PERSONALITY TYPING AND LEADERSHIP

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**USCG Leadership Competency: Leading Self - Self-Awareness and Learning**

*Editor’s Note: This article refers to leadership at a Coast Guard unit; however, all aspects of this article do apply to Auxiliary Flotilla Leadership.*

The Strategic Leadership style highlighted in [AUX]LAMS curriculum is typically very effective since different styles of leadership may be more appropriate for certain types of decision making and people involved. But one very important difference among people that is often overlooked is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality type {Note: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® and MBTI® are registered trademarks of Consulting Psychologists Press (CPP)}.

There are 16 MBTIs, each with its own potential strengths and weaknesses, and we all fall into one. The personality type consists of four letters, each representing how we interact and perceive the world around us. The resulting MBTI can serve to provide insights into one’s own communication, relationship and leadership preferences as well as those of others. Once you know your own type and that of another person’s, you can leverage a variety of literature to determine approaches most likely to result in a successful professional relationship. This technique is covered during the five- day Coast Guard Senior Leadership and Skills School.

Although there are 16 MBTIs, the military population is not equally divided among them. For example, four of the 16 (25%) MBTIs are described as “Sensing and Judging (SJ)” but studies indicate that 50% junior officers in the U.S. military have SJ personality types. SJs tend to gravitate to and thrive in a military career since they are naturally inclined to be meticulous, thorough, timely, by-the-book, serious, factual, organized, common sense-centered, reliable, goal-oriented, high-energy, professionally dressed, security-seeking, and down-to-earth. Your stereotypical XO/XPO afloat. But while many of these attributes would assist a Guardian early in their career, they can become a liability later on when vision, adaptability, imagination, and big picture thinking are required.

The opposite personality type of SJs are NPs – “iNtuition and Perceiving.” People with NP are less serious, prefer a slower pace, liable to not finish projects, disorganized, less professional in appearance, find rules and structure limiting and tend to procrastinate. Although this seems to describe someone destined to fail in the military, NPs possess qualities of vital importance to senior decision makers, including creativity, ability to envision the future, knack for big-picture thinking, and are imaginative. If it weren’t for NPs high in our organization, we likely wouldn’t be pursuing modernization.

So does our MBTI give SJs the excuse not to be visionary and our NPs to be sloppy in appearance? Not at all. Our MBTI is simply our natural preference – we can go against it if we make a conscious effort to. For example, if the XO/XPO of a cutter was a SJ and the CO/OinC was a NP, their natural tendencies would likely result in a very productive relationship. But what if it were the opposite – the XO/XPO was a NP not big on details, professional appearances, nor finishing projects, but the CO/OinC was? And the CO, being an SJ, was too focused on details to engage in big-picture vision? While this may sound like a train wreck waiting to happen, if each had insights into his/her own MBTI and worked against it, the relationship could very easily work. But not having insights into your own MBTI and that of others can negate any other leadership expertise you may have.

The LDC [U.S.C.G. Leadership Development Center] has MBTI evaluators on staff who can administer the “instrument” (it isn’t technically an exam) to your entire unit. Doing so for yourself and your subordinates seems like an easy way to potentially vastly improve your leadership and mentoring, but privacy is an issue. MBTI results are a psychological assessment and as such can only be shared by someone if they are freely willing to do so. MBTI results also have nothing to do with skill, ability, or intelligence and cannot ethically be used to hire, fire, or promote people. However, the MBTI types are fairly easy to discern among people you know well, and books such as The Art of Speed Reading People can help. In addition, the personality types of all of one’s subordinates can be averaged out into a “Team Profile” which avoids privacy issues and is still effective since groups tend to work within the behavioral structure of their group type. The Team Profile also provides advice to the leader regarding communication and problem solving best practices for the given personality type.

Overcoming our personality preferences takes some work but can have profound results and allows the leader to implement a leadership style that is truly situational. For example, in the movie Twelve O’Clock High, a staple of [AUX]LAMS, Brigadier General Frank Savage knew he was going to have to implement a much stricter and formalized atmosphere to improve operational effectiveness. This would come easy for someone with a “Thinking (T)” MBTI.

However, based on his interactions prior to taking command, he seems to be a “Feeler (F)” with a warm and friendly demeanor, sensitive to other’s feelings, gentle, diplomatic, and uses people’s first names. While he did an excellent job overcoming his preferences it clearly wasn’t easy, and he often heavily smoked or consumed liquor before and after chewing people out. And by the end of the movie he breaks under the stress and reverts back to being an F.

Clearly, going against your MBTI isn’t easy, but is necessary as you and your mentees progress throughout your careers.

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For more information on MBTI go to: <http://www.personalitypathways.com/type_inventory.html>