

## **The Second Essential Strategy for Career Success**

***By Jennifer Selby Long***

This essential strategy can go to any level of depth you want. This strategy is simply to learn and apply the science of interpreting behavior to avoid assuming your way is the only right way.

It's essential to learn the science of interpreting behavior and then apply it to all of your relationships in order to avoid projecting negative attributes on to others that may not be at all true, and doing damage to the working relationship.

Human behavior falls into patterns and that's a good thing since it means that even though people are different, you don't need a degree in psychology to vastly improve your ability to read them and adapt to them. You just need to understand and apply a few key principals.

One terrific tool for this is probably familiar to you already: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) or similar instrument. You don't need to administer the instrument to your coworkers, although you can certainly ask if they've taken it and use that as springboard to ask them more about themselves and understand them better.

However, if they haven't taken the MBTI® or you're not comfortable asking, there's quite a lot you can simply observe and then use your observations to improve your ability to adapt.

Here's a short primer for two areas in which I often find people don't adapt, don't work as well together, and have negative assessments of one another – right up until the minute they understand this dynamic.

*Extraversion vs. Introversion:* people who prefer Extraversion gain much of their energy from and direct it toward the outside world, whereas Introverts obtain energy from inside and tend to also direct their energy inward. You probably don't need an instrument to tell you which you prefer!

Misinterpretations and the resulting lack of peak productivity happen *all the time* between Introverts and Extraverts. Extraverts often prefer to be included in meetings and on email threads. Extraverts look for reasons to be in contact. They generally feel at their best in a group. They're happier on the phone than on email.

Introverts often see meetings and conference calls as a tedious and annoying waste of time, and therefore only include the people who absolutely have to be there, assuming no one else would want to attend.

Introverts rarely initiate lunch with strangers, preferring familiar faces. They generally feel very comfortable with the distance inherent in email communications.

*To distinguish between real threats and simple differences, you need to observe whether you are communicating with Introverts, Extraverts, or a group comprised of both.*

Ellen, an extraverted senior director in a new role and one of my clients, is a great example of this dynamic at play. Normally supremely confident, Ellen found herself questioning her competence and on the verge of tears after she was routinely excluded from meetings and when the same group of people ate lunch together without her on a daily basis.

Ellen is a strong, logical, cool-headed, mature leader, but here she was experiencing a distinctly illogical, not cool-headed, and almost child-like reaction to being excluded. This is one way of knowing you may be in the throes of a personality need that's going unmet. You don't react in your usual adult way, so the need starts asserting itself more and more until you listen to it.

She assumed they excluded her because they didn't think she was competent or would add any value in her role. Yet when we spoke, I didn't see any evidence that they were questioning her competence at this early stage of the working relationship.

Once she understood that this was simply a group of Introverts, she came to realize that it was unlikely that they were intentionally excluding her or making any assumptions about her competence, positive or negative, at this early stage.

They were merely doing what Introverts so often do when given the opportunity: working with the same people for many years, choosing familiar faces over strangers, and assuming that she would only want to attend meetings directly related to her job responsibilities and not waste time attending any others, including lunch in the break room.

Until Ellen saw this behavior for what it was, she was negatively projecting her fears (of being excluded, and ultimately cut out) on to people who simply behaved differently from her.

This had been draining energy from her job, which ultimately would have made her less effective and more vulnerable to being laid off. Now she's approaching this group as a team of Introverts and growing the relationships over time, in a way that feels a bit slow and unsatisfying to her, but that will work for them over the coming months.

For additional tips on Introverts and Extraverts working well together, visit <http://www.selbygroup.com/extraverts.html>.

The other area in which I often see misunderstandings is in how we interact with the environment around us. In Myers-Briggs parlance, this is the Judging and Perceiving dimension.

Under typical circumstances, these differences amount to little more than mere annoyances, but under extreme pressure, your image can be shaped (fairly or unfairly) by how well you adapt to those who interact with the environment differently than you do.

Those who prefer Judging generally like an ordered approach to time. If a project is assigned on Monday and due Friday, they would ideally like to make 20% progress daily, or even finish a bit early for good measure.

For the Perceiving folks, there is more often an initial burst of energy around the new project, followed by a lull for “noodling on it,” followed by a big ramp-up of activity closer to the deadline.

Much as with Extraversion and Introversion, many people are quickly able to identify their preference for Judging or Perceiving without completing an instrument, merely by recognizing themselves in these descriptions of behavior.

It’s a part of the MBTI report during which I often find clients vigorously nodding their heads and saying, “Oh, yeah. That’s me alright!” Other sections can be filled with surprises, but this is one area in which I rarely find surprises.

If you are a Judging type, be sure to ask questions to learn if the people around you feel micro-managed by your orderly approach. If they do, it’s the perfect opportunity to initiate a dialogue about how you can work better together. What would you need in order to feel reassured and therefore back off? Which of your behaviors seem like micro-managing to them?

If you are a Perceiving type, be sure to give a little more advance notice to others who need to be involved in your work than you would want yourself if you were in their shoes. This is one aspect of working together in which you should *not* apply the Golden Rule, which is to treat others as you would like to be treated. You should apply the Platinum Rule instead: treat others as they wish to be treated.

If you wait until too close to the deadline in an environment of tightly constrained resources, you may not be able to engage the people you need,

leading to a missed deadline or poorer quality work product than you're capable of -- and that is definitely not to your advantage in any environment.

Another key adaptation for Perceiving types is to report progress in a steady manner rather than going silent during your "noodling time," because you are almost certainly working with and for Judging types.

How can I know this to be true? They are half of the general population, but well over half of managers and executives! Perceiving types often don't realize that their style can be nerve-wracking, or even interpreted as disrespectful, by Judging types.

Again, adaptation goes a long way for a modest investment of time and discomfort.

Does this seem like a lot of work? For some it is, but for most, it's not as tough or time-consuming as it may look.

You may be wondering, "*Why should I have to do this at all? Shouldn't people just do things my way?*" Fair enough, but this question will take you off in the wrong direction (straight to the land of "I'm getting nowhere"), because work is inherently social and collaborative, so adaptation is necessary. We tend to overestimate how much we're adapting and underestimate how much adapting others are doing to our own styles.

Bottom line: when promotions, job assignments and even lay-offs are in the works, and several employees are seen as having similar skills and performance, the one who works best with the greatest number of people is inherently more flexible and therefore of higher utility.

That's the person who gets the better job, the more important projects, and the improved job security, so if that's the person you want to be, get on out there and adapt!

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