis and baseball with, and embrace right-handed persons, but they may have to make a few adjustments and be a little more patient to achieve a smooth, satisfying interaction.

While the traits of extraverts and introverts can affect how *tolerant* each person will be of the process and demands on time and energy, another set of preferences, thinking (T) and feeling (F) may be the challenge to reaching a mutually satisfactory resolution. One party may reach decisions using logic, analysis, linear thinking, and deductive problem solving (T). Many judges, scientists, and mathematicians solve complex problems in this way. Imagine Mr. Spock in the Star Trek series giving an answer to a complex problem posed by Captain Kirk, or Albert Einstein working out $E=mc^2$. But for 50% of the population if a rational decision is going to have a negative impact on a party’s personal values or needs, it is not the best decision. These people prefer to reach decisions that do not have a negative impact on personal values. If you give someone Sophie’s choice, pick one child to keep, what *is* the rational decision? If you tell a man to sell the ranch that has been in his family for years to pay off the creditors, a logical solution to his *financial* morass, he may tell you that he cannot betray his *family* values and the promise he made to his beloved grandfather to keep the land for his own lifetime and pass it on, intact, to his children. He isn’t being unreasonable, just *human*. If he is a Thinker he might have a value conflict, but sell the ranch because that is the rational choice. If he is a Feeler the creditors wont get the ranch!

Another way to “speed read” Thinkers and Feelers is to listen to the words they use as they talk. If you hear “I think,” “it would be logical to,” or “rationally, a good decision would be,” you are probably listening to a Thinker. If you hear “I feel,” “my sense is that,” or “this conflict involves my beliefs and strong feelings,” you may be listening to a Feeler. Imagine mediating a dispute with a Thinker (accountant?) and a Feeler (clinical psychologist?) and helping the accountant hear and validate the therapist’s way of processing information. In some cases party A (a T), sends an offer to party B (an F), that is a spreadsheet or a balance sheet. Party B wants to communicate with words, not numbers. An alert mediator can point out that it is important for each party to communicate to the other person’s preference. Party A can use words *and* numbers. Party B can get a financial expert and use the mediation to convey concerns and values in terms of the impact on monetary resources—how value can be distributed fairly and rationally without offending either party’s feelings or values.

Some mediators do these things instinctively because they are very Intuitive (N) but for many of us emotional intelligence must be acquired. Intuitive people think differently from people who show a preference for data discovered through the five senses. Their method of perceiving is called simultaneous processing: that is the “aha” or light bulb in your head that is an idea or possibility. Sensates (S) accept as fact what can be experienced through seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling. Sensates are concrete, literal, realistic, and practical. They are not likely to be persuaded by another’s hunch, insight, idea, or inspiration. A mediator who observes a party resisting change in the future and insisting on tangible benefits now for herself and others may suspect the party is a Sensate, and improve communications by using the words “see,” or “hear,” as in “what are you hearing the other party say today?” or “I see the balance sheet you brought reflects a \$50,000 equity in the house.”

A Sensate believes concrete, verifiable information, and values practicality and “good, common sense,” not inspiration or creative brainstorming. A mediator can assist a Sensate by providing the concrete, practical data required for him to process and make decisions at the table. A mediator can assist the Intuitive by encouraging her to brainstorm options, explore ideas for settlement, and create a vision of what a settlement package would include. Sensates and Intuitives have difficulty communicating because they perceive differently. A Sensate is a sequential processor—step by step in building blocks. Imagine a hard working, down to earth potato farmer (an S) trying to understand and negotiate with Kevin Costner’s character (an N) in “Field of Dreams.” “Build it and they will come,” says Kevin. “I don’t think so,” says the farmer, “and anyway, why play baseball when you can plant potatoes?”

Some people want closure quickly, plan and manage their lives carefully, and are action oriented. I imagine George C. Scott as “Patton.” We can guess their preference will probably be Judging (J). Many judges are “J’s!” Many leaders and executives are also. But about half of the population prefers to be more flexible and spontaneous, adjusting to changing circumstances by changing their plans or solutions. Trainers, psychologists, and artists are often Perceivers (P). This may cause the most difficulty in mediation. When an action oriented, managerial party wants to come to a quick solution and the other party cannot keep up with the pace, a mediator can assist by asking the Perceiver what data she needs to come to a decision and if a time can be established by which certain agenda items will be completed. The Judger can be given “homework” to do to assist the Perceiver to come to closure.

This is a very brief discussion of a very complex theory. At the 2003 TAM Conference I presented some tips on Personality Mediation. I invite you to contact me at k4mede8@swbell.net for those tips if you missed the conference, or if you want to share some of your own experiences on the subject. I promise to keep adding to the tip sheet.

Happy Personality Mediating!