



A compass point in the wilderness: coaching with personality type

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a popular psychometric tool used in personal, professional and team development. **Jenny Rogers** demonstrates its effectiveness in coaching and argues that knowing our preferences can be a useful starting point for self-acceptance and transformational change in our personal and professional relationships.



The scene: a coaching supervision session. I am the supervisor and this is a first face-to-face meeting. My supervisee is an experienced therapist who has recently completed her initial training as a coach.

'Of course', she says firmly, 'I'd never dream of using the MBTI. It's rubbish. I can't stand Carl Jung and all his slippery nonsense'.

There is a moment's pause. I don't want to embarrass my client; she will find out soon enough that I have written a short book of profiles on the 16 Jungian personality Types,¹ an additional book on using them in coaching² and that I am an enthusiast for the MBTI®,³ but nor can I leave her comment unchallenged.

Reservations about the MBTI

Depending on how familiar you are with the MBTI, you may have similar reservations.

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was developed by Isabel Myers and her mother, Katharine Briggs, based on the thinking of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. After many decades of self-funded research, the questionnaire was eventually published in its current form by Consulting Psychologists Press (CPP) in 1989. It is widely used for personal and team development. The MBTI can attract evangelists whose uncritical zeal can be offputting. The

16-cell table with its four-letter Type profiles unwittingly encourages the idea that the profiles 'box and stereotype', when in fact the whole point is that knowing your profile starts a lifelong process of development. There is literally an infinite number of ways in which people who share the same profiles will vary because any one individual could have any mixture of the strengths and weaknesses of that Type.

Some critics appear to have misunderstood the idea of *preference*, assuming that, for instance, if you have a preference for Thinking, this means you cannot manage relationships well, whereas it has always been a firmly held principle of the MBTI that all of us can and do call on behaviour associated with all eight of the preferences, but at heart are likely to prefer one over the other in each pair as our default. This may be too subtle, or as one such psychologist critic once said to me, 'too wiffly-waffly', for some people.

There are thousands of research studies on the MBTI and it is true that not all of them support all of its principles. For instance, there is dispute about some of the more complex theoretical ideas. But in general, the research is impressive: the instrument meets high standards of reliability and validity.⁴

The special language of Type can be seriously misleading. It still makes me smile when I think →



MBTI practitioners were early advocates for working from strengths rather than deficits



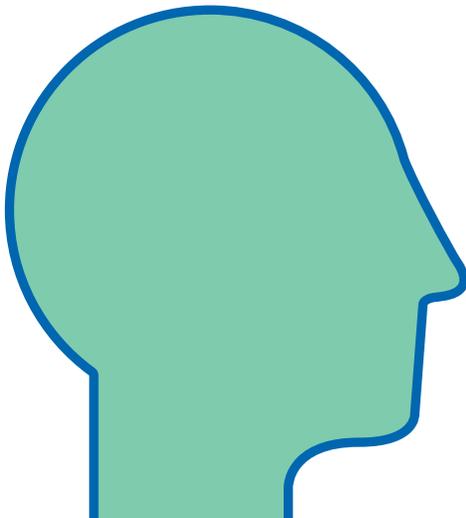
of a dear friend, clearly an Extrovert herself, asking me innocently if I thought her husband (INTP) and I (INTJ) were examples of 'high functioning Introverts', thus giving away her totally mistaken assumption that a preference for Introversion was somehow connected with autism.

The success of the MBTI has triggered the development of many rivals, some of which explicitly address its alleged weaknesses. These include Insights Discovery,⁵ Lumina Spark⁶ and the Type Mapping System.⁷ I have stayed with the magnificent original MBTI, which also includes the option of Step 11, a version built around 'facets', which break out each of the pairs of preferences into something more like a trait-based instrument. This allows for a considerable degree of subtlety in the interpretation.

Understanding the basics

If you are less conversant with the MBTI, here is a reminder of the basics.

Each of the four pairs of preferences has its own set of needs and associated behaviours, the assumption being that you will have a preference (from slight to strong) for one in each pair: →



Box 1: MBTI preferences

Choosing one from each pair of preferences produces sixteen possibilities, known by the four letters of each preference.

Where do you get your energy?

Extraversion (E)

Needing action and contact with people; doing your thinking out loud; enjoying contact with people and activity; liking breadth rather than depth

Downsides: talking too much; not listening; exhausting yourself with too much activity

Introversion (I)

Needing privacy and reflection; thinking before speaking; enjoying solitude; liking depth rather than breadth

Downsides: looking cool and detached; seeming shy, under-contributing, lacking social contact

Perception: where does your attention go first?

Sensing (S)

Looking for tangible evidence: what you can see, taste, smell, touch, hear; detail and data; relying on what is familiar; taking things step by step

Downsides: getting too literal, resisting change

Intuition (N)

Looking for what is intangible: possibilities, ideas, patterns; the new; liking to be different; jumping in anywhere

Downsides: seeming unpractical; over-fixed on change for its own sake

How do you make decisions?

Thinking (T)

On the basis of objectivity; standing back to see the overall; looking for what is logical and fair

Downsides: seeming tough and harsh, overlooking the personal dimension

Feeling (F)

On the basis of what is right for relationships and personal values; looking for what is compassionate

Downsides: seeming sentimental, overlooking the rational dimension

How do you live your life?

Judging (J)

Being organized and decisive; liking plans and goals

Downsides: deciding before you need to; being too serious; getting too fixed on completion

Perceiving (P)

Staying flexible and adaptable; liking to go with the flow

Downsides: missing deadlines; being too frivolous; being messy and disorganized

Box 2: MBTI - 16 types

These are thumbnail portraits of each of the 16 types:

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
Thoughtful, courteous, responsible and perfectionist; needs to be in charge and wants efficiency. May feel is never off duty. Pays meticulous attention to systems and processes. Likes the clarity of sensible rules. Can be stubborn. May over-rely on detail and tend to dismiss the importance of people's feelings.	Cordial, charming, patient; modest style fuelled by wish to help others through strong sense of loyalty to duty and liking for tradition. Observant of how others feel. Detail-conscious, steady and serious; delivers on promises. May need to guard against being exploited and feeling resentful.	Sensitive, patient, insightful and hardworking; willing to put effort into understanding the complexity of human relationships. Wants to contribute decisively to ideas that will affect people in important ways in the longer term. Can be dreamy and enigmatic and may find it difficult to put self first.	Inner energy, fierce independence and a preference for big-picture thinking go with calm and unflappable public face which disguises ardour for competence - for self and others. Impatient for improvement. Likes to organise. May have air of critical detachment which creates sense of being impossible to please.
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
Socially reserved; cool observer; needs variety; can come into own when the need is for quick thinking, practicality and coping calmly with a crisis. Needs to feel can meet the unexpected with ingenuity. Detachment, need for privacy and reluctance to communicate may create problems with others.	Kind, modest, attentive to others, with little need to impress or control. Loathes conflict. Needs to give service, but on own terms. Deeply loyal with quiet sense of fun; likes to offer practical support without judging. May make an art out of economy of effort and may annoy through holding back from communicating or explaining.	Gentle, loyal and apparently pliant style may hide intensely idealistic and driven interior. Wants to live in harmony with values and expand potential of self and others. Has little interest in worldly possessions or controlling others. Endless quest for the perfect may lead to perpetual dithering or unnecessary guilt.	Analytical, sceptical, cool seeker after truth. Tends to love the complex, theoretical and novel; resists authority and dislikes being in authority; constantly challenges the status quo through experiment; always ready to re-think. May need to learn that passion for the exact truth as sees it could alienate others.
ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
Straightforward, cheerful, inventive, practical; has zest for life and loves a challenge as long as it results in immediate tangible action. Sees self as an adaptable realist who gets round the rules. Has accepting attitude to others. Enjoys trouble-shooting. May need to take care that expediency does not dominate.	Open, modest, generous and tactful; commitment to active fun, practicality and to valuing people creates disarming realism about self and others. Sociable, gracious, flexible and enjoys the limelight. Relishes the good things of life without apology. May need to take care that is not seen as frivolous or unfocused.	Enthusiastic, versatile innovator. Likes to improvise and help people solve problems through creativity and insights into how people tick. Must give and receive personal authenticity. Builds bridges and 'walks the talk.' May need to guard against 'butterfly' approach which exhausts self and others.	Energetic, brash, original; wants to be where the action is. Needs to be right and to be first. Loathes routine and detail. Likes to challenge conventional wisdom and values independence. May need to beware of unintentionally hurting others through love of argument and of having the last word.
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ
Crisp, decisive, courageous; wants to get things organised now. Needs to maintain stability and order through care with detail; has robust often hearty style with people. Down-to-earth, practical approach. May need to take care that in concern to get things done, does not overlook the need for tact and sensitivity.	Friendly, brisk, talkative, loyal and practical; brings common-sense and warmth to dealings with people. Needs approval from others. Likes busyness, organising and socialising. Values working systematically and co-operatively. Sensitive to indifference. May need to give and take criticism in a more detached way.	Tactful, diplomatic; natural facility with words and commitment to good causes that will make a difference to the world can inspire others. Loves encouraging others; believes passionately in equality. Sensitive to disharmony. May need to watch tendency to 'rescue' others or to allow idealism to become rigid.	Energetic, clear-sighted, decisive, analytical; needs to turn ideas into action; loathes illogicality; needs to feel authoritative. Confident and articulate. Insists on looking at the big picture and enjoys robust discussions on improving standards and implementing change. Direct style can seem abrasive and may intimidate.

How are Type ideas useful in coaching?

MBTI practitioners were early advocates for working from strengths rather than deficits. Personality indicators assume that your task is to get the maximum leverage from your gifts, leaving it to others to be good at the skills which complement yours while also doing at least some work on the opposite preferences in due course. I find that most clients receive this idea with relief. So while, as is often rightly said, 'Type is not an excuse' for our failings, it does stop us wasting energy on a pointless quest to be geniuses in areas where we are very unlikely ever to excel.

The first and most obviously helpful use of personality Type is as a foundation for accepting yourself. Never underestimate the impact this can have, especially when clients are meeting such ideas for the first time:

Kirstin (call centre manager, INFP)

I hadn't realised that all my life I'd been fighting against the idea that there was something wrong with being private and gentle. I never understood that my preference for Introversion at least partly explained my exhaustion at the end of a long day of talking, talking, talking. I don't really like being a boss and my profile showed me why. I'm not at all ambitious for the usual kinds of 'success'. The MBTI was a revelation as it was suddenly OK to be me.

Type ideas will often provide uncomfortable but necessary messages around self-awareness:

Rob (company director, ENTJ)

Rob had courage. He was not afraid of the major changes so badly needed to improve the performance of his company. Rob's view of himself had been that he was an easy-going pragmatist, popular with his staff. At the start of his coaching programme I debriefed his MBTI results along with feedback gathered from colleagues. He came to see how much he was driven by uncompromising competitiveness and that what he saw as brief, occasional flashes of forgivable temper, mostly out of impatience with himself, were seen by others as frequent terrifying rages aimed at them. Realising that these were common traps for ENTJ leaders was

startling and comforting. Startling, because he had had no idea that this was what others saw, comforting because it identified his strengths and weaknesses as a recognisable pattern, all part of the process of making them manageable. As Rob commented later, 'Now I know why I don't always get what I want. I've been scaring people to death. I'm beginning to see what it's like being managed by me, and it's not always pretty!'

The simplicity of the 16-cell structure is an effective way for people to discuss differences safely, a reminder that much of other people's apparently annoying behaviour is not necessarily attributable to their doing those exasperating things on purpose, but because their minds, and possibly also their brains, function differently. This is a distinct advantage for team coaching as well as for understanding how to influence others.

Type ideas are also invaluable in pair coaching, whether this is two colleagues at work who need to work comfortably together, or personal partners whose relationship is under strain.

Type has a special role in managing stress. Our responses to stress tend to be that first we step up whatever tactics usually work: trying harder to be even more efficient, competent, likeable, ingenious... Under extreme stress, this doesn't work; we lose perspective, our thinking narrows, we feel out of control. The MBTI has a structured way to understand this, using Jung's ideas about the 'shadow' function. This offers clients an explanation for what otherwise seems inexplicable and upsetting. It normalises their reactions, and by doing so, helps them to recover. For more on this, see Naomi Quenk's excellent book, *Was That Really Me?*²⁸

Coaching leaders: how Type helps

So much is now demanded of leaders. If you look through a Jungian lens at what they are told they need, they are expected to be attentive listeners (I) and persuasive talkers (E); gifted strategists (N) yet know all the detail (S); be tough (T) yet sensitive (F); be able to plan (J) and yet remain adaptable (P). No wonder so many buckle under the pressure of these unrealisable expectations.

Outstanding leaders know that self-knowledge and personal development are a

lifelong process. They can find the Jungian approach a perpetual source of inspiration as well as having practical value in making career decisions:

Daniel (soldier and lawyer, ISTJ)

Daniel had seen battle and understood how his ISTJ preferences could be strengths. In an emergency he knew that discipline, hierarchy and clarity were essential, but he also grasped during our coaching that his instinctive resistance to change could hold him back. He used his strong preference for Thinking as the basis for logical analysis of vague dissatisfaction with his army career. He decided to revisit his early qualification in law and to retrain. He stayed in the army and became a judge-advocate, where his ability to absorb a mass of detail and to stay steady under pressure was a considerable advantage. This worked well with the empathy (Feeling), which he had consciously sought to develop as a balance to his preference for Thinking and for bigger picture thinking (Intuition), as a way of understanding that many of the cases which come to military courts have systemic origins.

Type on Type

The heart of coaching is the quality of the relationship. The client is not an object on which the coach practises some esoteric ritual. It is a collaboration. Knowing your own Type prejudices (yes, you will have some) is essential and may alert you to dangers in working with clients of the same and different Types. For instance, if you share preferences for Intuition and Feeling (NF), you might both overlook the importance of facts, get too far into unrealisable plans for the future and care too much about the harmony of the coach-client relationship. You might agree too readily that the problems lie with others, overdoing reassurance and avoiding feedback on your coaching.

Coach and client might be opposites on Introversion and Extraversion. The coach is slow, quiet and thoughtful, the client is animated and loud – or vice versa. This mismatching quickly gets in the way of rapport. A coach with a preference for Introversion and who knows how to use silence, has a valuable strength, but if it is

overdone, it can feel to the client like indifference. A coach who loves lively talking can generate energy in the conversation, but too much can deny clients the space to think.

Some best practice principles

These are my suggestions about how to get best value from personality Type questionnaires:

- Invest in training. Get familiar with the construction, strengths and weaknesses of whichever instrument you choose.
- Work on your own development, using Type principles.
- If the client is critical of the questionnaire, explore their doubts. It doesn't matter if the client doesn't arrive at a 'best-fit' Type. This is only a problem for coaches who believe that the questionnaire has mystical properties and has to be 'right'.
- Never use a Jungian Type questionnaire as the sole psychometric. Think about partnering it with one from each of these areas:
 - Needs and motivation - for instance, FIRO-B™⁹
 - Career - for instance, Schein's Career Anchors¹⁰
 - Trait-based personality assessments - for instance, the Hogan suite or the 16PF.
- Take your time with the debriefing: an hour is the minimum.
- Give the client material to take away. Most instruments produce online reports, but the MBTI scores well here in the plethora of additional high quality material it can offer.

Enthusiasm for Type concepts needs to be balanced by understanding their drawbacks and weaknesses. Personality Type is not a religion, where faith is essential to membership of the club. It is fine to be sceptical about some aspects of the theory and to be choosy about the applications that you like, as well as selecting which version of which questionnaire you endorse. For me, the MBTI has remained a source of inspiration, amusement and enlightenment. It has profoundly affected how I see myself and how I understand the complex world of human emotion and interaction. Jung commented about his own typology that it was intended as a compass point in the wilderness of human

personality, but without a compass, we would certainly find everything a lot more difficult. ■

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- 3 The ®MBTI, Myers-Briggs and Myers Briggs Type Indicator are registered trademarks of the Myers and Briggs Foundation in the United States and other countries.
- 4 For an overview, see Myers IB, McCaulley MH, Quenk NL, Hammer AL. MBTI manual: a guide to the development and use of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator instrument. Mountain View, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press; 1998.
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- 9 The original MBTI materials in their various formats plus the FIRO-B questionnaire and the 16PF are available from OPP in the UK. OPP runs a comprehensive training programme backed up by an extensive range of further workshops. Contact www.opp.com
- 10 Schein E. Career anchors: self assessment (3rd ed). New York: Pfeiffer; 2006.



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