

Solve Anything with Dr. Mark

Career Advice
for the
Working Class

Putting the fun into
personality testing



Q: The team I work on needs a personality makeover, but that is such a sensitive issue. We're all walking on eggshells and I think many of them are close to cracking. Do you know of any way to approach this ticklish issue in a constructive way that avoids the awkward confrontations and defensiveness?

A: This is a common issue with any team. One reason it is so tricky is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, opposites do not attract. As a consequence, people tend to surround themselves with people who think like them, resulting in teams that are not “playing with a full deck.” That is, they don't have a variety of personality styles represented on your team.

On the surface, this is not a bad thing.

Let's face it, homogeneous teams are efficient. When people think the same way, speak the same jargon, and use the same acronyms, things can get done quickly.

But this efficiency kills innovation and growth. Creativity is about generating and implementing new ideas that require fresh thinking and new perspectives. Gathering a bunch of “yes men” together who agree all the time only leads to solutions that are stale variations of old ones. Creativity is non-existent in such an environment.

For individuals and teams to maximize performance and innovation, the mantra must be: “The person you like the least may be the person you need the most.” Someone who thinks differently than you will complement your abilities and address your blind-spots. Although working against your natural desire for comfort and commonality may be uncomfortable at first, over time you will find that an appreciation for divergent points of view will accelerate speed and growth.

There are four primary personality styles that can and should exist on any team:

1. Analytical, fact-driven people who are talented at finding and defining problems that need to be solved or opportunities that are waiting to be tapped.
2. Creative and lateral thinkers who can identify and generate breakthrough solutions.
3. Methodical and results-oriented individuals who can plan the work and then work the plan.
4. People who are masterful at building relationships with both internal employees and external customers.

If your team has too many of one style, seek people who think differently.

To illustrate what is “normal” on most teams, consider a small branding and marketing agency that had each employee take a personality test. As expected in such a design-driven business, there were a lot of creative individuals. In fact, 80 percent of the employees fell into this category, while 15 percent were relationship-oriented, 5 percent were planners, and no one at all seemed to demonstrate an appetite for facts and analytical thinking. This quickly explained why the company was having difficulty scaling and growing.

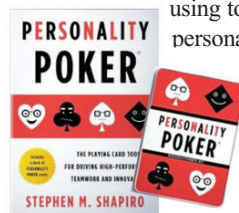
The objective is to create teams that embrace divergent and conflicting points of view and where each style is represented.

Unfortunately, in doing so, bickering and in-fighting can be an undesirable side effect. Few people have an appreciation for someone who thinks differently than they do. In fact, we have been programmed to not appreciate the viewpoints of others.

Consider the Golden Rule, which is often interpreted as “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” This is horrible advice for teams. Who really cares what you want? Treating people as you want to be treated doesn't address the needs and desires of others. Personality tests, when used properly, can help facilitate a greater understanding and appreciation among members of a team.

To turn this into a playful “game” that avoids awkward confrontation and defensiveness, Stephen Shapiro created “Personality Poker” (Portfolio Penguin, \$25.95). What he realized is that typical psychology tests although informative are rarely engaging. To be effective, whatever vehicle you are using to bring out people's different personalities has to be engaging and if possible, fun. In Personality Poker, players trade specially-designed cards — each printed with a different character trait — until they've created a hand that best describes their own personality style. Based on the resulting suits, colors and numbers of the cards, you can interpret your personality and have meaningful, yet fun conversations.

It's amazing not only how revealing people will be if it's done in a playful manner, but how quickly you can even learn to like someone different from you after you've put a smile on each other's face.



Ask Mark • Mark Goulston, M.D., is a Santa Monica-based business psychiatrist, executive coach and author of “Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone.” Ask him questions at mgoulston@markgoulston.com.