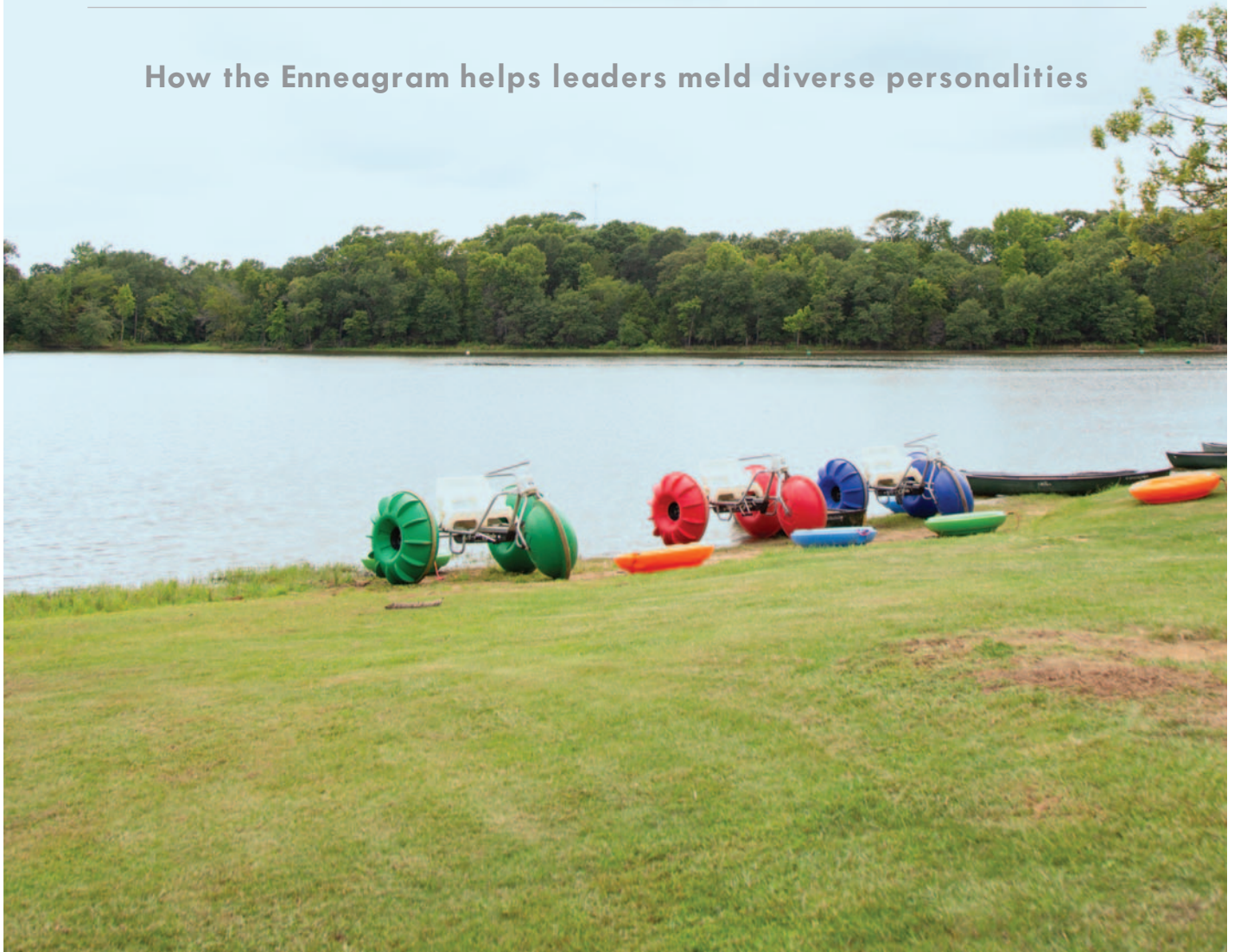


WHEN YOUR TEAM IS NOT YOUR TYPE

How the Enneagram helps leaders meld diverse personalities





Conflict at work is inevitable, and when it rears its head, it's easy for the combatants to retreat to their corners and review options for striking back. When viewpoints clash, the status quo can seem immutable, a natural result of incompatibility.

Sometimes, it appears, our team is just not our type. ►



While it's true that you may not naturally mesh with your crew, especially if it's one inherited rather than chosen, such fatalism need not become a self-fulfilling prophecy, says Beth McCord, founder of Your Enneagram Coach, which helps people uncover their "core motivations," using the personality typing tool.

The Enneagram rose to popularity in America in the 1970s and persists as a methodology for understanding the nuances of the human psyche and how they affect relationships. It groups people into nine interrelated types, helping unearth why they think, feel and react to certain situations in particular ways. In short, it uncovers the disposition of the heart and helps manage conflict by viewing it through the prism of one's basic desires and fears.

"We're wanting people to look at the why, not the what," McCord says.

On top of all this, Your Enneagram Coach layers biblical truth, noting that the goal of its personal assessments and coaching sessions is to help participants realize they are secure in the personality God created them to exhibit. But each type comes with incumbent strengths that He intends to use, as well as weaknesses that can put their hearts out of sync with the Gospel, McCord says.

Christians, in their desire to remain humble, often decry the Enneagram for encouraging an unhealthy focus on self, McCord says. She admits it can be used as a sword by those who would weaponize the intimate knowledge it unearths, and as a shield for those apt to justify determinism.

But tamed by the Gospel, it can provide deeper knowledge about ourselves that can have a profound effect on relationships with spouses, family members, friends and colleagues.

"The intention is not to be self-consumed. It is to be reflective enough so that we are aware of our heart condition — because that is what God looks at — and to bring it back into alignment with Him. Our ultimate focus is Christ, not ourselves, but we have to have enough self reflection to know if we are in alignment or not."

It's this aspect that makes it so powerful for leaders, McCord says. ►

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More Than Chemistry

On a leadership team, as in marriage, getting along does not always indicate a healthy relationship. Conflict is a crucible that, while sometimes painful, can expose issues that need to be addressed to avoid them in the future.

McCord gives an example from her own life: She reveals that she is an Enneagram nine, an accommodative type that seeks to avoid conflict at all costs. If paired with a supposedly compatible team member of the same number, the two may be tempted to tiptoe around each other in a way that manifests as harmony, but actually might be avoidance. Real problems may fester as a result.

Similarly, two very direct type eights, known as “challengers,” can revel in their ability to “say the hard things” to each other, but in doing so, they may be neglecting to encourage each other or validate one another’s emotions.

Relying on the concept of “chemistry,” or personalities clicking, can be a misleading form of relational laziness, setting leaders up to create a team in their own image, which ultimately could limit its effectiveness, McCord says.

The Enneagram at its core is a way to recognize that people see the same events in different ways as if wearing glasses tinted in different colors.

“We go through life thinking that we’re all wearing the same lenses, that we’re all seeing the same thing, reacting the same, or should react the same way, and when people don’t, we get frustrated and angry, hurt, irritated, annoyed, defensive — you name it.”

When leaders are intentional enough to embrace the Enneagram through humility, it can help leaders accommodate different worldviews, McCord says.

“It helps us pause and have a sense of understanding, empathy, grace, compassion, forgiveness, curiosity — it opens up more relational doors than it closes.”

Embracing Leadership Liabilities

At the minimum, McCord adds, leaders should realize that they don’t have a monopoly on perspective. In marriage sessions, she often puts a small object in the center of the room and places partners at various locations, then asks them to describe it. Inevitably, they see different aspects from their limited vantage points, like trial witnesses testifying with overlapping accounts of the same event.

But how can leaders, who are tasked with casting a vision and collaborating with their team, incorporate divergent views without letting progress get derailed?

In some ways, it’s more about the journey than the destination. Team members don’t necessarily seek to hijack the vision — they want to be heard and seen, even when the direction ultimately chosen isn’t one they would have preferred.

The best leaders, McCord says, admit where they’re weak and invite their teams to respectfully voice disagreement, a posture stemming from Christ’s example of servant leadership. But because they’re not perfect like Him, leaders need constant reminders of their liabilities from trusted sources, either superiors or subordinates — and mentors who can become sounding boards for working through the problems.

This takes a very particular type of submission to Jesus, a patient curiosity that can overcome conflict by understanding deeper emotions hiding behind our actions. Compatibility, then, starts to depend less on the other team members and more about one’s own alignment with God and valuing of others.

“Anyone who is healthy, who is aligned with the truth of the Gospel, can actually function really well with others, even if they disagree or are combative,” McCord says. “Because they have done their inner work, they have stamina like a marathon runner to stay in the relational game, versus wanting to fight back, hit, disassociate and use their defense mechanisms. Usually, when we’re less healthy, we’re quick to react in less healthy ways.” ►



Steps in the Conflict-coping Dance

Knowing your team helps to navigate conflicts

It turns out, the way we fight reveals a lot about our character, McCord says, so a conflict should never be wasted, lest history repeats itself.

McCord has grouped the nine Enneagram personality types into three triads that exhibit similar “conflict coping” strategies. Knowing where your team members fall on the continuum can help with the delicate dance of defusing — and preventing — tense situations.

Reactive

Reactive types tend to react to conflict emotionally — with sadness, passion, drive or any other type of feeling — and want their colleagues to do the same. They crave authenticity and in fights will sometimes provoke a reaction just to get a more detached partner on the same emotional page.

“They want to know: Am I dealing with a real person, with real emotions?” McCord says, and they don’t mind escalation as much as other types.

Includes types:

Four — Romantic Individualist

Six — Loyal Guardian

Eight — Protective Challenger

Logical

Logical types seek to examine a problem rationally based on data points, information and insights. Rather than reacting viscerally, they have tendencies to shut off emotions to keep them from obstructing the march to a solution. This sets them up to come off as cold, clashing with those who bring more feeling to the fight — or those who try to glide over real issues.

Includes types:

One — Moral Perfectionist

Three — Successful Achiever

Five — Investigative Thinker

Optimistic

Optimistic types adopt a strategy of avoidance or mitigation, holding out hope that the conflict will just find a way to work itself out without too much direct confrontation. They often try to defuse a situation by putting a positive spin on it, putting them at odds with those who see evidence of a relational issue or want to see them react with more authenticity.

Includes types:

Two — Supportive Adviser

Seven — Entertaining Optimist

Nine — Peaceful Mediator

Source: Your Enneagram Coach

Personality is another dimension of diversity, an asset for leaders and teams that make the effort to learn how to speak their co-workers' emotional language.

Strength in Diversity

In some corporate spaces, diversity in race, religion and socioeconomic status are seen as strengths, ways to drive innovation. In the church, the Bible teaches that the body of Christ has many members, each with his or her own function mutually recognized as essential to the work of the others.

Personality is another dimension of diversity, an asset for leaders and teams that make the effort to learn how to speak their co-workers' emotional language. Humble leaders can utilize the diversity of personality to make up for their own deficiencies.

McCord points to her own experiences as examples. One team member, a type six "loyal guardian," had to leave town for a family funeral. She framed her acceptance of the employee's request for time off with language that validated his desire to take care of his family in a tough time.

Also, her CFO is a hard-driving type eight whose style on the surface may clash with McCord's tendency to shrink from conflict, but they have learned to see their difference as complementary.

"I've set up our organization in such a way that I esteem her ability to challenge, to move forward to say what needs to be said. But because I've given her space and room for that, she doesn't need to use it in a forceful way," McCord says.

To get started on this path, she recommends that leaders engage with the free assessment on her website, examine the results and then use her "mistyping guide" to avoid letting their lack of self-awareness impede the assessment. Later they can decide if they need an outside coach to navigate these insights.

Ultimately, she says, leadership comes down to understanding and respecting one's team and the various ways their personalities reflect the image of God.

"It's not marginalizing gifts; it's helping them actually use their gifts in the most effective and beneficial way versus kind of plowing over people and people not being able to see the glory that they have." ■



Trevor Williams is managing editor of Global Atlanta, an online international business news service that has sent him on reporting trips to more than 30 countries on five continents. His writing has focused intently on Asia, investment, trade and how cities connect with the global economy. He earned dual bachelor's degrees in magazine journalism and religion at the University of Georgia, along with a minor in Chinese language and literature. He is a proud husband and father of two young sons, as well as the editor of the book Making Men: Five Steps to Growing Up.