

WHAT LIES BENEATH?

The exploratory potential of psychometrics

What are the preferred leadership styles of the person sitting in front of me? Do they have what it takes for this role? What are their development needs? How are they likely to react to the pressures of this job?

In short: What is really going on beneath the surface?

These are the sorts of questions that confront all of us involved in the selection, promotion, development and leadership of others. For the benefit of everybody involved, it is essential to understand as far as possible an individual's strengths, behavioural preferences and potential. This minimises the risk of making costly mistakes in recruitment and promotion, and maximises your return on investment in development and leadership.

So, what role can psychometrics, and, in particular, personality questionnaires play in this quest for insight?

Put simply, they provide an excellent, cost effective method of getting the most out of interviews, coaching sessions and development sessions. The resulting personality profile guides you to ask pertinent questions directly linked to the skills required for a role. In other words, they are invaluable for a quick and effective 'dive beneath the surface'.

Let's take a look at some typical scenarios:

Our first case is a large pharmaceutical company requiring a Quality Manager with the interpersonal skills necessary to manage internal clients across two European countries and the USA. The multicultural nature of the client base meant that this manager needed sophisticated and adaptable social and communication skills in order to interact effectively with colleagues in the different countries. Anne Shaw Consultants advised that candidates complete a personality questionnaire as part of the selection process. Crucially this would measure several dimensions relating to the individuals' preferences when dealing with people operating in different cultures. With the benefit of these profiles, the interviewers were able to direct their questions to specific areas of concern which might otherwise have been missed. The right candidate was appointed.

Our second case is typical of an executive coaching situation. Our client, an Operations Director in a medium sized engineering company already proven as an entrepreneur, wanted to improve his leadership performance. By using a number of psychometric questionnaires, we quickly identified the areas to focus on in our coaching sessions. The results clearly highlighted his competitive approach to handling conflict situations which was causing problems with other senior managers and his own team. Whilst this was no major surprise to our client, having the profile in front of us allowed the discussion to focus rapidly on this area as an underlying contributor to some of his problems. Whilst this style worked well for him in some situations, he recognised that it was not always appropriate. With the client's full acceptance of the evidence before him, it enabled the coach to ask questions which 'teased out' the underlying reasons for this approach and helped to explore the pros and cons of this style of conflict handling. Through the course of our coaching sessions, we explored alternative approaches to handling conflict and built our client's awareness of when and how to use the styles with which he felt comfortable. Three months later 360° feedback proved that his personal style was significantly more constructive, enabling him to operate much more effectively.

Our third situation involves an under performing team in a key operational area. Analysis revealed a clash of styles and conflict within the team of five. This was undermining any chance of effective productivity. During a two-day team-building event, delegates completed a psychometric instrument aimed at exploring (and exposing!) different types of team behaviour. The self-awareness and mutual understanding that this brought to the team proved to be a powerful force in helping them to improve their performance with clearly measurable benefits.

Of course, personality questionnaires are not the only vehicle for gaining a better understanding of an individual's suitability for a job or their strengths and development needs.

Anne Shaw Consultants, a long established Human Resources Consultancy – we are proudly celebrating our Diamond Jubilee in 2005 - can advise on additional methods which include situational or competency based interviews, work-based assessment scenarios such as in-tray exercises or case study presentations, and, of course, other psychometric tools which measure abilities such as verbal, numerical or abstract critical reasoning.

So, next time you find yourself wondering what really lies beneath the surface of the person in front of you, a psychometric tool or a similar professional assessment method can certainly help you to reach a new level of understanding.

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