

Picking the dream crisis team

This article by **Rob Shimmin** puts a microscope on the individuals tasked with making decisions in a crisis, looking closely at their personality and how measurable traits might influence the way a decision is reached

If you're responding to a crisis, whether natural or corporate – at some point you're going to have to make a decision, usually lots of them and in a highly constrained timeframe. It's the quality of those decisions and the ability of the team around them to execute that can make the difference between a favourable and disastrous outcome in crisis management.

This article considers the diversity of personalities in a team that collectively arrives at a decision and asks if there is any benefit in constructing a team with individuals with known differences in personality.

As a consultant dividing my time between executive coaching and crisis management, I bring 25 or more years of observing the behaviour of senior managers under intense pressure. My central theme is that pressure can bring subtle but significant differences in behaviour.

In his book *Primal Leadership* (2002) Daniel Goleman describes six styles of leadership and suggests that great leaders are able to select the style appropriate to the situation. A crisis that has dramatically damaged morale in the workforce might require an affiliative or democratic style to improve the situation, whereas a natural disaster requiring immediate and rapid action may dictate the need for a more commanding style.

Even the best leaders sometimes struggle to adapt their style. Think of the people who have made the big decisions in a crisis you have been involved with. Has their selected style matched the need perfectly? Did they dominate decision making with a 'their way or the highway' approach? Did they fall victim to analysis paralysis and fail to make the tough calls in a timely manner?

If you found failings it may be because of a pressure-induced phenomenon – the tendency to revert to type during a crisis.

Odgers Berndtson is a global executive search firm with a





► track record in finding top leadership talent. I spoke with Adrian Bassett, one of its occupational psychologists, who explained his approach to evaluating top talent for leadership roles.

“Our approach to executive assessment includes psychometric profiling to help examine the personality attributes a candidate possesses. They give us invaluable insights but are not infallible. To verify the psychometric data we run in-depth 1:1 sessions searching for behavioural evidence that mirrors the attributes highlighted by the testing. If they report that they are strategic, we ask what they have done to contribute to strategy, what factors they considered, how they got people to buy into that strategy and what impact did it have on the organisation? Our approach to profiling helps us to build a picture of how a person works, with a focus on developing strategy, leading people and teams, managing stakeholders, resilience and adaptability and their drive for results and execution.

“We’re also very interested in behaviours that might derail performance when the pressure is on such as in a major crisis. Essentially it’s about ‘over-played’ patterns of behaviour. There is a fine line between a confident leader and an arrogant leader, or a conscientious leader and one who is unwilling to delegate,” he says.

“What we find is that effective executives can usually manage these risks well. For example, a candidate who is aware that they prefer to decide on ‘gut-instinct’ without gathering broader opinion may overcome this by disciplining themselves to involve others in the decision-making process. On a day-to-day basis this executive will probably show inclusiveness in decision-making, but the risk is that when workload and pressure increase in a crisis their tendency is to revert to norm.”

So if psychometric testing suggests a weakness that might emerge under pressure, should that executive or officer be relegated to the bench when a crisis hits? Unless you can find faultless superhuman leaders in abundance then the answer is, of course, no. The secret to better decision-making comes down to awareness, first by the individual and second by the supporting team. In the above example, a mitigating action would be to place senior team members who are more inclusive and can redress the balance to drive better decisions around the leader.

To achieve that, the crisis team has to be constructed with one eye on the differing personalities at the table. Crisis simulations and exercises are a powerful way of knocking the corners off teams and improving the chances that personalities will gel to a powerful force in managing a future crisis. However, psychometric testing can take that art form to a more precise science. Knowing the personality make-up of each team member can ensure you give the lead to the personality best suited to the situation. So if it needs the softer touch, put forward a leader whose default personality is democratic. If the world’s on fire, go with your dyed-in-the-wool commanding leader. Too often we use a blunter tool in Gold Commander or crisis-leader selection: seniority.

Not all crises are clear-cut in terms of the leadership style needed to maximise the chances of success. Teams with highly diverse personalities take a little longer to reach a decision. However, the decisions reached are far stronger and better

considered. More importantly, when evidence emerges that an unhelpful direction has been embarked upon, complex mixes of personality tend to result in a faster re-evaluation of strategy and an altered course. It’s the dominant boss or same-thinking groups that are more likely to doggedly  the ship onto the rocks.

While the benefits of having diverse personalities in a decision-making group are clear, it can be a challenge to construct such a team. It could be argued that certain careers favour certain personality types. On discussing the impact of personality on decision-making with a senior officer from the London Metropolitan Police’s Counter Terrorism Command SO15, ~~it was observed~~ that those who did well and rose through the ranks often had a similar personality profile.

Figure 1: The Margerison-McCann Team Management Wheel - Six styles of leadership



TMS Development International Ltd (TMSDI) is a UK-based organisation skilled at profiling team members and advising on approaches designed to enhance collective performance. The company uses a suite of profiling tools to help uncover the deeper drivers that lie behind behaviour at work. Among these profiling tools sits the Margerison-McCann Team Management Profile (Figure 1), which seeks to measure personal preferences for different types of work as well as overall behaviours. My SO15 contact told me that an above average number of his colleagues fell in the Thruster-Organiser major role preference – indicating a collective drive for action, plans and structure.

I asked TMSDI Joint Managing Director Mark Gilroy about the significance of this finding. “We see that a preference in the Thruster-Organiser area of the Wheel is quite common. This can often be the result of a culture that rewards certain behaviours or tasks, or simply a halo effect of recruiting in the same image. One of the key benefits of profiling a team is to elevate its awareness of any potential

bias in the group, and to help put systems in place to ensure the best thinking is always applied to a problem,” he said.

Mark also recognised the tendency for individuals to revert to type under pressure: “Our observations have consistently shown that without the enhanced awareness that psychometric profiles offer, personality traits can become accentuated and entrenched when the going gets tough. If left unchecked, groupthink can occur and teams may find themselves making poor decisions with incomplete information.”

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You might argue that one place where personality should be taken out of the equation is an airliner cockpit, where a crisis ~~there~~ requires a by the book approach – this is not a time for creative thinking. British Airways probably leads the world in its rigorous and continual examination of Cockpit Resource Management (CRM), in essence, getting the very best from the crew when things go wrong in the air.

I asked BA Senior First Officer Allan Bailey if he fitted a BA pilot ‘type’ and his views on the potential for differing personalities to affect decisions in a crisis.

“Most airlines tend to recruit stable extroverts, it’s true that

pilots can be a somewhat homogenous group. However, there are still differing styles of working which can be accommodated in a meticulously safe operating environment," he said.

"The biggest learning over the years from CRM has been the importance of a junior first officer feeling comfortable and able to question the decision of a 30-year plus experienced captain if he or she deviates from Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). Those SOPs are very well thought-through and take a lot of the personality variance out of the equation. There have been avoidable accidents in the past (with other airlines) where saving face has come at an unacceptably high price."

As we discussed differing systems and approaches to problem solving in the cockpit, I was struck by how many of them could be adapted for use in larger teams facing business or security threats. ~~These are:~~

■ **Open questions:** A pressurised response to a closed question is perhaps more likely to be confirmation. Immediately you can see that 'Which engine has failed?' is an infinitely more useful question than 'Port engine failed, yes?'

■ **Fly - Navigate - Communicate:** Having a simple predetermined priority of actions in the event of a problem can be crucial in averting disaster. Two pilots head down in the cockpit working a problem are useless if shortly before fixing it the aircraft impacts a ridge. It's for this reason that tasks are allocated with the focus on continuing to fly the aircraft being paramount. I've seen many crises being steered to a magnificent legal triumph only to find while it was being won all the customers simply walked away; ~~and~~

■ **Time, Diagnosis, Options, Decide, Assign, Review (TDODAR):** Time – how long have we got? A massive fuel leak means you're very short of time but a single hydraulic failure means there is less urgency to rush into a potentially worse situation through a hasty decision. Diagnosis – what's gone wrong? This is where open questions help. Options – don't give them, ask for them and ensure all are considered. Decide – what's the best course of action given what's known? Assign – who does what to achieve the desired result safely? And Review – what can be learned from the incident?

TDODAR gives huge insight into broader crisis management. A varied personality team will present many more options than a homogenous one. There's a lot to be learnt from the assign section too. I once saw a comms director present on his company's crisis plan. He carried it carefully to the lectern before blowing a cloud of talcum powder off it. He got a hearty and knowing laugh – few read these plans between exercises or actual events. The result is like my experience of coaching 8-year-olds in touch-rugby: crowding around the ball rather than being aware of a role and how it will work within the team. The temptation in a crisis to noodle the core problem collectively is palpable and the teams that perform best divide the tasks, with a crisis management team considering what to do and a crisis communications team thinking through what to say. It's also helpful to allocate one person to look backwards – what's happened? And one to look forwards – where's this going?

What of review? For those who've been through more than one crisis – how much of the learning made it from the conclusion

of one crisis to the better management of the next? Often the blame game is a barrier to that process; some personalities are big enough to shoulder blame while others run a mile from it.

Airlines have made great strides in removing reticence to report errors by ensuring such reporting does not become career limiting. The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has achieved great success in its formalised systems of analysis and central to this is that pilots can report anonymously and receive automatic immunity from punishment. Reports also go to a neutral outside agency – Nasa – which has no interest in punishing pilots.

Atul Gawande is a talented surgeon who wrote *Complications* in 2002. He cites the FAA's approach as being instructive in the development of better reporting systems for medical practitioners who work in a hugely litigious environment.

The UK's National Health Service has also adopted practices pioneered by airlines like BA to remove the threat of punishment as a barrier to sharing valuable learning.

Today, an overly confident surgeon taking steps deemed to be excessively risky by the surrounding team is more likely to be challenged earlier because of the understanding of personality dynamics in a stressful environment such as the operating theatre.

Finally, there comes a time when all the decision-making has to be communicated to the wider public and it is here that a careful look at personality can bring dividends. Once again, the decision as to who speaks to the media is often driven simply by seniority. Putting the right rank or board level spokesperson in front of the cameras should, in my opinion, be secondary to finding a spokesperson most likely to resonate with the audience we're trying to influence.

Adrian Bassett from Odgers Berndtson makes this capability part of the leadership profiling process: "We only test leaders who we think

will need to stand in front of the media. We'll use external media trainers to interview candidates on a broad issue before suddenly moving it to an unexpectedly difficult issue. What we're looking for is credibility and control and it is one more piece of the jigsaw that we can fill in when assessing suitability for a leadership role."

Fatigue and emotion are key elements that can accelerate the reversion to type and resulting weaknesses from a personality perspective. Well run crisis teams look after each other and manage shifts and support to avoid individuals becoming burnt out or overly emotional. Varied teams help bring perspective on what is often a bleak outlook, and a collective sense of humour can be valuable as a coping mechanism. Sadly, inside jokes rarely travel well to the outside, so humour has to be managed very carefully.

In conclusion I make this suggestion: prior to your next crisis simulation, consider offering psychometric testing for key players in the decision-making team and use what you learn to build awareness, not just of what decision was made when, and with what information, but why a decision might have gone a certain way. It will take your readiness to a new level.

■ *D Goleman (2000): Leadership that gets results. Reproduced by kind permission of TMS Development International Ltd, 2016*

Figure 2: The Margerison-McCann Team Management Wheel



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