Kluwer Mediation Blog

Personality Preferences and Conflict

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I was reflecting the other day that in the 25 years that I have been conducting workshops in Negotiation, Mediation and other related areas, most conflict resolution workshops don't seem to pay a lot of attention to personality preferences and how these can contribute towards conflict. I recently ran a workshop for the Law Society of Singapore on personality preferences and conflict and I would like to share some thoughts from that workshop with readers in this month's blog entry.

Before I do so, let me make three preliminary observations.

First, I have deliberately chosen to use the term "personality preferences" rather than "personality types". For many people, a "personality type" is almost tantamount to an identity statement and this usually creates a mental box from which they believe they cannot depart. Coming from my back-ground in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), my view is that everything is context dependent and that the behaviors we manifest can change from context to context. Therefore, the use of "personality preferences" is to reflect our tendencies towards certain behaviors in certain contexts and that these preferences not immutable and can be changed by context or deliberate intervention.

Secondly, it is not being suggested that we subject the parties with whom we are negotiating or mediating to a survey or test in order to discover their personality preferences. This would be impractical and to be frank, a bit odd. Our personality preferences manifest in our words and behaviors and as professional communicators, we should be constantly processing what we see and hear to assess what preferences and patterns that might be in play. Therefore, the key to behavioral elicitation is to look out for the cues and clues that they provide us. Of course, this is easier said than done but it does get easier with practice. It is also important to realise that any behavioral elicitation we make is a hallucination and that we need to be constantly checking and looking for other cues that can help us refine our hallucination.

Thirdly, the usefulness of looking at personality preferences is twofold. Promoting understanding is important. In a negotiation for example, if we understand that our counterpart is acting in a particular way not because they are doing that to piss us off but that it is simply how they see and are responding to the world at the moment, we can begin to think of ways to overcome the obstacles these preferences are presenting. Similarly, in a mediation, the personality preferences that parties are manifesting may be making resolving a challenging conflict even more difficult. Being able to identify and understand these preferences allows us to reframe these behaviors and

allow us to play the mediator's role of translation to facilitate communication between the parties. Therefore, to be clear, understanding itself is insufficient. It must provide us the tools to design a useful intervention.

Now that these are out of the way, I would like to look at a sampling of personality preferences that we might encounter. These come from the Thomas-Kilmann Survey Instrument and the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory.

Turning first to the Thomas-Kilmann Survey Instrument, many readers might already be familiar with the Thomas-Kilmann modes towards approaching conflict. These essentially talk about the Competitive, Avoiding, Compromising, Accommodating and Collaborating approaches to conflict. As mentioned earlier, while one could have parties take the survey to help us identify their preferences, behavioral elicitation is often more appropriate. Let me look at two of these 5 modes when it comes to behavioural elicitation.

For the person exhibiting a competing mode of conflict resolution, we often see them manifesting a strong positional approach to negotiation, very strong in asserting for what they want, sometimes to the point of aggression. Building a relationship does not seem to be a priority. They generally do not seem very interested in listening to what the other party is interested in or considering proposals that might meet those needs. To the extent that they would be interested in considering a proposal would be when they acknowledge they need to compromise to get to a solution. However, this compromise is seen as giving up something they want, not necessarily meeting the needs of the other person. A party exhibiting competing preferences may use metaphors of war ("I refuse to give up ground" or "why should I surrender my rights?") or from games or sports ("The ball is in their court" or "I'm keeping score here").

Let's contrast this with the flip-side of the competing mode, that of the accommodating mode. Someone manifesting this preference will tend to adopt a very soft approach to the negotiation. They may seem uncomfortable talking about and asking for what they want and need. They might not speak very much except in so far as to acknowledge their counterpart's interests and to accommodate them. They are generally very quick to cooperate and seem more concerned about maintaining the relationship, sometimes to the point of sacrificing their own interests. The language and metaphors used by those with accommodating preferences may revolve around harmony ("We need to keep the peace" or "let's forgive and forget") or gardening ("We must grow the relationship").

What interventions might we use in this kind of a dynamic? In a mediation, some form of reality testing might be called for, although we would be seeking different outcomes for each preference. For the competing preference, we would reality test in the typical sense, of getting them to think about what might happen if no agreement eventuated. For the accommodating preference, reality testing should help them think about whether the agreement they are so eager to enter into actually meets their needs, is sustainable and can be complied with. While I am not suggesting that we dis-empower parties from being masters of their fate, I think it is important that as mediators, we are clear that the deal, whether one-sided or not, is sustainable. If not, and the matter descends into conflict again, then we might not have done our jobs as well as we could have. Another intervention here might be some negotiating coaching. Accommodators may need help in asserting their needs and being firm on their proposals. Competitors may need to be persuaded that it is in their interest to cooperate with their counterpart to get a sustainable deal.

Let's turn now to the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI). For those readers who are not familiar with the MBTI, it is commonly used personality typing instrument that measures an individual's personality on four continua. These are whether a person is an extrovert or introvert(E/I), an intuitor or sensor (N/S), a thinker or feeler (T/F), and a judger or perceiver (J/P). So if one places as an ISTJ, this person is a introvert, sensor, thinker, judger. The permutations of these four continua give us 16 personality combinations. To be clear, the MBTI folks generally take where we place on these continua as immutable. The NLPers of course, believe they can and will change.

I would like to focus on just one of the continua, the judger/perceiver scale. I choose this because it is something very close to my heart. In many contexts in my life, I am a dyed-in-the-wool judger. And just to show that the Universe has a sense of humor, my wife is the direct opposite. Judgers like myself, are the anal-retentives of the world. We like being organized, will make lists at the drop of a hat and like to plan. We believe that there is a right way to do things and generally do not adapt well to changing circumstances. We make decisions easily, require closure and stress when decisions are not made. Time is valuable and we are generally early or on time for appointments. Being reliable, predictable and timely are key values.

Perceivers on the other see time very differently. They are usually late either because they are preoccupied by something in the "now" or underestimate how much time it will take to perform certain tasks to how long it might take to get to their appointment. Perceivers generally like to keep their options open and put off making decisions for as long as they can. In fact, having to make a decision is a stressing event. Perceivers are less organized than their Judging counterparts and are happy to change plans at the drop off a hat. Needless to say, they are not bothered by changing circumstances. Being flexible and adaptable are key values.

It does not take much imagination to see how these personality preferences can lead to conflict. Before I understood these distinctions, I thought perceivers were disrespectful because they obviously didn't value the relationship enough to be on time. They were indecisive, fickle and disorganized. They, on the other hand, thought that judgers were inflexible, anal-retentives who were boring and could not go with the flow.

When faced with this dynamic, understanding these preferences went a long way to managing conflict. Understanding that what a judger was asking a perceiver to do (and vice-versa) was actually a stressing event, helped us empathize a bit better and removed the need to demonize the counter-part. Reframing also played an important part. After all, a judger's ability to organize and foresee problems and plan for contingencies can be very helpful when hammering out a deal. The perceiver's ability to adapt and be flexible make them great problem solvers and an asset in value creation. A mediator sensitive to these personality preferences could help parties help manage conflicts arising from them and capitalize on one another's strengths.

There is so much more that could be said about personality preferences. Due to space (and time) constraints, I have limited my self to talking about some of the preferences from the Thomas-Kilmann Survey Instrument and the MBTI. NLP itself has a system of 16 preferences, called Meta-Programs, some of which I might explore in a future entry.

For the moment, I hope that this entry has given readers some ideas as to what they can look for and what interventions they might engage in.

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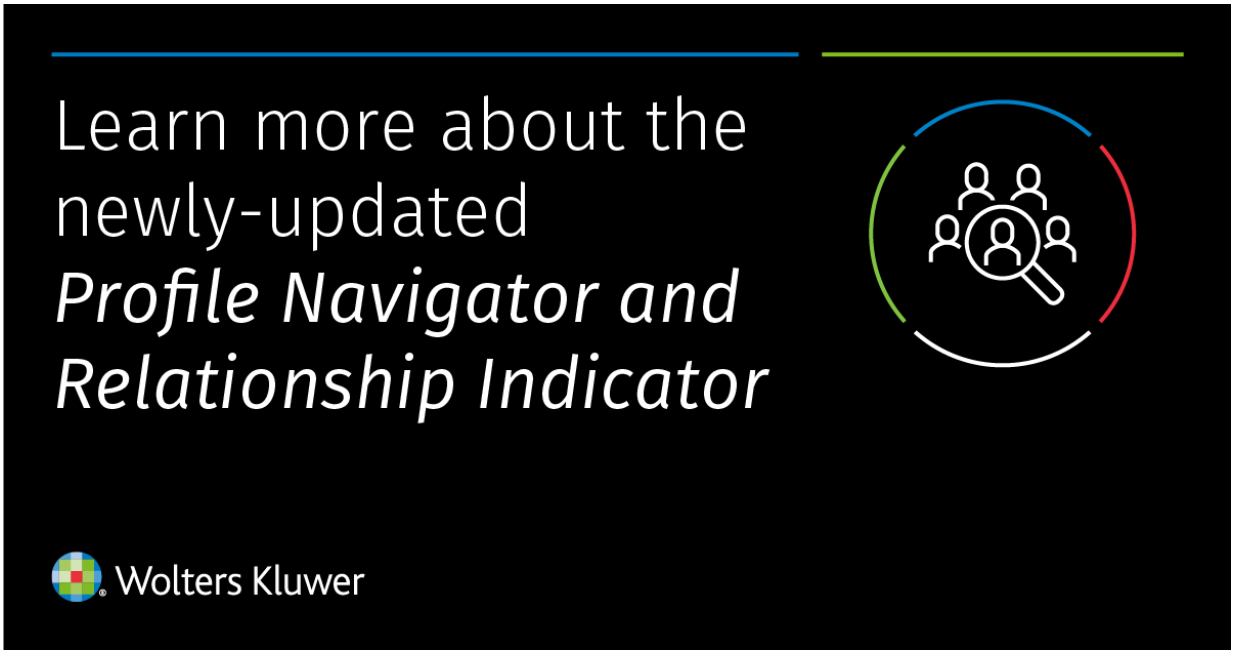

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