

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

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Newsletter

Leadership Personality: Do You Have the Big Five Traits?

"Personalities at work are like cars in the city: They often can keep us from our destination." Pierce J. Howard, *The Owner's Manual for Personality at Work*, 2001.

How well do you understand basic personality differences among the people at work? Knowledge of personality structure, dynamics and development is helpful to your:

1. Personal professional development
2. Relationships with associates
3. Relationships with superiors and the organization in general

The bottom line is performance. Whether you are working in a team, leading a department, or selling a service or product, the way you communicate and persuade is critical to your personal success and your company's overall effectiveness.

If you aspire to climb the leadership ladder, you will need to learn the basics of personality. Without studying for a PhD in psychology, you can gain a firm understanding of your own personality and those with whom you work.

Psychologists now believe that of all the various methods for classifying personality dimensions, only one stands out as the most statistically robust: the Big Five. This means personality factors can be differentiated and distilled into five separate components:

N = Need for stability, negative emotionality, neuroticism

E = Extraversion, positive emotionality, sociability

O = Originality, openness, imagination

A = Agreeableness, accommodation, adaptability

C = Consolidation, conscientiousness, will to achieve, goal-oriented



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**P.O. Box 20389
St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522
912.634.9300
877.626.2960
(toll free)**

potential@Herdlinger.com

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The Big Five Personality Factors

The Big Five, or Five-Factor Model, has been around since 1936. With computers and factor analysis software, research in the 1980s has consistently confirmed that these five personality factors are the most reliable for differentiating personality traits.

The Big Five synonym clusters appear to account for most differences among individual personalities, describing five universal dimensions. We score a high, low or mid-range rating in each dimension:

1. **N** refers to one's need for stability or negative emotionality. A person high in N is very reactive and prefers a stress-free workplace. A person low in N is very calm and relatively unaffected by stress that usually burdens others.
2. **E** refers to one's "extraversion." A person high in E likes to be in the thick of the action, while a person low in E prefers to be away from noise and stimulation.
3. **O** refers to one's originality or openness to new experiences. A person high in O has an appetite for new ideas and activities, and is easily bored. Those low in the O factor prefer familiar territory and tend to be more practical.
4. **A** refers to one's accommodation ability or agreeableness. A person high in A tends to accommodate the wishes and needs of others, while a person low in A tends to cater to his or her own personal priorities.
5. **C** refers to one's consolidation or conscientiousness. A person high in C tends to consolidate energy when accomplishing one or more goals. A person low in C prefers multitasking and a more spontaneous work style.

These definitions come from Pierce J. Howard, PhD, and Jane Mitchell Howard, MBA, as outlined in their book, *The Owner's Manual for Personality at Work* (Bard Press, 2001). While others have written about the Big Five Factors, this book summarizes how they manifest in the work environment.

Is the Big Five personality assessment valid? Researchers have pointed to reliability studies that are consistent enough to approach the status of law. In the business world, this model provides a reliable, standard vocabulary with which to discuss personality differences.

The most highly regarded standard test for measuring the Big Five is Costa and McCrae's NEO PI-R, also

called the NEO. In the fall of 2000, the Howards introduced the Workplace Big Five Profile (WB5P), which features questions and reports that incorporate workplace language.

A Word of Caution About Assessments

Human personality is complex, and we have yet to unlock its mysteries. The Big Five model gives us a uniform language based on standard definitions, but please note that no single profile represents an ideal.

Many forces shape an individual. The Five Factors form the main infrastructure. More than two dozen different traits are subsumed under them, providing trillions of combinations. Human individuality is too complex for any one system to explain adequately.

The N Dimension and Stress

Your N score estimates the point at which your flight-or-fight response is triggered. This period of arousal is eventually counterbalanced by parasympathetic arousal, or a return to normalcy and calmness.

Individuals with higher N scores have a shorter "trigger" and can't take much stress before feeling it. Those with lower scores have a longer fuse and can take abundant amounts of stress before showing the signs.

Resilient N-/Low N Score: If you are particularly resilient, you tend to respond to stressful situations in a calm, secure and rational way. Typically, you are stress-free, guilt-free and urge-resistant. Unless you are very attentive, you may appear to others to be too laid back and relaxed. Others may even perceive you to be uncaring, lethargic, insensitive or unaware of problems. You may need to take others' concerns more seriously if you want to nurture good working relationships.

Responsive N=/Mid-Level N Score: You are responsive and tend to be calm, secure and steady under normal circumstances. You have a moderate threshold for handling workplace stress.

Reactive N+/High N Score: You are reactive and tend to respond to most situations in an alert, sensitive, concerned, attentive, excitable or expressive way. Under stress, you may appear anxious, tense, restless, depressed, easily discouraged, temperamental or worried. In tough times, you need time to vent your frustrations or alleviate your concerns before you're ready to tackle the next job challenge. You may fill the role of conscience or emotional barometer for your team or organization.

The E Factor: Sociability

This factor describes comfort levels with external stimuli.

Introvert/E-: If you're an introvert, you prefer working alone. Typically, you are a serious, quiet, private person who may opt to write or email instead of talking to others. Others may consider you a loner.

Ambivert/E=: If you fall in the mid-range on the E scale, you tend to move easily from working with others to working alone. You have a moderate threshold for sensory stimulation and may tire of it after a while.

Extravert/E+: You prefer to be around other people and are talkative, enthusiastic, sociable and fun-loving. You often become the formal or informal leader. You may not be a good listener because you tend to dominate the conversation.

Recognizing your natural tendency to be surrounded by people, noise and activity will help guide you in making career choices.

The O Factor: Curiosity

This factor reflects your openness or originality—your level of curiosity versus comfort with familiar territory.

Preserver/O-: If you are in the low range for this personality factor, you are practical and down to earth. You approach work with efficiency and are comfortable with repetitive activities. Others may view you as conservative, narrow in your thinking, set in your ways or even rigid.

Moderate/O+: You tend to be somewhat down to earth, but you'll consider a new way of doing something if convinced. You aren't known for your creativity or curiosity, but you appreciate innovation and efficiency.

Explorer/O+: You tend to have many broad interests and like to be cutting-edge. You are often curious, introspective and reflective, seeking new experiences and thinking about the future. You may be easily bored. Others may view you as impractical or unrealistic.

The A Factor: Negotiation

Your A factor is an estimate of the point at which you tire of being defiant and turn to acts of submission. Biologically, it is based in the dominance challenge system of our brains.

Challenger/A-: You relate to authority by being skeptical, tough, guarded, persistent and competitive. You may come across as hostile, rude, self-centered or combative.

Negotiator/A=: You can shift between competitive and cooperative situations and usually push for a win-win strategy.

Adapter/A+: You tend to relate to authority by being tolerant, humble and accepting. You may come across as naïve, submissive, conflict-averse and even unprincipled because you will yield your position.

The C Factor: Focus

This personality dimension describes your capacity to focus attention on sustained, repetitive, goal-focused behavior.

Flexible/C-: You tend to approach goals in a relaxed, spontaneous, open-ended way. Your mind can switch tracks on the run. You may be a procrastinator or viewed as casual about responsibilities or unorganized.

Balanced/C=: You tend to keep work demands and personal needs in balance. You can switch from focused activities to spontaneous diversions.

Focused/C+: You work toward goals in a disciplined, dependable fashion. You proceed in a linear, sequential manner, with a strong will to achieve. You typically consolidate your time, energy and resources in pursuit of your goals.

Understanding the Nature of Great Leaders

Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, argued that the best leader needs to do whatever it takes to get the job done. If toughness is required, or if a situation calls for tenderness, successful leaders will adapt to succeed. Mihalyi Csikszentimihalyi, author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* in 1996, found that creative geniuses share one tendency: They do what it takes to get the job done, even if it requires a behavior that is less than appealing.

Portrait of a “Natural Leader”

There has been substantial research over the last two decades on the Big Five profile of an ideal leader. This does not mean people who fail to fit this profile are unable to lead; rather, the Big Five profiles the typical leader’s personality, based on organizational studies. These personality traits move along a continuum, and one can exercise non-preferential behaviors when necessary.

The natural leader defined in Big Five terms is resilient (N-); energetic, outgoing and persuasive (E+); visionary (O+); competitive (A-); and dedicated to a goal (C+).

“Leadership involves persuading other people to set aside for a period of time their individual concerns and to pursue a common goal that is important for the responsibilities and welfare of a group.” (Hogan, Curphy and Hogan, 1994, “What we know about leadership: Effectiveness and personality.” *American Psychologist*. 49(6), 493-504.)

Leaders who are generally calm (N-) must occasionally show agitation and strong emotions (N+). They may be generally outgoing and assertive (E+), and occasionally retire in solitude (E-). They may espouse a vision (O+) and also be practical and efficient (O-). They can be unyielding (A-), but also nurturing on occasion (A+). And although they must focus on goals (C+), they must occasionally be spontaneous (C-) and playful.

The Big Trade-Offs

It is impossible to have some traits simultaneously. The drive to lead and achieve (A-) runs contrary to interpersonal sensitivity (A+). If you want a leader with a strong drive, you must typically sacrifice some interpersonal sensitivity. If you want a leader with strong interpersonal sensitivity, you must sacrifice some amount of drive.

Carefully identifying the needs of a specific role prior to selecting or appointing a leader will help determine any necessary trade-offs.

If you want to learn more about where you score on the Big Five personality factors, there are a few commercial online assessment sites. But simply knowing where you stand, without factoring in the context of your work environment, provides an incomplete assessment. A coach or consultant can help you apply this information for personal development and career advancement.

Herdlinger Associates

P.O. Box 20389

St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522