Using Personality Assessment for Management and Leadership Development:
An Overview
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What is personality?

Personality is one of the most popular areas of research in psychology and is commonly applied in organizations for the purposes of selection, employee development, and team-building. Although dozens of personality traits have been studied, a great deal of research over the past two decades has converged around the Five Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which consists of five broad traits that are commonly referred to as the “Big Five.” The Five Factor Model conceptualizes personality as a hierarchy in which the Big Five are at the top. At the next level are “aspects,” which are more specific categories (Young, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). Each Big Five trait has two aspects. For instance, agreeableness consists of the aspects of compassion and politeness. The table in appendix A lists the aspects of the Big Five traits, along with a brief description of tendencies of individuals high and low in each aspect.

Psychologists define personality as “psychological qualities that contribute to an individual’s enduring and distinctive patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving” (Cervone & Pervin, 2008, p. 8). There are two notable features of this definition. The first is that personality represents more than behavior. It refers also to the way that one thinks, perceives the world, and feels. Second, the definition suggests that, contrary to what many believe, a score on a single administration of a personality test does not imply that one is expected to behave a certain way all the time. It simply suggests that one has a higher probability of behaving that way across many types of situations. This stable aspect of personality is what is meant by the terms “trait” and “disposition.” However, you know from your own experience that your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors vary according to where you are and what you are doing. At any given moment, your trait personality may influence your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, but you will also tailor your behavior to what is going on at that time. For instance, an individual with a high score on an extraversion scale may be highly sociable at parties and less so during study time at the library. Nevertheless, that highly extraverted person is likely to behave more sociably relative to someone with a low score on extraversion across situations, whether at parties or at the library. Finally, some people appear to be more variable than others in their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. People low in emotional stability, for example, have been found to exhibit more variability in their behaviors toward other people than do people high in emotional stability (Moskowitz & Zuroff, 2004).

Where does personality come from?

The jury is still out on how exactly personality develops. Based on “twin” studies, there is evidence that approximately 50% of the variance in each of the Big Five traits is attributable to
genes (Loehlin, McCrae, Costa, & John, 1998). The rest appears to be due to developmental experiences, both in childhood and throughout adulthood (McAdams & Olson, 2010). Thus, personality can change. For instance, people tend to increase in agreeableness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness as they age (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006).

The Influence of Personality on Job Attitudes, Motivation, Performance, and Careers

Personality is a complex phenomenon, much more so than popular sources on the topic tend to convey. But does it matter? Does it impact outcomes that are important within the context of business and careers? Hundreds of studies have been conducted to address these questions, and recent research in the fields of psychology and economics have found that personality may be as important as cognitive ability and socioeconomic status in predicting long-term career success and well-being (Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Roberts, Shiner, Kuncel, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). The table in Appendix B provides the meta-analytic correlations between the five-factor traits and numerous work outcomes. Below, we briefly discuss some of these relationships in more detail.

Satisfaction & Motivation

Emotional stability (low neuroticism), extraversion, and conscientiousness exhibit modest correlations with job satisfaction (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002). Of the five traits, emotional stability shows the most consistent relationships with motivation. People who are emotionally unstable may set lower goals, feel less confident in their ability to do their job, and tend to doubt whether their efforts will yield favorable results. Together, extraversion and emotional stability seem to be the most important predictors, among the Big Five, of self-efficacy motivation (i.e., motivation based on belief in one’s capabilities). Conscientiousness and agreeableness are also important to motivation, especially goal-setting. High conscientiousness predicts the setting of higher goals, while agreeableness is negatively related to goal-setting.

Performance

Job performance consists of numerous dimensions. Task performance consists of behaviors that fall within the formal definition of one’s work role and relate to carrying out the core activities of the organization (Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994). Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) consists of voluntary behaviors carried out for the benefit of coworkers, supervisors, or the organization in general (Bateman & Organ, 1983). The importance of task performance to the organization may be obvious, but the importance of OCB less so. Yet, meta-analyses have found that individual OCB is related to team effectiveness ($\rho = .36$; LePine, Piccolo, Mathieu, Jackson, & Saul, 2008) and unit-level OCB is related to unit-level performance ($\rho = .35$; Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). Finally, counterproductive work behavior (CPB) refers to deviant behaviors directed at individuals (e.g., gossiping, insulting) and the organization (e.g., intentional lateness, stealing, slowing down work). Although no meta-analysis has been conducted on the relationship of CPB to organizational or unit performance, there are individual
studies demonstrating a negative relationship between counterproductive behavior and business outcomes (e.g., Dunlop & Lee, 2004). It is probably not too far-fetched to presume that CPB has been at the root of most of the scandals that have damaged or destroyed organizations.

The table in Appendix B exhibits the meta-analytic correlations of the Big Five traits with each of these dimensions of performance (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Chiaburu, Oh, Berry, Li, & Gardner, 2011). Conscientiousness is a robust predictor of job performance across settings (e.g., types of jobs and industries) and rating methods (i.e., self-ratings or observer ratings). Although not displayed here, of the four facets of conscientiousness, dependability seems to be the most strongly related to higher citizenship behavior (i.e., helping coworkers) and lower CPB, while the achievement facet is most strongly related to task performance (Dudley, Orvise, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006). Emotional stability and agreeableness seem most important as predictors of better individual performance in teams (ρ = .22 and .34, respectively), possibly because people high in emotional stability are less likely to behave hostilely toward others while those high in agreeableness are more cooperative. Meanwhile, openness and extraversion are most strongly related to higher training performance (ρ = .33 and ρ = .28, respectively). Highly open people tend to be more receptive to new ideas, which should enhance their ability to benefit from training. Extraverts may perform better in training settings because they are more proactive and, thus, more likely to ask questions and fully engage in the learning process.

Although meta-analytic estimates are not available, it is important to note the relationship of trait openness with creativity. Given support for creativity (e.g., moderate to high time pressure, room to experiment, opportunities to discuss ideas), people high in openness are more likely to produce creative solutions at work than those low in openness (Baer & Oldham, 2006; George & Zhou, 2001). Paradoxically, there is evidence that people low in openness produce higher creative performance than those high in openness under low levels of time pressure and high managerial support for creativity. Therefore, people high in openness may find that their abilities are better-utilized in firms in which there is a need for creativity, managers are supportive of the creative process, and there is deadline pressure (Baer & Oldham, 2006).

Teams

Appendix B provides an overview of the meta-analytic relationships of team personality with performance of work teams (Bell, 2007). In most cases, the average level of a given personality trait in a team seems to be most predictive of how teams will perform. However, in the case of agreeableness, the lowest score on agreeableness within a team is just as important. One highly disagreeable member can substantially and negatively impact a team’s performance. This underscores the notion that team personality composition likely influences performance through its impact on team processes. For example, several of the Big Five exhibit moderate meta-analytic relationships with team cohesion (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998). Thus,
team personality composition affects how well members of the team coordinate and build relationships that result in high performance and learning.

Leadership

Together, the Big Five seem to be most influential on the charisma (idealized influence) dimension of transformational leadership, but also are related to the other dimensions of transformational leadership and to contingent reward leadership. Extraversion is the strongest and most consistent Big Five predictor of transformational and contingent reward leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004).

For decades, scholars have debated whether great leaders are born or made. These data cannot entirely answer that question. Given that traits are as much influenced by developmental experiences as they are by genetic influences, the influence of traits on leadership could suggest the influence of inborn tendencies or of learning. But the data do suggest that high levels of certain personality traits, such as extraversion, are advantageous for becoming a leader, whether because they make one a “naturally” better leader or because those traits are simply more valued in our culture. (Most of this research has taken place in Western—mainly North American—contexts). This does not mean, of course, that people who are not extraverts, for example, cannot and do not become leaders. President Barack Obama is well-known to be an introvert. There are numerous examples throughout history of successful introverted leaders. Research on the conditions that foster successful leadership among introverts is still rare; however, recent evidence suggests that introverted leaders are more effective than extraverts when their employees are proactive because introverted leaders are more receptive to ideas and suggestions (Grant, Gino, & Hofmann, 2011).

Traits Outside of the Big Five Model

Although this note has focused on reviewing research related to the Big Five, there are other traits that are important predictors of work, organizational, and career outcomes. For example, fundamental beliefs about one’s capabilities and worth (i.e., core self-evaluations; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997) are associated with objective (e.g., income) and subjective (e.g., satisfaction) career outcomes (Judge & Hurst, 2007; Judge & Hurst, 2008; Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009).

Another interesting set of personality traits that is receiving increasing attention is the “Dark Triad,” which is comprised of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Narcissists, who have a grandiose sense of self, are more likely to engage in counterproductive work behavior ($\rho = .35$; O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012) and to receive low ratings of leadership effectiveness (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006). Machiavellianism refers to the tendency to be cynical about human nature, manipulative, and self-interested and is positively related to counterproductive work behavior ($\rho = .20$). Finally, psychopathy refers to a set of tendencies to be risk-taking, lacking in empathy, callous, and uniquely self-interested. Although scholars are only beginning to research psychopathy in the corporate setting, one study of 203 “high-
potential” managers in seven organizations found a higher rate of sub-clinical psychopathy (i.e., scores that are nearing levels that meet the standards for a psychiatric diagnosis) than has been found in samples drawn from the general population (5.9% in the corporate sample vs. 1.2% in the community sample). In 360-degree evaluations, participants found to be high in psychopathy were rated as higher than low-psychopathy managers in creativity, strategic thinking, and communication skills but lower in management skills, team behaviors, and overall performance (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010). People high in any of the Dark Triad traits may be charming and may possess characteristics that can actually be advantageous to organizations. Yet, those advantages do seem to come at a cost, one that may ultimately be too great for most organizations to tolerate.

**Problems with Personality Testing**

People are often skeptical about personality tests because such tests seem easy to “fake.” There is little reason for concern about dishonest responses when personality tests are being used for employee development or team-building and when employees feel assured that the results of their tests will not negatively impact their position within the organization. But when personality measures are used for selection purposes, it seems more likely that people may attempt to fake their answers. This is a possibility, just as it is possible that people will seek to present themselves favorably—and perhaps somewhat inauthentically—in any type of job search context such as interviewing, recruiting events, or social media profiles. Research on faking of personality tests is rich and ongoing, and psychologists have developed a number of means to try to minimize it or offset its effects. This includes the use of observer scores and expert ratings, development of items that do not contain obviously desirable responses, adjusting scores to take faking into account, test instructions, and testing of measures under “honest” and “faking” conditions (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006).

Organizations that use personality testing for hiring face other obstacles in addition to faking. For example, some tests could disparately and negatively impact certain groups of employment applicants (e.g., people with disabilities; Ellin, 2012). In addition, there are many different personality assessments available, and some are based on very little empirical investigation of their validity, defined as their ability to predict subsequent job attitudes or performance. Third, it is important to take into account the relevance of the trait measure to the job in question and to keep in mind that personality is more complex than disposition alone, a fact that scientists are only now beginning to appreciate.

Of course, any employment selection mechanism is vulnerable to risks. Although interviewing is fixture in the selection process, there is ample documentation that it is ridden with the potential for bias and inaccuracy. The drawbacks of measuring personality, therefore, do not mean that organizations should avoid doing so entirely. It means that they should do so carefully, with expert guidance, and with full awareness of how it fits their goals. Applicants, though aware of the possible drawbacks, should also keep in mind that personality measurement is used by smart
organizations as only one tool of several. Furthermore, self-rated personality tests, which are the most common type, provide you with an opportunity to tell the organization how you see yourself rather than hoping that an interviewer will accurately perceive your personality. Finally, answering personality measures honestly could make it more likely that you will land in an organization that is a good fit for you.

**Personality & Leadership Development**

There is extensive evidence that managers who are self-aware are more effective than those who are not (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Fleenor, Brightwater, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm, 2010). Self-awareness refers to accurate and adaptable understanding of one’s identity, goals, capabilities, weaknesses, and values (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Being self-aware enables you, for one, to better assess the types of careers and work environments that are going to be most conducive to your success. Highly open people, for example, may be best-suited to jobs where they can explore and be creative.

Self-awareness may also help you to understand where you need to focus your developmental efforts. If you score high on agreeableness, for instance, you may privilege harmony with others over advocating for yourself and your point-of-view, even when your coworkers or organization would benefit from your advocacy. For instance, people high in agreeableness are less likely to exercise “voice,” which means constructively challenging the status quo (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). Research based on several large data sets has also found that highly agreeable people are at an earnings disadvantage relative to disagreeable people, and the gap is much greater among men (an 18% advantage for disagreeable men relative to agreeable men vs. a 5.5% advantage for disagreeable women vs. agreeable women; Judge, Livingston, & Hurst, 2012). Some of this effect appears to be due to gender stereotyping, but it may, in part, be attributable to the possibility that highly agreeable people do not as often pursue goals that will advance their self-interests, such as higher pay and promotions. This, of course, does not mean that you should try to become highly disagreeable. Agreeable people confer many benefits on their organizations and enjoy many personal benefits as well. They engage in higher levels of helping behavior and are more cooperative (Chiaburu et al., 2011; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). Moreover, they tend to get fired less often, are more satisfied with their jobs, and enjoy more positive social relationships at work and in their personal lives (Judge et al., 2002; Judge et al., 2012; Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Ilies, 2009). The moral, therefore, is not to attempt to change entirely but to be alert to situations in which your disposition may be working against you.

As a leader, a realistic understanding of yourself may lead to greater authenticity and humility. You may be more likely to solicit input from others if you are aware of your shortcomings. For example, leaders who are highly extraverted are biased toward risky decision making and impulsive action. Knowing this about yourself, you may ask other people to help you evaluate the downside of an option that you are favoring. Should you choose the riskier option, you may
invest more time in contingency planning and partner with people who are likely to proceed in a more measured manner than you would on your own.

**Conclusion**

Personality assessment is no crystal ball. It provides but one lens into the complex whole that is you. It can provide information that you can incorporate into your understanding of yourself and use to build your career and your life. Therefore, take the results of your assessment, along with the research described here, not as a pronouncement on your fate but as a means of developing into the type of leader you want to be.
References


*Journal of Applied Psychology, 92,* 1212-1227.

Judge, T.A., Hurst, C., & Simon, L. (2009). Does it pay to be smart, attractive, or confident (or all three)?: Relationships among general mental ability, physical attractiveness, core self-evaluations, and income. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 94,* 742-755.


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<th>Trait</th>
<th>People who score high on this trait tend toward:</th>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>People with high scores on this aspect tend toward:</th>
<th>People with low scores on this aspect tend toward:</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional Stability</strong></td>
<td>Low levels of negative emotions</td>
<td><strong>Volutility</strong></td>
<td>Composure, even-temperedness</td>
<td>Hostility, instability, immoderation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Withdrawal</strong></td>
<td>Low self-consciousness, calm</td>
<td>Depression, self-consciousness, anxiety</td>
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<td><strong>Agreeableness</strong></td>
<td>Concern for others &amp; prioritization of relationships</td>
<td><strong>Compassion</strong></td>
<td>Interest in others, empathy, altruism, gratitude</td>
<td>Indifference to others’ needs and feelings</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Politeness</strong></td>
<td>Nurturance, cooperation, compliance, concern for impact of one’s actions on others</td>
<td>Pushiness, arrogance, conflict-seeking, focus on personal gain</td>
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<td><strong>Extraversion</strong></td>
<td>High levels of positive emotions</td>
<td><strong>Enthusiasm</strong></td>
<td>Friendliness, fun-seeking, comfort around others, not being easily embarrassed</td>
<td>Keeping a distance from others, being difficult to get to know, not easily excited</td>
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<td><strong>Assertiveness</strong></td>
<td>Taking charge, self-expression, confrontation, energy, talkativeness</td>
<td>Difficulty influencing others, waiting for others to lead, withholding opinions</td>
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<td><strong>Conscientiousness</strong></td>
<td>Achievement-orientation and dutifulness</td>
<td><strong>Industriousness</strong></td>
<td>Purposefulness, efficiency, self-discipline, achievement</td>
<td>Easily distracted, difficulty making decisions</td>
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<td><strong>Orderliness</strong></td>
<td>Planning, avoiding mistakes, scheduling, following rules,</td>
<td>Messiness, dislike for routine</td>
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<td>Exploration, curiosity, and imagination</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Mastery of language, self-examination, idea generation, preference for intellectual challenge, quick to grasp new information</td>
<td>Difficulty grasping abstract ideas or reading difficult material, avoidance of philosophical discussions, preference for the concrete and quantifiable</td>
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<td>Openness</td>
<td>Creativity, preference for change, reflection, enjoyment of art, seeking beauty</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Little interest in art, rarely daydream or get lost in thought, seldom get emotional about art</td>
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Appendix B

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<th>Job Satisfaction</th>
<th>Goal-Setting Motivation</th>
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<th>Self-Efficacy Motivation</th>
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