The Big Five Personality Test

**Introduction**

Researchers and psychologists have identified the following characteristic traits as the central dimensions of our personalities: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. These 5 traits are components of what has become known as “The Big Five Personality Theory”. While many previous theories indicated that there were many more aspects to personality—some listing as many as 4,000 traits—recent trends have leaned towards a more streamlined foundation which can be used to explain human behavior.

**History**

Research to support the Big Five Personality Theory began in the late 1940’s through the works of clinical psychologist D. W. Fiske. This direction was continued by other researchers throughout the remainder of the 20th century. In fact, many researchers had independently defined the Big Five characteristics without initially realizing the overlap with Dr. Fiske’s work. In the late 1950’s, Ernest Tupes and Raymond Cristal began work on a similar model. By the early 1990’s a well established metric for personality identification had been adopted and implemented throughout much of the business world.

Interestingly, further research has shown that the five traits model is universally applicable. Studies conducted on subjects from more than 50 different countries shows that the traits identified in the Big Five Personality Test can accurately describe personalities across a multitude of cultures. There are some researchers who suggest that these easily recognizable personality traits have a biological component. Psychologist Davis Buss suggests that personality is an evolutionary factor and that our personality traits influence the ways in which society has evolved.

**Big Five Tests and How They Are Used**

Organizations and corporations use the Big Five Personality Tests to identify employee traits and behaviors so that individuals can be placed in the jobs and positions that are most suited for them. These tests can also be used in employee performance evaluations and for optimizing team dynamics. Furthermore, they are a valuable tool which can help management to identify individual strengths and weaknesses within their workforce – an important factor in determining what types of individuals should be slated for hire when openings...
become available.

**The Big Five Personality Traits**

While many psychologists may differ on the specifics of each personality dimension, there are some very basic, generally agreed upon descriptions of the traits each category possesses. It is important to note that each category represents a wide range of extremes. As you explore and identify the different categories, you should understand that behaviors are always rooted in individuals and the situations in which they find themselves. The circumstances of the situation may determine the ways in which people respond; that being said, individuals generally react in ways that are consistent with their personalities. Let's now take a look at those traits and the extremes contained within each subset.

**Extraversion**

This trait includes assertiveness, excitability, energy, emotions, and sociability. Extraverts are energized by their interactions with others. To represent the opposite of extraversion, introversion refers to people whose personalities are turned within. These individuals are quiet, reserved, and gain their energy from time spent alone. While extraversion and introversion represent opposite ends of the spectrum, most people fall somewhere in the middle. The extravert-introvert dimensions are identified in the Myers-Briggs indicator that we explored in the Management Skills and Styles Assessment previously assigned in this course.

**Agreeableness**

This trait identifies individuals who are friendly, kind, affectionate, and compassionate. This personality type relates to people who get along well with others. They have faith in others and believe that people are honest and trustworthy. People with low levels of agreeableness generally do not care about getting along with others and put their own interests first. They tend to be unfriendly, skeptical, and suspicious of others.

**Conscientiousness**

This dimension represents individuals who are goal-directed and exhibit strong measures of self-control. These people are methodical, organized, and reliable. They are detail-oriented and considered by others to be intelligent and thorough. On the opposite end of the spectrum, people who are unconscientious are
thought of by others as being unreliable and having a lack of ambition. While we might assume that being conscientious is the preferred state, people who are highly conscientious may also be viewed as workaholics, who are rigid and inflexible. Additionally, while those who are unconscientious may be viewed negatively, they also might have more pleasant interactions with their coworkers and subordinates, and are not usually perceived as being too rigid.

**Neuroticism**

This characteristic refers to emotional stability. Those people with high neuroticism may be anxious, moody, tense, and depressed. They may have negative thoughts and feelings. Having high levels of neuroticism can impact how people think, make decisions, and deal with the stresses associated with work and their personal lives. People with low levels of neuroticism, on the other hand, are calm and have positive thoughts and feelings. They have an easier time coping with life’s pressures and situations.

**Openness**

This dimension refers to people who are imaginative, creative, and curious. They have a wide range of interests, especially in art, culture, and nature. They enjoy learning and like to have new experiences. They are generally non-conforming and considered to be intellectual. On the other hand, those with lower levels of openness tend to be conventional and less aware of their feelings. They have fewer interests and may be resistant to change.

**Summary**

- The Big Five Personalities identified by researchers are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness.
- The study of this theory goes back to the 1940’s and continued to grow in popularity well into the late 20th century.
- One theory suggests that personality has a basis in biology and has been an evolutionary process.
- The Big Five Test is used in employee placement and career development.
- Each of the Big Five Traits represents a wide spectrum; most individuals fall somewhere in the middle of these personality traits.
• Extraverts are energetic social beings who get their energy from interaction with others, while introverts represent individuals who prefer to be alone and are inner-focused.

• Agreeableness represents people who are social, friendly, and trusting of others, while people with low levels of agreeableness are often uncooperative, anti-social, and untrusting of others.

• Conscientious people are goal-oriented, methodical, and organized, while unconscientious people are those who lack ambition and are unreliable but remain flexible and have fun.

• Neuroticism refers to people’s individual levels of emotional stability with highly neurotic people being tense, depressed, and oriented toward negative thinking.

• People with low levels of neuroticism are calmer and are better able to deal with stress.

• Openness describes people who are creative and imaginative. These sorts of people tend to have a wide range of interests, while people with lower levels of openness are conservative and prefer familiarity.