

DIFFERENT COURSES FOR DIFFERENT HORSES

How understanding innate personality type can help facilitators enhance program delivery, group participation and participant outcomes

by Toni McLean

www.tonimclean.net.au

Introduction

The more we work with people the more we see the infinite variety of personalities there are. This becomes more apparent and significant when we are part of a small group of people who have to function together – in the work place, in the family, in a social setting, or doing group work.

As group facilitators we are naturally interested in how people participate in groups, how they learn, how they communicate. In fact, our own personality also determines in part how we as group leaders communicate and facilitate group work.

Most facilitators work hard to ensure that the content of their program is relevant to their participants, that the delivery techniques are appropriate to the content and the participants, and that they are well versed in group dynamics. But have you ever had the experience that there was someone in your group you just didn't seem to get through to, who was speaking a different 'language' from you, or who just didn't seem to get as much out of the group as you thought they could?

If we have a simple framework that we can use to help us quickly identify certain aspects of the participants' personalities, we can match our communication style and focus to that of the participants, explain things in a way that they relate to more easily, and enhance their experience of participating in the group, thus making our group work even more effective. When participants feel the facilitator is really on their wavelength, they will contribute more to the group and gain more from it.

What follows will at least strengthen what you probably already know about doing group work and group dynamics. I hope it will also open your mind to greater awareness of your own personality and how it affects your style of group facilitation, as well as greater awareness of the unique style each of your participants brings to the group process, and how to work with that to maximise the benefit they obtain from the group program.

This article will discuss two aspects of Jung's theory of personality and provide some easy to follow guidelines to help you as a facilitator understand these particular mental processes of the participants so that you can enhance your effectiveness as a group facilitator and help maximise the learning experience of the participants.

Jung's Theory of Personality

Some years ago I became familiar with Carl Jung's theory of personality through the Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator (MBTI®), which identifies 16 basic personality types or groupings. I went on to study it in depth and I have found it indispensable to my work in counselling and group work. In this article I will be reducing these 16 groupings to four, for simplicity.

Although each person is unique in his or her totality, nonetheless people can be grouped together according to some aspects of their personality which they have in common. Just as we group people according to sex, hair colour, or nationality without suggesting, for example, that all men, all blonds or all Australians are the same, we can also group people according to aspects of their personality without dismissing the fact of their individuality.

A very brief introduction to Jung's theory follows. It is by no means a complete introduction, but focuses on those aspects of the theory which are particularly relevant to working with people in groups.

Jung developed a theory on how the psyche functions based on four dimensions of personality. Jung theorised that, at a very fundamental level, personality is structured around taking in information and processing information. In this discussion, I will outline the two dimensions that are most directly related to these mental processes. These two dimensions determine:

- how people gain information from the world
- what information they prefer to focus on
- how they use this information to make decisions
- and how they communicate what they have processed.

Throughout his work with thousands of clients Jung came to see some fundamental patterns which underlay how people carried out these mental functions, and that individuals generally had preferred ways of doing them.

Two dimensions or categories of mental functions: Perception and Judgement

Jung categorised these two mental functions of taking in information and processing information as perception (P) and judgement (J). Perception is the process of acquiring information and judgement is the process of evaluating information to make decisions. The use of the term judgement is sometimes misunderstood as meaning judgemental, however if we think of it as evaluation we will be closer to Jung's intended meaning. Jungian theory identifies two ways of taking in information, ie perception, and two ways of processing information, ie judgement.

Perception: Two ways of gathering information

Some people have a preference for taking in and focusing on concrete information, using their five senses, and also a preference for concrete facts. This way of gathering information is referred to as Sensing (S). Others have a preference for going beyond the raw data to focus on making connections between ideas and concepts in order to generate options and possibilities. This way of taking in information is labelled Intuiting (N). (Note N and not I, as I is reserved for Introversion, another Jungian dimension which is not being covered in this discussion.) Intuiting should not be confused with ESP, though sometimes people who are very skilled in this area can seem as though they have ESP!

Judgement: Two ways of processing information

When it comes to processing information to make decisions, Jung identified that some people are seen as having a preference for making decisions primarily in their heads, and he labelled this function as Thinking (T). People who use this function adopt an analytical, objective approach to decision-making. Others, he saw, had a preference for seeming to make decisions with their heart, using a person-centred approach, and he called this the Feeling (F) function. People who use this function take a subjective perspective when making decisions. Jung emphasised that both processes are rational, they just prioritise different information using a different framework.

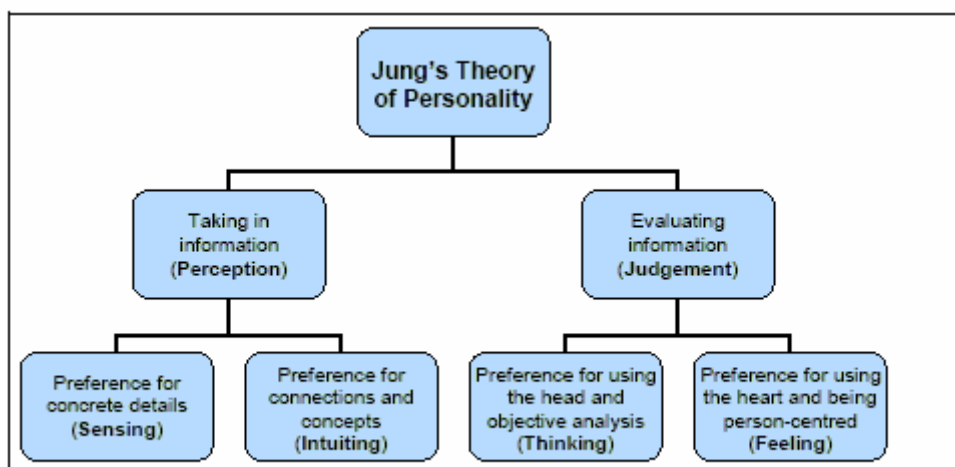


Figure 1. Partial Representation of Jung's Mental Functions

It must be emphasised that, while individuals have a preference for using one of each of the above pairs (ie Sensing or Intuiting; Thinking or Feeling), everyone is capable of using the opposite function as well, but they are less comfortable and less skilled with it.

It is implicit in this theory that we are all 'hard-wired' to prefer to operate in a particular way. Scientific imaging studies are beginning to confirm what Jung long ago theorised. This doesn't mean that we can't learn or be conditioned to operate differently, that is, to develop the opposite function, we can. However, under stress, people will tend to automatically resort to what their innate preference is.

How Group Facilitators can use this Framework

We can use this information firstly to understand our own preferences. Just as the participants are hard-wired to take in certain kinds of information and to make decisions in particular ways, so are we. Our preferences will have a significant input into how we facilitate groups, what we focus on with regard to content and delivery, and even into what kinds of groups we prefer to facilitate or are better at facilitating. So, as well as using this information to understand your participants, it will be useful for you to look at your own preferred style.

Each of these functions is supported by a preference for a particular communication style. We can use this knowledge to build rapport with participants by using language and information that they feel comfortable with because it matches their own. If you are an intuiting person, and use your own natural style of communication, you risk losing participants with a preference for sensing. We can use the kinds of words, information and examples that have most meaning for participants so that they feel understood.

By being aware of the focus of group members we can match our responses to help them get more out of the content of the program by making it more specifically relevant to them. If we are people-centred, and our participants have a more objective focus, our examples may not seem helpful to them. If we are totally present-centred and they are future-focused, they are likely to feel frustrated.

What follows is a quick guide to how you can quickly and fairly accurately identify the four functions or processes in your group members. I stress that it is only half the picture with regard to Jung's theory of personality, and it is a 'whistle stop' tour at that. However, it can be enough to help you move towards ensuring that the way you deliver the content of your group programs is especially meaningful and helpful to the people you are working with.

A Quick Guide for Detecting the Four Functions

PERCEPTION (the mental function of taking in information)	
<p style="text-align: center;">Sensing Types (preference for concrete details and facts)</p> <p>Indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May use words like real, facts, action, guidelines, do. • Tend to see their view of a situation as the only possible one, as they place a lot of faith in their own observations and the ‘facts’ that they know. • Tend to be more present-focused than future-focused, just wanting to deal with the current issues in their lives. • Tend to not be interested in lengthy explanations. • If they feel the group is going off course, may attempt to steer the group back by controlling it. <p>How to communicate with Sensers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use specific, concrete examples from real life situations that they can directly relate to. • Begin with details before moving on to the big picture. • Ask for details using specific questions. • Get to the point quickly. • Be literal, not metaphorical. • Less likely to be interested in imagery or fantasy (imagining). <p>How you can help Sensers while doing group work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help them to ‘join the dots’ to see the bigger picture and how it can be helpful to them. • Help them to see possibilities that include ‘facts’ other than what they are already aware of. • Help them to see that others may experience the same situations differently. • Help them to project into the future to foresee what may be coming up. • Cognitive-behavioural approaches generally work well. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Intuiting Types (prefer concepts, connections, possibilities)</p> <p>Indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May use words like imagine, create, ideas, possible, achieve. • Open ended and broad ranging in their ideas, comfortable with abstractions and concepts. • Can spend so much time being future-focused that they don’t attend to the present situation. Tend to move on quickly to possibilities without full consideration of the facts. • Are interested in making the connections to form the bigger picture and may be seen as rushing ahead. • May not notice a lot of concrete details, or may ignore them if they don’t fit with the possibilities they have in mind. • May lead the group off the track as they go off at tangents. <p>How to communicate with Intuiters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t bore them with too many concrete examples, but focus on possibilities. • Make sure they get the big picture and then ‘back fill’ with the relevant facts. • Don’t overwhelm them with too many facts. • Allow them time and space to develop their ideas. • May be quite happy with imagery or fantasy. <p>How you can help Intuiters while doing group work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help them to be specific and to focus on the facts of the here and now situation. • Help them to be realistic about the present. • Help them to not race ahead of the others. • Insight-oriented approaches generally work well.

JUDGEMENT (the mental function of evaluating information)	
<p style="text-align: center;">Thinking Types (preference for objective analysis)</p> <p>Indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use words like think, criteria, outcome, priority, logical. • Tend to be naturally sceptical and critical, and may require good evidence of what the facilitator is saying. • Tend to regard their and others' emotions as irrelevant. • May not be as comfortable in social situations. • Not comfortable with interpersonal language generally, eg giving compliments, emotional language. • May inadvertently hijack process-oriented groups as they prefer an objective climate. <p>How to communicate with Thinkers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be direct in your communication. • Present facts and ideas logically. • It's not usually useful to ask them to describe their feelings. • Be prepared to debate your and their ideas with them. • Affirm their efforts to make suggestions, even if you disagree with them. <p>How you can help Thinkers while doing group work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help them to understand that feelings are 'facts' too. • Help them be aware of others' feelings and needs as well as their own. • Help them to find language and ways to express their own feelings. • Analytical approaches generally work well. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Feeling Types (preference for person-centred analysis)</p> <p>Indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use person-centred language, eg personal, feel, validate, values, relationships. • Tend to ignore unpleasant facts that conflict with what they feel to be right. • May have difficulty in speaking up to ask for what they need and expect others to work it out. • May be focused on the participation of others in the group and not actually focus on their own participation. • If they feel they're being ignored or overlooked in a group may become negative or cynical. • May be so focused on the process that they hijack the content work of the group. <p>How to communicate with Feelers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use personal language to establish rapport. • Explain how your suggestions will help people. • Acknowledge that feelings are as important as 'facts'. • Be tactful and supportive with feedback. • May need more approval than thinking types. <p>How you can help Feelers while doing group work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage them to speak up and express their own views. • Help them to focus on and integrate 'facts' with their feelings. • Help them to manage emotional expression if it is getting in the way. • Confront gently with discrepancies between their feelings and the facts. • Process-oriented approaches generally work well (unless the participant has real difficulty in regulating emotions).

Packaging Preferences Together

When preferences are combined there is a dynamic interaction which produces a particular kind of 'package' or presentation for each combination. These functions can combine in four possible ways:

- Preference for concrete details + Preference for objective analysis: ST
 Preference for concrete details + Preference for being person-centred: SF
 Preference for connections and concepts + Preference for objective analysis: NT
 Preference for connections and concepts + Preference for being person-centred: NF

Sometimes, viewing the person's presentation as a whole can be a useful alternative way to understand an individual's innate personality. At a very simplistic level, to help you begin to identify these presentations, the following examples may be helpful:

<p style="text-align: center;">ST Style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay attention to details and administration. • See that procedures are followed. • May be good at analysing situations or understanding technical things. • May focus on the present more than the future. • May be unaware of the sensitivities of others. <p>These kinds of people will like the groups to proceed in an ordered, structured way, and will probably use the group to help themselves solve life problems in current, specific situations.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">*Well-known example: John Howard</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">SF Style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tend to take care of people, particularly in a practical way. • Attentive to detail that affects people. • Tend to be sensitive to others' feelings and needs. • Tend to focus on the present more than the future. <p>These kinds of people are likely to be the ones making sure everyone has a cup of tea, that the group proceeds harmoniously and, for themselves, are likely to be focused on what they can learn from the group to help with their current issues.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Well-known example: Oprah Winfrey</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">NT Style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tend to be more future-focused and aware of the bigger picture rather than the detail. • Usually want to analyse the content. • May tend to automatically take charge and lead. • May be unaware of the sensitivities of others. <p>These are the people who will want to build on what is being covered in the group, and tend to be interested in how they can develop what they learn to help with situations in the future.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Well-known example: Bill Gates</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">NF Style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer to relate to people in a mentoring rather than a practical way. • Tend to be concerned with values being upheld. • Tend to want everyone to be included. • Focus on the future possibilities for people rather than the details of the person's present life. <p>These kinds of people are likely to be encouraging others in the group to achieve their best, and, for themselves, will tend to be focused on how they can build on what they learn in the group to help achieve personal change and growth.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Well-known example: Mahatma Gandhi</p>

* These have been assessed by experienced MBTI® consultants based on extensive study of their public lives.

I stress again that what has been presented is only half the picture with regard to Jung's theory of personality, and it is a 'whistle stop tour' at that. It has implications and applications that go way beyond the scope of this article. However, I hope this has been enough to help you further in ensuring that the way you deliver the content of your group programs is especially meaningful and helpful to the people you are working with. I hope it has also stimulated your appetite to know more about personality theory, in particular Jung's theory and the MBTI[®] which grew out of it.

The full benefits of this approach to working with people, whether individuals, couples, families, groups or organisations, justify further exploration of Jung's theory. It facilitates individuals identifying their strengths, their challenges and their potential and has practical application from individual counselling and therapy through to managing large organisations.

Material adapted from: McGuinness, M. (2004). *You've Got Personality*. MaryMac Books: NSW.