

Digging deeper: Getting the inside scoop through profiling

Business owners need to understand the people they deal with. Unfortunately, the information they glean often does not tell the whole story.

With both associates and clients, we constantly face critical "personality-related" business issues. A

INSIDER VIEW



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boss or peer might smell "fishy." A competitor's management may make all the right moves and connections, leaving us jealous and confused.

Perhaps we're doing a joint business venture. In these and many other situations, pat answers don't work, the stakes are high, and we can't ask the target or avoid the issue. What to do?

We need insight into the target's personality and behavior. Simple fact gathering can occasionally be adequate. But we can go much further, to the heart of an individual's psychology. Hard data must be gathered and a psychological portrait developed. This knowledge can guide us toward appropriate action.

These days, a data search starts (but only starts) with the Internet. Search engines yield the basics. Personal-fact sites can provide addresses, mortgages, felony convictions, etc. But remember: Clever or private people leave few tracks.

For better hard data, consider hiring a serious detective who has quick access to high-quality facts. Executives can also glean their own data by phone. It costs nothing, and the right source may be a gold mine of information.

If facts alone don't show you what to do, it's time to generate a psychological profile, to pin down probable behavior, values, motivations and other critical factors.

The profiling psychologist knows how a given person's personality is structured. Thus, he or she knows how the person might think, feel and experience the world. Most important, he can infer how those elements lead to particular behavior. This knowledge leads to a plan of action. The more we have riding on the situation, the more sense his or her input makes.

Does it make a difference? Here are two real-world examples:

The CEO of a debtor business stopped paying on a \$150,000 loan, claiming fraud on the part of the company's president. Repayment was promised after a planned bankruptcy. The "safe" course was to repossess the collateral and lose 80 cents on the dollar. After all legalities, it came down to the CEO's word. An exhaustive background check put the CEO in good

light. The client took no action. The amount owed was paid in full.

In another case, the dying patriarch of a family business was squandering millions and bankrupting the organization out of negligence and malice. The heir apparent and his lawyers could do nothing. It was determined that the patriarch would be invulnerable until his final downhill slide. The heir planned accordingly, stepped in at the right moment to rescue the patriarch psychologically, and simultaneously save the company from oblivion.

How might you institute strategic personality profiling in your company? First, help staff understand how it can add value by reviewing internal and client-related situations. Also, each industry has its typical and recurring problems. In the lending/leasing field, for example, the issues are whether to approve loans and whether to foreclose.

You need, at minimum, an employee who can gather initial data and access to a skilled consultant. Some clients save money by gathering information themselves and using the psychologist only for brief consults. Some companies with predictable, recurring needs have more people involved, outsource to private firms, or discretely fold their profiling into "executive development" activities.

The worth of profiling depends on the gravity of the situation. If critical, it makes sense to spend more. It can be difficult to predict how long a given case will take: One situation might be quickly resolved; another might remain confusing after much work. In any case, the client should expect diligence, a realistic action plan and an estimate of the profiler's confidence in his findings.

Legally, watch what hard data you gather. For example, in some states, you can legally learn only about a felony conviction, not an arrest, and you can obtain financial information only with the target's consent.

Instead of just bulling our way through business situations, let's admit there's more to learn, and do the learning. Such crucial issues as a business win, happiness in a partnership, or economic survival are too important to leave to chance. If we find out who we're dealing with, and use this knowledge to develop a first-rate plan of action, we have a huge advantage.

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