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The NFP Strategic Leader

R. CRAIG BULLIS

Individual self-awareness is a strategic leader's greatest asset,¹ and the importance of efforts to enhance such awareness is clearly demonstrated by research concluding that leaders have significant effects on the competitive advantage of organizations.² Organizations that ensure leader development are degrees better at mission accomplishment than those that focus their attention elsewhere.³ Optimizing strategic leader development efforts, therefore, is a fundamental challenge for almost all large organizations in today's environment. Some observers have argued that developing leaders should be the predominant strategy in organizations that wish to excel in the future.⁴ Other researchers postulate that the entire body of literature on transformational leadership should focus on activities specifically designed to create differing types of leaders.⁵ Consequently, the development of leaders at every level becomes the priority of any organization that depends on achieving a competitive advantage for long-term success.

The distinct leader responsibilities at progressive organizational levels demand different models to stimulate individual development. This article suggests organizations that develop leaders across their life cycle might actually be establishing and reinforcing behaviors that, while required and necessary at the direct and operational levels, are inappropriate at the strategic level.⁶ In such cases, organizations need to ensure that development activities consider both the short- and long-term needs of the leader. Consequently, this article examines executive leader development using the personality preferences framework provided by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).⁷ The MBTI is based on Psychological-Type Theory⁸ that provides a model of individual preferences and corresponding potential behavior patterns. The article advances the case that effective strategic leadership requires behaviors aligned with the Intuitive, Feeling, and Perceiving (NFP) preferences rather than the Sensing, Thinking, and Judging (STJ) preferences prevalent in leaders at the lower levels of organizations. While it is clear that measured preferences do not dictate behavior and should never be used to select leaders, tendencies do suggest certain behavioral implications and can be extremely beneficial in leader development. For organizations that utilize the MBTI as a leader-development assessment measure, understanding the interaction between the roles and responsibilities of

the leader and the personality of the individual selected for a leadership role can have important implications for individual effectiveness, as well as organizational performance and development programs.

Strategic Leader Responsibilities

There has been a great deal of research regarding the roles and responsibilities of executive leaders, ranging from academically rigorous studies⁹ to more experientially focused research.¹⁰ Reviewing the details of the executive leadership research is beyond the scope of this article. It is necessary, however, to make explicit the assumption, supported by extensive research, that strategic responsibilities (and, therefore, requisite leadership behaviors) are fundamentally different at the strategic level than effective leadership behaviors demonstrated at lower organizational levels.¹¹ As a way to provide context for the remainder of this examination, it is necessary to review the principal responsibilities of senior leaders. Through extensive research the US Army War College has identified six roles required of strategic leaders.¹² In general terms, this summary provides a synthesis of this comprehensive work, with regard to strategic leader responsibilities. The major areas of leadership responsibility are:

- Provide vision; set long-term direction for the organization's future.
- Shape culture; establish shared values that facilitate both short- and long-term goal accomplishment.
- Build and shape joint, interagency, multinational, and intra-agency relationships; align organizational processes and outcomes with major external stakeholders to achieve objectives across the full range of possible missions.
- Build and shape national-level relationships; align the organizational resources and vision with overarching national policy and participate in that policy development, as appropriate.
- Represent the organization; develop and maintain relationships and expertise so that the leader is recognized as the spokesperson for the organization.
- Manage change; proactively facilitate processes to embed the vision, shape the culture, and manage internal and external relationships so that the organization is successful in both the short- and long- term.

Given these requirements, how should organizations establish developmental programs to assist aspiring strategic leaders in their efforts to focus personal resources so they can be most effective? The following section briefly

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highlights the importance of self-awareness, both from a behavioral and personality perspective, as a means to develop strategic leader capabilities.

The Importance of Self-Awareness

For leaders whose responsibilities demand that they function in the strategic context, understanding one's self has special importance. An individual's personality almost always influences behavior, often triggering an "automatic" behavioral response to a particular context. The experiences of a successful tactical-level leader can prejudice the individual into believing that the best predictor for future success is past behavior. As a result, they are often resistant to developmental efforts at higher levels of responsibility.¹³ These individuals know and are comfortable with the styles that have resulted in success in previous activities. This anticipated response, of course, can be valuable as it presumes predictability for the leader (if I do X, then Y will happen). Individuals who interact with a particular leader better understand how he or she will respond in certain contexts, and that knowledge allows the motivated subordinate to anticipate and prepare information that will assist the leader in being successful.

While these rational arguments may work well in a stable environment, such assumptions may be invalid in a rapidly changing world in which leaders are expected to ascend the organizational hierarchy. As leaders obtain additional stature and authority and enter the strategic arena, they need to adjust to the rapidly changing nature of the external environment. That environment is characterized by greater uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity than what the leader experienced at lower levels of responsibility. Consequently, organizational efforts to prepare leaders for new requirements demand an understanding of the leader's current propensities, augmented by an examination of the impact those current styles hold for future challenges.¹⁴ Said another way, the efficiency of our existing cognitive structures can actually limit our learning.¹⁵ As individuals experience new events, our brains develop "rules" that associate the context and particular behaviors. The development of these cognitive routines provides the basis for "experience" and "judgment," making individuals efficient, knowledgeable, and expert decision-makers.¹⁶ These same cognitive routines, however, can cause individual stubbornness, inflexibility, and resistance to change. The critical distinction between these varying outcomes—respected decision-maker or obstinate, inept boss—demands the appropriate application of experience to context. Enhanced self-awareness fundamentally facilitates the metacognition required so that leaders better understand their cognitive preferences, enabling them to judge whether their instincts are appropriate or dysfunc-

tional for a particular context. In other words, strategic leaders who are sufficiently self-aware recognize their own inclinations in a particular context and judge the appropriateness of those instincts before acting.

The implications of a leader's learned behavior that is inappropriate for the situation can have serious personal and organizational consequences. Morgan W. McCall, Jr., and Michael M. Lombardo have published research related to why leaders derail in organizations. One reason for such failures is that much of the leader's reasoning can be traced back to dispositions that were inappropriate for the situation at hand. Additional research efforts have argued that an executive's habitual inclination can result in behaviors that are either incorrect or, in the extreme, can result in failure.¹⁷ Recently, Ellen Van Velsor and Jean Brittain Leslie concluded that four enduring themes account for executive derailment: problems with interpersonal relationships, failure to meet business objectives, inability to build and lead a team, and the inability to develop or adapt. While Van Velsor and Leslie argue that "derailment is a fact of life in organizations," they also argue that "derailment can be prevented, but only if managers and those around them are willing to work on some relatively tough developmental issues."¹⁸ For Van Velsor and Leslie, avoiding derailment is fundamentally an issue of development.

Some will argue, appropriately, that what matters most to the organization is the effective behavior of the leader, the role leaders play in successfully obtaining motivation and commitment from subordinates and peers. One aspect of the degree to which strategic leaders are effective in their jobs, however, is the energy required to perform those roles.¹⁹ Managing energy is a result of the interaction between the role and the personality or disposition of the person who performs it. The behavior required of the leader might be exactly opposite of his or her disposition. For example, consider the highly introverted strategic leader who has to attend numerous formal social functions to mingle and speak briefly with individuals. Many introverts are effective at this responsibility, but such behavior requires extra energy.²⁰ Personality researchers recognize that, while an MBTI "snapshot" can provide insight into a personality preference or disposition, such measures will never predict behavior with absolute certainty.²¹ These measures, however, do give insight into what the individual's first instinct might be, especially under stress. The combination of behavioral and personality assessments can be very powerful, as the intent of these evaluations is not only to communicate to leaders how they are perceived by others but also to help the leader better understand how their personality is manifested in behavior. Such knowledge can enhance individual understanding as to why certain behaviors are more physically or mentally draining than alternatives. Such enhanced self-awareness can influence self-monitoring behavior so leaders recognize that,

within a particular context, their initial action might be the wrong one and extra energy will be required to act appropriately. When the leader does take action, such knowledge may help the individual to behave differently than they might otherwise. Those sometimes subtle differences can distinguish the effective strategic leader from those who are simply “good.”

Self-aware leaders understand their preferences and dispositions, which allow them to manage their own behavior and, in doing so, become more effective. Fundamentally, this argument is the basis of contingency theories, as the assumption of such theories is that the leader can modify his or her behavior to more accurately match the behavior required in a particular context. Understanding the roles and behaviors required for effective performance at each organizational level is critical for individual effectiveness. Additionally, one needs to understand how much energy is required to perform the particular roles, especially roles that are inconsistent with a strong personal disposition. Given the behavior required, what personality characteristics most closely align with the roles demanded of strategic leaders?

The Case for NFP Behavior

Numerous organizations have attempted to enhance employee self-awareness by using the results of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The MBTI is one of the most widely utilized personality measures in the world. It assesses personality preferences along four continuums: Introversion/Extroversion, Sensing/Intuition, Thinking/Feeling, and Judging/Perceiving. The results of these measures suggest the preferences people have in both their public and private lives. Examples of how the MBTI-measured personality dispositions manifest themselves in behaviors include the information one attends to, how quickly one makes decisions, how one interacts with others, or how conscientious one is regarding his or her responsibilities.

The culture of many large organizations, combined with the expectations of direct and operational-level leaders, often reinforces a preference that is consistent with the MBTI preferences of Sensing (obtaining verifiable facts); Thinking (being analytical and systematic, wanting to come to an objective decision) and Judging (making decisions quickly and moving on). Some researchers suggest that there is an overabundance of Thinking-Judging leaders in organizations due mainly to the fact that behaviors associated with these preferences are often viewed as “leadership like.”²² One potential concern is that these preferences might be counterproductive in the strategic context. A number of researchers believe that successful leadership at the strategic level might actually demand behavior reflecting Intuitive, Feeling, and Perceiving preferences.

The Importance of Intuition

The MBTI is based on Carl Jung's theory of personality preferences. Jung argues that the first function in personality is how one perceives the environment and gathers data. Those with a Sensing preference are more drawn to facts and detail, are present-oriented, and have confidence in data gathered through the five senses. Those on the other end of the continuum have more of an Intuitive preference, in that they are more theoretical, abstract, future-oriented, and trust in data gathered through their "sixth sense." Behaviorally, those with a Thinking preference are drawn to tangible evidence and will demand verification of information before considering it. Those with an Intuitive preference, on the other hand, are more likely to react based on their instinctive judgment. They consider tangible evidence "too obvious" and will look for underlying interdependent or reciprocal relationships. One major concern is that this Intuitive preference can result in relatively simple problems being made overly complex. On the other hand, those with a Sensing preference might try to over-simplify problems that are inherently complex.

At the strategic level, the volume of factors accounting for strategic performance can obscure the opportunity to collect objective performance data for leaders in complex or ambiguous strategic environments. For individual leaders, a major concern is that the strategic context is characterized by a constantly shifting environment. External fluctuations cause changes, slight or significant, in internal systems and structures. As previously discussed, some argue that the principal responsibility of strategic leaders is to manage the interdependence between internal and external constituencies. This constant interaction manifests itself in issues, adjustments, and problems to be resolved. Consequently, many performance factors interact in such a convoluted manner that identifying the unique contributions regarding a particular outcome is difficult, if not impossible. Leaders need to develop a level of comfort regarding indirect measures of performance. Put another way, it might not be the measures representing the performance that are primary, but rather the holistic picture of what the measures might mean, thereby implying that strategic leaders need to be comfortable using their sixth sense or intuition. These behaviors may come more easily to a person with an Intuitive preference.

Let us examine the need for behavior representing the Intuitive preference a bit further. The truism "the only constant in today's world is change" demands that strategic leaders not only react to change, but that they also encourage, facilitate, demand, and cause change. Indicators of what will require change, the timing of change efforts, and, sometimes even more importantly, what must not change, often demand that the leader operate in the speculative

world of hunches, innuendoes, and judgments. While the Sensing perceiver might quickly identify significant facts, the relevancy of those facts may dissipate as the external environment shifts, making a leader with an Intuitive preference more comfortable in this fluctuating environment.

Effective change requires the leader, in concert with other members of the organization, to develop and articulate an organizational vision that can both shape and motivate individuals toward some future state. Management specialist Peter M. Senge describes this shared vision as “a force in people’s hearts” that motivates them toward a shared outcome.²³ Such efforts are not easily quantified. It is hard to measure the effort that goes into actions that often harness and direct the enthusiasm of a diverse group, actions that often require the integration of broad, sometimes competing, individual desires. Clearly, effective communication skills are required to express the conviction that is desired by the leader. There are those who believe the content of such a message, reflecting an integrative, holistic approach, might be more easily conveyed by a person with an Intuitive disposition.

While a person with a Sensing preference may be more at ease in the direct, hands-on tasks representative of operational leadership, strategic responsibilities may pose greater challenges, and this requires additional effort. Openness to change, future orientation, and comfort with the abstract that traditionally characterize the strategic leader may be more in keeping with the Intuitive preference as measured by the MBTI.

The Feeling Decider

Jung argued that the second “life function” that is subject to preference is how an individual makes decisions. After gathering data through the Perceiving function, one will come to some conclusion based on those perceptions. According to Jung’s theory, individuals at one extreme have a Thinking preference that causes them to decide in an objective, analytical, nonpersonal manner. Objectivity and clarity are critical for a Thinking decider. They will strive to identify logical, cause-effect relationships before making decisions. Thinkers separate themselves from the problem in order to make decisions in a manner that places primacy on the issue at hand with limited consideration for the individuals involved with the process. At the other extreme are individuals with a Feeling preference, reflecting more subjective, experiential, and interpersonal factors. Feeling deciders place primacy on the people involved and make decisions based on the congruence of the potential solution and their interpersonally focused value system. Some researchers mistakenly believe that those with a Feeling preference are emotional decision makers and are, therefore, not firmly wedded to a decision once made. The truth

is that both Thinking and Feeling deciders can be equally stubborn once they make a decision; it is the underpinnings for their decisions that are dissimilar. Even though both of these decision processes are rational, it is the rationale supporting the processes that is different.

The ambiguous, complex, and volatile environment does not often facilitate direct, quantifiable measures of performance. Organizations may attempt to apply rational decision-making methods to imprecise data; however, such analysis is limited by either the “squishiness” of the information or the multiple interactions among data. While such efforts can provide some insight, the methods used to evaluate such imprecise data often have to be competed, or at least interpreted, with a more subjective approach. A Feeling decider is more inclined to adopt the subjective approach.

Additionally, most senior leaders of large organizations have limited direct influence over the day-to-day performance of the organization. Instead, they influence performance through the allocation of resources and the establishment of a context that facilitates subordinate and leader performance.²⁴ As such, one could argue that the senior leader’s primary role is taking care of subordinate leaders and managing the talent pool in those organizations. Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, posited that in the great organizations, strategic leaders enhance organizational performance not by focusing on mission accomplishment, but instead by hiring the right people and focusing on developing them.²⁵ Those subordinate leaders, in turn, ensure that tasks are accomplished in accordance with the senior leader’s intentions. These empowering activities are more consistent with the behavior patterns of the Feeling decider who, as previously described, places primary emphasis on people and relationships. Feeling deciders are thereby more comfortable in stepping away from the direct, face-to-face problem-solving approach and choosing instead to work through their subordinate leaders.

Senge’s notion of a shared vision, as discussed earlier, demands that senior leaders are cognizant of, respectful of, and receptive to the individual visions of others in the organization.²⁶ Developing and sustaining a constructive organizational culture requires that leaders pay particular attention to this alignment. To have a truly shared vision requires the alignment of individual visions and demands. It requires that leaders take responsibility for establishing individual visions with subordinates and then linking those visions to the broader organizational vision. While a Thinking decider and a Feeling decider can be equally committed to achieving a vision, it is the Feeling decider that is more comfortable in the interactive development and the individual or organizational alignment of the vision Senge advocates.

Finally, the complexity of strategic-level problems suggests that solving them might be beyond the ability of a single individual.²⁷ As com-

plexity rises, the need for diverse viewpoints and approaches increase.²⁸ Harnessing these diverse viewpoints has become a major challenge for the senior leaders of today's organizations, primarily because if diversity is not explicitly recognized, it will seldom play a role in solving the challenge. Consequently, it is logical that team management comes first for senior leaders, with the consequential benefit being more an effective response to strategic problems.²⁹ In other words, effective team building is a requisite means to the goal of leading an organization that is capable of meeting the challenges of the future. As one builds a team, it is often useful to examine the contributions each cognitive style (personality) brings to the larger group. Multiple approaches to challenges are necessary and when taken together make a powerful combination. Teams, in and of themselves, do not necessarily produce better outcomes.³⁰ Success is realized when the effective senior leader concentrates on the team's development as well as the processes that the team employs, with the overarching objective of harnessing the unique contributions of each member. These functions are consistent with the behavioral characterizations of leaders with a Feeling preference, who are more likely to place primacy on the interpersonal component of their interactions.

When we review the requirements for strategic leaders, the importance of interpersonal skills is paramount. Building internal and external relationships are critical to cultivating current and future opportunities. Recognized strategic leadership scholars Michael A. Hitt and R. Duane Ireland argue that the principal responsibility of strategic leadership, the "essence" of the role, is the management of human and social capital.³¹ A careful review of the behaviors associated with these preferences would lead one to conclude that emphasizing the human component is much more comfortable for those with a Feeling preference than those with a Thinking preference.

The Perceiving Orientation

The final personality trait examined is that of lifestyle orientation. Not an initial component of Jung's theory, this orientation is attributed to work by Katherine Briggs.³² It argues for an individual preference in either the Perceiving function (likes to gather data as long as possible) or the Judging function (prefers to make decisions quickly).

In a complex, uncertain strategic environment, the competing agendas of multiple stakeholders demand flexibility from those who interact with them. Other organizations that either compete or cooperate with the strategic leader's organization have their own agendas, needs, and stakeholders. While organizations may attempt to influence the behavior of external entities, the relative power of one organization over another might lead to such efforts be-

ing less than successful. In these instances, flexibility is required of the strategic leader in an effort to accommodate change and competing demands. Leaders need to remain open to fluctuations that not only directly influence them, but also changes that may influence their stakeholders.

The timing of a strategic leader's decision is more important than the speed of that decision. At the operational level, many leaders have been taught to "make decisions and get on with it." Limits are often set on the boundaries associated with lower-level decisions, so both discretion and consequences are somewhat limited, especially when compared to the discretion of strategic leaders and the implications of their decisions. While strategic leaders' internal discretion might be greater, it can still be limited by external constituents. The implications of their decisions are also much broader, both internal and external to the organization, than what many have experienced at lower levels of authority. Senior leaders often have to be patient before acting on their decisions, intentionally postponing the implementation of a decision until the political climate is more advantageous or a significant number of stakeholders can be brought on board.

Finally, research suggests that the brain's automatic responses (pattern recognition and emotional tagging) can cause experienced leaders to make wrong decisions because they fail to recognize errors associated with these responses.³³ Related to the earlier thoughts on the difficulty of obtaining objective information for senior leaders, the senior leader needs to be willing to ask for additional information that either confirms or contradicts a proposed course of action. Leaders need to understand that additional information might not materialize in a timely fashion, or even be available. The willingness to apply patient decision-making techniques is more descriptive of the Perceiving rather than the Judging preference.

Advocating Particular Preferences

While this analysis is intended to relate strategic leader responsibilities to a particular theory of individual preferences, caution is warranted when describing a preferred "set" of personality preferences. Some of the stereotypes of the NFP-disposed leaders are that they are not fully grounded (some will argue that they have their heads in the clouds), are easily swayed by emotional pleas, are indecisive, and have a tendency to go on tangents. Clearly, such extreme behaviors have potentially dysfunctional implications. On the other hand, the archetypical STJ may pay attention only to quantifiable data, make decisions without regard to interpersonal consequences, and jump to judgments without considering the long-term consequences. In essence, then, both of these exemplary combinations have weaknesses. But both also have strengths. Lead-

ership consultants Robert E. Kaplan and Robert B. Kaiser suggest that leaders who “overdo” their strengths can become victims of the dysfunctional aspects of particular behavior. They argue behaviors that served as leadership virtues at the operational level turn into vices at the strategic level.³⁴ Slight changes in those same behaviors, however, enable leaders to reestablish their strategic-level effectiveness. The well-developed strategic leader understands the benefits and limitations of extreme styles, both for themselves and for others. While STJ leadership might be required at the tactical level of an organization, strategic leaders are required to be explicitly cognizant of and consider as more important the behaviors associated with NFP tendencies.

It is also important to note that a leader’s preference does not necessarily dictate his or her behavior. Many leaders seem to resist personality typing and focus more on the competencies or roles required by a particular strategic environment. The value of understanding the relationship between one’s personality and required behavior, however, is that performing nonpreferred functions will almost certainly require additional effort. An alternative methodology for organizational effectiveness suggests that leaders also can build their team to accommodate for any lack of leader preferences. For example, the detail-oriented leader may intentionally keep a “big-picture thinker” close by to compensate for his or her natural inclination to take refuge in minutia. While building a heterogeneous team is a viable strategy, it appears that the complexity of the demands placed on senior leaders suggests that the more effective leaders demonstrate an appreciation for the perspectives at both ends of the preference continua.

Finally, there is one important caveat that deserves explicit attention. This article does not imply that senior leaders should be selected for a position based on their having an MBTI profile that is aligned with the demands of the leader’s role. Such improper usage is often cited by researchers, who rightly challenge the use of personality measures for selection purposes.³⁵ The MBTI is more appropriately used to help individuals enhance their self-awareness regarding their own psyches. It was not designed to suggest how well individuals use preferences or the skills related to their preferences or nonpreferences. The ethical use of assessment measures is strongly reinforced in certification programs; following those principles is essential for the constructive reputation demanded of successful leader development programs. As suggested by the principal authors of the measure, “The crucial question for the team and practitioner is, given our type distributions, how can we make the best use of each team member and our type knowledge to be as effective as possible?”³⁶ For example, if the team is very similar in preferences, it may lack some of the potential benefits of a more diverse population. If, on the other hand, the team members are very dissimilar with

respect to preferences, how does the team take advantage of those differences in their effort to be more effective? Similar arguments can be articulated at the individual level of analysis. Leader self-awareness, especially with respect to the preferences measured by the MBTI, can assist leaders' self-monitoring, so that they understand both their natural inclinations and the potential energy required to portray behavior outside their preferences.

Conclusion

The responsibilities of strategic leadership demand that leaders obtain a level of comfort with respect to roles they have not previously experienced. In other words, the experiences of tactical and operational leaders provide the necessary but incomplete conditions associated with the development of strategic leaders. Efforts to close the gap between what leaders can do and what they need to do form the foundation of leader development programs. Within any organization, initiatives to enhance such understanding will increase the organization's ability to succeed.

Assessments designed to enhance individual self-awareness are a critical component of effective developmental programs. Behaviors demanded at the strategic level reflect psychological preferences that are not typically reinforced at the tactical or operational level. Specifically, the responsibilities of the strategic leader reflect behaviors more in line with the Intuitive, Feeling, and Perceiving preferences as measured by the MBTI. For organizations that use personality measures to enhance individual self-awareness, the relationship between the role of the strategic leader and the temperament of the person filling that role can have important implications for individual enhancement, organizational development, and, ultimately, organizational success. Due to the differences between these preferences and roles at the tactical and operational levels, strategic leaders are required to have a broader understanding of their own preferences. In addition to these preferences they need to understand the requirements associated with strategic responsibilities, and then focus their efforts to achieve those objectives, realizing that certain responsibilities will require more energy. The leader's personal effectiveness, as well as the effectiveness of the organization, depends on that synchronization.

NOTES

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