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## Decision-Making Styles: An Exploration of Preferences of On- and Off-Campus Faculty

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## Decision-Making Styles: An Exploration of Preferences of On- and Off-Campus Faculty

### Abstract

Collaboration between off-campus agents and on-campus specialists is often strained. We hypothesized that the strain relates to the groups having different styles of decision making. We administered a variation of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to on-campus specialists and off-campus agents in Utah. Although the groups share many MBTI preferences, there was a highly significant difference on preference in the "judging" function, with 72% of the specialists indicating a Thinking preference and 60% of agents indicating a Feeling preference. This suggests major communication challenges when working together. We offer that the solution is in understanding the differences and using them as an asset.

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### Introduction

One of the main functions of Cooperative Extension is to facilitate change in our clientele. Field faculty (agents) team up with on-campus faculty (specialists) to develop educational programs that help the public solve problems, improve their lives, and develop sustainable communities. However, communication between on- and off-campus faculty often undermines effectiveness of these programs. The problem has been recognized nationally in Extension. Ukaga et al. (2002) write:

One challenge Extension faces in addressing this issue is a dichotomy that often exists between campus-based and field-based faculty. This includes differences in approaches for determining clientele needs, areas of focus, operational support mechanisms, and procedures for reporting to and evaluation by administrators.

Utah Extension recognized this issue in their state and convened a special task force in 1998 to develop guidelines for successful agent/specialist interaction (Task Force Recommendations, 1998). The report offered guidelines for improvements, including:

- Agents: Spend time getting acquainted with specialists, local clientele, community leaders, and university personnel....
- Specialists: Use agent input when developing in-service and updates....
- Both: Have reasonable and clear expectations of each other, team-teach when possible and appropriate, get to know each other to avoid stereotyping, and be willing to help each other.

From our experience in leadership training, specifically with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, we anticipate that these assessments and guidelines, although reasonable, do not get at fundamental differences between on- and off-campus faculty. Although it can be argued that professionals should not need research to work well together, we hypothesize that there are significant

differences in decision-making styles between on-campus faculty (specialists) and off-campus faculty (agents). We propose that these differences may give insight into ways to improve communication in decision making, the fundamental activity of client-driven projects.

To test this hypothesis we administered a variation of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to 127 faculty at Utah State University. We found a significant difference in one dimension of decision-making preferences between on- and off-campus faculty. This difference is closely linked in the literature with communication issues. We suggest that Extension look closely at these differences and initiate training to develop skills among faculty that facilitate communicating effectively across preferences. (We also discovered major differences between faculty preferences and that of the general public, a topic we will save for a second article.)

## Decision Making and Preferences

Field agents work with the public, their clientele, to address issues and make productive decisions. For many issues, agents work with on-campus specialists to bring additional theory and analysis to the discussion about the issue and what to do about it. Whether the agents and specialists use informal or formal research or decision-making model, they deal with such logical steps as:

- Assessing the problem and values at stake,
- Setting goals,
- Gathering relevant information,
- Creating alternatives, and
- Selecting the best alternative for implementation (Gallagher, 2002).

If agents and specialists differ in how they approach these steps, communication problems can arise. For example, if one faculty member focuses primarily on the problem definition and its human dimensions, while another one is brainstorming alternatives and theoretical constructs, conflict can arise. Part of the rationale for using a structured process in decision making is that it can help individuals with varied preferences complete all the steps (Gallagher, 2002).

But how do people differ in their preferences for the various tasks in the process? The mother-daughter team of Myers and Briggs (Myers, 1990), building on the theory of Carl Jung (1923), developed a four-letter code to help people gain insights about themselves. Focusing on the opposites in Jung's theory, preferences can be established for:

1. "Where you get your energy". Extraverts (E) derive energy from outside themselves, whereas introverts (I) do their best thinking alone.
2. "How you gather information". Sensors (S) collect information about the world through practical use of the senses, whereas intuitives (N) translate sensory information into possibilities and meanings.
3. "How you make decisions". Thinkers (T) make decisions that are impersonal and based on objective information, whereas feelers (F) make decisions based on personal values and subjective information.
4. "How you live your life". Judgers (J) prefer an ordered world full of structure, preplanning, and closure, whereas perceivers (P) prefer life to be open-ended and flexible (Kroeger, 1992; Berens & Nardi, 1999).

## Methods

For this study we used a 70-question variation of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (available from the authors on request). We contacted all off-campus agents (78) and all on-campus specialists (49) and asked them to self-administer the test and return the answer sheet by either campus mail or US postal service. Those interested in more information about their type and decision making electronically requested a packet of information. A single reminder was sent 2 weeks after the initial request.

## Results

Of the 127 individuals we queried, 84 (66%) responded, including 55 (71%) of off-campus agents and 29 (59%) of the on-campus specialists.

In our analysis we first identified the responses of each group for each of the four major preferences, presented in the order used in MBTI training (MBTI Manual, 1994):

- Extraversion/introversion,
- Sensing/intuiting,
- Thinking/feeling, and
- Judging/perceiving (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
MBTI Preferences

<b>Preferences</b>	<b>Combined</b>	<b>Agents</b>	<b>Specialists</b>	<b>Significance</b>
	<b>Number: %</b>	<b>Number: %</b>	<b>Number: %</b>	
<b>Relation to world</b>				
Extraversion (E)	44: 52%	25: 45%	19: 66%	ns
Introversion (I)	40: 48%	30: 55%	10: 34%	
<b>Perceiving</b>				
Sensing (S)	78: 93%	51: 93%	27: 93%	ns
Intuiting (N)	6: 7%	4: 7%	2: 7%	
<b>Judging</b>				
Thinking (T)	43: 51%	22: 40%	21: 72%	.0001
Feeling (F)	41: 49%	33: 60%	8: 28%	
<b>Dominance</b>				
Judging (J)	79: 94%	51: 93%	28: 97%	ns
Perceiving (P)	5: 6%	4: 7%	1: 3%	

We then identified four key pairs of temperaments and used terms applied by Keirsey (1998). There were no significant differences between agents and specialists using these categories.

**Table 2.**  
Keirsey Temperaments

	<b>Number: %</b>		<b>Number: %</b>
<b>Guardian - SJ</b>		<b>Artisan - SP</b>	
Off-campus	48: 87%	Off-campus	3: 6%
On-campus	26: 90%	On-campus	1: 3%
<b>Idealist - NF</b>		<b>Rational - NT</b>	
Off-campus	4: 7%	Off-campus	0: 0%
On-campus	2: 7%	On-campus	0: 0%

## Discussion

### Pairs of Preferences

Looking first at the results in Table 1, the four pairs of preferences provide insight into the decision-making styles of Extension faculty.

Concerning the "where you get your energy", agents are slightly more introverted (I), while specialists are more extraverted (E). The results are not significant, but there is a suggestion that specialists are somewhat more likely to address the problem through an engagement with the outside world, while agents are more likely to use introspection.

For the "how you gather information" function, almost all faculty are highly "sensing" (S) oriented, at 93%. Both groups share the preference for gathering information in a literal fashion through their senses. There are relatively few intuitives in the group.

For the "how you make decisions" function, there is about an even number of "thinking" and "feeling" preferences for the faculty as a group, but significant differences across the two sub-groups. Sixty percent of agents chose the feeling preference, while 72% of specialists chose thinking. Thus, when most specialists are using rational rules to make decisions, agents are more likely to make decisions based on the values of the people involved.

Concerning the "how you live your life" function, the faculty are nearly uniformly "judging" (J) in preference, with 93% for off-campus faculty and 97% for on-campus faculty. Both off- and on-campus faculty are highly oriented toward judging and its decisions/closure preference.

From this data we anticipate that there may be some minor problems in communication across the extraversion/introversion (E/I) preference but some major problems across the thinking/feeling (T/F) preference.

### Temperaments

From Table 2, the vast majority (88%) of faculty, agents and specialists, fall into the Guardian category. Several (6) are Idealists and fewer yet (4) are Artisans. There are no Rationals among the Extension faculty.

Guardians tend to draw values from the past, to be very concerned about the institution, to desire "the facts," and to focus on "how" rather than "what" and "why." They care about policy, process, and closure. They can be resistant to change, except in small doses that are not threatening.

Idealists are often best at drawing values out of people, the affected parties. They are most interested in people data and in alternative futures that benefit people. In the typical group decision process, they can be effective team builders.

Artisans, in the decision process, push for action. They like to learn by doing. They are often frustrated by policies and procedures, and strive to get through the decision to the action. They are seldom found in public agencies, avoiding the bureaucracy of hiring and day-to-day work.

Rationals come to the decision process with the intention of conducting analysis that leads to logical change. They are interested in the "big picture" and the theory that gives patterns to the data; they love to brainstorm alternatives.

### Potential for Conflict

As noted, over 80% of faculty, both on- and off-campus, are Guardians. However, within this group, the data from Table 1 indicates that there is significant difference between those who prefer "thinking" and those who prefer "feeling" when they make decisions. Thus, there is very high agreement among faculty about the norms of the Guardian, about drawing values from the past, about caring for the institution, and focusing on facts. There is a strong sense of need for policy, process, and closure. Yet, within this broad agreement, there is substantial disagreement about how to get there, about what metric to use--the rational or the feeling--in making decisions.

This similarity/difference situation creates a potential for misunderstanding. When there is an implicit assumption that "we are all the same," then the potential to recognize differences may decrease. When differences are expressed in beliefs or behaviors, there can be an increased potential for misattribution, where the meaning is incorrectly interpreted.

The Ukaga et al. article (2002) offers specific strategies to work across these differences and avoid misattributions. They include:

- Ideas about how to build good working relations (e.g., take initiative to make/build the connection),
- Changes that would improve relationships (e.g., examine reward systems and institutional structure), and
- Specific suggestions for agents and specialists (e.g., for agents, "Have a specific role in mind when making the contact with a campus-based faculty member").

The article concludes with encouragement for building a collaborative effort through the power of a shared organizational vision.

In Utah, the "guidelines" developed by the taskforce suggest very similar sensibilities and behaviors to work together, with a page of guidelines for agents, a second for specialists, and a third for both.

It is our view that these guidelines serve to bridge over differences, but they don't provide insight into why a bridge is needed, into what is creating the divide. That such a divide exists, which requires energy and resources to build and sustain, suggests the value of this type of study about the source of differences.

We propose that the first step toward finding these efficiencies is awareness, followed by understanding and skill building through appropriate training. Perhaps ironically, a great many Extension professionals have taken the MBTI. Over two million formal tests are administered nationally each year (Gardner & Martinko, 1996), and experience indicates many are given to Extension faculty.

We suggest that the MBTI be revisited for its value in understanding the preferences that agents and specialists bring to decision making, particularly to the "judging" function in which there is much difference. We propose that training in this area is needed to create the awareness, perspective, knowledge, and skills to move toward better communication. We believe that the guidelines offered in the Ukaga et al. article (2002) and by Utah Extension are helpful but not sufficient.

It is not our intent to develop guidelines to resolve this gap for Extension. We see the prescription as more long term and propose that a qualified MBTI trainer work with specific groups to understand the situation and the resolution. We see these efforts as targeting the areas of differences raised in the Ukaga et al. article (2002), "...including approaches for determining clientele needs, areas of focus, operational support mechanisms, and procedures for reporting to and evaluation by administrators...", all of which are influenced by decision-making preferences.

For those who wish to dig further into this issue on their own, there are several books written about communication across type in the workplace (Kroeger, 1992; Isachsen & Berens, 1995; Hirsh, 1996).

## Conclusion

In this study we found that Extension faculty have differences, and they are of a type that can influence communication. However, these differences are important not just because they cause communication issues, but because they can lead to both good and bad decision making.

On the bad side, the uniformity we discovered suggests that everyone is of the same mind and that there is little room for other perspectives; i.e., in a society where everybody thinks alike, nobody thinks at all. Thus, there may be more agreement, but there is also greater risk of a narrow solution. In this study we found that most faculty have the "sensing" preference, which suggests weak expression of "intuiting," of exploration of possibilities, in decision making. Without the intuitive's high level of creativity and tolerance of change, Extension is likely to be "stuck in a rut"--and some would say it is.

On the good side, the differences we discovered suggest a strength. That faculty differ on how to make decisions--"thinking" versus "feeling"--is an asset to Extension because it takes both thinkers and feelers to make a decision that is both analytical and caring. What is needed then is not removal of these differences, but understanding and working with the differences so they become an asset and not a liability. For example, promotion and tenure committees for off-campus agents need to be made up of both agents (F) and specialists (T) so that progress can be reported objectively while recognizing human differences and providing the mentoring and motivation appropriate to the person.

One strategy for working with differences is to engage a process that focuses all parties on key steps of decision making:

- Identifying values and goals,
- Gathering information,
- Creating alternatives,
- Analyzing the alternatives, and
- Selecting a course of action (Gallagher, 2002).

A final note: Extension faculty in this study are much different, as a group, than the public. With almost 90% of faculty in the SJ category, there appears to be bias toward the Guardian way of management and behavior. This strong perspective can create a culture of norms that dissuades other types from applying for employment or even being engaged in programs. It can make those with different perceptions feel left out of programs and discussions. We are preparing a paper on this subject.

To build the interaction and teams that will make Extension successful, Extension needs to create,

honor, and work with diversity of people. We encourage more in-depth application of the MBTI to help understand basic differences among faculty, and between faculty and the public.

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