

Executive Briefings

The Connection Between Personality and Learning

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Most learning professionals probably know a thing or two about personality assessments, but they might not associate them with a lot of what they do. But these tools can be applied in certain ways to increase the efficacy of employee development.

Patrick Sweeney, executive vice president at international hiring and development management consulting firm Caliper, said the relationship between personality and performance (and potential performance) is evident.

“When people’s strengths, motivations and potential are ideally matched to the job they’re undertaking, they have a much higher possibility of succeeding,” he said. Sweeney added that although personality assessments are closely related to people performance, they won’t always reside in HR.

“It depends so much on the individual company,” he said. “Sometimes, it might be the head of sales, who has a budget and specific performance expectations. Oftentimes, it’s the head of HR. It just depends on the size and the nature of the company and how it’s structured.”

A great deal of the personality-assessment process takes place in recruiting and hiring new staff, but some of this also is devoted to fostering manager-worker relationships, building the right teams and developing employees. Where learning is concerned, personality assessments most often are included in high-potential and leadership development programs.

“Perhaps there’s an employee who’s been a top performer,” Sweeney said. “Do they have what it takes to step into a management position? If so, what strengths do we need to build upon? How do we help them identify areas they need to work on?”

Personality assessments also can play a role in determining what dispositions dominate in a given organization and what the implications might be for delivery based on prevailing learning styles.

“Personality certainly plays a significant role in how someone learns,” Sweeney said. “Much of learning has not only to do with what we know, but also with who we are. It has

to do with influence and how we work with each other. The more you know about individuals, the more you can tailor learning to them and be made effective.”

Additionally, he said certain personality qualities will help people learn, while others will get in the way.

“You have to be open, flexible and curious to really want to learn. Someone who might be really bright but also rigid and dogmatic might end up just using their intelligence to defend their preconceived notions. They might actually stop themselves from growing. “In terms of someone’s personality, they have to be open to change. Why do so many people who have heart bypass surgery go back to their old eating habits later? You can learn and understand exactly how fat and cholesterol get broken down, but will you really change?”