

Self-awareness Rules
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In its first season, *Modern Family* tackled the theme of whether people can change. Phil Dumphy, always the dutiful dad, opened the episode with a simple question, “Can people change?”¹ His answer? “Well, that’s a, that is a tough one, but yes, people can change, that’s what I believe anyway, and I will until the day I die.” Always quick with the comeback, his wife Claire says, “You do realize you’re proving the exact opposite of your point.” Not be upstaged, he deadpans to the camera, “See, she’s changed. She used to be very supportive of me.”

Just what kind of change is Phil talking about? Is he referring to the behaviors that people have, the way they interact with others? Or is it the underlying personality traits that drive those behaviors? Turns out it’s a both/and thing. Says Seth Gillihan, “While personality is not a perfect predictor of behavior, it does give us a general idea of how someone is likely to think and act.”² Put simply, personality explains your behaviors and vice-versa.

Self-Assessment First

Let’s say that Phil decides he wants to be a better leader in his real-estate practice and he starts by thinking about what traits and behaviors he should work on. He could just go to his colleagues and direct reports and ask, but that honest feedback might be tough to get.³ Because he knows that “personality traits are some of the most powerful predictors of long-term relationship quality,”⁴ he goes to the web in search of a personality assessment, which shouldn’t be a problem given that there are about 2,500.⁵ This despite the warning that “Precious few personality assessments are known to be reliable.”⁶

Take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator taken annually by 2.5 million people give or take. Wharton Professor and author Adam Grant (*Blink, Tipping Point, Outliers*, etc.) is not a fan: “When it comes to accuracy, if you put a horoscope on one end and a heart monitor on the other, the MBTI falls about halfway in between.”⁷ This pretty much goes for all assessments out there says Merve Emre, author of *The Personality Brokers*: “Personality tests are sold on the promise that they are valid (they measure what they say they will measure) and reliable (they produce consistent results) . . . Yet every major personality test has faced challenges to its reliability and validity.”⁸

Perhaps more importantly is that all personality self-assessments are pretty much garbage in – garbage out. Do I really want to own up to some of my mannerisms? Am I even aware of them? Do I want my boss to know that I score low on the Big Five’s emotional stability scale? Sometimes I can be a dark cloud complete with thunder, rain, and hail. But in the assessments that I’ve taken, not so much.

By the way, Adam Grant is a fan of the Big Five Factors, which are extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness: “The Big Five traits have reality and considerable power in predicting job performance and team effectiveness.”⁹

Let me give you an example. A few years ago, I took the ever-popular DiSC, which is described as “a non-judgmental tool used for discussion of people's behavioral differences.”¹⁰ Here’s my summary from the profile:

Mark, like others with the iS style, your most valuable contributions to the workplace may include your ability to connect with others, your commitment to building team spirit, and your desire to see people succeed. In fact, these are probably some of the qualities that others admire most about you.

Gosh, I like my sunny disposition, don’t you? No dark clouds for me. But I was also somewhat skeptical. So, I asked a very close friend to do it on me and this is what she found:

Mark, like others with the D style, your most valuable contributions to the workplace may include your drive to make things happen, your tendency toward bold action, and your willingness to challenge assumptions. In fact, these are probably some of the qualities that others admire most about you.

Put bluntly, I see myself as a warm-hearted people person; my friend saw me as a cold-hearted bottom-liner. But which is truthier?

That’s when I turned to Gallup’s Clifton StrengthsFinder, which encourages visitors to its website to “Discover the assessment empowering 20,759,693 people to succeed.”¹¹ Based upon 20,000 in-depth interviews and 10,000 followers, Gallup researchers identified three key findings:

1. The most effective leaders are always investing in strengths.
2. The most effective leaders surround themselves with the right people.
3. The most effective leaders understand their followers’ needs.¹²

Sounded pretty appealing to me – just straight-up commonsense. So, I took the assessment, which Gallup asserts is specialized enough that the odds that “someone shares the same Signature Themes – or ‘top five’” with me are about 1 in 33 million.¹³ A theme is a grouping of talents; there are 34 of these categories. “A strength is the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance in a specific activity. Talents are naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied . . . talents are innate and cannot be acquired”¹⁴

My top five talent themes (it’s not a strength until you’ve invested in it) are strategic (willing to consider all the possibilities), belief (passionate, uncompromising about core

values), positivity (optimistic, hopeful, fun-loving), futuristic (fascinated with tomorrow), and developer (patient with the inexperienced and unseasoned).¹⁵

The thing that I like so much about this assessment is that you are forced to acknowledge that the top 5-10 themes are where you could be strongest, the next 10 or so are supporting themes that you use situationally, and the rest are lesser themes that are unlikely to ever become strengths. Bottomline, “Just as your dominant themes illustrate who you are, your lesser themes echo who you are not.”¹⁶

With StrengthsFinder, the “key is to be aware of your potential *and* your limitations.”¹⁷ Maybe instead of trying to change himself, Phil could play to his strengths and delegate to his limitations? He could form partnerships with people whose strengths balance his lesser talents. Or maybe Phil could work on some of his limitations and smooth them out a bit, upgrade them as it were.

Alas, the StrengthsFinder comes with its own set of complaints according to Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: “There’s no scientific evidence it works, it can give people a false sense of competence, it leads to resources being wasted on C and D players, overused strengths become toxic, and it doesn’t address the real problem workplaces face.”¹⁸

Even if assessments aren’t your thing, you certainly should consider taking the Implicit-Association Test,¹⁹ which looks at people’s unconscious biases:

These tests find that – regardless of how many Pride parades they attend or how many ‘This is what a feminist looks like’ T-shirts they own – most people trust men over women, white people over minorities, and straight people over queer people. These trends can hold true regardless of the gender, race or sexuality of the test-taker.²⁰

To be fair, there is criticism about the test including Jesse Singal’s in New York magazine: “The scientific truth is that we don’t know exactly how big a role implicit bias plays in reinforcing the racial hierarchy, relative to countless other factors. We do know that . . . the test has a markedly unimpressive track record.”²¹ That said and as noted earlier, tests like the IAP might serve as an opportunity for self-reflection and this certainly cannot be a bad thing especially when thinking about undoing racism.

Feedback Next

Once you have some handle on who you are, you have a potpourri of options. Anthony Tjan lists three: 1. Test and know yourself better. 2. Watch yourself and learn. 3. Be aware of others, too.²² Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves list 15 options. Of these, the one that stands out for better leadership is to seek feedback:

Everything you see – including yourself – must travel through your own lens. The problem is, your lens is tainted by your experiences, your beliefs, and, without question, your moods . . . Self-awareness is getting to know yourself from the

inside out and outside in. The only way to get the second, more elusive perspective is to open yourself up to feedback from others [and] be sure to get specific examples and situations.²³

This is easier said than done according to Robert S. Kaplan:

As hard as it is to give effective and timely feedback, many leaders find it much more challenging to get feedback from their employees . . . The problem is that, while your direct reports know what you are doing wrong, most of them are not dying to tell you. With good reason—there's very little upside and a tremendous amount of downside. The more senior and the more important you become, the less your subordinates will tell you the "awful truth"—things that are difficult to hear but that you need to know.²⁴

Clearly self-assessment may be a good place to begin that examination, but it can only be useful when tested against the reality of those who know you well. You can do it in person or you can ask for anonymous feedback like 360-degree tools from places like the Center for Creative Leadership wherein "the person sees a more complete picture of themselves."²⁵

No matter how you do it, the late Stephen Covey writes, "It takes humility to ask for and receive it. You may have to take oxygen to get through it. But understanding it and acting wisely with regard to it can powerfully impact your time and quality of life."²⁶

Self-Awareness Rules

Personality assessments aren't worthless if, and that's a big if, you use them as an entry point on your journey towards change. "It's not that such tests are perfect measures or predictors, but they facilitate self-reflection, which leads to better self-awareness."²⁷ Add in the feedback and you're in the self-awareness zone. "Simply put, to be self-aware is to know yourself as you really are."²⁸

Why care about self-awareness? First, successful leaders recommend it: "When the 75 members of Stanford Graduate School Business's Advisory Council were asked to recommend the most important capability for leaders to develop, their answer was nearly unanimous: self-awareness."²⁹ Second, "Executives need to know where their natural inclinations lie in order to boost them or compensate for them."³⁰ Third, self-awareness is the "inevitable starting point. Without it, executives will find it hard to evolve or find coping strategies."³¹

Self-awareness isn't a goal unto itself; it must be followed by an on-going, some will say life-long, program of self-correction.

Recall from earlier that Phil Dunphy has some options when it comes to his limitations. He can play to his strengths and delegate to his limitations. Or he can try to polish the

weaknesses. Though it's often easier to form collaborations to address weaknesses, polishing is sometimes a moral imperative.

My StrengthsFinder lowest rated talent theme is consistency (keenly aware of the need to treat people the same [and] crave stable routines and clear rules and procedures that everyone can follow).³² Is it responsible to write this one off with a glib “So sorry, but it's not one of my talents”? Of course not. I am morally bound to pay attention to it and do what I can to minimize it.

Fortunately, recent research is beginning to answer the age-old question of whether personality is fate, which is Phil's question of whether people can change. The good news is that “Personality traits are not only robust predictors of important life outcomes, but also appear to be amendable to intervention.”³³ No, I will never be a star of the consistency theme, but just knowing of this limitation causes me to be better. As Fritz Perls says, “awareness per se – of and by itself – can be curative.”³⁴

How much polishing of any weakness can you do? Let Modern Family's Mitchel Pritchard, the lawyer and gentle husband of Cameron, tell you. At the end of the episode, Mitchel revisits the opening question of whether people can change, “People are who they are, give or take 15 percent. That's how much people can change if they really want to. Whether it's for themselves or the people they love . . . But you know what? Sometimes that's just enough.”

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- ³ (Kaplan, 2007)
- ⁴ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/06/30/484053435/personality-can-change-over-a-lifetime-and-usually-for-the-better>
- ⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18723950>
- ⁶ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-accurate-are-personality-tests/>
- ⁷ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20130917155206-69244073-say-goodbye-to-mbti-the-fad-that-won-t-die/>
- ⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/five-myths/five-myths-about-personality-tests/2018/09/20/3a57a8ee-b78a-11e8-a2c5-3187f427e253_story.html
- ⁹ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20130917155206-69244073-say-goodbye-to-mbti-the-fad-that-won-t-die/>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.discprofile.com/what-is-disc/overview/>
- ¹¹ <https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/home/en-us>
- ¹² (Rath & Conchie, 2008, pp. 2-3)
- ¹³ <https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/home/en-us/cliftonstrengths-how-it-works>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/help/en-us/faq-item/genfaq20?type=GEN>
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- ¹⁶ <http://coaching.gallup.com/2018/05/unlocking-power-of-cliftonstrengths-34.html>
- ¹⁷ (Rath, 2007, p. 24)
- ¹⁸ <https://hbr.org/2016/01/strengths-based-coaching-can-actually-weaken-you>
- ¹⁹ <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- ²⁰ <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/08/04/416827667/so-you-flunked-a-racism-test-now-what>
- ²¹ <https://www.thecut.com/2017/01/psychologys-racism-measuring-tool-isnt-up-to-the-job.html>
- ²² <https://hbr.org/2012/07/how-leaders-become-self-aware>
- ²³ (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009, p. 92)
- ²⁴ (Kaplan, 2007, p. 91)
- ²⁵ <https://www.ccl.org/lead-it-yourself-solutions/benchmarks-360-assessment-suite/>
- ²⁶ (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1994, pp. 246-247)
- ²⁷ <https://hbr.org/2012/07/how-leaders-become-self-aware>
- ²⁸ (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009, p. 61)
- ²⁹ (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007, p. 133)
- ³⁰ <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/self-awareness-a-key-to-better-leadership/>
- ³¹ (Toegel & Barsoux, 2012, p. 57)
- ³² <https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/home/en-us/cliftonstrengths-themes-domains>
- ³³ (Roberts et al., 2017, p. 132)
- ³⁴ (Baumgardner & Perls, 1975, p. 25)