

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as a Tool for Leadership Development in Management Education Programs: What's Type Got to Do with It?

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1. Abstract:

Leadership development is a process that begins from the inside out. Leaders first need to be aware of their personal strengths, their challenges, and how they approach situations. Leaders also need to be aware of how others view them and how others may choose to approach situations. While many aspiring leaders enroll in management education program to help them develop their leadership skills, the value of management education programs to developing effective leaders is widely debated. Management education programs may not provide adequate opportunities for aspiring leaders to increase their self-awareness and to develop critical interpersonal skills that are considered fundamental to effective leadership. This paper explores the use of the Myers- Briggs Type Indicator in management education programs as a tool for developing leaders and providing an opportunity to explore differing views. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is commonly used in workplace organizations but not as commonly used in management education programs. Through the lens of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, aspiring leaders may gain an opportunity to assess themselves and reflect on how their preferences may affect their leadership approaches. Providing management education students with an opportunity during class time to assess their preferences and to engage in discussions about those preferences may influence their interactions with others in the workplace is a valuable learning experience.

Key Words:

Leadership development, self-awareness, management education, Myers-Briggs Type.

2. Management Education and Leadership

Leadership development is a process that begins from the inside out. Fletcher & Baldry (2000) noted that self-awareness is critical to developing effective leadership skills. Leaders need to be aware of their personal strengths as well as their challenges. Building and enhancing their knowledge, skills, and abilities are customary steps in developing leadership skills. Some aspiring leaders participate in individualized learning opportunities such as reading, attending workshops, or seeking professional coaches or mentors to assist them in developing their leadership capabilities. However, an increasing number of aspiring leaders seek out formal management education programs to prepare them to serve in a leadership capacity. For many, management education programs seem to be a logical preparation for serving as a leader.

One of the most prevalent management education offerings for those seeking to develop leadership skills is the Master's of Business Administration (MBA). There are more than 100,000 MBAs awarded annually in the United States and the numbers

continue to increase in Europe and Asia (Sherwood, 2004). Yet many leadership experts are critical of the gap between the theory taught in the MBA programs and the actual learning needs of leaders in the workplace (Spender, 2005). Management education programs are frequently viewed as necessary for attaining a desired credential, but having little or no relation to actual practices or needs of organizational life (Sherwood, 2004).

Management education programs traditionally provide a foundation in multiple perspectives and theories on approaches to leadership. The lessons learned from the combination of multiple perspectives and approaches can be extremely valuable in developing critical leadership skills. Lecture, discussion, case studies, and in-basket exercises are widely used in management education programs and some of these methodologies provide an experiential component to the theories (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). While exposure to theories, circumstances, and experiential learning opportunities are important for developing leadership skills, they do not inherently provide an opportunity for leaders to assess or reflect upon their personal approaches to leading others nor do they help them to gain insight into how they may be viewed by others (Mintzberg, 2004).

Rausch (2004) observed that management education programs are frequently focused on “hard domains” or topics associated with a specific body of knowledge such as accounting, finance, marketing, or technology. Certainly, these topics are important. However, management education programs generally place less emphasis on “soft domains” such as communication, motivation, and personal styles or preferences. Yet, these latter skills are critical for leadership development (Rausch, 2004). Most critics contend that management education does little to serve as a foundation to develop competent leaders because the programs lack a focus on critical interpersonal skills and interpersonal insights.

Mintzberg (2004) takes a stand against many current MBA program practices. He argues for the necessity of “real world” issues and needs to be considered and discussed in management education programs. These issues should not be addressed through professorial lecture, but rather through learner reflection and interaction about their experiences and views. It is imperative to provide learners with an opportunity to consider and discuss these issues and experiences while also providing a forum for them to reflect on the meaning and implications (Mintzberg, 2004). The opportunity for interaction and reflection on their perceptions and approaches are key points. Leaders need to be aware of how others perceive situations and how their behavior is perceived. The perception of the leader’s behavior is important because it is likely to influence employees’ performance (Manz & Sims, 1980).

Perceptions of others, particularly the perceptions of employees, are critical to a leader’s success (Manz & Sims, 1980). Social learning theory would suggest that employee perceptions and the resultant performance are an integration of employee knowledge, abilities, and views on the working environment (Bandura, 1977). According to social learning theory, employees’ performance is likely to be influenced by their own knowledge and skills as well as their perceptions of the environment. Leaders are a major influence of the workplace environment. Leaders set the tone. Therefore, it makes sense that leaders need to be aware of how their employees view them.

The term “self-awareness” has been defined as the extent to which individuals accurately perceive their own strengths and limitations (Fletcher & Baldry, 2000). According to Fletcher & Baldry (2000), self-awareness needs to be considered as an individual leadership variable and should be developed in its own right. Nilsen & Campbell (1993) argue that self-awareness is a key foundation for leadership development and ultimately leadership performance, yet there is often little consistency between how leaders view themselves and how others view them. Their study demonstrated there is little consistency between how leaders believe they are being viewed and how they are actually viewed by their employees. Many leaders lack self-awareness. Church (1997) believes that self-awareness can assist leaders in adopting a planned or strategic approach to leading others.

3. Increasing Personal Awareness through the MBTI

There are many instruments that could be used to assist with the development of self-awareness including the 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire, the Big Five Personality Inventory, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and various 360-degree feedback instruments (McCarthy & Garavan, 1999). Organizations frequently use one or more of these instruments in workshops or coaching sessions to facilitate leadership development. However, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is the most commonly used instrument in workplace settings (Gardner & Martinko, 1996).

The MBTI measures and explores preferred styles of interacting, making decisions, and planning or organizing life and work. The MBTI was researched and developed by Isabel Myers and Katherine Briggs more than 60 years ago. They based their research on the theories of Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung. The MBTI is administered to more than three million people each year and terminology or “type talk” that is associated with this instrument is becoming an increasingly common vernacular in organizations. Of sorts, the MBTI has created its own language to describe differing preferences. According to the MBTI there are sixteen possible personality types based on four dimensions or dichotomies. These dimensions are actually preferences that influence how individuals choose to operate or approach situations. Each of the dimensions can influence how individuals communicate, react, and make decisions. These dimensions, or preferred methods of operation, are keenly visible to others. While each of the dimensions or preferences is considered normal and valuable in work situations, differences in or bias against these preferences can be the source of miscommunication and misunderstanding for both employees and leaders. These dimensions represent nothing more than differing approaches. Yet, these distinct approaches may be interpreted differently by others.

4. MBTI Dimensions

The first of the dimensions on the MBTI is Introversion - Extroversion and it explores sources of energy and communication preferences (Hirsh & Kummerow, 1998). A preference for Introversion means a person’s energy is derived from individually reflecting on thoughts, ideas, and experiences. Leaders with this preference may be most comfortable when they can reflect upon ideas before sharing them with others. Conversely, a preference for Extroversion means the person’s source of energy is likely

to come from interacting with others. Leaders with this preference may be quite comfortable when they can freely brainstorm thoughts and discuss ideas with those around them. In the workplace, these two preferences may be viewed quite differently. For illustration, imagine a manager is given some information on a new project that needs to begin with some immediacy. A manager with a preference for Introversion may initially seek some solitary time to consider the implications of the information and to reflect on strategies to share the information with employees and also formulate a strategy on how to begin the project. This solitary time provides the manager with an opportunity to clarify thoughts and as well as gather the energy to move forward. Alternatively, a manager with a preference for Extroversion may be more likely to seek out immediate contact with others to discuss the implications of the information and the strategy for moving forward. Both managers will share the information and begin the new project, but a manager with a preference for Introversion may first seek out the opportunity to reflect think through the process individually and the manager with a preference for Extroversion may first seek to brainstorm ideas with a group. It is simply a different approach.

The Sensing-Intuition dimension explores how a person prefers to attend to information. Leaders with a preference for Sensing may be most attuned to information that is concrete and precise and they may have a tendency to attend to information they can take in with their five senses (Hirsh & Kummerow, 1998). Alternatively, leaders with a preference for Intuition may prefer information that provides a “big picture” view and allows for the consideration of patterns and future possibilities. Leaders with a preference for Intuition may appear very innovative and open to change by focusing on future ventures. Conversely, leaders with a preference for Sensing may appear more practical and definitive in their approach to issues. From the earlier illustration of the manager charged to begin a new project, a manager with a preference for Intuition may demonstrate interest in and ask questions about future possibilities of the project and how it fits into the organization as a whole. On the other hand, a manager with a preference for Sensing may be more interested in the specific details of how the project will evolve.

The next dimension, Thinking – Feeling, is related to how a person makes decisions or decides on the information at hand. Leaders with a preference for Thinking are likely to mentally remove themselves from the situation, weigh the facts, and make an objective decision based on facts and logical consequences (Hirsh & Kummerow, 1998). Conversely, leaders with a preference for Feeling may be most comfortable when they can mentally place themselves in the situation while weighing the views and potential impact on those involved before they make a decision. For illustration from the earlier example, imagine now the manager is ready to share the information about the new project with the employees. A manager with a preference for Thinking will likely *first* outline all the objective facts or pros and cons that support the need for this project. In contrast, a manager with a preference for feeling may *first* outline the potential concerns or benefits for the people involved before moving on to the additional information about the project.

The last set of dimensions is Judgment – Perception and is related to how a person orients their life. Leaders with a preference for Judgment may tend to work best with

plans, schedules, and deadlines. They want set and achieve goals methodically. Conversely, leaders with a preference for Perception may seek opportunities to provide a work environment that promotes flexibility or spontaneity and may prefer plans that can readily adapt to change (Hirsh & Kummerow, 1998). Following the previous example, a manager with a preference for Judgment may be comfortable with a comprehensive schedule of due dates, accomplishments, or milestones for the implementation of the project. Conversely, a manager with a preference for Perception may be comfortable with a more fluid schedule for the progress of the project and include opportunities to reconsider some of the timelines.

Each of the dimensions describes a different approach to situations. None of the dimensions leads to right or wrong approaches. They are simply different approaches. All of the dimensions are valuable, yet sometimes serve as a source of misunderstanding or miscommunication. Considering these dimensions helps explain how individual differences can affect how people work together (Wethayanugoon, 1994).

5. MBTI in Education

The interest in the use of the MBTI in organizations has increased, yet management education has been not been as quick to follow this trend. While the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one of the most widely used personality instruments in organizations, it is not as commonly used in management education programs (Dent, Curd, Carr & Blass, 2004). This raises a question. If use of the MBTI in organizations has increased, why have management education programs not followed this trend? It appears some management education programs are reluctant to incorporate the MBTI or similar instruments as a mainstay of their management development curriculum. Some management education programs disregard the instrument or suggest interested students seek out the instrument through the educational institution's auxiliary career or counseling services but do not use it part as the class activities. Some faculty may be unsure if there is any value for the MBTI in their classroom.

Wethayanugoon (1994) found the successful use of the MBTI in classrooms depended on the faculty member's knowledge of the MBTI dimensions and the supporting theories. Is it possible that faculty have not had enough exposure to the MBTI and the theoretical underpinnings to feel comfortable using it in their classroom? Another possible consideration for faculty in utilizing the MBTI is that administering the MBTI requires a special certification. The certification process generally involves participating in special noncredit training and taking an exam. However, if the faculty member did not want to seek certification, most colleges and universities have MBTI certified personnel on staff who could administer the MBTI to their students for them. Cost would not seem to be a major concern because the average cost of the self-scorable MBTI is approximately \$10.00 per instrument.

It is possible that still another reason management education programs do not incorporate the MBTI or disregard the instrument is because of the reported limitations and criticisms of the instrument. The MBTI has faced serious questions about its conceptual framework. While the purpose of the MBTI is to gain a better understanding of individual preferences and behavior patterns, there is mixed evidence on its ability to

predict behavior consistently (Michael, 2003). Thus, questions concerning the instrument's validity have been raised. Additional concerns have been raised about the MBTI's reliability. Test and retest measures can vary or fluctuate due to many circumstantial factors. It is possible for individuals score differently on the instrument at different times making a true identification of preferences dubious (Michael, 2003).

While these concerns and considerations are justified, they do not negate the potential benefits the MBTI experience can provide to aspiring leaders. The true value of participating in the MBTI assessment and reflection is not necessarily in the actual measure or identification of the leaders' preferences or dimensions, but rather in the raised awareness of how others may view them as leaders and how they may choose to approach differing situations. As stated, the MBTI identifies normally occurring preferences. These preferences may be similar to or different from others' preferences. Regardless of similarities or differences, the preferences are normal and at minimum should be respected. Ideally, these preferences can be leveraged to garner differing insights.

There is little evidence to suggest that certain preferences will consistently translate into leadership effectiveness (Gardner & Martinko, 1996). As such, there is no point in trying to coach or persuade aspiring leaders to develop one preference over another. There is an inherent benefit, however, for aspiring leaders to consider how these normally occurring differences in preferences may provide opportunities for diverse thoughts, insights, and approaches. However, they can also be a source for challenges when differing ideas arise. Through the lens of the MBTI, aspiring leaders may gain an opportunity to assess themselves and reflect on how their preferences may affect their leadership approaches. Providing management education students with an opportunity during class time to assess their preferences and to engage in a rich discussion about how those preferences may influence their interactions with others in the workplace is a valuable learning experience.

6. The Value of Type

So what does the combination of preferences or "type" have to do with leadership development? This paper proposes it is possible that aspiring leaders' exact "type" has little to do with the value of the MBTI as a leadership development tool. However, raising the awareness of an aspiring leader on the differing preferences they and others may have and providing the opportunity to discuss those differences can have a transformative effect on the development of leadership skills. While determining the exact "type" of an aspiring leader may be a dubious task, the discussion and reflection on different preferences and approaches can be a valuable learning experience for aspiring leaders. As stated earlier, differing preferences are frequently a source of misunderstanding and miscommunication. Through the lens of the MBTI, aspiring leaders can become more aware of their own preferences and using rich classroom discussions, become better prepared to respond to, accept, and utilize the differing preferences around them.

It is less important that aspiring leaders are labeled with a specific combination of preferences or "type" and more important that they have the opportunity to reflect on how different preferences may be viewed. The true value is in the opportunity to

increase their self-awareness and increase their awareness of others. This opportunity comes from the reflection on and discussion of the MBTI experience. Participation in an MBTI discussion session along with the opportunity to reflect on the differing preferences can provide aspiring leaders with additional insights on how those around them may choose to interact, make decisions, and approach situations. The value is being aware, accepting, and respectful of differing approaches.

Additionally, using the MBTI terminology on differing preferences (e.g. Thinking – Feeling) in the MBTI discussion session provides an opportunity to explore and discuss differing approaches in a non-evaluative language. Learning more about the differing approaches provides aspiring leaders with additional insight that may minimize some of the sources of miscommunication or conflict when differing preferences arise. Further, the diversity of the perspectives from each of the preferences can provide insight on how to work more effectively with others (Wethayanugoon, 1994).

Self-awareness continues to be an essential consideration in leadership development. There is considerable research to suggest that increasing self-awareness can lead to enhanced leadership skills (McCarthy & Garavan, 1999). Many researchers contend that self-awareness is an important contributor to a leader's success (Goleman, 1998). As such, it is important that management education programs provide opportunities for aspiring leaders to become more aware of themselves and also become more aware of others in the workplace. Providing management education students with an opportunity during class time to assess their preferences and to discuss how those preferences may influence their approaches and their interactions with others in the workplace is a valuable learning experience.

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