

He can't help it – it's his mental programming

Never try to teach a pig to sing, as the saying goes – it wastes your time and annoys the pig. Yet organisations try to do this all the time when they ignore employees' individual temperaments, and mental programming, argues Dr Leandro Herrero

I've got my own unscientific, observation-based classification of people. I claim no intensive background research, no 500 CEO interviews, no 2,000 manager questionnaires. My categories are more to do with mental programmes than personalities. None of them correlate with IQ. They are non-judgmental: good people and difficult people are present throughout. But people tend to be polarised to into one or the other category. Inevitably this is artificial as many people fall between the extremes or have mixed traits, but the dominance of a particular mental programme is what matters.

You wouldn't ask an Eskimo for advice on tropical fish. However, in business life, we do that all the time, expecting certain thought processes and behaviours from people simply unequipped for them.

We are all programmed by our genes, education and experience. This is one reason why it is a waste of time to try to teach a pig to sing – all it will achieve is to irritate the pig.

Understanding the diversity of mental programmes is the first step to functioning socially and working in an organisation. To understand the everyday business plot requires an appreciation of the characters' mental programmes (people in the organisation) and the organisation's mental framework (culture).

Next time you are frustrated by seemingly incomprehensible behaviour from colleagues, suspend your judgement and irritation. Instead, try to think how the perpetrator may have been programmed. At least, it may help you to understand them – and even respond, attack, change direction or adapt to the situation.

Types and consequences

Here is a summary of my people classifications:

•**Sequence.** There are 'parallel people' and 'sequential people'. The former are able to work

(mentally and physically) on several tracks at the same time. They are jumpers. They navigate very well from one thing to another, by switching between ideas and tasks. They have no problem with unfinished issues to be picked up later on. Sequential people, however, need to go from A to B first, and from B to C afterwards. Don't interrupt them in their sequence, or dare to ask what is going to happen with D. This is a stupid question – they are still solving B. Their view of parallel people is that they are unmethodical and prone to sloppiness. By contrast, parallel people consider sequential people to be inflexible, 'one-ball jugglers', often at the expense of everybody else.

•**Uncertainty.** People fall into two types, those who are driven by the need for data and those who are driven by goals. 'Data (facts)-driven people' hate uncertainty – decisions must be based on solid research or facts. Guessing, 'what if' or speculation is considered a waste. Scientists are welcome here. On the other hand, 'strategy (goal)-driven people' see the future, and work backwards; they have no problem with lack of current data, they love scenarios and possibilities. While they agree that information is needed, they often cannot wait. They need to imagine the future and play with choices. They think that data-driven people lack imagination – and are accountants at heart.

•**Channels.** People have preferred channels through which to see, understand and communicate with the world. There are 'verbal people', 'visual people' and/or 'written people'. Entire corporate cultures are shaped on these preferences, for example voice mail cultures, e-mail cultures, fax cultures and 'pick up the telephone' cultures. You need to understand those preferences and adjust to them, otherwise be prepared for surprises. A one-slide bubble chart won't do for the boss expecting a report. Another might expect nothing less than a face-to-face meeting – don't send him the slides.

•**Unit.** 'Atomic people' dissect the elephant (the problem) into pieces and deal with legs, tails and ears, one at a time. 'Molecular people' see an elephant when they see a combination of body parts. Atomic people thrive in an analytical environment – they should have no problems in answering job ads as everybody seems to ask for analytical skills. Molecular people synthesise ideas or programmes into a complex whole, and are often referred to as having a 'helicopter view'. They refer to the others as lost in the detail, while atomic people decry this

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lack of attention and consider them not to be trusted to complete a job well.

•**Decisions.** ‘Open-decision people’ are happy to postpone and defer; literally, leaving the decision open. ‘Closed-decision people’ are always desperate to reach a resolution and complete what they are doing, sometimes at any cost. They think of open-decision makers as always paralysed and with poor leadership qualities. If you are a closed-decision person and want to force a resolution in an environment (team, customer group) that needs more time to reflect you may feel frustrated. Alternatively, open-decision makers may interpret an organisation’s or individual’s need to complete as too eager or desperate. They just may not have the concept of reviewing it again tomorrow in their mental programming.

•**Propositions.** Some people focus first on a question or statement and then develop the idea and the arguments further. I call them ‘the journalists’. Others do exactly the opposite. I call them ‘the lawyers’. Consider these two memos:

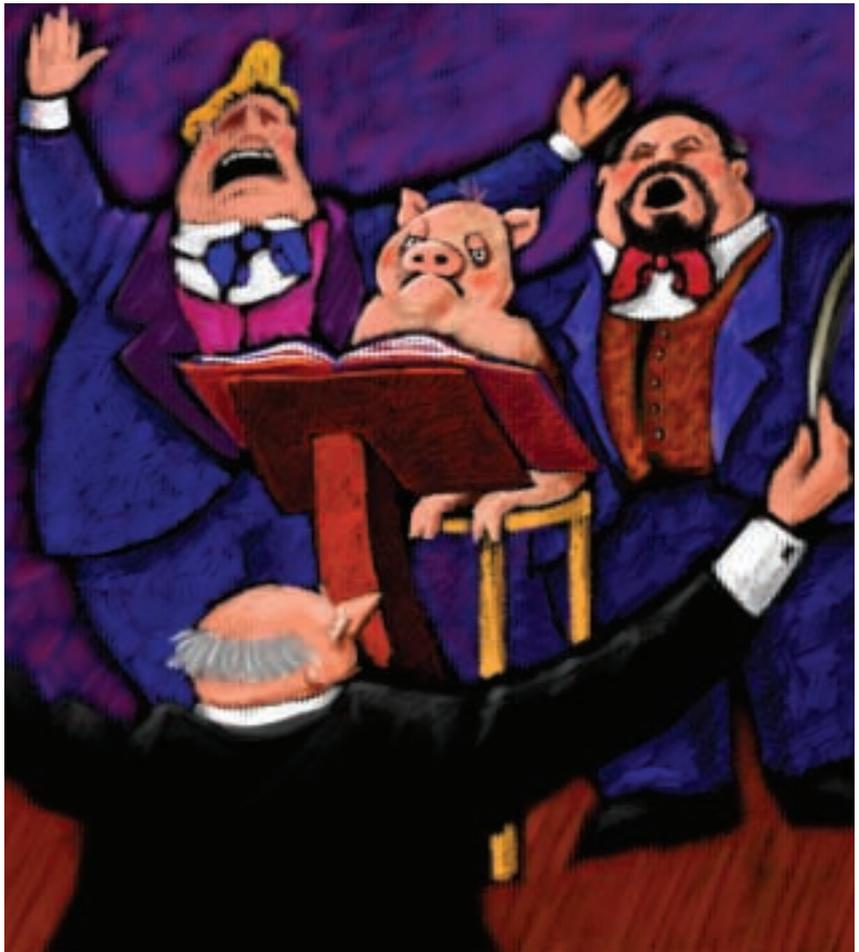
(A) ‘This is to request the hiring of a new manager; the situation in the office has become unbearable. We have [such and such] projects and these deadlines, etc...’ [development of these reasons, and suggested solutions then follow in one or two pages].

(B) ‘We have become inundated by projects and are under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines [two or three pages of more details, reasons and explanations follow, concluding with] This is why I am requesting a new manager.’

In (A) the request is upfront, in (B) it comes three pages later. (A) is journalistic: the message must be in the first paragraph. By contrast, legal documents, from petitions to court rulings, follow (B) style: ‘Considering such and such [one page], having heard N and N [one page], and taking into account X and Y, we declare that [concluding statement]’. Many people think that the sharpness of the (A) model means a well-organised mind, considering the (B) model as verbose and disorganised. However this is not how the lawyers style themselves, that is, more logical in thought flow.

•**Simplicity.** Not to be mistaken for atoms and molecules, this has to do with people’s ability to create and convey simple messages, whether they come from a simple or complex topic. Some science writers have this ability, explaining complex science in ways that lay people can understand. Others just can’t do it – don’t expect bullet points from them. In some business cultures, the norm and expectations are ‘1,2,3’, ‘one-page summary’, ‘in three bullet points’, and ‘the net-net’. Don’t go to them with an intricate elaboration based on chaos and complexity theory. Paul Valéry said: ‘Everything that is simple is false, everything that is not simple is useless.’ This dilemma is still looking for a solution in business life today.

•**Inclusiveness.** Some people ask for opinions and go around the table or company for recommendations. These are ‘constituency people’, sensitive to the inclusion of as many players as possible. Oth-



Out of tune. Not all performers have the same range of capabilities.
Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

ers are ‘ad hoc people’ – they will ask you for an opinion or a recommendation only if you are key to the topic, otherwise, they would genuinely consider it a waste of time. At one end of the spectrum, entire organisations suffer from over-inclusiveness syndrome: everybody must be (or wants to be) involved in everything. At the other end are organisations with no collective soul and a pretty good organisation chart to make sure that one knows whom not to ask in the chain of command. If you are a newly appointed ad hoc boss in a constituency organisation, you will soon earn the label of autocrat.

•**Authority.** Cultures have been classified according to their attitudes towards authority. What applies to cultures applies to individuals as well. ‘Status people’ will follow hierarchy-based authority. ‘Wisdom people’ regard authority as something that somebody earns. For the former, the boss is not only a boss, but a smart boss because he is the boss. Always check out this programme before embarking on any new partnership. For clues, watch body languages around the negotiating table. Ten pairs of eyes looking in one direction? He’s the man.

•**Project.** There are ‘doing what people’ and ‘doing how people’. The former, task-oriented

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individuals have an eye on the endpoint, love milestones, distinct tasks with clear desirable outcome, and are often simply referred to as 'doers'. For them, how to get there is less relevant. Indeed, they may get there at any cost. To the latter, process matters most, they have their eye on the journey and the way things are done.

•**Time.** There are 'past', 'present' and 'future' people. They differ in their reference to the world. To anchor everything in the past with somebody working in next-century time leads to a dialogue of the deaf. Those better equipped with past-time mental programmes choose professions accordingly: archaeologists, historians, or psychoanalysts. They may not be the best people to invent the third-generation Internet, but then you would not want Bill Gates as your psychotherapist. Short-termism in current business life has led to a new breed of present-time managers who count time in quarters.

•**Options.** There are people who tend to follow one single, logical, linear thinking path, probably the one that makes more sense to them, and are happy with the outcome. I call them 'therefore people'. They sound like this: 'We have done A, have considered all the risks and therefore we must choose X.' It is solid and reassuring. Other people can't stick to one linear track, even if it is very reasonable. I call them 'however people'.

They sound like this: 'We have done A, explored B, and we think we should do X; however, we could also do Y and Z.' Each side irritates the other. The 'therefores' are perceived as rigid or, more benevolently, 'determined', while the 'howevers' are viewed as lacking clarity and being indecisive.

Although business leaders often receive media training to learn how to cope with TV interviews or journalists, particularly in times of crisis, I have not heard of any 'people training' to learn to cope with different mental programming. This seems like an oversight as it would equip them to understand colleagues, enemies, team-mates or the CEO who wants to buy you. Psychology, the most important business discipline, is the noticeable absentee. EM

Further reading

L Heckling. *Managing cultural differences*, Addison-Wesley, 1995.

R D Lewis. *When cultures collide*, Nicholas Brealey, 2000.

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