How can I use psychometrics in my coaching?

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Introduction

'She is such a people person', or 'He's a big picture person'. We often hear these types of phrases used to describe others at work, and sometimes among our friends, who have had the fortune, or misfortune, to have completed a personality questionnaire. However, these phrases often hide a greater complexity, not only within the instrument, but also in understanding the true richness and diversity of what it is to be human. In this chapter, we look at what is personality and how psychologists have tried over the past one hundred or more years to categorise it, and we consider the implications of different personalities for coaching.

What is personality?

The word 'personality' derives from the Latin word 'persona', meaning the mark worn by actors or performers as a disguise or to project a specific role in a play. A wide range of definitions has been offered over the decades; here are just a couple:

'That which permits a prediction of what a person will do in a given situation.' (Cattell, 1950).

'Although no single definition is acceptable to all personality theorists, we can say that personality is a pattern of relatively permanent traits and unique characteristics that give both consistency and individuality to a person's behaviour.' (Feist and Feist, 2009)

In summary, a person's personality may be defined as being made up of the characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that make the person who they are. This personality arises from a mixture of our given traits, contained within our genetic code, and our environment, where we were born, brought up and live now.

Different ways to think about personality

Coaches have an expanding range of psychological assessment tools from which they can draw to help clients build the self-awareness that is necessary to identify new career and life goals, and to enhance their performance at work. The burgeoning psychological testing industry has produced a myriad of measures enabling coaches to support clients to better understand their behaviour, their preferences and their capabilities, as they relate to work and life. Personality tests, aptitude tests and questionnaires assessing values, interests, leadership and motivational needs represent some of the kinds of tests currently available on the market internationally. Many of

these psychological tests have made a positive contribution to coaching and have been rigorously tested to ensure their reliability and validity.

There is an abundance of personality questionnaires on the market, each measuring a broad or narrow domain of individual behaviour and personal preferences. Four commonly used kinds of personality measures (see Passmore, 2012) used in work-related coaching are:

- Trait-based questionnaires such as NEO-PI-R, 16PF, Saville Wave and OPQ32
- Type questionnaires such as MBTI® and 16Personalities
- Competence-based tools such as ILM72 and TLQ
- Specialist questionnaires such as MTQ48, VIA or MSCEIT

Trait-based questionnaires ask us to consider how much of a specific trait or behaviour we have. They compare our score with others to give us a comparative score. These instruments are often based on the Big Five personality factor model, originally developed during the 1970s, but which is now widely accepted as a result of cumulative research into personality over the past five decades.

Table 31.1: The five-factor model of personality

Big Five Factor	Description
Conscientiousness	Careful, reliable, hard-working, well organised, punctual, disciplined, ambitious
Extroversion	Sociable, fun-loving, affectionate, friendly, talkative, warm
Agreeableness	Courteous, selfless, sympathetic, trusting, generous, acquiescent, lenient, forgiving, flexible
Openness to experience	Original, imaginative, creative, broad interests, curious, daring, liberal, independent, prefer variety
Neuroticism (emotional stability)	Worrying, emotional, high-strung, temperamental, insecure, self-pitying, vulnerable (emotional stability: calm, at ease, relaxed, even-tempered, secure, hardy)

Adapted from McCrae and Costa, 1987

A second common example is the type-based instrument. MBTI® is one example, but others are 16Personalities, TDI and Insights. These are often used by coaches to help clients reflect on their working styles and how they relate to others. The approach is based on Jungian psychology that believed personality was both innate and fixed – that is, it did not change significantly over time.

Also widely used are competence questionnaires. These are often developed by the organisation or by a professional body, and aim to capture the key behaviours that lead to successful outcomes in a role or the organisation. Individuals may rate themselves or the questionnaire can be used as a 360-degree tool with self- and peer-ratings. The 360-degree model has become very popular. It offers the opportunity for clients to reflect on their own behaviours, but also to consider how others see them. In many cases this scoring is supported by confidential, qualitative feedback that can provide a richness, and personal examples, to drive deeper reflection by the client.

Using 16Personalities and type-based questionnaires in coaching

Some instruments, such as MBTI®, require a licence. However, in recent years new instruments have been developed and are free to use online – examples include 16Personalities. This has revolutionised psychometrics and means that more clients can complete the questionnaire themselves and watch online explanations before having their coaching session.

For coaches too, such questionnaires offer benefits, helping us to reflect on our innate preferences and being more aware of how such preferences may impact on our coaching work. Table 31.2 gives a brief summary of how different personality preferences may impact on our coaching. Other guides (Rogers, 1997; 2017) provide more detail on preferences and how they can influence our wider behaviour at work.

Table 31.2: Potential impacts of personality preferences

	Likely strengths	**Likely areas for development**
Extraversion (E)	Helping clients explore a wide range of issues. Establishing the coaching partnership. Thinking on feet.	Using silence. Helping clients explore issues in depth. Reaching the ‘way forward’ stage.
Introversion (I)	Helping clients explore issues in depth. Reflecting on strategies. Using silence.	Helping clients move to action. Helping clients explore all relevant issues. Establishing the coaching partnership.

Sensing (S)	Observing details. Using the 'reality' stage. Helping clients decide on practical steps at the 'way forward' stage.	Taking the big picture into account. Generating ideas at the 'options' stage. Using intuition.
Intuition (N)	Seeing the big picture. Using intuition. Generating ideas at the 'options' stage.	Being specific. Testing out intuition. Helping clients decide on practical steps at the 'way forward' stage.
Thinking (T)	Being objective. Challenging.	Picking up client's feelings. Being empathetic. Challenging in a supportive way at the right time.
Feeling (F)	Being warm. Being empathetic.	Taking thoughts into account as well as feelings. Challenging the client. Being more objective.
Judging (J)	Being organised. Being decisive.	Helping clients make decisions in a timely way. Being flexible.
Perceiving (P)	Being spontaneous. Being flexible.	Being organised. Helping clients make decisions.

(Adapted from Passmore et al, 2006)

A word of caution

Personality questionnaires have become increasingly popular. They are often used by organisations to help with recruitment and selection, in development centres and many coaches use them with their clients. However, it's important to keep in mind that the questionnaire results are only based on our responses. As living beings, we change and develop over time, and thus many people think that our scores may also change over time. Secondly, questionnaires only ask us about certain aspects of our personality. The reality is that humans are highly complex animals and our behaviour is multifaceted. We can't simply be reduced to a series of scores from a questionnaire to explain all of our behaviour. Thirdly, many people believe that our behaviour is situational, and thus how we report our behaviour in one situation or circumstances will be different to how we may behave in a different situation. Finally, many questionnaires require the coach to be formally trained or licensed to use the tool. Before embarking on using an instrument, check out what training is required so you can use the tool ethically. Training can often be very expensive. It's therefore also worth considering the likely return on your investment. How many times will you use the tool and what can you charge clients?

How many sessions over a year or two years will you need to undertake to recoup your investment?

Conclusion

Psychometrics can be a useful tool to help us better understand ourselves and also a useful tool to use with clients. However, there is a wide range of tools available and we need to be selective in what we choose. Tools are not the answer to any question by themselves. They are simply a useful starting point for a conversation. They give us a language to talk about behaviours, or leadership, with clients. From this, combined with a coaching approach, they can help clients to develop new insights into who they are and how they behave. Combined with good coaching, we can help clients to become more choiceful about how they may develop their best self.

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