Segment: People at Work

Topic 1: Individual Characteristics

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## 📖 Introduction

All people are similar in some ways. For example, people have similar needs and most people can be motivated to take action. However, people are motivated by different factors because they have different personalities, belief systems and capabilities.

In this topic and the rest of the segment, we will discuss about people's personalities, motivations and perceptions, and how people problems can be managed in an organisation.

## ✏️ Learning Objectives

At the end of this topic, you will be able to:

- describe the model of changing individual characteristics in the workplace
- discuss the "Big Five" personality dimensions theory
- describe the four personality scales in the Myers-Briggs® Type Indicator.

# 1. Managing People Problems

Before starting this topic, complete the following exercise. You need to play the role of a manager interacting with two employees. Your goal is to find a course of action that can result in a favourable outcome for the employees in the scenario. At the end of this exercise, you will be in a better position to appreciate people problems caused by differences in personalities, motivations and perceptions.

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**Exercise: Identifying Perceptions and Expectations**

**Instructions**

In this exercise, you will play the role of a manager interacting with two different employees to see how they react to the same situation. The exercise begins with a description of a situation and three choices of action you might take. Each decision renders more decisions, until you come to the end of the exercise.

The goal of this exercise is to find the most favourable outcome for both employees.

**Scenario**

Paley Delillo provides logistics consultation for Fortune 500 companies. Many process consultants have been with the company for several years. They have been praised for their work, and clients frequently ask for specific consultants on subsequent jobs.

About a month ago, the manager in charge of the process consultants hired Sam Chmielski. Sam has a reputation for performing at a very high level using innovative methods. The process consultants aren't sure whether Sam deserves his reputation, but they are a bit jealous, nonetheless.

Paley Delillo has also acquired two new clients, both very large companies. These assignments are considered to be very desirable and rewarding, and the consultants have discussed at length who will work with these new companies.

**Employee**

First you will work through the exercise with one employee, then the other. Remember that these two employees (Jorge and Irene) will react differently to the same situation.

**Jorge**

**Your Role: Manager**

Your best consultant, Jorge, is very upset about Sam's hiring. He thinks he has been treated unfairly and claims that Sam is making much money than he is and has better clients.

You can't believe what he is saying. You helped Jorge get a $10,000 raise five months ago, and he is the highest-paid consultant at this level of experience in the company. You pushed

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management to approve the raise because you believed he deserved it. You're not sure what to do. Jorge is angry with you and thinks that decisions are made unfairly. You wonder whether you can do anything to satisfy him.

Some of the other managers are angry that you are paying him at the high end of the salary range. You also assigned Jorge to the company's most important clients as a reward for outstanding work, and because you think he is the best. You even requested a promotion for him.

You're not sure what to do. Jorge is angry with you and thinks that decisions are made unfairly. You wonder whether you can do anything to satisfy him.

What do you do?

A. You try to get another raise for Jorge. He is a key employee, works long hours, and does excellent work. It's true that Sam is making more than Jorge is.

B. You confront Jorge and tell him how ungrateful he is. Remind him that his recent raise puts him above the salary range and that you fought with management to get that raise for him. Ask whether anything would satisfy him and whether he is committed to the company.

C. You ask Jorge why he thinks he is better treated unfairly. You ask him to explain which elements of his compensation trouble him. Then you try to find out what the money means to him.

## Irene

### Your Role: Manager

Your best consultant, Irene, is very upset. She thinks she has been treated unfairly and claims that Sam is making much money than she is and has better clients.

You can't believe what she is saying. You helped Irene get a $10,000 raise five months ago, and she is now the highest-paid consultant at her level of experience. You pushed management to approve the raise because you believed she deserved it. Some of the other managers are angry that you are paying her at the high end of the salary range. You also assigned her to the company's most important clients as a reward for outstanding work and because you think she is the best. You even requested a promotion for her.

You're not sure what to do. Irene is angry with you and thinks decisions are made unfairly. You wonder whether anything you can do to satisfy her.

What do you do?

A. You try to get another raise for Irene. She is a key employee, works long hours, and does

excellent work. It's true that Sam is making more than She is.

B.  You confront Irene and tell her how ungrateful she is. Remind her that her recent raise puts her above the salary range and that you fought with management to get that raise for her. You ask whether anything would satisfy her and whether she is committed to the company.

C.  You ask Irene why she thinks she is better treated unfairly. You ask her to explain which elements of her compensation trouble her. Then you try to find out what the money means to her.

## 2.  Changing Individual Characteristics

The graphic below illustrates people's individual characteristics, the difficulty or ease with which those characteristics can change, as well as the methods used to produce change.
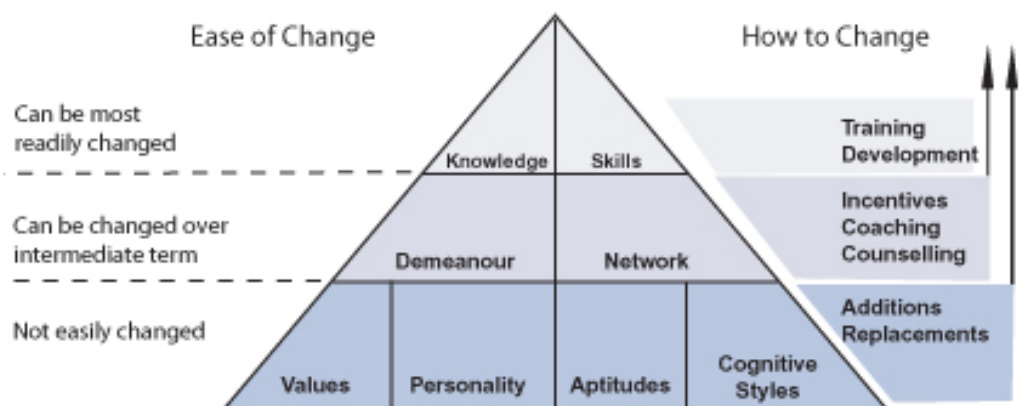


**Fig.1: Pyramid Diagram Illustrating the Difficulty and Ease of Changing Individual Characteristics and the Methods to Produce Change**

As the above model demonstrates, characteristics such as knowledge and skills can be most easily changed through training and development. Other characteristics, such as demeanour and personal networks, are more difficult to change. These characteristics take time to alter and can be modified through incentives, ongoing coaching and counselling.

At the base of the triangle are characteristics that are very difficult to change such as values, personality, aptitude and cognitive style. These characteristics are partly inborn and are developed over many years. Training or coaching may not make significant changes in these characteristics. In the case of these characteristics, managers must replace employees rather than try to change them.

Individuals differ in their general mental ability so that those with a high mental ability are able to perform better on almost any job compared with those with a low ability. Therefore, there are considerable economic gains to organisations through selecting their employees based on tests of general mental ability.

Although all individual characteristics are important when studying people in the workplace, this segment focuses on personality, aptitudes, networks and their consequences on the workplace. The examples and readings in this segment offer strategies for effectively dealing with these consequences.

## 3. Personality

Chu Chin and Khadijah both work as computer programmers for a small insurance firm. One day, owing to a computer problem, business comes to a stop. All computer programmers are asked to stop what they are doing and to focus their attention on solving this problem. Chu Chin becomes enraged at the request to stop his work and handle the immediate situation. Khadijah calmly works to solve the problem at hand. Why do Chu Chin and Khadijah respond differently to the same situation? To put it simply, their personalities cause them to have different reactions to the same situation.

Personality can be described as traits, characteristics and predispositions that differentiate people from each other. The personality an individual has, tends to remain fairly constant over time and because genes affect personality, it is, to a degree, set at birth. It is these more fundamental and enduring aspects of the person that we are considering in this section on personality. However, not all aspects of the behaviour of an individual are this stable. Some aspects of an individual's behaviour are more fluid, and they can be changed by altering the situation the individual is in.

For example, part of an individual's behaviour is caused by the communications he or she receives, and so his or her behaviour can be changed by altering the communications he or she receives, for instance, from co-workers. In this section, we will consider the more unchanging aspects of individual behaviour, before turning later on to the major changeable aspects.
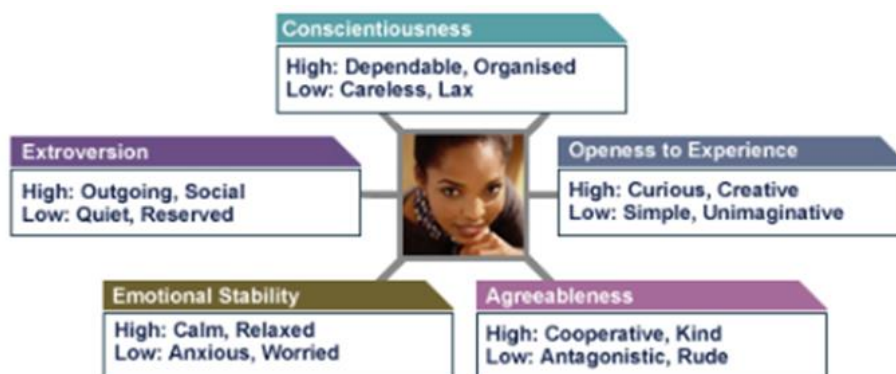
# 4. The "Big Five" Personality Dimensions

One theory, the "Big Five" personality theory, describes personality differences as existing across five dimensions.

1. conscientiousness

2. emotional stability

3. openness to experience

4. agreeableness

5. extroversion

According to this theory, people who score high or low on these scales may have difficulty modifying their behaviour according to different work situations. For example, a person who scores high on the extroversion scale may find it difficult to work alone; a person who scores in the middle can easily work alone or with others.



**Fig.2: Graphic Illustrating the 'Big Five' Personality Dimensions and the Personality Traits on Each Dimension Scale**

How can you identify these traits in co-workers? You can observe them and see how they interact with people. For example, Bo, an energetic leader, loves new projects and rarely misses work; when she does, she works from home. Based on these overt behaviours, you can assume that Bo is extroverted, high in conscientiousness and open to new experiences. Because Bo calmly meets multiple new challenges, you can also assume she has a great amount of emotional stability.

Personality, however, is not always reflected in people's overt behaviour. Despite a preference to behave one way or another, many people are able to adjust their behaviour to different situations. For example, a naturally introverted person may be able to perform daily work with a team and meet group goals, and a naturally extroverted person may be able to work productively alone. People can monitor their outward appearances to present a different view of themselves. However, constantly controlling natural tendencies can become a source of stress for some people, especially people with extreme personality traits. This may lead to problems in the workplace and ineffective coping strategies.

Some characteristics are easier to modify than others and any attempt to do so must begin by acknowledging a problem in a given situation and a desire to change. When people are unable to adjust to their environment, they might find that the best strategy is to find a different, better-suited work environment. For example, an introvert might find it stressful to work in a constantly noisy office space. Stress could lead to decreased ability to cope and perform. However, his or her performance may improve with a quieter work environment.

Effective managers use what they know about employees' personalities to place them in jobs, to understand and cope with interpersonal conflicts between employees and to develop employees. For example, imagine that a manager must choose one of two people to be a project leader. The new project leader will launch a new product with little information and many unknowns. Although both candidates are very conscientious, one is not comfortable with unstructured work assignments. An effective manager would consider both personalities and choose the candidate who is most comfortable working in an environment with little structure.

Overall, personality is difficult to assess. People often discover what a person's personality is like by watching his or her behaviour. However, most people behave differently in different situations and change the way they behave to give a specific impression of themselves. Many managers incorrectly assume that the behaviour they observe is the only way an employee acts, regardless of the situation or environment. An effective manager will consider how an employee behaves in different circumstances and with certain co-workers before making assumptions about an employee's personality.

The kind of interactions people have with others at work may depend on where people fall on the "Big Five" dimensions. Individuals at the extreme ends of dimensions may have some difficulty in their relationships. For example, Ji Un and Amira work together on a daily basis. Ji Un is high in agreeableness and openness and Amira is low in both dimensions. Because Amira is low in agreeableness, she may find it difficult to accept any of Ji Un's ideas. In general, individuals at low ends of the agreeableness dimension may have interpersonal difficulties because they are not open to others' ideas.

## 4.1 Congruence or Heterogeneity in Teams

Teams may consist of people who are similar or different in personality traits. If six of seven team members are extroverted, the team is considered trait congruent. However, if the team members fall in different dimensions of the extroversion dimension, the group is trait heterogeneous.

Trait congruence or heterogeneity is neither good nor bad. It does not matter if everyone in a group demonstrates the same or different traits. What works best depends on the situation and the mix of traits that each individual brings to the group. For example, although a group of highly conscientious people may be diligent and hardworking, these people may also argue constantly about the "right way" to do things. Highly conscientious workers may also be so focused on doing things the "right way" that they do not innovate, even when a situation suggests that new methods are needed. However, the group might argue less if some of these highly conscientious people also rate high in agreeableness. Keep in mind, however, although a group that mostly displays high agreeableness may create harmonious work relationships, it may not debate issues enough, which will lead it to make popular but not well-tested decisions.

Because the Big Five personality dimensions affect how people behave at work, there are gains for organisations from selecting a variety of people, as Barrick and Mount (2000) explain.

## 4.2 Personalities in the Workplace

Read below to learn how to identify the different personality dimensions.

**Becton & Associates**

Becton & Associates (B&A) is a midsize accounting firm located in Detroit, Michigan, in the US. The company is divided into three business units:

- corporate accounts (CA)

- small business accounts (SBA)

- individual accounts (IA)

B&A is appropriately staffed to accommodate regular customer demand in each business unit, and normally, staffing is not a problem. Things become chaotic during tax season, however, especially during the last weeks of March through mid-April. Although there is some predictability in the corporate and small business accounts (i.e., their customers' fiscal years are staggered fairly evenly throughout the quarters), there is less predictability for accountants in IA. Usually, this group puts in extra hours during the busy tax season to meet customer needs.

This is an unusual year for IA in that an unusually low number of customers filed their taxes early while fewer customers than usual requested extensions. The firm also picked up many new last-minute customers. In total, B&A experienced a 65% increase in individual accounts between 15 March and 15 April, creating a personnel crisis. This year, employees in the IA unit will have to put in more extra time than usual. To get through the crisis, management asks for volunteers from the other business units to help handle the unusual demand for time.

**Mei**

Mei is a corporate accountant who enthusiastically volunteers to work with IA during this crisis. She has worked at B&A for 20 years and views this as an opportunity to contribute to the company. Although she normally puts in 10- to 12-hour days with her regular duties, during this time she anticipates she will work about eight hours a day in the corporate sector and another six hours a day with IA. She tends to work a little slower than others but usually finds hidden benefits and deductions other accountants miss. In her opinion, this personnel crisis can be handled if people work hard and focus.

## Wu Jiang

Wu Jiang, on the other hand, has an active social life outside of work and believes eight hours is more than enough time to spend at work, regardless of any crisis. Even though he works in IA, he refuses to stay late to handle the workload. He tends to work quickly but sometimes misses sources of income or obvious deductions that clients do not explicitly bring to his attention. He has been known to misplace documents and lose track of dates, especially when he is under pressure from tight deadlines. On more than one occasion, he has filed his clients' returns late, resulting in penalties for his customers. Regardless, Wu Jiang has no plans to work extra hours this month.

## Young Lee

Young Lee has worked in IA for 13 years and is considered easy-going and kind by his co-workers. He normally sticks to eight-hour workdays for family reasons, but he does not mind putting in the extra hours during this time of year. His family has learned to expect that his schedule will change dramatically during tax season, and they make arrangements to be without him. In some ways, Young Lee enjoys the shift in responsibilities and the chance to interact more with his colleagues. He does not mind working the extra hours and knows that if everyone cooperates, the crisis will be managed. As he says, "I can't understand why so many people are complaining about this situation. After all, isn't this what accounting is all about?"

## Helen

Helen, whose workspace is next to Young Lee, hates this time of year. Helen's husband Thomas hates it, too, because it means a month of endless evenings listening to her complain about the company, the boss and the customers. Although Helen begrudgingly puts in the longer days required, she is often angry and spends a great deal of time complaining.

## Ravi

Ravi is another IA accountant who is really upset by the situation. He chose accounting as a profession because it is logical and systematic. He is upset by the need for so many extra hours and the disorder that comes with bringing other accountants into "his" department. He worries that if he has to rush, he will make mistakes for which he will be penalised. Ravi

secretly feels this crisis is beyond his capacity and wishes the bosses had not accepted all those new customers. He tends to get depressed at the beginning of every new year, anticipating the stress of the next four months.

## Sarah

Sarah is an accountant in the corporate sector who also volunteers to work a few additional hours each evening in the IA unit during this time. Sarah's calm, easy-going demeanour make her an excellent addition to the midnight team. When others become frantic or upset because numbers or documents are missing, she works with them until they are able to calm down and refocus. Even when she is not directly working with someone, her composure and easy confidence serve as a calming influence on people around her.

## Daoud

Daoud is a recent hire to B&A's small business accounts unit. He is excited by the opportunity to volunteer extra time to IA and views this situation as an opportunity to learn more about the business and how to deal with different kinds of financial situations. He loves learning and craves new experiences. Daoud is not concerned about the extra hours and believes the situation can be handled if people work creatively together.

## Mario

Mario, on the other hand, has been working for the firm for 20 years and has had enough of these "challenges". He has seen hotshots like Daoud come and go. As far as Mario is concerned, all accounting is pretty much the same – as long as the debits and credits balance, what is there to learn? Mario refuses to use any of the new programmes that the company purchased to make the process faster and more efficient; the programme he's been using for the past 10 years works just fine and he feels no need to change.

## Keiko

Keiko also works in SBA and agrees to work in IA because she really likes the accountants in that business unit. She enjoys her regular job because she supports, counsels and advises entrepreneurs who have many questions and concerns. As a result, she interacts a great deal with customers. Although she often finds the routine of accounting boring and sometimes misses details when she gets distracted, she is highly effective with customers. This unusual demand for time and effort is stressful, but the high level of camaraderie that

results appeals to Keiko. She believes this crisis can be handled if everyone pulls together and breaks up the work with a little fun along the way. She intends to instigate as many fun and social activities as possible to keep things "light" during this crisis.

## William

William, who works in IA, is upset that space was made for Keiko in a small workspace next to his. Typically, William has plenty of quiet in his large cubicle area located in the back corner of the office. He enjoys his work and has no problem putting in the required time, but prefers to work in a quiet atmosphere. Too much conversation and interaction leave him exhausted. In his words, "With Keiko in this area, people constantly drop by to talk, gossip and let off steam. If people aren't stopping by, you can bet that Keiko will be talking on the phone". When Keiko brings a radio to work, William finally complains to their boss. Keiko defends herself by claiming that music helps her focus. The situation is resolved when Keiko agrees to wear earphones, but it is still very disturbing to William. He will be very glad when she moves back to her department and he has his corner back to himself.

## Expert analysis

The "Big Five" Theory of Personality maintains that human behaviour can be categorised into five core personality dimensions: conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness to experience, agreeableness and extroversion. Most people are a combination of highs, mediums and lows of all five dimensions. Many people are able to adapt their behaviours to fit a situation rather than remaining rigidly controlled by personality preferences. For example, people who are not highly conscientious by nature may become more so under certain work conditions.

 Under pressure, however, people tend to react more according to their instincts than their learned behaviours. The B&A crisis created the kind of pressure that could throw employees into their more primal, instinctive responses to situations. We can use the "Big Five" personality traits to interpret the reactions of these 10 B&A employees to the unusual request for time and energy required to meet their deadline.

Mei demonstrates high conscientiousness when confronted with the request for support in another department. Although she regularly works long hours, she is more than willing to work even more (up to 14 hours per day) to benefit the company. Her work style is slow

and methodical, and she regularly finds details that others do not. Wu Jiang, who is unwilling to put in the time and focus required to meet goals accurately and efficiently, demonstrates the opposite end of this dimension.

Young Lee is described as easy-going and has no problem putting in the extra time, even though he has family obligations. People who are cooperative, good-natured and courteous are said to demonstrate an agreeable personality. Helen, who complains about the company and customers, demonstrates disagreeableness, which is the opposite reaction. Typically, people scoring high on disagreeableness demonstrate such behaviours as fault-finding and bickering.

Ravi is upset by the demand for extra time and the disorder caused when other accountants move into "his" department to help out. He is also worried about making mistakes and gets depressed even anticipating a stressful time. He reflects the anxiety, insecurity and depression of people low in emotional stability. The opposite end of this dimension is characterised by Sarah's calm, quiet composure. People demonstrating high emotional stability take crises in stride without becoming nervous or anxious about life's many ups and downs.

Daoud is looking forward to learning more about the business by jumping into this challenge. He reflects the broad-minded, curious and creative approach demonstrated by people high on the openness to experience dimension. People who view situations from narrow perspectives with few alternatives reflect the opposite end of this dimension, closed-mindedness. Mario, who thinks he knows all there is to know about accounting and who refuses to use the new programme, demonstrates this.

Keiko enjoys her job because of the social aspects of interacting with customers. She volunteered to help during the crisis because she likes the employees in IA. She also intends to keep things "light" during the crisis by finding ways to make the work fun. She reflects the sociability, gregariousness and attraction for activity demonstrated by people high on extroversion. William, who works best when there is little noise or distraction and actually becomes fatigued when there is too much stimulation, exemplifies the other end of this spectrum, introversion.

## 5. The Myers-Briggs® Type Indicator

The Myers-Briggs® Type Indicator (MBTI®) is another widely used approach to studying and measuring personality. This instrument was originally developed in the 1920s by a mother (Katherine Briggs) and daughter (Isabel Briggs-Myers) team. They based their assessment on the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung's theory which explains how people perceive their environment, obtain information and make decisions about the information they perceive. The MBTI® measures people's preferences along four distinct scales:

- *Extroversion-Introversion*: where people get their energy and how they focus attention (outer world or inner world)

- *Sensing-Intuition*: how people collect information (through their five senses or through inner, intuitive processes)

- *Thinking- Feeling*: how people make decisions about the information they collect through either their senses or intuition

- *Judging-Perceiving*: how people prefer to approach and structure their world view

Assessment results place people into one of sixteen quadrants or types. Research on the MBTI® has found very mixed support. Despite this fact, it is one of the most widely used instruments in US corporations.

People can use information gained from the MBTI® to better manage their interpersonal relationships. In addition to identifying one's own distinct type, an effective employee should be aware of how his or her personality type interacts with the personality types of another, and the manager should be aware of the combinations of MBTI® types that are an element of all groups and teams.

## 6. More Personality Traits

There are other ways in which personality has been defined.

Read below to learn about two other personality traits; tolerance for ambiguity and rigidity versus flexibility.

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## Tolerance for Ambiguity

How comfortable are you with performing assignments that are not clearly explained? How comfortable are you in roles that have not been clearly explained? Those who find unclear, unspecified situations desirable are thought to have a high tolerance for ambiguity. When asked to produce or perform without clear instruction, they can do so effectively. On the other hand, those with a low tolerance for ambiguity find unclear tasks and role assignments very stressful. For example, someone with a high tolerance for ambiguity may enjoy working on the help desk of a large organisation. The variety and complexity of possible calls during the day would make the work exciting. However, for someone with a low tolerance for ambiguity, this situation may be very stressful, owing to the non-routine nature of the job.

## What coping strategies are available if you have a low tolerance for ambiguity?

If possible ask for clarification from the person assigning the task. If the person that assigned the task is not available, it may be possible to ask someone that has experience in the area. Step back from the ambiguous situation until you have had an opportunity to think about how you might approach the situation.

You can also try to change the way you perceive ambiguity. Look at the assignment as an opportunity to use your creativity and insight in solving a particular problem or performing a given role. In extreme cases, some people may leave an ambiguous situation in search of a less ambiguous one.

Dyadic and group interactions are also affected by your tolerance for ambiguity. If you are uncomfortable with ambiguity, you work best with people who can tell you what they want done and how to do it.

## Rigidity versus Flexibility

Rigidity refers to an allegiance to authority and the concern with following the rules of an organisation. More flexible individuals are not as constrained by organisational roles and responsibilities. For example, a more rigid person might be more comfortable with an organisation maintaining the status quo; more flexible individuals may be less stressed by organisational changes.

A person with a more rigid personality is more likely to strictly adhere to the values of the organisation, despite what may be going on around him or her. People with more rigid personalities may align themselves with people who embrace the same views as the organisation and may have little tolerance for people with opposing views and ideas. In some business situations, this intolerance may actually be desirable. For instance, if a person works in a highly regulated industry or one in which an error can be disastrous (such as a nuclear

power plant), the ability to strictly adhere to rules and policies is a positive trait. However, if a person works in an industry or job where markets and products change rapidly (such as software development), a rigid personality may be a poor fit for that environment.

There is a potential trap whereby aspects of an individual's behaviour that are really caused by the situation may be wrongly attributed to his or her personality. When we say "it is just his (or her) personality", we assume that the cause lies within the individual. This may not always be the case. The cause of the individual's behaviour may lie in the situation, so that if the situation shifts, the individual's behaviour will change. We should therefore beware of readily interpreting everything as "his (or her) personality". This is especially important for us as managers, in that we may be able to change the situation and thereby change the behaviour of an individual, for example changing the job assignment of a subordinate. In subsequent topics we will discuss these situational causes of behaviour that allow us to change the behaviour of individual.

## 7. Summary

Here is a quick recap of what we have learnt so far:

- Personality refers to enduring traits, characteristics and predispositions that differentiate one person from another.

- According to the "Big Five" personality dimension, people differ based on their levels of conscientiousness, emotional stability, openess to experience, agreeableness and extroversion.

- The Myers-Briggs® Type Indicator is another way of assessing personality by measuring scales in four areas: extroversion–introversion, sensing–intuition, thinking–feeling and judging–perceiving.

- Managers should use what they know about their employees' personalities so as to better motivate, lead and develop them. However, caution should be exercised so that you avoid over-attributing another's behaviour to his or her personality. This will also help you to avoid overlooking or neglecting other important situational factors.

## 8. Glossary

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| Demeanour | The image projected to others by how one looks and acts (physical appearance, non-verbal behaviour, verbal behaviour) rather than a true reflection of who one really is. |
| Conscientiousness | A "Big Five" dimension of personality that relates to one's dependability and self-discipline. People high in this dimension tend to be task-orientated and focused, while people lower on this dimension tend to be easily distracted from the task at hand. |
| Emotional stability | A "Big Five" dimension of personality that relates to one's poise and stability. People high in this dimension tend to be relaxed under pressure, while people low in this dimension may be indecisive and anxious. |
| Openness to experience | A "Big Five" dimension of personality that relates to diversity of interests. People high in this dimension are sensitive, flexible, creative and curious. |
| Agreeableness | A "Big Five" dimension of personality that relates to the extent to which one is courteous, good-natured, caring or accepting of norms. People high in agreeableness tend to be more accepting of others' ideas or norms than people low in agreeableness. |
| Extroversion | A "Big Five" dimension of personality that relates to sociability and assertiveness. People high in this dimension tend to be outgoing and assertive, while people low in this dimension tend to be quieter and more shy. |
| Overt | Open and observable; not hidden, concealed or secret. |

# 9. References

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