



Persona-Plus: Flexing Personality to Fit

Andrew works for a large advertising agency company. In his performance reviews he was reviewed as being a very effective creative talent, but poor at meeting deadlines, reactive and easily distracted. This not only affected his own work performance, but impacted the performance of co-workers in his team. These behaviours are consistent with a spontaneous person – the other end of the conscientiousness dimension of personality. Spontaneous people are prone to being unmethodical, casual, and are more likely to procrastinate over tasks. They can be seen by others as unreliable and even lazy.

The traditional approach to try and improve Andrew's performance might be to set targets, give time for those targets to be met and seek to remedy any skills gaps with training courses. However, we considered it more appropriate to develop a solution that fits with Andrew's personality, rather than use the conventional 'one size fits all' approach to help Andrew overcome the issues he faces at work.

An individual's personality determines how they react to the various situations and experiences of their lives and this is particularly true of how they perform at work. There is general agreement that there are five components to personality: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and emotional stability. The differences you see in your work mate's or staff's response to work challenges represents their personality at work.

There are a number of traditional approaches to how employers deal with performance or skills gap issues; however, their effectiveness is blunted by their failure to take account of the individual's personality. Traditional improvement techniques concentrate on the solution and the delivery of the solution, they fail to take account of the problem – the particular person who is seeking improvement.

Our approach is to begin with the individual by testing their personality to ascertain how the facets of their personality influence behaviour, and then work with them on improvement techniques more suited to them.

We started with Andrew, from the inside out. Personality testing revealed the facets of his personality and with those results we were able to develop a plan with a greater level of detail relevant to Andrew. We were able to work on what he was doing now to achieve valued long term goals and teach specific self-



awareness techniques for helping with his procrastination and spontaneity. These techniques, coupled with his learning to monitor his behaviour and improvement helped him to achieve the new targets and improve his performance. Andrew is still spontaneous, but he is now able to contribute to his own and his team's success in a more constructive and planned way.

The approach works across other areas of work performance issues.

Celise has been working as an accountant in a medium sized chartered accounting firm for the three years since graduation. She has got excellent ratings for her audit work, and now supervises audit teams. She is well-liked by staff and clients but does have some issues around overload and stress. In a training simulation she indicated that she is inclined to avoid conflict, to defer when attacked, and to be more inclined to get stuck in to her work rather than to promote her own achievements.

This pattern of responses is typical of the expression of the personality trait of Agreeableness at work. Agreeable people tend to be more trusting, altruistic, tender minded, compliant and modest. Nice, helpful people in other words. Celise had scored high on this personality dimension.

As a highly agreeable person, Celise worked hard on her own work, did more work when covering for her staff (who had learned that she did not turn down requests for time off), did extra work requested by clients (who had learned that she would do it without charging), and worked even harder when under pressure, since that was one of her preferred coping strategies. Why was Celise prone to being overloaded? In large part a result of her agreeable type behaviours as revealed in the simulations.

Celise's situation illustrate the difficulty of traditional approaches to dealing with people who are, in personality terms, 'agreeable'. Agreeable is one of the two social personality dimensions, the other being Extroversion. Extroverts can be found building relationships, bridging between teams, and influencing others. Agreeable people use their considerable empathy to serve others, and ensure that people get along. They add considerable value in customer service roles and as team-workers.

Agreeable people are often seen as useful, if not high profile workers. Not exceptional often, because unlike the well-connected and higher profile extroverts, they are getting on with it, or helping others get on with it, rather than talking about it. If they have work overload, or stress problems, the traditional solution is often to suggest stress management solutions – relaxation to buffer



the anxious feelings, cognitive approaches to reduce catastrophic thinking, desensitization to help them stay in the work area – despite the conditioned aversive reactions that work might induce.

Our approach with Celise was more upstream. Why was she doing too much work? Because she was kindly volunteering for it. We worked with her on assertion skills (saying 'No' in firm but not aggressive way), and negotiation skills (enabling her to 'take' as well as 'give' in her interactions with clients and staff).

Celise is still a nice person. But she has learned the value of flexing her personality style with the application of some useful skills. She gets more from her staff, she ensures clients pay for value, and they like and respect her for it.

Alan Goodwin and Stewart Forsyth are the Principals of Persona-Plus, a group that uses personality-based approaches to develop effective self-improvement strategies. Persona-Plus provides training and on-line tools to support the development of skills that enable people to flex their personality to fit job and life demands (see more, including interactive learning tools at www.personaplus.co.nz – from November 2007!).

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