

How to Keep Your Personality from Working against You

I had a conversation with a client some time ago that points out how personality strengths sometimes work against us. My client, Tom, is the CEO of a manufacturing company, and Charlie is one of his senior managers. Here's my conversation with Tom:

Tom: "I'm having a problem with Charlie. I'm just not sure he knows what is really important."

Me: "What do you mean when you say he doesn't know what is important?"

Tom: "He doesn't seem to know how important it is, when faced with a new problem, to first think it through before taking action. He just wants to start dealing with the most obvious part of the problem. I want you to talk with him and find out what he needs to do to fix this problem."

Later on, I meet with Charlie, who seems glad to have the opportunity to get some things off his chest.

Charlie: "I'm glad we have this opportunity to talk. I've been dealing with a problem with Tom for some time and it's got me stumped."

Me: "What is the problem?"

Charlie: "Tom is a great guy and one of the smartest guys I know. But he doesn't appear to know what is important when he is faced with a new problem. Instead of jumping in and beginning to deal with it, he wants to over-think the problem: 'How many possible causes are there? Which is most likely the most important cause? How does the problem affect other areas of our business? What are the implications for future business?' And on and on. He just doesn't understand how important it is to stop wasting time nattering about this and that and just start dealing with it."

Both Charlie and Tom are being sabotaged by their strong personality traits. Tom sees a problem as being at the center of a web of pre-existing conditions and patterns that produced it. He feels that, if you don't take these things into consideration, you may end up missing the real issue that the presenting problem is only a symptom of.

On the other hand, Charlie assumes that the presenting problem *is* the problem. He feels that it is important not to waste time over-thinking a situation, especially if it means that you put off dealing with the presenting problem. "Time's a-wasting."

To both Tom and Charlie, a problem looks like a nail. Charlie's personality says to him, "Pick up a hammer and start hitting the nail." Tom's personality tells him to pause and consider whether a nail is

the right solution. Would a bolt or a screw be better than a nail? If we do use a nail, what are the possible downsides?

Both Charlie and Tom have successfully solved problems in the past, each using his strongly-valued approach. But the more strongly held a preference is, such as how to solve problems, the more difficult it is to be flexible about the approach you take. It's as if Tom's and Charlie's personalities have them both on autopilot, telling them, "What has worked in the past will work now." But no single approach, no matter how effective, will work with every problem.

There are all kinds of problems we have to solve. Author David Epstein helpfully sorts them into two broad categories: "kind" problems and "wicked" problems.

"Kind" problems are those where the rules for how to handle the problem repeat (for example, changing the toner cartridge in your printer.) Feedback about how well a solution is working is accurate and usually immediate.

"Wicked" problems, on the other hand, are characterized by incomplete or unclear rules. They may, or may not, have patterns that repeat and, if they do repeat, the patterns may not be obvious. Feedback is often delayed, inaccurate or both.

Charlie's personality predisposes him to see all problems as "kind", whereas Tom's personality predisposes him to assume that all problems are "wicked". The difficulty that they have in working together comes from the fact that each assumes his approach is best under all circumstances. They need to:

1. learn to see the other's approach as having merit, depending on the nature of the problems that needs to be solved;
2. recognize the difference between "kind" and "wicked" problems;
3. recognize which approach is best for the kind of problem ("kind" or "wicked") they are facing.

This lesson about strongly-held personality traits affects more than problem-solving. Our underlying personality affects how we perceive the world around us, and the stronger any preference is, the more likely we are to develop "blindness" about alternative ways to see things. The best way to keep your personality working for, and not against, you is:

- to know your personality's strong preferences, and
- to remind yourself that as "right" as they seem to you, any one of your preferences may be wrong at any given time.

Chiseled into the stone over the entrance to the 2300 year-old Temple of the Oracle in Delphi, Greece, are the words "Know Thyself".

It's still pretty good advice.

And we're still working on it.