

Careers and development

Yeung At Heart –

Determining your five personal traits (Part I)



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How would you describe yourself? Would you say that you are warm and helpful? Loud and outgoing? Disciplined and careful? Creative and a little bit eccentric? Perhaps you would say that you are all of those things – or perhaps none of them.

Such adjectives describe facets of your personality, your tendencies or preferences in life. The nature of your personality matters greatly if you want to succeed in life. Few people are all-rounded and talented in everything they do. Successful people understand what they're good at; they understand their natural preferences and their usual ways of behaving, and they seek situations that allow them to be themselves.

For example, an individual who hates rules, bureaucracy, and careful form-filling would be better off knowing that and avoiding a career in something like audit or the actuarial profession.

So what's your personality? In this two-part article running over this issue and the next, I'll be asking how you can use an understanding of your personality to thrive.

Diving into your personal OCEAN

All over the world, there are *hundreds* of different questionnaires that allege to measure personality. You may have completed one online or perhaps as part of a training event organized by your workplace. Unfortunately, some were developed decades ago and haven't taken advantage of more recent advances in psychology. Others have been developed quickly by consultants more interested in making a quick profit than understanding whether their questionnaire may genuinely predict how people behave.

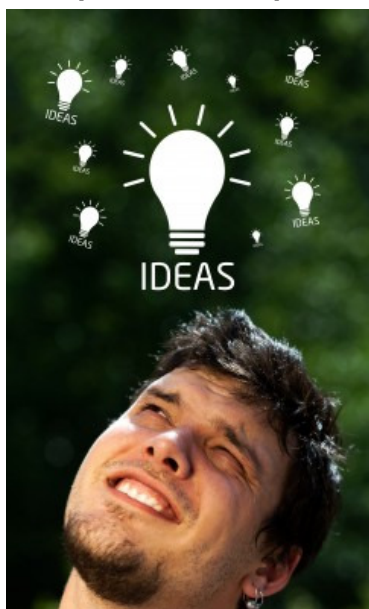
Thankfully, most reputable psychologists agree that personality can be measured by between three to seven dimensions. One of the most popular models of personality divides our tendencies up into five dimensions, which are captured by the acronym OCEAN: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.



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I'll begin by describing the five dimensions. At the end of the second part of this article, I'll make some recommendations if you should wish to learn more about yourself.

O - Openness to experience



Each of the five personality dimensions is a scale. At one end, people who are high on the openness-to-experience scale tend to be extremely inquisitive and curious about the world. They greatly enjoy learning about the world. They visit galleries, museums, exhibitions and have many hobbies and interests. As a consequence, they are very creative and enjoy nothing better than coming up with new ideas for how they and others could be doing things at work. However, this creativity means that they can be perceived by other people as being eccentric, as having ideas that are insufficiently grounded and just too crazy.

At the other end of the spectrum, people who are low on openness-to-experience tend to prefer to do things in ways that have been proven. Rather than trying a new method of doing something, they would rather stick to the techniques and ways of working that have been tried, tested and proven. Why recreate the wheel? Such individuals tend to be pragmatic and uncomplicated. But their pragmatism means that some people (particularly those who are high on openness-to-experience) may see them as narrow-minded, as lacking in vision and originality.

Clearly, neither end of the spectrum is better than the other. The point is that both ends of the scale are associated with both strengths and weaknesses.

C - Conscientiousness

The conscientiousness dimension measures our innate desire for discipline, organization and self-restraint. People who are high on conscientiousness like to make plans. Given the choice, they prefer to prepare well in advance of projects, whether at work or in their personal lives. They enjoy running their lives to schedules; they keep their promises and they pride themselves on rarely – if ever – forgetting things or letting people down. But the fact that they are so in control can irritate colleagues, who may find them rule-bound and bureaucratic.



At the other end of the spectrum, people who are low on conscientiousness are adaptable and flexible. They prefer to keep their options open and don't really like making plans. They enjoy dynamic, changing situations. But that same adaptability and reluctance to be pinned down means that certain other people may find them to be mavericks that are too unpredictable, unreliable and undependable.

How does this help us?

I've already mentioned that successful people tend to know themselves very well. For a start, our personality preferences suggest the kinds of working environments that would suit us or stifle us. An individual who is high on openness-to-experience, for example, would do well to seek out environments where creativity is genuinely valued. On the other hand, someone who is low on the conscientiousness may struggle in a workplace that has very strict rules – for example around health and safety.

In the next issue, I'll cover the remaining three personality dimensions and discuss how this self-knowledge can help us all.

