



Building better relationships

David Archer and Alex Cameron explain how they have applied the principles of MBTI to organisations



The ability to get people from different organisations and cultures to work together has never been more important than it is today.

In 1963, Martin Luther King wrote: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Of course, he was writing about a different and deeper connection between people, but the financial turmoil of recent months makes it clear just how interconnected our lives are.

This process of delivering results across organisational and cultural boundaries has been gathering pace for some time. In the UK, we are betting the future of our public services on our ability to make public-private partnerships work and, on a global scale, we are betting the future of the planet on the ability of nations to work together to tackle problems such as terrorism and climate change.

The stakes are high, so within organisations the need to develop the capability of leaders at all levels to work across organisational boundaries and understand differences in organisational culture is near the top of many L&D professionals’ list of priorities. This article outlines a tool that we have developed, based on the language and concepts of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), to help people work with difference in organisational culture and ultimately get more from their critical business relationships.

Analysing collaboration styles: the Organisational Partnering Indicator

You can’t tie down fully an organisational culture. There will always be something unexpected – just as an old friend or partner will sometimes surprise you by acting out of character. However, you *can* go a long way towards

understanding and describing the distinctions between organisational types and their typical, or preferred, ways of working.

The model we use for analysing organisational cultures and sub-cultures owes much to the work of William Bridges. He pioneered the use of personality type testing for organisation in his groundbreaking book *The Character of Organisations*¹. Basing his work on MBTI, he proposed that organisations differed in character in the same way that individuals do and he developed a way of analysing and articulating that difference.

For Bridges, and for us, there is no ‘right’ answer for organisations. He compares character to the grain in a piece of wood – no grain is inherently good or bad, but each behaves differently. Some can take great pressure, others can withstand bending, while others take a fine polish. Each is well fitted to a particular purpose.

Over the last seven years, we’ve built on Bridges’ thinking so that, not only do we describe the character of an organisation, we also identify its collaboration style and indicate how other groups might experience working with it. The resulting tool – the Organisational Partnering Indicator (OPI) – helps leaders predict the challenges when different types of organisations work together, and gives them the knowledge to start addressing those challenges effectively.

The OPI uses terminology from MBTI that describes an individual’s personality preferences and applies it to the culture of an organisation, analysing the way culture is expressed in terms of an organisation’s process, ways of working and habits. The result of this analysis goes way beyond amorphous feelings of ‘chemistry’, giving a detailed picture of what makes an organisation tick and, importantly, how it’s likely to work with others.



To obtain a detailed profile for an organisation, a representative sample of staff complete a questionnaire, rather like those used in MBTI, and their scores are taken for each of four dimensions, just as a Myers-Briggs profile is obtained for an individual. We can explore the dimensions briefly below.

Where does the organisation direct its energy?

Introvert (I) – Extrovert (E)

The first dimension of the OPI explores whether the organisation looks outwards towards its customers, stakeholders and regulators (Extrovert) or inwards towards its own systems, leaders and interests (Introvert). So, for example, Extrovert organisations are open to influence from external bodies and act quickly in response to changing situations. Introvert organisations, on the other hand, are less open to influence from outside and respond to a changing situation only after some internal debate and consideration.

What information does the organisation pay attention to?

Sensing (S) – iNtuition (N)

The second dimension looks at whether the organisation pays most attention to details and facts (Sensing) or to future trends and the big picture (iNtuition). Sensing organisations are at their

strongest when dealing with specific detail and like their partners to operate precisely within set procedures. iNtuitive organisations are at their strongest when dealing with the big picture and like their partners to be creative and make connections with new ideas.

How does the organisation make decisions?

Thinking (T) – Feeling (F)

The third dimension looks at how the organisation makes its decisions: mainly by impersonal logic, based on clear principles (Thinking) or more personally, based mainly on its values (Feeling). Thinking organisations focus on rules and exceptions and often believe that criticism will lead to greater efficiency, whereas Feeling organisations focus on relationships and believe that support for one another leads to greater effectiveness.

How does the organisation plan and structure its work?

Judging (J) – Perceiving (P)

The fourth dimension looks at whether the organisation prefers to close down decisions (Judging) or to keep its options open for as long as possible

(Perceiving). Judging organisations focus on decisions and quickly lock into them – they never like to sit on the fence and they value others who deliver to plan. Perceiving organisations, on the other hand, like to stay flexible in order to seek more information – they never like to miss an opportunity. They value others who think on their feet and take a business relationship in new directions.

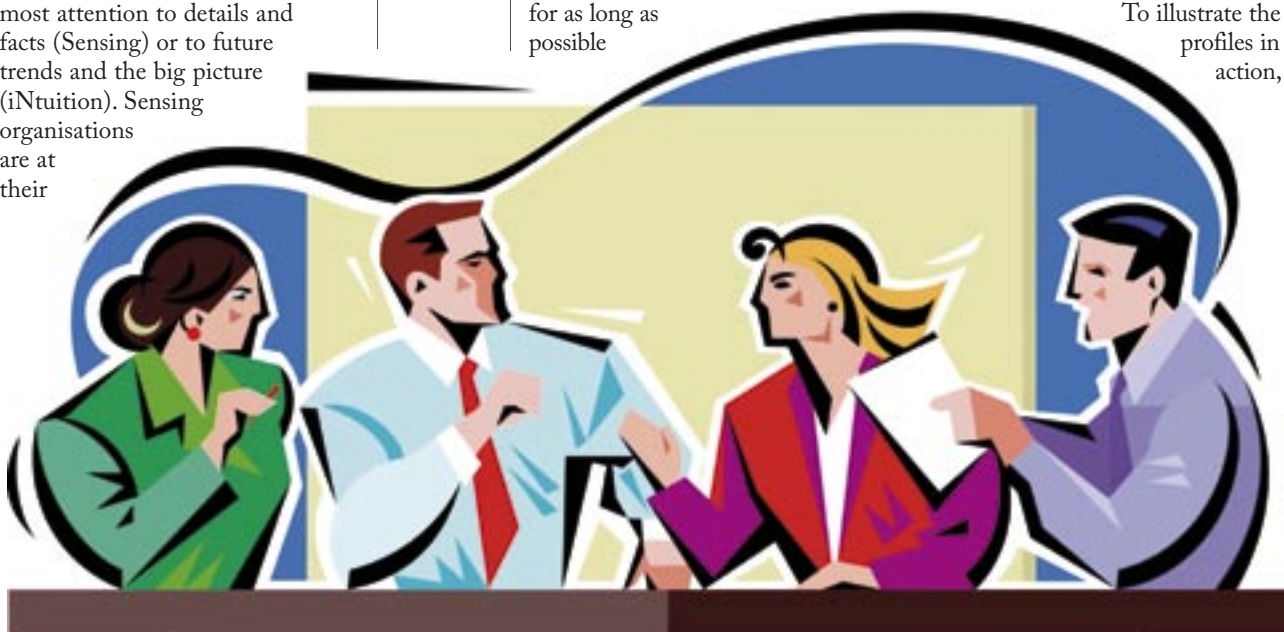
The 16 types of organisation

There are 16 possible combinations of the four dimensions and we have developed detailed profiles for each organisational type, describing the collaboration habits and pitfalls for each. These profiles predict how an organisation is likely to behave in collaborative situations.

How to use the profiles: get under each other's skin

Understanding your own organisational profile and those of others sheds remarkable light on the frustrations within a partnership. It also allows you to use cultural difference by tailoring your approach towards partners of a different type and taking their preferences into account.

To illustrate the profiles in action,



we'll look at an example of three different organisational types in partnership together. A large engineering and project management consultancy (let's call them Aardvark) is in a long-term contract with a government department to deliver a major IT project. In addition, a small, hi-tech start-up company (let's call them Zenith) is supplying some innovative touch-screen technology as a key part of the overall contract.

Things are beginning to go wrong. Decisions get reversed and ideas are blocked, the right people aren't consulted at the right time. A team-building day has no effect. Something needs to be done. Finally, the partnership assesses each partner's organisational type using the OPI. This throws up some interesting results.

Aardvark has the profile ISTJ – introvert, sensing, thinking, judging. Its people are focused on implementation and want the partnership to deliver tangible results. They're also good at rules and procedures, and at putting the right governance in place. As partners, they need to be given time to digest ideas and come back with an analysis of the challenges. But they're pretty demanding: they want evidence and precision and, if someone makes a commitment, they expect it to be delivered in full.

The government department is ESTP – extrovert, sensing, thinking, perceiving. Its people are single-minded and task-orientated. They like to take charge when time is critical, and they're good at unblocking bottlenecks. They'll get involved in the detail of their partners' work, but want them to communicate concisely and stick to the point. However, long-term planning doesn't come naturally to them and they're likely to spring some surprises on their partners.

Finally, Zenith is INFP – introvert, intuitive, feeling, perceiving. Its people are passionate about what they do, though not always articulate about it. They hate

Sample of sections and statements taken from OPI reports	
<p>The Department (organisational type ESTP)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We want to take charge of the partnership in time-critical situations • We are good at identifying ways of addressing urgent issues that are holding progress back • Our communication style is very task-focused and can appear harsh 	<p>When you partner with us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate concisely and stick to the point • Expect us to want to get closely involved in the details of your work for the partnership • Expect us to surprise you with changes of direction when political or other external forces dictate it
<p>Aardvark (organisational type ISTJ)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We focus on implementation and want the partnership to deliver tangible results • We are good at bringing the necessary governance and formality to a partnership • We will follow the agreed rules and procedures of the partnership and expect others to do the same 	<p>When you partner with us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give us time to digest new ideas and expect us to come back with an analysis of implementation challenges • Set clear rules and boundaries about what we expect of each other • Be precise in your communications and provide evidence for your opinions
<p>Zenith (organisational type INFP)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are passionate about the aims of this partnership and we see it as a long-term relationship, not a contract • We can be very flexible in the way we work – as long as we believe this takes us all towards our shared goals • We hate bureaucracy and can rebel against it at times 	<p>When you partner with us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give us the freedom to do what we do best • Expect us to question the values and beliefs of our partners – they matter to us • Don't try to tie us down to specific processes too early

If all parties truly understand what makes each other tick, they can use that knowledge to build better relationships

bureaucracy, and sometimes rebel against it, but they're happy to be flexible and to share knowledge and expertise in the pursuit of shared goals. They need to be given the freedom to get on with what they do best, and to question the beliefs and values of their partners. Tying them down to processes too early is a big mistake – they'll jib at it. Probably the best way to get to know them is to spend some social time with them – they don't believe life is all about work.

Understanding each other's culture is a vital first step towards tackling some of the clashes that have characterised the three-way

relationship to date. Once each partner understands a bit more about the others, they can start accommodating their preferences far more than they have in the past.

In this example, the three partners agree to hold pathfinder meetings where the government department can talk about a range of possible future requirements without having to commit anything to paper. The hi-tech start-up can respond to these with creative ideas of its own. Meanwhile, the consultancy can take note of possible implications for its core infrastructure. There's a long way to go but it's a strong basis for effective collaboration.

Shifting the culture

Although organisational type tends to be deeply ingrained, it is not immutable. Organisations change over time. A start-up will gradually settle down into a more process-driven organisation and, over time, a process-driven organisation can ossify into a

slow-moving bureaucracy. Even a change of CEO can herald a new culture, since many CEOs build a culture in their own image, whether consciously or not.

One organisation that has successfully shifted its culture is The Royal Parks, the body in charge of Hyde Park and other historic London green spaces. When Mark Camley took over as CEO in 2005, the prevailing culture was inwardly-focused, concentrating on preserving the landscape and heritage. The parks' many stakeholders were not seen as a high priority and, while marketing staff had ideas for using the spaces in new ways to generate income, the horticultural staff were vetoing these initiatives.

Camley told us: "We were often on the back foot, governed by the seasons rather than a business plan. We needed a new culture of decisive planning and implementation – a more proactive and extrovert approach based on information gathered from the outside world, not just horticultural issues."

Using the OPI, we helped Camley analyse the Royal Parks culture. This score gave him a baseline measure for his process of change, and was followed by training in collaborative leadership for senior managers. One of the insights from the training was that different functions were working on radically different timescales. When one horticulturalist was asked for his view of the long term, his response was: "See those trees we're planting right now? We'll know whether we planted them in the right place in 100 years – governments may come and go, but trees remain."

A year on, however, the different functions were able to understand each other far better, and to look externally as well as internally. The Royal Parks hosted Live 8 and the London stage of the Tour de France, as well as winning Green Flag Awards for all eight



Alex Cameron and David Archer will be running a session on using the OPI at this year's *TJ* Annual Conference on 23rd June. To find out more, visit www.trainingjournal.com/conference

parks under its management. Meanwhile, plans were underway for hosting several events for the 2012 Olympics. The second OPI measurement confirmed that the culture had shifted significantly towards planning and implementation. According to Camley, the detailed analysis helped "unstick" the organisation.

"Understanding your organisational type helps you convince even the most sceptical people that you're making progress," he says.

Making difference work for you

Cultural differences can be a huge problem for organisations that have to work together. They can bring out fear, prejudice and distrust. Yet they're a fact of life. Most partnerships involve a degree of difference in values and preferred working methods and some, indeed, are forced marriages. Pleasant though it might be, you can't always create cosy

relationships with like-minded organisations, and nor would you want to if you're trying to create something new. Often the very reason for entering a partnership is to harness that difference in order to achieve something neither could accomplish alone.

For OD professionals and trainers, the issue is how to get leaders to look beyond the skin-deep. It's not an instinctive skill to be able to read organisational character, yet it's critical to much business success in this interconnected world. If all parties truly understand what makes each other tick, they can use that knowledge to build better relationships. The essence of collaboration lies in knowing each other's skills, likes and dislikes, trigger points and support needs, and not only accommodating those differences but employing them to the full. ■

Footnotes

- 1 Bridges W *The Character of Organisations* Davies Black Publishing 2000

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