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The As and Bs of personality at work



by *Kenya McCullum* | May 2, 2012

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Steve walks into the office on Monday morning and makes a beeline to a group of coworkers discussing their weekend adventures. The people that he works with think of Steve as being easygoing, friendly and concerned about others' feelings. Although he works hard, sometimes his colleagues get frustrated with him

because when Steve's out of the office, he's really out of the office -- so you can forget about him checking his work e-mails when he's on vacation.

On the other hand, when Michael sees his coworkers chatting on Monday morning, he generally makes a beeline to his desk, trying to avoid getting entangled in the conversation. Although Michael is mostly pleasant, he's more concerned about getting his work done than socializing with members of his team -- and every once in a while, his temper runneth over. His coworkers think of him as driven, detail oriented, stressed out, and an all-around workaholic. His doctor thinks that he is well on his way to myriad health problems -- not the least of which being heart disease.

Chances are, if you were going to categorize these workers by their [personality](#) types, Michael would be a Type A, while Steve would be a Type B. Although these personality types are polar opposites, there are advantages to working with each one.

Who do you want on your team?

"If you're really lucky, you're on a team in the workplace where you have a combination of Type A and Type B people because there can be great complementarity between the types -- assuming that there's an understanding that there are behavioral differences within the team and you're trying to leverage the best of everyone's behavior," said Dr. Karol Wasylyshyn, a [clinical psychologist](#) and author of "Behind the Executive Door: Unexpected Lessons for Managing Your Boss and Career." She explained, "It's not that one is better than the other, they are just different."

For example, if Michael and Steve are running a meeting together, Michael would make sure that all participants have an agenda beforehand and are aware of how much time should be allocated to each discussion topic. Michael will also make sure that the meeting stays on track and never steers too far from the tasks at hand. On the other hand, Steve will make sure that everyone is heard during the meeting and even the quietest members of the team have their say.

With this complementary combination, the meeting will be productive, while allowing everyone to feel like they've made a contribution to the group.

Typing the boss

Everyone wants to please the boss, and -- depending on whether you work for a Steve or a Michael -- there are different ways of doing that based on the boss's personality.

Get to the point. If Michael is your boss, you don't ever want to waste his time. "If your boss is a Type A, don't ramble and give all of the background information while he's fuming, or getting high blood pressure -- get the point across immediately and then ask if he wants supporting details," said Dr. Marlene Caroselli, [author](#) of "The Critical Thinking Toolkit: Spark Your Team's Creativity with 35 Problem Solving Activities."

Be the peacemaker. People like Steve want to work in a harmonious environment. Any way that you can contribute to keeping the peace will not go unnoticed. "Figure out how you can help create calm in an environment that might not be as calm as it needs to be, and be sensitive to what's going on in the culture, and what people's issues and concerns are," said Wasylyshyn. "Be sure to carry that information to the Type B boss and suggest ways where you can engage together in proactive problem solving for those issues."

The personality chameleon

Although we may naturally lean toward being Type A or Type B personalities, ideally, we would integrate pieces of both into our personalities. By observing Steven and Michael in the workplace, you can pick and choose what parts of their personality you want to adopt as part your own, and make an effort to be a little more Type A or little more Type B.

"I don't think there's any psychological purity in the world -- we all have a dominant leaning -- but if we're being intelligent about it, we can see the deficit in being too much one way and adopt other behaviors in order to survive and get ahead," said Caroselli.

Tread with caution

Although thinking about your colleagues in terms of personality types may be a quick and dirty way of looking at their behavior, Wasylyshyn urges us to delve deeper than that to avoid stereotyping them. She notes that although the concept of personality types has persisted since the 1950s -- in part because we can easily identify these behaviors, so they ring true -- it's actually controversial in scientific circles because it has not been proven.

Instead, Wasylyshyn says, we should also consider people's behavioral preferences, which can be measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator -- a measure that is used to determine how people view the world and make decisions.

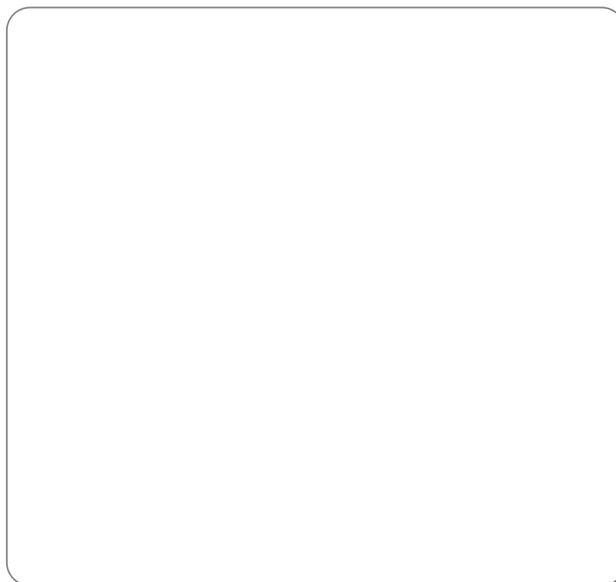
"Through the Myers-Briggs, we can learn about what our behavioral preferences are and that has implications for us understanding the kind of situations, or work teams, in which we are likely to thrive or likely to have more difficulty," she said.

About the Author

Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in California.

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