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## Do Personality Tests (Actually) Work?

Article | February 01, 2023 | Grace Castro, DVM, MBA

### Key takeaways

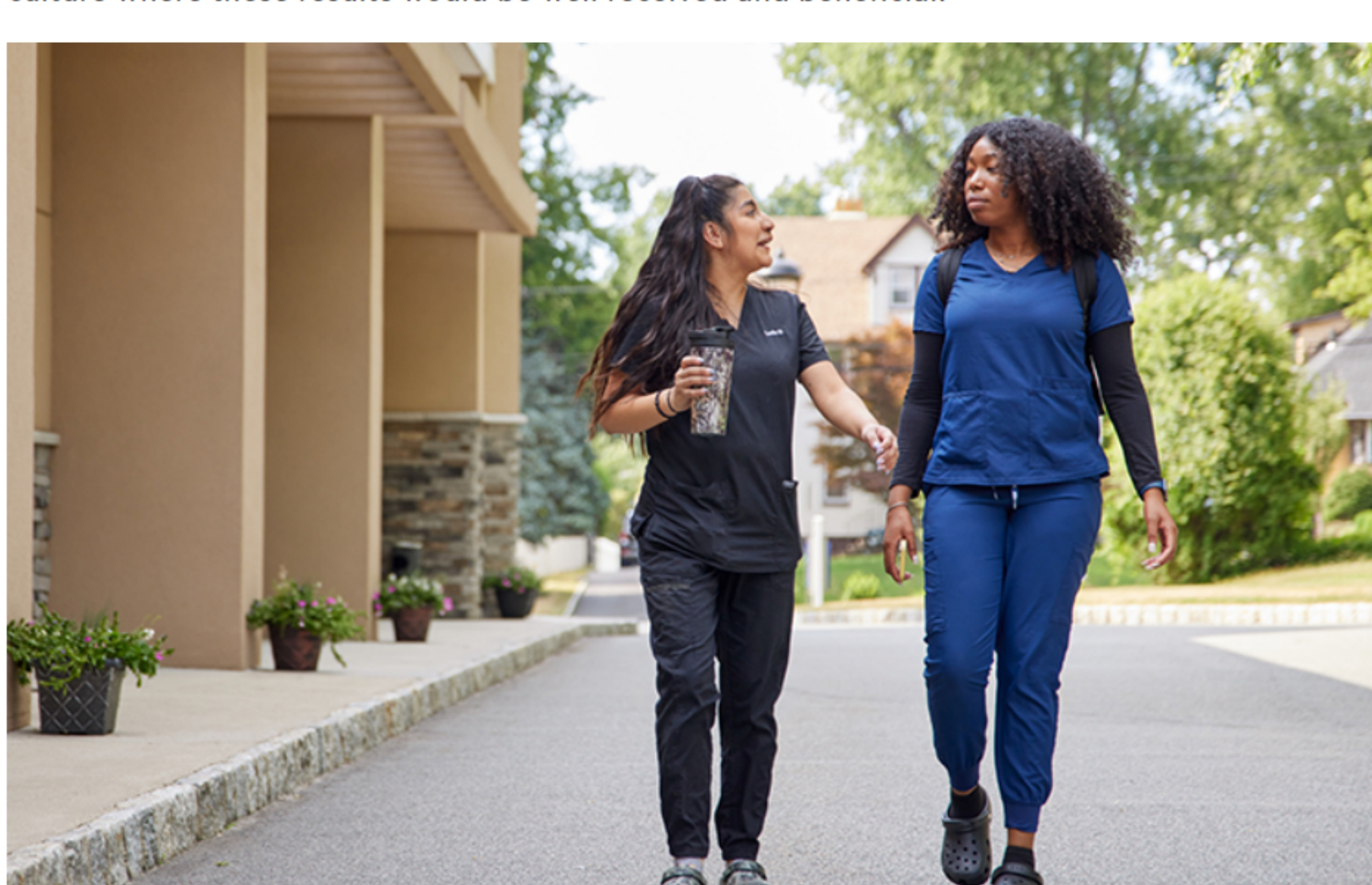
- There are a few common personality tests that can be leveraged across your team to uncover insights into working styles: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, Big Five Model, DISC® profile, and Enneagram
- Consider if your current work culture fosters the emotional safety required for personality tests to be implemented as an ethical team building activity
- Understanding your coworkers' personalities can lead to more productive relationships

## An excuse or a badge of honor, what is the deal with personality tests?

Maybe you've taken the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® five different times for every new job or maybe your friends share Enneagram infographics on their Instagram story like a badge of honor. Either way, most of us are familiar with at least one type of personality test or personal assessment tool. Yet wading into the world of personality tests can be like opening a can of worms: what's the best test, do they actually work, are they even accurate? Then, from a managerial perspective: is there a best personality test for the workplace, is there a benefit of using personality tests for team building, is it even ethical to use them?

The good news is there is no "bad" result to these tests. Every individual is unique in their personality and can be critical to a team in their own right. When we lean on our emotional intelligence, particularly social awareness and relationship management, we can benefit from a team full of differing personalities working in harmony.<sup>1</sup> We can pull from an ENFP's empathetic strengths for how to go about a certain difficult client conversation or look to insight from an Enneagram Type 5 for an obscure case that would benefit from thorough investigation. Using that emotional intelligence, we can recognize diverse personalities can lend themselves to a cohesive, well-oiled machine of a team.

There are a few considerations to take prior to implementing any type of personality test team building activity with your team. Understanding the nuances between types of tests or tools to select the best one for your team is key. Below is a non-exhaustive list of the most common types of personality tests and tools out there. But before you go out and take all four tests with the rest of your coworkers, ensure you've fostered a culture where these results would be well received and beneficial.



## The classic everyone has heard of: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®

As previously mentioned, the MBTI® personality test is likely the most widespread and classically used test. The testing instrument itself has been shown to be valid and reliable<sup>2</sup> and sorts into the 16 different personality types by a person's preferences. These 16 types come from a combination of 4 dichotomies:

- Outer world (Extraversion) vs Inner world (Introversion)<sup>2</sup>
- Information received (Sensing) vs Interpretation (Intuition)<sup>2</sup>
- Logical decision-making (Thinking) vs People-focused decisions (Feeling)<sup>2</sup>
- Decisive structure (Judging) vs Open structure (Perceiving)<sup>2</sup>

Of each person's four preferences, there is a dominant function that carries the most influence on how you interact in the world; however, throughout life, different preferences could emerge and potentially be used more frequently.<sup>2</sup> For further detail on the MBTI personality test, please see [their website](#).

## The go-to for psychologists: the Big Five Model

Backed by scientific research and widely accepted by psychologists, the Big Five Model boils down your personality to where you fall on a spectrum of five core traits. Using the statistical method of factor analysis, psychologists narrowed 4,500 factors<sup>3</sup> down to 16 factors, and even further to the 5 traits we utilize today.<sup>4</sup> These traits fall on a continuum<sup>5</sup> (see below) as descriptors of a person's behavior, rather than the causal explanation.<sup>6</sup>

- Practical ↔ Curious (Openness)<sup>5</sup>
- Impulsive ↔ Organized (Conscientiousness)<sup>5</sup>
- Reserved ↔ Outgoing (Extraversion)<sup>5</sup>
- Critical ↔ Empathetic (Agreeableness)<sup>5</sup>
- Even-tempered ↔ Anxious (Neuroticism)<sup>5</sup>

These 5 traits will remain stable throughout a person's life and have been shown to be influenced by both genetics and one's environment with heritability at approximately 50%.<sup>7</sup> For further detail on the Big Five Model, please read [here](#).

## The workplace-focused communication tool: the DISC® Profile

Research-backed with high validity and reliability, the DISC® profile is another type of personal assessment tool that mainly focuses on communication.<sup>8</sup> The tool, typically used in a workplace setting, measures four dimensions of a personality, specifically a person's behavioral styles, as well as 8 different priorities set along a circle that reflect the more nuanced aspects of one's personality.<sup>9</sup>

- Challenge ↔ Results ↔ Action (Dominance)<sup>9</sup>
- Action ↔ Enthusiasm ↔ Collaboration (Influence)<sup>9</sup>
- Collaboration ↔ Support ↔ Stability (Steadiness)<sup>9</sup>
- Stability ↔ Accuracy ↔ Challenge (Conscientiousness)<sup>9</sup>

Of the 4 dimensions, we typically gravitate toward one or two styles the most; however, we are a blend of all four and can have strong priorities outside of our "main" style.<sup>9</sup> For further detail on the DISC® assessment tool, please see [their website](#).

## The ancient tradition turned modern emotions tool: the Enneagram

Then there's the personality test that plagues your social media, the Enneagram, made of 9 distinct types arranged in a circle connected by inner lines to show the relationships between the types.<sup>10</sup> The Enneagram originated from ancient traditions<sup>11</sup> but as a modern synthesis, the tool has been shown to have comparable validity to the Big Five Model and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®.<sup>12</sup>

- Rational, Idealistic: the "Reformer" (Type 1)<sup>13</sup>
- Caring, Interpersonal: the "Helper" (Type 2)<sup>13</sup>
- Success-Oriented, Pragmatic: the "Achiever" (Type 3)<sup>13</sup>
- Sensitive, Withdrawn: the "Individualist" (Type 4)<sup>13</sup>
- Intense, Cerebral: the "Investigator" (Type 5)<sup>13</sup>
- Committed, Security-Oriented: the "Loyalist" (Type 6)<sup>13</sup>
- Busy, Fun-Loving: the "Enthusiast" (Type 7)<sup>13</sup>
- Powerful, Dominating: the "Challenger" (Type 8)<sup>13</sup>
- Easygoing, Self-Effacing: the "Peacemaker" (Type 9)<sup>13</sup>

Each person has a little of every type, but one dominant type—rooted from a core desire and fear—emerges post-childhood and does not change with time. However, one's type can shift to pull more strongly from another type in periods of growth or stress.<sup>12</sup> For further detail on the Enneagram, please read [here](#).

## So...do they (actually) work?




The answer lies in the environmental context these various types of personality tests are used. Socially, the results of personality tests can be as private or as public as the individual test-taker dictates. Whereas those same results in a workplace setting force the test-taker to be more openly vulnerable. An employee may worry a direct line manager would use their results against them; a caveat to someone's typical behavioral style could be colored in a negative light (e.g. deliberate vs. lazy).

If a manager does wish to utilize a personality test for team building and development purposes, it's crucial to consider a few key factors when broaching this topic with your team. Prior to asking your team to divulge private aspects of themselves, there must be a 'positive practice' already in place,<sup>14</sup> or "mutual trust, respect and confidence" in the work environment.<sup>15</sup> The presence of positive practice increases an employee's perceived emotional safety and therefore willingness or openness to taking & utilizing a personality test.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, a manager should be very transparent in the goals of the activity: how are these results going to be used, will the outcomes be useful to each team member, will everyone be met with respect regardless of their final "type?" Generally, the overarching goal of the test should be driven toward employee-oriented outcomes and insights. A pure manager-oriented approach will likely cause resistance from the team and the feeling of being "pigeonholed" by their results. Along that note, ethical concerns should be addressed upfront when the activity is initially introduced as a possibility. If there is not perceived emotional safety among the team, the personality test activity should not be used.<sup>14</sup>

If personality tests are used within the right environmental and emotional setting, they can be beneficial to better understand not only yourself, but your coworkers as well. When we understand priorities and behavioral styles, we can interact with more effective and productive relationships. However, given the level of vulnerability these tests require, the workplace must have previously fostered and validated that culture. Without a positive practice environment, we can't expect a simple online personality test to effectively aid in the team's greater working relationships.

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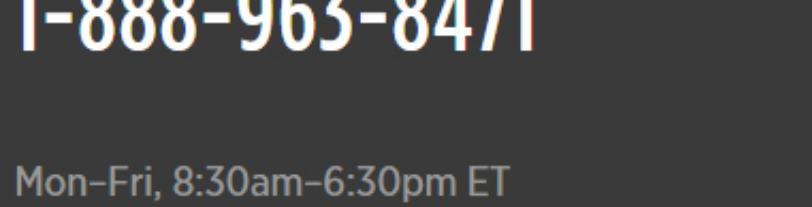
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