In her examination of neurological correlations of personal temperament, Helen Fisher, research professor, author, and speaker, found that personality is not random. Deeply ingrained in genetics, human behavior and individual traits play a major role in dictating leadership approaches and styles.

By Marta Perez Drake

Why does someone fall in love with a particular individual versus any other? That was the question that first compelled biological anthropologist Helen Fisher to begin her research into understanding personality differences. “People talk about having chemistry with someone, and so I thought there must be some biology behind that,” says Fisher. Fast forward to present day, when 13 million people in 40 countries have completed the Fisher Chemistry Test—the results of which have fueled her most recent books, as well as numerous articles on the brain science of human social behavior.

Fisher, NACUBO's 2015 Leadership Series speaker, is a member of the Center for Human Evolutionary Studies, Rutgers University; and senior research fellow at the Kinsey Institute, Indiana University. Since 1983, she has also served as an anthropological commentator and consultant for businesses and the media. In her upcoming keynote presentations at NACUBO programs throughout this year, Fisher will impart her knowledge of genetics, brain architecture, and neurochemistry related to four broad styles of thinking and behaving, and discuss ways to recognize and influence each temperament style.

In this interview, Fisher provides an overview of these behavior styles that influence leadership skills, and offers insights for better communicating and working with a diverse team.

Before we discuss your research into behavior styles, how would you characterize the importance of understanding personality within the workplace?

There are two basic components of personality. The first is culture, which is everything you grew up to believe and do, say, and think. The second is biology—all those traits that emerge from your nature as a human being. That second half of this puzzle is the basis of much of my research. I believe that the more you become familiar with the different patterns of personality, the better equipped you are to respond to and connect with colleagues and members of your team.
In fact, the vast majority of problems at work are not about the bottom line or the way an organization is structured, but are the result of people not getting along. And most often, these disagreements stem from an inability to understand one another’s perspectives and behaviors.

Most of us were taught the Golden Rule as children—to treat other people as we wish to be treated. I would rework that premise into what is now called the Platinum Rule: We first need to understand who someone else is and then treat that individual in the way he or she wants to be treated, not in the way we want to be treated, because that may not be the same way.

**You center your research on four broad styles of behavior. Can you provide an overview of each style?**

Absolutely. The work I’ve done through my personality questionnaire and subsequent brain scan studies shows that we have evolved four broad brain systems, each linked with a particular constellation of personality traits. These are the dopamine, serotonin, testosterone, and estrogen systems. While my research does explore gender differences, its focus is much broader. We all express all four of these brain systems, but each of us expresses some of the traits in each of these brain systems more than others. It’s a matter of ratios. In fact, each of us is a unique combination of all these systems and their associated traits. But, I have definitely found four broad patterns to personality, based on brain architecture and biology.

To start, some of the basic traits linked in the academic literature with the dopamine system are curiosity, energy, spontaneity, enthusiasm, optimism, independence, creativity, and open-mindedness. Of course, there is always a potential downside to personality traits. A person who tends to be energetic can go overboard and become manic. Someone spontaneous can end up being reckless. People who are very creative can make a lot of money or lose a lot of money when they become impulsive.

The second broad style of thinking and behavior is linked with the serotonin system. Traits include being conventional, following the rules, and respecting authority. These individuals like the familiar. They are cautious, though not fearful. They tend to be calm and controlled, and think concretely. They’re less theoretical, and more literal and detail-oriented. They’re meticulous, orderly, and systemized. They seek loyalty and want to belong. On the downside, they can be stubborn, moralistic, controlling, and close-minded.

A third style is linked with the testosterone system. These individuals tend to be direct, decisive, bold, analytical, logical, tough-minded, skeptical, and emotionally contained. They like to debate. They get to the point. They focus on the goal. They do more of what I call step thinking—getting rid of what they regard as ancillary or extra data to focus on what they think is important. They are quite rank-oriented and competitive. They tend to have very good spatial skills and can also be extremely inventive. On the downside, they may be aloof, demanding, impatient, and uncompromising. On average, they have poor social skills and don’t often pick up on the nuances of how someone may feel.

The fourth style is the estrogen system. The traits linked with this system are what I call web thinking—the ability to see the big picture and to contextualize. These individuals are empathetic, introspective, imaginative, and intuitive. They are long-term thinkers. They express real mental flexibility and the ability to tolerate ambiguity. They have what are called executive social skills—the ability to read posture, gesture, tone of voice, and facial expressions. They seek win-win solutions, are not rank oriented, and are quite emotionally expressive. They also
tend to have excellent verbal talents. Yet, on the downside, they can be unforgiving, hypersensitive, indecisive, and scattered.

Talk more about these traits in terms of leadership potential. For instance, what might be a particular trait that is more common among CEOs and other individuals in senior positions? First, I think it’s important to keep in mind that we all are some combination of all these brain systems. Within the dopamine and the serotonin styles, you will find as many women as men. While more men score high on the traits linked with the testosterone system, and more women score higher on traits linked with the estrogen system, there are plenty of women who express many of the traits linked with the testosterone system, and men who show several traits linked with the estrogen system. And, all four of these personality styles can produce effective leaders, though their leadership styles will vary in basic ways.

That said, I do think that people who express different styles of thinking and behavior tend to gravitate to different interests in their work. For instance, individuals who express more of the traits linked with the testosterone system tend to climb the ladder toward the CEO or other senior leadership positions. Those involved in mergers and acquisitions—which require risk, strategic understanding, inventiveness, and some healthy skepticism—are probably going to be more expressive of testosterone. I think you’re going to find in all the tech fields more men and women with high-testosterone traits, since these careers require spatial and mathematical skills. I refer to these individuals as Directors. They are commanding leaders who primarily express strategic (systems) intelligence.

Individuals who score high on the estrogen system—which is linked with empathy, nurturing, and trusting, as well as linguistic and people skills—may gravitate to the not-for-profit sphere and fields like early childhood education. That’s because these people tend to be quite empathetic and to have a broad holistic view. These are what I call Negotiators. They are socially savvy leaders primarily exhibiting diplomatic (people) intelligence.

Accountants and some money managers are probably going to be more expressive of the serotonin system, because these men and women like to stick to the rules and enjoy really digging into the details; they don’t need to be overly imaginative. I refer to individuals who are expressive of the serotonin system as Builders or Stabilizers. They provide authoritative leadership and possess a logistical (goods and services) intelligence.

Finally, those who are highly expressive of the dopamine system—whom I call Explorers or Innovators—are likely to be artists, poets, writers, and business entrepreneurs. As risk takers, these people tend to start companies. They can come up with all kinds of ideas; but if they are smart, they get other people to manage what they create, since very often they don’t have the same kind of patience as someone with a high-serotonin personality style who is good at managing people and paying attention to logistics. Individuals who are expressive of a high-dopamine style tend to be charismatic leaders with a creative and tactical (timing) intelligence.

Our CFO members work with faculty quite a bit, and a common refrain is that many faculty don’t typically have an interest in the bottom line. So where would you put faculty in this mix? I would think that most people in the technology, math, and engineering departments who deal less with people and more with systems will have traits
linked with the testosterone style. Conversely, I imagine that faculty in economics, psychology, and sociology may well score high on the estrogen scale, because these are fields that require people skills and a sense of the big picture. More than likely, your high-dopamine style will be your art department and may well be found in your literature and anthropology departments. Of course these all are generalizations, but I am convinced that people who gravitate to different disciplines are probably going to have different perspectives on life—as well as variations in their biology.

All this is a good starting point to understanding these personality differences. However, as a leader your next step should be learning how to communicate with individuals who express a very different style of thinking and behaving, because this enables you to better focus your communication in effective ways to reach different audiences and different stakeholders.

**What should leaders keep in mind when trying to communicate or convey a particular message or a particular process to a group, given that the people within that group—whether faculty members, students, parents, board members, or external community members—may possess the full range of different personality types?**

It's true that you can't please all people all the time. What I would do if making a pitch to a particular community is to try to figure out the predominant personality traits and values of that audience. I would certainly give a nod to all four styles of thinking and behaving, but I might focus my remarks on what I regard as the dominant style of the group.

For instance, your local community is going to have different interests and concerns than those of your board of directors, or students or parents. Most important is to remember that each one of these groups is going to have a predominant group style, so you can change some of your behavior to address that group style.

As part of my research, I’ve done a study of 178,000 people to see if individuals within these four broad styles of thinking and behaving not only say different things, but actually use different words when describing something. Sure enough, all four styles tend to use certain groups of words.

For example, those expressive of the dopamine system are drawn to words like _adventure, spontaneous, energy, new, fun, traveling, outgoing, passion, and active_. For the high-serotonin type, top word choices include _family, honesty, caring, morals, respect, loyal, values, loyaling, and trustworthy_. Whereas you can better connect with those expressing a high-testosterone style with words like _intelligent, intellectual, challenge, debate, ambition, driven, and politics_. Individuals with a high-estrogen personality style prefer to use words like _passion, real, kind, heart, sensitive, sweet, learning, random, and empathetic_.

As you can see, these are very different sets of words. So, if you think that most of the people in the group you’re talking to are of a particular style of thinking and behaving, use the words that will most connect with that group. You can also employ a different body language and communication approach depending on the predominant group style.

**What are some good examples of that?**

When trying to connect with the high-dopamine style, be energetic, optimistic, and enthusiastic. Be flexible and creative, speculate and theorize, be daring, and offer possibilities and choices. Definitely don't be repetitive or dwell too long on one point. Don't require rigid schedules or smother them with details.

With the high-serotonin style, you want to be punctual, orderly, calm, respectful, and less emotional. Provide all the details, discuss concrete topics and proven principles, and accentuate tradition. Don't speculate, exaggerate, leave issues unresolved, or push for decisions without providing sufficient time to think.

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Faculty are perhaps more problematic. Academic faculty really are independent, so it's more difficult to characterize them as a group. If I were working with or addressing faculty, I would assume that among their other traits, perhaps by department or discipline, they all express much of the dopaminem system—particularly curiosity, creativity, spontaneity, energy, and the need for autonomy. So, in part, I would appeal to that.

Since your board of directors consists of primarily financial people, they want to know about the bottom line and where the institution is headed. With them, I would stick with the details. In fact, before presenting the big picture, I would provide the details first to build to that larger framework. For other groups, you may need to do the reverse—provide the big picture first and then fill in the blanks with the details.

Once you become familiar with these different styles of thinking and behaving, you will almost intuitively know the style of the larger group and can respond accordingly. In fact, it's not only what you say, or how you structure your remarks, but also the words you choose as you talk.

**What do you mean by that—the importance of the words you choose?**
To connect with individuals with a high-testosterone style, it's best to be direct, logical, clear, and unemotional. Avoid sustained eye contact, provide the big picture before presenting the details, and ask what they think instead of how they feel. Don't minimize achievements, use moralistic statements, make small talk, be long-winded or redundant, or talk about theories without providing facts.

And, when addressing individuals of a high-estrogen style, you will have better success if you face them, lean toward them, listen, smile, be friendly and considerate, find points of agreement, think contextually, and balance facts with ideas and emotions. Don't come across as competitive, confrontational, aggressive, or impersonal. And don't interrupt or push for a decision before allowing time to explore options.

Bottom line, you can convey essentially the same message and provide your point of view to any of these styles, but you will be more successful if you can offer that message in a way that the particular group or individual can hear it.

So, if we can learn how to modify our behavior in response to another person, can we alter our own personality type or are we hardwired to a particular type? And if we can change, what benefit is there in doing so?

Many academics also want to know the answer to this question. My observation is that we absolutely can change. People who have a predisposition to alcoholism can give up drinking. People who feel that they talk too much can cultivate listening skills. People who are stubborn can attempt to be more flexible. But, to see how changeable we really are, scientists do what is called test/retest. They give people a questionnaire and then give the same questionnaire six months later or six years later or even 20 years later to see how much the participant changes his or her responses. Cumulatively, studies like this tend to show that, more than 80 percent of the time, people do not change dramatically. They may change somewhat. We all can change somewhat. But, can a very curious person become not curious? I doubt that.

Perhaps more important for leaders is to know what they’re not as good at so that they can surround themselves with others who have the traits they lack. So, underlying this effort to get to know the personality traits of your colleagues and team members is to understand who you are—and who you are not—so that you know where to look for complementary talent to build the best team possible.

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