

Liberating Labels - Profiling tools and Choice

Do you label yourself? Isn't it tempting? Doesn't life seem simpler if you can categorise yourself as belonging to one group or another? Is it not a basic human need to feel a sense of belonging?

Do you label others? Perhaps even more tempting! We have a natural tendency to give names to people as well as things – to categorise and make sense of them. Many people love profiling tools for this reason: they help us to understand others better, and to get a better 'handle' on them.

Do you, like many, feel a sense of unease when you hear someone being labelled as a certain type? Perhaps you have the instinctive feeling that categorising people diminishes them in some way, that it 'fixes' them in time and space with no possibility of growth. Once an ESTJ, always an ESTJ. "He's a 'Procedures' person, we need 'Options' people..."

In our modern lives full of complexity and confusion our experience is full of ways of classifying ourselves as one thing or another:

- Profiling tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator™, DISC and Enneagrams
- IQ, EQ and SQ assessments
- Cultural, national, religious and family groupings
- Caste systems
- NLP Meta Programs
- Representational systems (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic etc)
- Sports team allegiance
- Self-assessments for all sorts of traits in the popular press
- NLP Practitioner and non-Practitioner
- and many, many more

This article asks how these ways of classifying ourselves help (or hinder) us in making sense of who we are and how this relates to one of the fundamental purposes of NLP – to increase choice.

We pay particular attention to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the most widely used profiling tool in business, its relationship to NLP Meta Programs, and how tools such as these can be used to increase choice rather than limit our view of ourselves and others. For more information on the MBTI and NLP Meta Programs please see the references and additional boxes at the end of this article.

And what can we learn from the use of a mature tool such as the MBTI? Are there lessons that can be carried over to the use of NLP tools that can be used to create more ecological change? Undoubtedly there are. Let's first look at how profiling tools are used in practice and the issues surrounding improper use.

Frameworks for understanding

Framing and categorising enable us to simplify and make sense of our world. We are better able to understand otherwise complex interactions and develop our own behavioural flexibility. Profiling tools are regularly used in team building, career management, performance improvement, leadership development and many more business applications.

It is surely a good thing when the use of any tool serves to expand choice, increase flexibility and build self awareness.

One of the authors was working with a team made up of lively assertive individuals who had an energetic approach to developing new ideas and moving forward. Only it wasn't moving forward, and no one could really understand why. When we used the MBTI profiling tool with team members, they were amazed to discover that all 7 of them shared an ENF preference. This would suggest that there was a general preference for ideas, rather than detail and logical sequencing. They suddenly realised that what was holding them back was a lack of detailed actions in a strict time frame. Knowing this, they were able to concentrate on these aspects of development and also to use the services of others who had a preference for sensory detail and structured steps. The tool served to expand their self-awareness and give them more choices.

An executive was having trouble communicating at work. A review of basic Meta Programs showed that he had a strong 'Towards' preference and he was clearly excluding a large part of his audience who appeared to have an 'Away From' preference. Rather than try and change his audience or himself the executive expanded his message to include a relationship to past events and in general enrich his communications with others. Paying attention to this one aspect of communication also raised awareness of more differences and increased his overall behavioural flexibility and effectiveness.

The dangers of Stereotyping

Psychological type isn't a box to put people in, nor does it describe the whole individual. It's a way to understand our preferences and those of other people. No two people are alike and within the types there are infinite personalities.

"We human beings are more than just sets of skills, knowledge, and competencies; our personalities bring order, excitement, and unique nuances to each individual"
Introduction to Type and Coaching by
Hirsh and Kise.

So what are some of the dangers of using profiling inappropriately regardless of what tools are used? Here are some of the more obvious and I'm sure you can probably think of more:

- **Limiting awareness and choice**
By pigeonholing we limit ourselves and others choices. Rather than use a profile as a starting point it may be tempting to exclude ourselves because certain choices are seen as too much of a stretch or a poor fit. Even things we may have been successful at in the past; "Yes, I did do a good job but I found it hard. No wonder – well I won't be doing that again!"
One of the authors remembers working with someone insisting he was 'no good at conflict' and waving a profile in justification. "Much better with things rather than people" he thought, and was using the profile information to limit his career choices. It turns out that the evidence suggested just the opposite. The profile had been carried out poorly and the real issue was the perfectly normal fear of taking on a different role which this person went on to excel at.
- **Increasing judgement**
A handy label might be used as a way to judge people negatively. "Of course she can't do that, she's one of those stupid types who don't care about people". Does that sound familiar to you? Have you ever judged someone because of some label? Of course we all do to

some extent but this always limits us and undervalues others.

Some people for example are mistakenly regarded as having 'no feelings' relative to others. We would suggest that actually everyone has feelings but how they choose to cope with them and express them varies from person to person. Just because someone doesn't do something 'your' way doesn't mean there is anything wrong with them.

- **Excluding people by valuing one type over the other**
Profiling used in recruitment can often exclude certain types of people as false assumptions are made about what a team or role needs. This can of course be a huge mistake. This may have the effect of reinforcing strengths and weaknesses at the same time, thereby perpetuating an undesirable situation rather than helping.
- **Predicting skill or performance**
Knowing someone's type is no predictor of skill or performance. Yes people with certain preferences tend to be drawn towards certain careers in a statistically valid way. However a person's type preference is no predictor of performance. An individual may in fact excel in roles that an inexperienced recruiter may exclude them from. A combination of thinking differently from the 'norm' with a supportive and flexible working environment may in fact increase performance of an individual and team.
- **Predicting values**
Ghandi and Hitler apparently shared the same MBTI type. Their way of thinking about the world may have shared similarities but their outcomes were entirely different. Knowing someone's type says nothing about their values. It might give clues as to how they mentally process their decisions or behave in certain contexts but not why.
- **Confusing type with skill**
MBTI theory suggests that although a 3 year old may be innately left-handed that doesn't mean that they will learn to write with their left-hand. Just because a person indicates a certain type preference doesn't mean they will necessarily have the associated skills. And in the same way many people are highly-skilled at tasks that aren't considered to 'belong' to a certain type.
- **Confusing type with identity**
Whenever the kind of language is used that states that someone is a certain type then warning bells should go off. A person is not their type. A profile merely expresses preferences and in no way describes the whole person and who they are.

The MBTI and ethics

The creators of the MBTI tool, Katharine Briggs and Isabel Meyers, were very clear from the outset about the ethical principles guiding the use of the type indicator. These include:

- MBTI should not be used to limit an individual and is not appropriate for making selection decisions
- MBTI is intended to support self-awareness and development
- Preferences always describe positive and constructive attributes, and should avoid type bias and stereotyping
- Completing the MBTI is voluntary, and a person taking the MBTI does not have to disclose their results to others
- The preference scores should not be interpreted as traits, but refer only to the clarity with which the individual has reported their preference

Those of us that enjoy the use of other profiling models could well learn from the strong ethics of MBTI.

Best practice

So what is best practice? What pragmatic advice do we have for using profiling tools appropriately? Here are a few suggestions:

- **Give time to discuss and understand**
Differences are truly valuable things. When introducing any form of profiling give enough time for people to understand and appreciate the value of differences.
- **Treat as a starting point**
Treat any profiling tool as a starting point to building self awareness and understanding. The focus should be on adding more information in to the system to increase choice.
- **Be well trained**
Know what you are doing and practise with people who you respect and have more experience than you. Think of the sports analogy. We tend to 'raise our game' and learn more when we play someone more skilled than we are.
- **Be aware of ethical guidelines**
Think these through for yourself and be aware of what is and isn't appropriate. If you are going to use a tool then be prepared to challenge others when ethical boundaries are crossed.
- **Be led by the client's agenda**
Make sure the tool you are using is adding value to the client by increasing options and choice. If it isn't then don't use it. Be flexible – if all you have is a hammer everything tends to look like a nail.
- **Know yourself**
We all have our own preferences. Know how this makes a difference and plan how to handle these when working with others. For example your need for structure may not match your clients. Create the space that your client needs while also taking in to account your own preferences.
- **Be sensitive to confidentiality**
A key issue when working with groups particularly where there may be pressure to reveal type. Differences can be explored as a group without revealing individual preferences and ensure that people know this. Be sure that the choice to reveal is truly a personal choice.
- **Let others reach their own conclusions**
In exploring differences it is always good practice to let others discover what the impact of differences might be. Give space and time for self-discovery. For example people of the same type may enjoy working together but find it difficult to deal with certain areas, like getting a job finished. Telling people this is the case removes the power and enhanced learning of discovering this for themselves.

The choice challenge

All profiling models are ways of understanding our place in the world, having a sense of fit and giving us data for enhancing our relationships.

We fall into the trap of thinking we know someone really well through knowledge of their type. But even knowing ourselves and our own motivations is not easy. You know how hard it is for you to make sense of your own world sometimes. Use this self-knowledge to appreciate that you can't really know someone from the results of using any kind of profiling tool.

MBTI, Meta Programs or any kind of profiling tool, used in an informed way with sensitivity can increase choice and enable us to feel a greater sense of belonging to the complex and ever-changing reality of the human race.

© ABL World Ltd 2006

References

Two greater starter books if you want to know more about practical applications of NLP Meta Programs and the MBTI.

'Words that Change Minds', Shelle Rose Charvet
'People Types and Tiger Stripes', Gordon Lawrence

Box 1: The MBTI™

The MBTI is a personality type framework built on the work of Karl Jung, and then interpreted and developed by Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Meyers. It looks at the strengths and gifts of ordinary healthy individuals and explains some of the apparently random differences in people's behaviour.

Jung observed that when your mind is active you are either taking in information or organising information and coming to conclusions. He then identified two distinct ways of taking in information 'perceiving', and two distinct ways of 'judging'. Everyone is engaged in these four processes in the external world (E) and in the internal world (I). Briggs and Meyers then developed this theory and added another pair to distinguish between those who prefer to use their Judging process in the outer world (J), and those who prefer to use their 'perceiving' process in the outer world (P).

That gave four pairs of preferences, as follows:

Extraversion (E) - A preference for focusing attention and being energised by, the outer world of people and activity.
Introversion (I) - A preference for reflecting on one's inner world of thoughts and feelings. Energy is focused inward and energy received from internal thoughts, feelings and reflections.

Sensing (S) - A preference for taking in information through eyes, ears and other senses, to notice what is actually happening, to recognise the practical realities of a situation.
Intuition (N) - A preference for taking in information as a big picture, focusing on relationships, patterns and interconnections between facts. Good at seeing new possibilities and ideas.

Thinking (T) - When making decisions, a tendency to focus on logic and analysis, to examine things objectively and examine cause and effect.

Feeling (F) - When making decisions, a tendency to consider first the people involved and their needs, to focus more on personal values and priorities.

Judging (J) - A preference for judging in the outer world. Tends to live in a planned, orderly way, to be decisive and prefer structure and control.

Perceiving (P) - A preference for perceiving in the outer world. Tends to keep options open, and to prefer spontaneity and flexibility. More interested to experience life than to control it.

There are 16 combinations of the 8 preferences, and the dynamic interactions of these give 16 personality types. No one combination is better than another: all have their gifts. Jung held that these personality preferences to be innate, but that does not mean that they are highly developed in an individual. Some people with a particular natural preference learn to become really skilled at their non-preference dynamic due to upbringing or the nature of their work.

Box 2: Meta Programs

Meta Programs – often referred to as filters on your world – are a much looser set of sorting principles than the MBTI type preferences. They are many distinctions by which people filter, sort and organise sensory input to make sense of reality. Like the MBTI preferences, they operate in large part out of consciousness. There is a tendency to have a general preference for one dynamic rather than another, though people don't operate all the time from one extreme.

Although different Meta Programs often go together, e.g. Associated and Moving Towards, they are taken separately, and there is the assumption that people can have any combination.

There is an assumption that there are numerous sorting principles of this kind, and the main ones are taken as examples of an almost unending list of distinctions that can be made in the way people filter their experience and prefer to respond to the world.

Some examples:

Associated - In the here and now, looking from your own eyes, feeling your bodily sensations in the moment.

Dissociated - Thinking about rather than being in it, at a distance from what you are doing and from bodily sensations, seeing yourself rather than looking out from your own eyes.

Away from - A tendency to focus on what you don't want, what to avoid, what will make for safety.

Moving towards - A tendency to focus on what is possible, what you want.

Necessity - Focus on what needs to be done, on procedures, obligation, responsibility, pressures etc.

Possibility - Interest in opportunities, possibilities, what could be, what might expand options, present new challenges.

Big chunk - Interest in the overall concept, the big picture, large chunks first, the general idea or concept, the pattern.

Small chunk - Concentration on specifics, the details, concrete examples, steps and sequences.

Match - Noticing first what is there, what there is in common, what fits or is the same as something else

Mismatch - More aware of what is different or missing, what is unique, radical or new. Looking for exceptions.

Internally referenced - Tendency to rely on own criteria, get validation from inside, to produce own motivation, and to know internally when a job has been well done.

Externally referenced - Where external reference is sought, validation felt after external evidence acquired, and the opinion of others is wanted.

The Authors:

All the authors are part of the training team at ABL World which specialises in delivering highly practical NLP-based training. For more information please see www.ablworld.com or email info@ablworld.com.



Judy Apps

Combining the skills of a performing arts and business management background, Judy has spent many years unravelling the secrets of how great leaders inspire others, and now teaches these skills to leaders in major corporations. With 15 years' experience in developing creative training programmes and in coaching, her programmes emphasise the reconnection of mind/body processes, and ways of awakening the state of being that moves, energises and influences others.



Paul Belcher

Paul's working life has been characterised by leading collaborations and troubleshooting roles requiring systemic thinking, cross-cultural management, and strategic analysis to bring about successful and sustainable change. Paul currently works as a trainer and coach specialising in business applications of NLP and coaching executives and senior technical professionals.



Mirjam van Roon

Mirjam van Roon is a graduate of Coach University and is accredited as a Professional Certified Coach (PCC) by the International Coach Federation (ICF). She is qualified to deliver and interpret the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI™) and uses the assessment extensively in coaching and training. She is a member of the faculty at Coach University, where she teaches both introductory and advanced coaching skills to a new generation of coaches.