The Introvert's Agile Survival Guide

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Abstract: The terms introvert and extrovert were introduced close to a century ago. Since then cultural stereotypes have developed around expected behavioral tendencies of introverts and extroverts. There is often a misunderstanding of why individuals behave the way they do, leading to frustration and dissonance on teams. Because many Agile practices tend to favor the needs of extroverts, the introverts can become frustrated and possibly resistant. This article describes typical needs of introverts, extroverts, and ambiverts, and offers tips for establishing a strong mixed-vert team.

Measuring Stuff

In 1724, Daniel Fahrenheit measured the temperature at his home town of Danzig, Germany on what he believed to be the coldest day of winter. He marked this point on a thermometer as zero degrees. He then measured the average of several human body temperatures, and marked that point as 100 degrees. Hence, the birth of the Fahrenheit scale.

It would be difficult to argue that the Fahrenheit scale lacks precision or accuracy. With a good quality thermometer, a measure of temperature that is both accurate and precise is certainly possible. What's questionable is the meaningfulness of the measure. In the U.S., we have become accustomed to the Fahrenheit scale and when we hear that it's 30 degrees outside, our experience and familiarity defines what that means to us. When someone from Canada journeys south to the U.S. and they hear that it's 30 degrees outside, their Celsius brain may not comprehend that it is cold outside.

Measuring quantitative aspects of something is usually a fairly straightforward process, as long as we have an appropriate instrument available. Height, weight, barometric pressure, fuel level – are all easily measurable. However, even these clear cut "measurables" aren't always what they appear on the surface.

Measuring Soft Stuff

When attempting to measure "softer" things, additional layers of subjectivity are added. You could potentially use an applause meter to measure how

funny a comedian is. However, the maximum attained decibel level could be argued as a poor measure of an individual's comedic talent.

Throughout history, professionals in the social science field have endeavored to measure human personality and behavior. While many popular measures have emerged in the past century, a few of these tend to get more use than others. While it can be fun to "measure" one another, it can be easy to over simplify our understanding of individuals by boiling them down to a few easy to understand labels.

While this paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive education on any of these measures, a prominent measure for each of these four psychological interest areas will be briefly described:

- Needs
- Behavior
- Motivators
- Personality

Needs

In 1943, Psychologist Abraham Maslow introduced his *hierarchy of needs* [1] which described a person's needs in layers. Needs at one layer must be satisfied before needs at the next level can be satisfied. The primary layer addresses basic physiological needs such as food and sleep. Once these physiological needs are met, one can focus attention on safety, followed

Figure 1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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[1] "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50(4) (1943): 370–96.

by love/social, esteem, and finally self-actualization.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is well known by anyone who has ever taken a Psychology class, however, it does have critics who claim there is no empirical evidence to support the hierarchy[2]. Nevertheless, the hierarchy continues to be popularly understood and referenced.

Behavior

William Moulton Marston, eclectic Psychologist who invented the blood pressure cuff, the lie detector, and the Wonder Woman comic book series, also created a popular metric called the DISC in 1928[3]. His DISC model described four behavioral patterns:

- Dominance
- Inducement
- Submission
- Compliance

Marston and his followers created variations on these concepts, and since his interests shifted to comic books, the DISC lay in the public domain. There are currently over 30 DISC vendors who offer similar measurement tools, although some use different labels for the D, I, S, and C.

While the DISC avoids complexity with only four measures, the combined scores along each of the four dimensions actually leads to a complex number of combinations, each with a different behavioral profile. However, many individuals that are measured using a DISC tool tend to remember only the "letters" they scored highest in.

[2] "Abraham Maslow and the Pyramid that Beguiled Business", BBC News Magazine, August 2013.

[3] Marston, William Moulton. *Emotions of Normal People*. London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd.; 1928.

In the DISC wheel shown below, both natural and adaptive behavioral styles of the members of a team are plotted to help team members better understand one another. This is a useful application of the DISC to enhance team performance through empathy for one another's different behavioral tendencies[4].

SS : Sean ScrumMaster   TT : Tom Tester
JD : Joe Developer   PP : Paul ProductOwner
SD : Stressed Developer   BB : Bob BusinessAnalyst
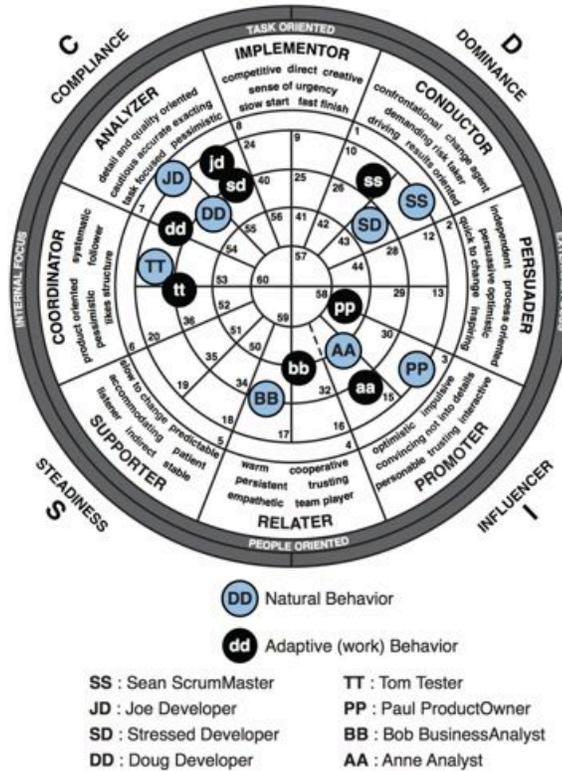DD : Doug Developer   AA : Anne Analyst

Figure 2 - The DISC Team Wheel

A unique component of the DISC versus other measures is how it measures the difference between natural behavior (e.g., how you behave at home) and adapted behavior (how you behave at work.)   While some people have overlapping behaviors at home and at work, others have to dramatically adapt their behavior to suit a job role they perform at work.

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[4] *The Abelson DISC Behaviors Wheel is an adaptation of the Target Training International, LTD.*

Motivators

In 1927, Eduard Spranger describe six dimensions of what makes people "tick" – their motivators[5].   While this is a close cousin to Maslow's later work, it more explicitly describes motivators in the workplace.   The six motivators are:

- Theoretical – Learning; Discovery of truth.
- Utilitarian/Economic – Attainment of tangible wealth and property.
- Aesthetic – Beauty and harmony in surroundings.
- Social – Ability to help others.
- Individualistic/Political – Personal power, influence and fame.
- Traditional/Regulatory: Rules, unity, order, tradition.

Although most individuals are at least moderately motivated by each of these, they tend to have one or two motivators that are dominant.   It's particularly helpful to know the dominant motivators of subordinates and teammates.   For example, an individual who ranks low on utilitarian and high on political motivators would be more motivated by a more prestigious title than by a raise or bonus.

Personality

Personality assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) are often confused with behavioral assessments like the DISC.   While our behavior tends to adapt to our work environment, our personality tends to be more or less fixed throughout our life.

While the MBTI is very popular and has a long standing reputation, the "Big Five" are emerging as the modern measure of an individual's personality. The five factors, following the CANOE acronym, are all measured on a sliding scale:

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[5] Spranger, Eduard, and Paul John William Pigors. *Types of men: The Psychology and Ethics of Personality*. Halle (Saale): M. Niemeyer, 1928.

		Low		*High*
C	Conscientiousness	Negligent Lazy	⟷	Hard-working Punctual
A	Agreeableness	Critical Suspicious	⟷	Trusting Lenient
N	Neuroticism	Calm Even-tempered	⟷	Worried Temperamental
O	Openness	Down-to-earth conventional	⟷	Imaginative Curious
E	Extraversion	Quiet Passive	⟷	Joiner Talkative

When Personality is layered with behavior and motivators, it's evident that there are numerous possible combinations[6].   This is why it can be risky to assume you understand someone based on just a few measurements.

Other "Pop" Psychology Metrics

Many best sellers have been published in the "pop" psychology realm, many by individuals without conventional credentials in the behavioral science field. This does not necessarily discredit any of them, but it does warrant a caution.

Abraham Maslow, mentioned earlier, is rarely credited for his famous quote, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, every problems begins to resemble a nail."   The purpose of describing any of these measures is not to add credibility, rather to advise consideration of proper context and application of each of them.

Introversion/Extraversion

The fifth personality factor in the "Big Five" is based on the work of Carl Jung in the 1920's, who originally coined the terms introvert and extrovert[7].

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[6] Costa, P.T.,Jr. & McCrae, R.R. (1992). Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) manual. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

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These terms have become well-known words internationally. The remainder of this article will focus on this dimension of an individual's personality. However, it's important to bear in mind that this only describes one aspect of an individual. Introversion/Extraversion blended with behavioral style, motivators, etc. results in a multitude of variations. As a matter of fact, with over seven billion humans on earth, there are probably than many different combinations. Therefore, be cautious about drawing stereotypes about an individual based on any of these measures.

Extrovert

The term extrovert is often associated with adjectives such as talkative, social, and outgoing. Extroverts prefer social settings is because it energizes them. Conversely, working alone tends to make extroverts tired.

When working on a task or project that requires extensive time alone reading, researching, and thinking, the extrovert will eventually want to escape to socialize in order to recharge. This does not mean that extroverts cannot be effective working on these types of task; it just means that it will consume an excessive amount of energy.

Jobs commonly associated with extroverts include motivational speaker, actor/performer, dental hygienist, customer service representative, and receptionist.

Introvert

The term introvert is often associated with adjectives such as quiet, reserved, introspective, and thorough. Participation in social events such as meetings, parties, mixers, etc., tend to make an introvert tired. Conversely, time alone spent reading, writing, studying, etc., will recharge the introvert.

Introverts are often mislabeled as shy. The clinical term for an extreme case of shyness is *Social Anxiety Disorder.* This is a psychological disorder characterized by intense discomfort in social situations. This causes impairment of normal functions, which can include physical symptoms. While it's possible for an introvert to have social anxiety

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[7] Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 6: Psychological Types, C.G. Jung, Gerhard Adler and R.F.C. Hull, Princeton University Press, 1976.

disorder, it's just as likely for an extrovert to suffer from this treatable disease.

Common jobs performed by introverts include software developer, librarian, scientist, and accountant.

Ambivert

When defining these personality characteristics, Carl Jung once said, "There is no such thing as a pure introvert or extrovert. Such a person would be in the lunatic asylum." Think of it as a sliding scale, where an individual has tendencies that lean more toward introvert or extrovert.

There is a lesser known third characteristic those who cycle between introvert/extrovert modes: the ambivert. Working alone on a task may energize an ambivert., however, eventually the energy level will peak then start to drain. The only way for the ambivert to recharge again is through social interaction with others. After a period of recharging through social interaction, the energy will again peak, sending the ambivert back into the "cave" for a while.

Adapting and Coping

It's not uncommon to find an introvert in a stereotypically extroverted role, and vice versa. It's also not uncommon for that role to be a perfect fit, with a high level of job satisfaction. When this happens, however, the individual must learn to cope with impact to energy. For example, an introvert in an extrovert-biased job may find the need to escape to solitude from time to time in order to recharge. Conversely, when locked in a cube working on independent tasks, the extrovert is likely to roam from time to time to interact with others until the energy level increases enough to get more work done.

The Agile Introvert

The first of the Agile Manifesto states, "We value individuals an interactions over processes and tools." Ironically, if you do an online search for books

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related to agile, however, the majority of publications you'll find actually focus predominantly on processes and tools!   Why is this?

The United States is predominantly an extroverted society – as much as 2/3 of the U.S. population is estimated to be extroverts.   In the STEM (Science-Technology-Engineering-Math) field however, the inverse is true.   As a predominantly introverted population, the tech community favors learning and using introvert-biased elements of project methods.

When an introvert joins a project team that is using Scrum, many of the practices tend to be extrovert-biased: planning meetings, the daily Scrum, open office team rooms, retrospectives, Sprint reviews, etc..   All of these interactions tend to exhaust an introvert.   Unrestrained, an introvert who is new to Scrum is likely to focus the majority of attention to its mechanics and tooling.   An introvert must often be pushed outside this comfort zone to get the most value from agile practices.

While all this collaboration may make the introvert tired, collaboration is an essential component of a high performing team.   How does an introvert work on an agile project without getting tired all the time?

Tips for the Agile Introvert

The Introverted Scrum Master
If you are an introverted Scrum Master, collaboration and conversation often consume a significant portion of the workday.   To be effective in the role, it's important to prepare to go outside your comfort zone frequently. A Scrum Master who avoids collaboration opportunities could negatively affect the performance of the team.

The introverted Scrum Master can become uncomfortable when there is a lot of uncertainty.   To best manage the introvert's reaction to social interaction, increase the amount of structure in meetings.   In other words, use techniques such as "the three questions" for the daily Scrum, and planning poker or white elephant sizing for planning meetings.   Reducing the amount of free form interaction helps the introverted Scrum Master maintain control, which can reduce resulting exhaustion.

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Facilitating the sprint retrospective can be the most unnerving to an introverted Scrum Master. To maintain structure, it's best to determine which retrospective technique you plan to use prior to starting the meeting. Additionally, it's a good idea to be mindful of introverted team members during the retrospective. They may not be at ease participating in a free form retrospective discussion. Instead, give everyone note cards or stickies and have them write down their thoughts during a sufficiently timed period. After the quiet period, a round-robin discussion becomes much more structured and comfortable for the introverts to participate in.

The Introverted Product Owner

Just like the Scrum Master, the Product Owner role also requires a lot of interaction with others. Since Product Owners are not official members of the development team, they often have responsibilities outside the project. While an extroverted Product Owner may savor lots of interaction time with the team, an introverted Product Owner is more inclined to escape to a quiet place to work.

The Scrum Master often bears the burden of encouraging an introverted Product Owner to participate more fully on the project. To engage an introverted Product Owner, it's best to provide concrete goals and specific tasks with deadlines and clear completion criteria. Although it deviates from the rules of Scrum, it may be helpful to include Product Owner tasks on the Sprint plan. This adds clarity to the role and reduces the ambiguity and subjectivity that can be annoying to an introvert.

The Introverted Team Member

Ironically, the majority of a typical development team are often introverts, yet many typical agile work environment choices tend to favor the extroverts. Open workspaces, frequent impromptu conversations, limited privacy – all of these things can make an introvert anxious or tired. Beyond comfort, an extrovert-favorable work environment can impair an introvert's productivity.

Rigid adherence to arbitrary dogmas, practices, and workplace design can be detrimental. To optimize all team members' effectiveness, compromise is

essential.   Often, extroverts lack an awareness of the needs of introverted teammates.   This can lead to an extrovert's frustration with introverts who complain or passive aggressively try to subvert the processes. Establishing working agreements with clear empathy toward the needs of introverts and extroverts provides a means for a team to improve its overall performance.

Work Environment Enhancers

Open plan workspaces are becoming very popular, and are often the default choice for Agile teams.   The presumption is that elimination of cubes and offices encourages collaboration.   While collaboration is an essential component of high performing teams, over-collaboration can be detrimental to productivity.   Additionally, work environments with frequent unplanned discussions can exhaust and frustrate the introverts on the team.

There is a common misconception that constant communication is an essential component of Agile methods.   In actuality, frequent interruptions can seriously impair productivity.   Ken Auer introduced the concept of "Caves and Common Room" in his book on Extreme Programming[8] in 2001.   Auer acknowledged that individuals need private workspaces in addition to the common team room.   This provides a more balanced work environment.

Another useful practice is to set up a quiet zone in the common area. Setting up a quiet zone with comfortable chairs and a "no talking" rule provides a safe place for team members to get work done without interruption.

Some successful Agile teams establish quiet hours as part of their team's working agreements.   The team agrees on specific hours during the workday when interruptions are not permitted.   This allows team members to plan a period each day for heads down productive work.

Scheduling structure "think time" can be difficult to implement, since exceptions are often made. Eventually, the sanctity of the quiet hours can

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[8] Extreme Programming Applied: Playing to Win, Ken Auer and Roy Miller, Addison-Wesley, 2001.

deteriorate. A less rigid alternative is the *Pomodoro Technique*[9], developed by Francesco Cirillo. In *Pomodoro*, individuals start a 25 minute timer and focus on completion of a single task during the timed period. When other team members see a timer running, they respect the individual's need for quiet until the timer's alarm rings.

In Conclusion

Introverts and extroverts are energized differently. Extroverts should understand the needs of introverts and empathize with them. Conversely, introverts should understand the needs of extroverts and empathize with them. Overall, the team should agree compromise for the sake of the project. Through compromise, establish working agreements to enhance the work environment and practices to balance the needs of everyone on the team.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Howard is Vice President of Consulting at Improving Enterprises and has been involved in most aspects of software development for over 30 years with such languages as diverse as COBOL, Smalltalk and Java. Over the years, Ken has provided consulting, training and mentoring to companies in twelve countries around the world, helping with adoption of software development best practices. He is also on the computer science faculty at SMU's Lyle School of Engineering. Ken's specialty is helping companies increase productivity through efficient practices and pragmatic organizational dynamics, which was the topic of the Addison-Wesley book that he co-authored titled Individuals and Interactions: an Agile Guide.

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[9] The Pomodoro Technique, Francesco Cirillo, FC Garage GmbH, 3rd Edition, 2013.