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The Uses And Misuses Of Personality Tests
by Ben Dattner

Introduction
In addition to the increasingly common use of cognitive and personality tests for personnel selection, organizations now administer millions of personality, learning style, conflict style, and emotional intelligence tests to individuals and teams every year for assessment and development purposes. Examples of popular tests include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the Learning Styles Inventory (LSI), the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), the Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument, the DISC, the FIRO-B, the Emotional Competence Inventory, the Bar-On EQ-i, and many others. By doing so, organizations may inadvertently perpetuate what is known as "the fundamental attribution error"—the tendency to focus on individual dispositions, and to ignore situational factors, in explaining behavior. Unfortunately, too much focus on people and not enough focus on situations can minimize the benefits of assessment and development initiatives.

I will not suggest that these tests have no utility or that they should never be used for employee and team assessment and development. Instead, I will argue that HR needs to help managers carefully consider the potential benefits, risks, and limitations of these instruments before deciding if, how, and when to use them. Additionally, if organizations do decide to use these tests, they need to balance a consideration of individual dispositions with a consideration of situational variables.

What are these tests?
Some of these tests are "self-report" based on multiple choice tests. Others are "360 degree" and are based on quantitative ratings by oneself and others. "360 degree" tests are usually more expensive and difficult to administer, though they yield a benefit in terms of providing multiple ratings which are generally more "objective" than self-reports. Some are paper and pencil, others are administered online, and some are offered in either format. The most popular tests place people into categories. Here are some examples of popular tests that categorize style and personality in the workplace:

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI):

Sixteen distinct personality types based on combinations of four dimensions:
Extraversion–Introversion: describes where people prefer to focus their attention and get their energy—from the outer world of people and activity or their inner world of ideas and experiences
Sensing–Intuition: describes how people prefer to take in information—focused on what is real and actual or on patterns and meanings in data
Thinking–Feeling: describes how people prefer to make decisions—based on logical analysis or guided by concern for their impact on others
Judging–Perceiving: describes how people prefer to deal with the outer world—in a planned orderly way, or in a flexible spontaneous way

Source: www.mbti.com

Kolb Learning Style Inventory (LSI):

Four learning styles:
Diverging: combines preferences for experiencing and reflecting
Assimilating: combines preferences for reflecting and thinking

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Converging: combines preferences for thinking and doing
Accommodating: combines preferences for doing and experiencing

Source: www.hayresourcesdirect.haygroup.com

Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode instrument (TKI):

Five conflict handling styles:
Competing: High assertiveness and low cooperativeness — the goal is to "win"
Avoiding: Low assertiveness and low cooperativeness — the goal is to "delay"
Compromising: Moderate assertiveness and moderate cooperativeness — the goal is to "find a middle ground"
Collaborating: High assertiveness and high cooperativeness — the goal is to "find a win-win solution"
Accommodating: Low assertiveness and high cooperativeness — the goal is to "yield"

Source: www.cpp.com

What are these tests used for in the workplace?
Personality and style tests are currently being used for executive coaching, career counseling, conflict resolution, team development, organizational development, to predict fit in mergers and acquisitions, negotiation training, sales training, etc.

How popular are they?
According to an article in the December 2003 issue of *Workforce Management*, The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator alone is administered over 2.5 million times every year. There are thousands of other tests on the market, and estimates of the number of employees who take them each year for purposes of both selection and development range in the millions.

Why are these tests so popular?
While many of the most popular workplace assessment tests are short and easy to administer, well-validated tests, like the 434-item California Psychological Inventory, tend to be quite lengthy and time consuming. In addition to being easier to administer, the results of the most popular tests are often easier for people to accept than the results of the more validated tests. For example, the results of NEO PI-R, which is based on the most well-supported model of personality, the "Big Five" model (Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Openness to Experience, and Extraversion) might tell you that you are lazy, unfriendly, neurotic, closed minded, and withdrawn, and the 360 degree Emotional Competence Inventory might tell you that your boss, peers, and subordinates rated you as unempathic, lacking emotional self-awareness, and demonstrating poor relationship and conflict management skills. However, as reflected in the table above, the more popular tests place people into non-evaluative categories. For example, people with the same Myers-Briggs "type" can be either stellar performers or criminally insane. In general, people have a predisposition to make personal, rather than situational, attributions for behavior. We are all susceptible to "the fundamental attribution error," meaning that we discount situational factors when trying to explain why other people behave as they do. Personality tests therefore confirm what we have a natural tendency to believe-- that individuals create and influence situations and not the other way around. These tests are also memorable, simple, intuitive, and often confirm what we already know about ourselves and others, even if that knowledge is to some extent built on simplified, stereotype-like categories of personalities and styles. This type of classification of people is an integral part of American popular culture, marketing, and politics. We all use movie and television stars as points of reference when describing others, marketers have well-developed "psychographic" categories that they use to target advertising, and pollsters segment the electorate and tailor candidates' messages accordingly.

What are some of the limitations of these tests?
Research evidence about these tests is mixed. In most cases, a barely significant proportion of variance can be accounted for by these tests. This is related to a broader debate in psychology about the relative importance of "person" versus "situation." Ample research has shown that organizations are "strong" situations, and that situational variables (i.e.: the demands of a person's role, incentive structures, team norms, organizational culture) are much better predictors of behavior than are individual attributes. In order to add explanatory value, tests should explain the impact of personality or style on behavior, and also the

impact of behavior on performance. Establishing the link between personality or style and behavior is difficult enough- many studies were unable to establish any link between personality or style and actual performance. The flip side of the popularity and simplicity of these self-report tests is that they are easy to fake. It is quite easy to answer the questions to appear however you want to appear, and people in organizations have been known to try to mimic certain "types" on the Myers-Briggs. Additionally, by providing an "objective" and non-evaluative reference for personality and style, some of these tests provide good rationalizations and excuses for one's shortcomings when circumstances cannot be blamed. For example, one can blame a messy desk or missed deadlines on the fact that one is "a P"—a perceiver in Myers-Briggs terminology.

Based on their limitations, when can these tests be harmful?
Tests can be harmful when they are used for purposes for which they are not intended. For example, because it is an "ipsative" test, meaning that there is forced choice between alternatives and no "right" answer to any question, the Myers-Briggs test is not meant to be an employee screening tool, and its publisher cautions against using it to select employees. Managers should consult with their HR team before deciding which tests are appropriate to use for selection purposes. In terms of employee and team development, these tests can be harmful insofar as they put a focus on the wrong variables, in isolation. In many cases when organizations use personality and style tests, it might have been worthwhile to first consider whether roles and responsibilities need to be clarified, the quantity and quality of performance feedback needs to increase, and/or whether new strategies and systems for the recruitment, retention and development of employees need to be created and implemented. In other words, successful managers and their teams are able to balance a focus on assessing and developing people with a focus on assessing and improving the context within which they individually and collectively work.

Based on their limitations, how should these tests be used?
Since behavior is a function of an interaction between individuals and situations, personality and style tests can help provide a useful framework for assessing the ways that different individual personalities and styles contribute to the behaviors that impact performance in the workplace. Tests can also be useful to the extent that they serve as a starting point for candid and constructive discussions of individual behavior and performance in the workplace and create an environment where candid and constructive feedback can become the rule and not the exception. However, like any other kind of organizational intervention, expectations should be realistic. It is not realistic to assume that getting back the results of a personality or managerial style test will lead to sustained personal insight and growth. HR can add substantial value to managers by helping them to identify the talent and behavioral implications of organizational strategies, and by helping them define and achieve their human capital goals in general, with personality tests being only one tool among many that can be used to assess and improve individual, team and organizational performance.

Conclusion
Organizational behavior is very complex and is influenced by many variables at the individual, relational, group, organizational, and environmental levels of analysis. Neither descriptions of organizational phenomena nor prescriptions for change should be based on simple models or categories of individual personality. If personality and style tests are used in the workplace, they should be used as part of a larger, integrated human capital assessment and development system, and should be a point of departure rather than a point of arrival. HR professionals can ensure that these tests are put to best use by encouraging managers to take both people factors and situational factors into account when assessing and developing themselves and their teams.

Author

Ben Dattner
ben@dattnerconsulting.com
www.dattnerconsulting.com

Dattner Consulting, LLC

Ben Dattner has helped a wide variety of corporate and non-profit organizations become more successful by developing a better understanding of the impact of individual psychology and group dynamics on their performance. His consulting services enable organizations to make better hiring and staffing decisions, to enhance the professional capabilities of managers and employees, to configure teams more effectively, and to reduce the amount of interpersonal and intergroup conflict.

Ben received a BA in Psychology from Harvard College, and his MA and Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from New York University, where he was a MacCracken Fellow. His doctoral dissertation analyzed the relationship between narcissism and fairness in the workplace, and his masters thesis examined the impact of trust on negotiation. Before graduate school, Ben worked at Republic National Bank of New York for three years, first as a Management Trainee and then as Assistant to the CEO. After graduate school, Ben was Director of Human Resources at Blink.com before founding Dattner Consulting.

Ben is an adjunct professor at New York University, where he teaches Organizational Development in the Industrial and Organizational Psychology MA Program, and at Marist College at the New York City Police Academy, where he teaches Organizational Change in the MPA Program. Ben is a member of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology and the Metro New York Applied Psychology Association.