

Know Your Marines

Leadership applications of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

by Capt Andrew Reaves

Leaders of Marines are no strangers to the leadership principle inscribed in *Leading Marines* (FMFM 1-0), to “know your Marines and look out for their welfare.”¹ The foundations of Marine leadership predicate themselves upon this standard and the other 11 directives imbued in Marines from the beginning of their careers at either recruit training or TBS. So are the objectives of Marine leadership—mission accomplishment and troop welfare. As Marine leaders continue to advance in grade, they receive several opportunities to engage in both resident and non-resident professional military education (PME) courses, which provide numerous tools to assist them in accomplishing those objectives. On the subject of leadership, formal PME course curriculums rely heavily on guest speaker lectures, literary reading, and small group discussions to inculcate

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Marine leaders on practical and tested methods that have created success in the past. While these lessons are ripe with invaluable knowledge gleaned from years of experience, they do not address the fundamental core of Marines—their personalities.

Too often, Marine leaders surmise that knowing Marines includes compiling only rudimentary facts like marital status, child names, favorite hobbies, and family issues. In order for leaders to truly “know [their] Marines,” they must

have, as Gen John A. Lejeune stated, “a full understanding of their thoughts, their attitude, their emotions, their aspirations, and their ideals.”² Thanks to decades of study, today’s psychologists have developed several methods of determining and assessing an individual’s psychological type. One of the most researched and popular tools in this field is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).³ Through adding the study and application of the MBTI into formal PME curriculums, Marine leaders will gain understanding of how their Marines process information, make decisions, communicate with others, and receive both praise and criticism. Armed with this knowledge, Marine leaders will be far better prepared to ensure the welfare of their Marines and employ them to accomplish any given mission.

The MBTI

Following its translation into English in 1923, Swiss-born psychiatrist Carl G. Jung’s work, *Psychological Types*, became the foundation of Katharine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers’ psychological research. Jung postulated that human behavior is predictable rather than completely random; humans have preferences related to the basic functions their personalities perform throughout life. Using this perspective, the mother-daughter team developed the MBTI in 1942. They then spent the next 20 years verifying their theories before publishing the first edition of the *MBTI Manual* in 1962.⁴

The MBTI is a diagnostic test that categorizes a person’s personality into a four-letter combination. Each of the four letters is one of two alternate preferences beginning with E or I, extrovert or introvert; S or N, sensor or intuitive; T or F, thinker or feeler; and J or P,



Leaders need to know their Marines’ strengths and weaknesses. (Photo by Cpl Paul S. Martinez.)

judge or perceiver. The summation of the four options is one of 16 unique personality types complete with its own psychological "portrait" which includes a variety of personal preferences such as how individuals of that type gather information, make decisions, and organize themselves.⁵

Response to MBTI Criticism

Common criticism to MBTI application is that the "typological portraits [are] like astrological horoscopes" with rarely any negative information included in their descriptions.⁶ While the type descriptions in current MBTI literature are lacking in adverse diction, the point of typology is to explain personality preferences. These preferences are neither good nor bad, but rather have both strengths and weaknesses. MBTI scholars are also quick to note that an individual's type "is only an explanation" and "never an excuse" to absolve them from either ethical or

professional failings.⁷ Another criticism of personality typology is that it categorizes individuals into "rigid boxes." While MBTI portraits might include some descriptions that individuals find more accurate than others, it should not be a reason to dismiss the entire portrait as whole. A key point to understanding typological preferences is that they are just that, preferences. If someone is right- or left-handed, it does not mean that he does not use his non-dominant hand; rather, he *prefers* to use his dominant hand. The same analogy applies to an individual's MBTI preference.⁸

Others skeptics argue that the MBTI lacks absolute validity. MBTI scholars do not deny that psychological types are not 100 percent accurate for every individual. Typology experts Otto Kroeger and Janet M. Thuesen state "there are no absolutes" in one's type as "gender ethnicity, values, [and] socioeconomic factors" also influence the core of one's psyche.⁹ Therefore, it is inaccurate to

say that individuals of the same type will behave exactly the same. However, MBTI scholars also disagree that a personality type needs to be unerringly precise in order to be useful for understanding one's personality. Gauging the overall validity of one's MBTI-identified type requires life experiences to serve as empirical evidence.¹⁰ Only with possession of that data can one test the accuracy of his MBTI portrait and modify it to other type.

Regardless of its criticisms, the MBTI still remains the foremost method of qualifying personality types. Evidence in this assertion rests in the fact that over 2 million people took the MBTI in 1990, *before* the advent of the Internet. Furthermore, prestigious companies and institutions such as HSBC (Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation), American Telephone & Telegraph, IBM, Ford Motors, General Electric, McDonnell-Douglas, and the Department of Defense have all utilized



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the MBTI and its applications in order to improve staff efficiency.¹¹

Military Application of the MBTI

While several civilian companies have used the MBTI in their operations to improve performance in the business environment, military leaders can also glean crucial information about their subordinates through the MBTI. The personality portrait provided following the completion of an MBTI assessment has several applications for military leaders, the first of which is that a personality type reveals to leaders how their subordinates naturally process information. Military psychologist Charles W. Bray asserted, "the methods and knowledge of the psychologist are also useful in training men."¹² MBTI psychology portraits validate Bray's postulation. Based on their temperament, subordinates are more adept at processing either details and facts or theory and possibilities. Additionally, those of differing psychological types prefer to either learn in a group or by self-study.¹³ Therefore, recognition of subordinates' personality preferences in synthesizing information allows Marine leaders to best tailor their unit PME programs to their Marines.

In addition to gaining a greater understanding of how their subordinates process information, the study of typology also provides Marine leaders with insight into what influences their subordinates' decision-making processes. An individual's personality portrait depicts whether logic, justice, and objectivity trump empathy, relationships, and subjectivity in achieving a decision.¹⁴ Knowledge of their subordinates' personality-driven motivations will aid commanders in formulating their specific guidance and orders to each subordinate. The implicit knowledge of their subordinates' personality types also assists unit commanders in maximizing their staff's potential as the commander can form planning teams with a heterogeneous mixture of temperaments, assuming the staff includes a myriad personality types rather than a homogenous group. A team of diverse psychological types has the potential to create solutions that take into account



Learn to understand how they process information. (Photo by Cpl Joseph Karwick.)

several different methods of thought rather than a staff of identical temperaments.

Another vital aspect of a subordinate's personality revealed through study of their MBTI results is how they prefer to communicate. *Warfighting* (Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1), states that the Marine leaders must "exploit the human ability to *communicate implicitly...through mutual understanding...or even anticipating each other's thoughts*" because it "is a faster and more effective way to communicate." [author emphasis].¹⁵ A thorough comprehension between seniors and subordinates of their personality profiles directly supports this directive. Through cognizance of how each processes information and makes decisions, seniors and subordinates can become faster at developing implicit communication because of their mutual psychological understanding. Such speed could be a vital commodity in future contingency response missions.

Not only do leaders discover valuable insight into how their subordinates process information, make decisions, and communicate with others by analyzing their psychological type, leaders also learn the best methods to admonish and praise their subordinates. In regard to application of praise in the military, the famed naval officer John Paul Jones

remarked succinctly "no meritorious act of a subordinate should pass without its reward, even if the reward is only a word of approval."¹⁶ An MBTI profile discloses to superiors effective methods to show appreciation to deserving subordinates based on their personality temperament. Without understanding the differences in psychological preference, a leader giving praise might issue approval in such a way that the subordinate does not receive it in the manner the senior desires. Therefore, leaders must understand both their own type and that of their subordinates in order to ensure that leaders achieve the correct effect in bestowing praise.¹⁷ Criticism is no different; each personality type reacts to admonishment differently. Therefore, just as leaders must affirm individuals in personality-focused methods in order to achieve optimal effects, they must also rebuke subordinates in specifically tailored ways.

Recommendations for MBTI Use in the Marine Corps

Despite its pragmatic application, the Marine Corps doesn't offer any formalized period of instruction on the MBTI or its uses in any formalized PME program or school curriculum. In order to utilize the benefits from personality typology, all Marines should take the MBTI at recruit training and

TBS. The results of that assessment should become a part of a Marine's Marine Online (MOL) profile which unit leaders can access. Marine Officers should receive formal instruction on basic typology during TBS and take a refresher course via MarineNet as a part of annual training requirements. As a part of career-level school, either resident or non-resident, captains should undergo MBTI certification provided by an accredited authority in order to further their comprehension of personality types. Enlisted Marines should receive initial instruction on the MBTI beginning at the sergeant level as a part of Sergeant's Course. Additional training should occur as a part of the Advanced Course curriculum. Based on personal observations, MBTI-certified company-level commanders and above should have the authority to edit their Marines' personality types in MOL. Furthermore, commanders should disclose their MBTI profile to their subordinates in order to facilitate implicit guidance to their personal preferences and command climate.

Leaders will find the greatest benefits of typology on a one-to-one basis. Leaders lose the advantages of applying type-tailored interactions to subordinates in proportion to the number of different types in a group since the leader will be unable to refine the personal communication to best suit a specific temperament. Therefore, it is on the individual level, such as a part of the habitual teacher-scholar relationship between seniors and subordinates, where leaders can enjoy the greatest benefits of MBTI application. Marine leaders can integrate typology seamlessly into existing personal interactions such as the Marine Corps Mentorship Program and counseling process. Currently, MBTI certification through the Center for Applications of Psychological Type (CAPT) is a 35-hour syllabus divided into a 4-day schedule costing \$1,280.00 per person at the government rate. CAPT has the ability to send mobile training teams to provide both certification "and custom-designed, MBTI programs" to sites of the trainees choosing which would eliminate any possible student temporary additional duty costs.¹⁸ Given the

pre-existing systems for both training and implementation, the integration of MBTI application into the Marine Corps would be a simple process.

Summary

Fledgling military psychologists first viewed their field as a "practical subject" for "practical purposes," such as developing job classification tests like the current Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery.¹⁹ It was not long, however, before they discerned that "astute military leader[s] will never undervalue the human factor" in their commands and that they must "be quick to observe the most tactful way of approaching different types of personalities."²⁰ Kroeger and Thuesen affirm the predecessors in their assertion that "one's effectiveness as a leader depends on [the understanding of the personality types] of one's followers."²¹ The MBTI provides an invaluable and tested instrument to leaders so that they can accomplish both the former and the latter. While perhaps unorthodox to some Marines, the use of typology in military leadership runs parallel to retired Marine LtGen Paul K. Van Riper's charge to "cast your nets" widely in order to spurn new and creative thought in solving complex problems of the modern world.²² The net for understanding subordinates needs widening, and utilizing the MBTI is one way to fulfill that requirement. In order to achieve the intent of the timeless leadership principle to know one's Marines, the Corps as a whole should step forward with embracing the MBTI as an invaluable leadership tool.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Leading Marines*, Fleet Marine Force Manual 1-0 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995), 105.
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Mentorship Program*, Marine Corps Order 1500.58 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), 1.
3. Otto Kroeger, Hile Rutledge, and Janet M. Thuesen, *Type Talk at Work: How the 16 Personality Types Determine Your Success on the Job* (New York: Dell, 1993), 7. Otto Kroeger and

Janet M. Thuesen, *Type Talk: The 16 Personality Types That Determine How We Live, Love, and Work* (New York: Dell, 1988), 16.

4. Kroeger and Thuesen, 281.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 17, 26.
6. *Ibid.*, 215.
7. *Ibid.*, 73.
8. *Ibid.*, 14, 214.
9. Kroeger, Rutledge, and Thuesen, 44–45.
10. *Ibid.*, x, 7–9.
11. Kroeger and Thuesen, 28–29.
12. Charles W. Bray, *Psychology and Military Proficiency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University), 1948, 4.
13. Kroeger and Thuesen, 28–29.
14. *Ibid.*, 31–32.
15. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), 79.
16. U.S. Department of the Navy, *Reef Points: 2001–2002*, 96th ed. (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Academy Press, 1995), 122.
17. Marilyn Bates and David Keirse, *Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types*, 5th edition (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis, 1984), 130.
18. Center for Applications of Psychological Type, *MBTI On-Site Training*, accessed at <http://www.capt.org>.
19. Bray, xi.
20. Norman C. Meier, *Military Psychology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), xiii, p. 185.
21. Kroeger, Rutledge, and Thuesen, 66.
22. LtGen Paul K. Van Riper, USMC(Ret), "Address to Expeditionary Warfare School," Quantico, 30 August 2012.

