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Does changing future direction have to create interpersonal conflict?

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Abstract

In order to forge positive future directions in a constantly changing information environment teacher-librarians are sometimes faced with objections, personal attack and unresolved interpersonal standoff situations. A case study involving a teacher-librarian introducing change is explored to recognise interpersonal issues which will positive win/win partnerships to be created and maintained. In particular, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® personal preferences will be identified to help explain why different people respond to change in quite different ways.

How change is promoted

Change is promoted as the way of the present and the way of the future. “Professional development of school employees and significant changes in the organizations in which they work are both required if schools are to adequately prepare students for a life in a world that is becoming increasingly complex” (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997, p.96). At the same time some members of parent and employer communities cry out for teaching the 3Rs in the same way they were taught when they were children.

Strategies involving development of mission statements, vision and collaboration are essential ingredients for change to occur (see for example Covey (1990), Tokatlian, 2000). Peter Senge (1992) identifies personal and organisational disciplines which must be in place for an organisation to be a true learning community which is always open to change. Focusing on a specific context and the abilities of the people involved in the change process is part of a notion of distributed leadership. Leadership is distributed when many players are involved and influenced by each other as well as the context of the situation in which they are interacting. Spillane et al (2001:23) recognise how the “interdependence of the individual and the environment shows ... human activity as [being] *distributed* in the interactive web of actors, artifacts , and the situation”. These combine to become the appropriate unit of analysis for studying the practice of leadership.

It is the individual who apparently bears the brunt of change within a changing environment. Some colleagues will actively promote change while others will wonder what all the fuss is about when whatever happened in the past worked quite successfully. According to research related to personality differences, there are innate reasons why some people embrace change while others seemingly refuse to consider new ways of doing things. Pearman (1998) calls these ‘habits of mind’. Thus each person will be motivated or convinced of the need to change in a different way.

The teacher-librarian is often at the forefront of change in the school as she/he foresees future directions in the continuously changing global information environment. In initiating change, a teacher-librarian interacts with library staff, volunteers, teachers, students, administrators and members of the wider community. Often cases are presented, words are said and comments made, which cause undue stress even though they were spoken without intention to cause stress. Apparent interpersonal conflict is often caused because two people are experiencing and responding to a situation in quite different ways.

Some personalities will promote change, others will forge ahead with the task of creating change, some will want to think about it and others will seemingly not wish to change under any circumstances. How can the teacher-librarian recognise his/her own propensity for change and understand how to inspire colleagues to share vision for future directions?

General communication strategies

Providing feedback, listening, paraphrasing and presenting a summary of shared understandings are key aspects in any positive interpersonal communication situation. Providing feedback which describes a situation or behaviour, followed by self disclosure about feelings and influence of the behaviour is important for clarification if there is a difficult situation (Bolton, 1987). Listening twice as much as one speaks allows a person's values, beliefs and personality to be recognised. Paraphrasing by a listener enables the originating speaker to recognise how their communication has been internalised by someone else. Summarising allows all parties to appreciate what has been covered and what actions need to be taken.

When these strategies provide open communication each party will know how to cope with the situation and will have the freedom to state their own perspective. In terms of a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) framework, each person will articulate a particular situation from a different perspective. Recognising and understanding these differences will enable more positive relaxed rather than stressful communications to take place.

MBTI dimensions

The MBTI is a useful framework to assist in identifying one's personality strengths and to find opportunities to see how other people gather information and make decisions. In this paper I will explore the four key mental functions and how they operate differently with various personality types.

The four functions or mental processes

The two **perceiving functions** are *Sensing* and *iNtuting*. One of these functions is more readily used (preferred) by an individual to gather information. One of these functions will be energised through extraversion and the other through introversion for each individual.

The two **judging functions** are *Thinking* and *Feeling*. One of these functions is more readily used (preferred) by an individual to make decisions. One of these functions will be energised through extraversion and the other through introversion for each individual.

A short hand way of writing these functions is: Se, Si, Ne, Ni, Te, Ti, Fe, Fi These are explained in the Table on the next page.

An example of how the Sensing function can be expressed quite differently by Se and Si will be seen in action with the change scenario reported later in this paper and is also represented by the following quotes:

Se (Sensing is extraverted): I enjoy change and am always open to ideas. I get bored without change. I dislike repeating units of work and prefer to come up with something new and interesting for teachers, students and me. I've even noticed that after 3 years at one school I start to get itchy feet and look for something different. I need new stimulation and new environments.

Si (Sensing is introverted): In the work world, I find large or sudden changes difficult to deal with. It takes me time to digest these changes and I want to know lots of details before I go along with them. I prefer fine-tuning and improvements rather than starting from scratch. As change is a constant in the school system, this is a bit of a disadvantage.

Table 1.1 The functions in their attitudes explained

<p>Se –sensing is extraverted - information is gathered through the senses. Energy comes from interacting with current experiences and talking about reality in the present. What is the impact or effect for this moment? “I am bored without change and look for something new.” Let’s change it now!</p>	<p>Si – sensing is introverted – information is gathered through the senses. Energy comes from making connections in the mind with realities experienced and remembered from the past. If it worked in the past why change now? If you want me to change give me the details, tell me how it is more practical and give me time to think it over.</p>
<p>Ne – intuiting is extraverted – information is gathered through the ‘sixth sense’ from the outer world. Energy comes from interacting with people and objects and brainstorming aloud. What are the possibilities for the future? Here’s another idea so let’s do this one!</p>	<p>Ni – intuiting is introverted – information is gathered through the ‘sixth sense’ and symbolic connections are made with models previously constructed in the mind. Give me some time to think of the possibilities before we do something.</p>
<p>Te – thinking is extraverted - decisions are made objectively through discussing logic, rules and systems. Energy comes from efficiently creating a system or structure where change will be achieved. Let’s list the things to be done and work out the most efficient way to do it.</p>	<p>Ti – thinking is introverted – decisions are made with reference to philosophical questioning and inner exploration. The change will be classified and systematically linked with previous concepts. Energy comes from inner questioning of all aspects of the change. Don’t change until we have theorised it.</p>
<p>Fe –feeling is extraverted - decisions are made rationally based on values for people and norms for society. Identify the benefits for stakeholders in this environment. Energy comes from organising people so they have a better life. How will I organise people to make the change operational?</p>	<p>Fi – introverted feeling – decisions are made rationally to accommodate personal values related to what is ideal for people. Identify differences between previous benefits and potential future benefits for people. Energy comes from seeing other people achieve and grow. This is how people will benefit from the change.</p>

Each person has a dominant function and an auxiliary or supporting function.

For **Extraverts**, the dominant function is Extraverted and their auxiliary function is Introverted. Extraverts are energised by their environment and they think best when they are talking out their ideas. Often they will solve a problem as they talk about it. They talk using their dominant extraverted function. In a stimulating environment where there is plenty of action, the extravert needs someone to listen to them and engage in conversation. While talking aloud they may seem

to be constantly changing their mind, whereas they are talking out a variety of options and in the end will identify the most suitable option.

For **Introverts**, the dominant function is Introverted and their auxiliary function is Extraverted. Introverts are energised when they have time to reflect as they think through their ideas before being ready to articulate their final conclusions. They solve problems within their mind. However, they often use their auxiliary extraverted function when they talk about their ideas. In an uninterrupted environment the Introvert will be energised by taking time to reflect and process information before carefully articulating the outcome of these deliberations. The change ideas of Introverts will probably be well formulated when they 'put them on the table'.

A change scenario

In order to see how the dynamics of different personalities operate Liz has provided a situation which was apparently an incidental change, but for her library aide it caused major stress. This scenario can be addressed through awareness of how each participant experienced the situation differently according to their personality preferences.

Liz is probably ESFP: dominant Sensing is extraverted (Se) and supported by Feeling which is introverted (Fi). Her third and fourth functions are Te and Ni.

Denise probably ISTJ: dominant Sensing which is introverted (Si) and supported by Thinking which is extraverted (Te). Her third and fourth functions are Fi and Ne.

Here is the story as described by Liz.

People involved:

Me - not quite fifty - have been teacher-librarian for almost thirteen years I have been described as friendly, easy going, helpful, and knowledgeable and the other day one of the Year 12 girls told me I should be very proud of the library.

Our wonderful Library Assistant who has been with me for nearly five years . Denise is very capable, efficient, conscientious, particularly interested in learning how to fix computer problems and enjoys the challenge of cataloguing resources not on SCIS. What more could I ask for? We get along very well together.

Situation:

A Year 12 student asked me if she could help in the library as part of her service for her Duke of Edinburgh Award. Maxine had been a library monitor in earlier years and is a reliable and responsible student. I said yes. We agreed that mornings would best as it is very busy and I thought that Maxine could man the desk while Denise and I help students. Teachers also meet three mornings a week so Denise is on her own.

Issue and reactions of each person:

I discussed this with Denise and I knew that she was not really happy with the idea but willing to go along with it. From the beginning I could sense Denise's increasing frustration with the situation. She felt she had to find jobs for Maxine to do and did not think that Maxine should just run the desk. Maxine was happy to do anything asked of her. I let it go on for a couple of weeks as I could see no real harm being done and I wanted Denise to allow and encourage students to help run the library.

Denise did not say much but I could see that she was still not happy. Time to clear the air and ask Denise to tell me all that was bothering her. I could appreciate that she did not want Maxine fiddling at the computer when she was not busy- nothing drastic like corrupting data, just checking out loans' histories - still, mistakes can be made, and I talked to Maxine about this.

This is an ongoing problem that Denise has with anyone (students or parent volunteers) helping in the library. I have let our library monitor system slide over the years as a result of this. However, if Denise gets to know certain students and feels comfortable with them they seem to ease their way into helping behind the desk. I am not comfortable with this as I do not think it is fair to other students who have been asking me if they can be library monitors. I do not want to upset Denise so have not pushed to have a library monitor system again.

Denise quietly tolerates helpers like Maxine and a Mum who comes in once a fortnight.

MBTI preferences:

I did not like to presume that Denise had certain preferences without discussing it with her. I saw it as a great opportunity to become more aware of our differing preferences and to use them to complement each other with a greater understanding of our strengths and weaknesses.

Denise -

As Denise and I discussed the conflict situation which was caused through the change I had initiated, her responses indicated certain preferences, and after reading some MBTI preferences in books she also identified certain preferences. Recall the words used to describe Denise: 'capable', 'efficient', 'conscientious', can 'fix computer problems', and 'enjoys the challenge of cataloguing resources not on SCIS'. These characteristics suggest a Sensing preference for perceiving/gathering information (as she likes to focus on details to fix things) in combination with a Thinking preference (with her focus on the efficiency of getting tasks done).

I will use her words to support this:

- *"It takes me a while to get comfortable with people."(Introversion possibly combined with Thinking or Feeling)*
- *"Just leave me alone in here" & "I just want to get in and do it."(Sensing which is introverted)*
- *"What is the point of their doing it if I have to stand around and watch?" (Thinking which is extraverted – ie it is logically not efficient use of my time)*
- *"I need time to observe people to see if I can trust them to do the job."(Sensing which is introverted – needing time for reflection to see if they get the details correct)*
- *"I wished more feeling thoughts rather than thinking thoughts came into my head, but they just don't come often enough."(An awareness that the Feeling function is potentially introverted and possibly not recognised by Denise or others.)*
- *"I like things to be "black and white" and have difficulty accepting otherwise" (Thinking).*

Liz -

- *I asked Denise how she felt I had responded to the situation and she said "very patiently".*
- *I was very aware of Denise's feelings and did not want to let any tension escalate (Feeling if introverted would be aware of Denise's concerns, but may not initially share this observation).*
- *I saw the broader picture of developing a sense of responsibility and skills in students (Sensing (Se) – with the focus on responsibility and skills for the present).*
- *Sometimes Denise says I am a bit too "airy fairy" for her (iNtuition or perhaps this represents a focus on details for the present (Se), in comparison with Denise's focus on the practicalities of how things operated in the past (Si)).*
- *Being more comfortable with talking openly about things I was the one to initiate discussion of the situation (the Feeling function is operating here – perhaps in its introverted form (Fi) in discussing one-on-one rather than organising people in the external environment (Fe))*
- *Particularly when working in a library I think it is important to be flexible and to encourage students when opportunities, like being involved in the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme, arise (the Feeling function provides support for the growth in individuals).*

- *I also wanted to stress the importance of Denise sharing her skills and teaching others (again the Feeling function is operating and Denise may not be aware of this if the Feeling function is introverted (Fi))*

We are still a great team. Our Principal has commented on how well we work together.

Conclusion

With a Se approach to change, Liz is open to new ideas and embraces change. Denise, with a Si approach wants time to digest the details and plan strategies for coping with change well before it occurs.

Liz has approached the situation using her ESFP preferences. She has recognised Denise is stressed and opens up communication. Through using understanding of MBTI preferences she and Denise have been able to objectively articulate why the situation is difficult. From this scenario it is apparent there are two important understandings:

1. recognising our own preferences and how these are 'seen' by others and
2. recognising possible preferences of significant others to 'see' where they are coming from.

Recognition of how different personality types gather information about change and how they deal with that information provides a valuable perspective on the impact change has on an individual. Through understanding concepts of Myers-Briggs personality preferences, teacher-librarians can approach uncomfortable/debilitating communication situations with new insights. Once these differences are realised and addressed participants can recognise how different people need to be introduced to change. Change does not have to create interpersonal conflict.

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