

The FIRO Element-B Instrument: Its Use in Team Building & Executive Coaching

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In my work as a consultant, trainer, and executive coach I use many preference instruments (or psychological inventories, if you prefer that term). You are probably already familiar with several of them (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Kirton's KAI, Change Style Indicator, etc.). I will not attempt to convince you about the value of preference instruments here.

One instrument I have found to be especially valuable is Will Schutz's FIRO Element-B Instrument. The instrument measures preferences for inclusion, control, and openness. Needless to say, these three preferences affect our behavior as team members and as executives. Awareness of our own preferences and the preferences of other individuals significantly affects our effectiveness.

A Bit of Background

Will Schutz, Ph.D. introduced his theory of interpersonal relations in 1958. He called his theory FIRO, Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation. He has developed and revised several instruments since that time.

Element B, the focus of this special report, provides feedback on eighteen aspects of interpersonal behavior. As stated above, Element B focuses on preferences for inclusion, control, and openness. Let's take a look at each of these preferences and how they affect our behavior as team members and leaders.

Inclusion

Don't confuse this concept with introversion. Introversion is a concept developed by Carl Jung. Jung's theory is the basis for the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). According to Jung, introversion pertains to how you recharge your "batteries" and process information (internal vs. external).

Introverts want to get away from people at the end of the day to recharge and reflect. Their orientation (Jung's word) toward the world is internal rather than external.

While there is high correlation between preference for introversion and preference for inclusion, they are not the same thing. Inclusion concerns our preference for working with others as opposed to working alone. Some introverts (an MBTI measurement) prefer to work with others during the day

(high “inclusion” on Elements B), but prefer solitude for recharging during the evening.

Individuals who are high on inclusion tend to start conversations with strangers and invite others to join the group.

Control

Control is the aspect of the Elements-B Instrument that is often misunderstood. A high number on control (seven to nine on a scale of nine) does not mean you are a “control freak.” Being “in-charge” or being highly directive is appropriate in some situations. Of course, it could be inappropriate in other situations, such as supervising a team of highly trained, highly motivated professionals.

Individuals who score high on the control dimension often seek out situations where others clearly define responsibilities. Everybody has some desire to control others and some desire to be controlled (directed, if you prefer that term).

Openness

Openness concerns preferences for being open versus closed. This dimension is not about honesty, but the willingness to reveal “personal” aspects of you.

Some individuals enjoy working relationships where they can talk about their feelings and their personal life. Others prefer to see fellow employees as colleagues rather than friends.

Everybody has some desire for openness with co-workers, and also a desire for privacy. But there are differences in matter of degree.

Initiate vs. Receive

The Element-B instrument provides feedback on how you perceive your level of initiating interaction with others (DO) and the level of interaction received from others (GET).

Current vs. Desired

The instrument also offers feedback on current behaviors (SEE) versus desired behaviors (WANT). It indicates how you want to behave towards others and how you want others to behave toward you.

Differences in Scores

Differences in current (SEE) and desired (WANT) scores indicate levels of dissatisfaction. Small differences (three or less) typically indicate little or no stress for the individual. Larger differences may indicate areas where the individual should change his/her interpersonal behaviors.

How to Interpret the Scores

The scores on Element B are not stable. Unlike the results of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and Kirton's KAI that are stable over time, your Element B scores will change over time. Element B scores are a "snapshot" of where you are currently. When circumstances change, scores typically change.

The ultimate determination of the meaning of the scores is your responsibility. While you should work with a trained, certified Elements B practitioner, you should determine the meaning after serious reflection. The scores are starting points for your personal exploration. Element B does not determine your "type" (as is found in the MBTI).

Finally, don't label scores with judgments. The scores are neither good nor bad. Whether behaviors are appropriate or effective in particular situations is the key to interpreting the scores. Awareness is the goal of this instrument.

According to Schutz (1994), rigidity leads to all kinds of difficulties in teamwork and leadership. Individuals tend to become immovable from their places of comfort. Leaders are more effective when they have a host of behaviors to draw upon. All points on all scales are appropriate in some situations.

Team Compatibility

Element B scores provide a means of determining team compatibility. Team compatibility is necessary to accomplish team goals.

In my consulting work with teams, I use an overhead projector to display the team members' individual scores in columns of side-by-side numbers. (Obviously, I don't reveal the team member's names at this point.) After the team members view the columns of numbers for a while, they begin to understand the numbers as simply data (not as good or bad). Once

this happens, it is easy to lead a discussion about how to make the team more effective.

Implications for Leadership

As a leader, you know there is no one style or pattern of leadership behavior that succeeds in all situations. To be an effective leader, you must have self-awareness about your preferences and style; plus you must be able to quickly determine the preferences and styles of others. That is why I use preference instruments, including the Element B, in my consulting work with teams and individual executives.

The Element-B instrument provides scores on the individual leader's preferences for inclusion, control, and openness. By comparing the leader's preferences with those of his/her team members, opportunities and potential problems are quickly revealed. As a consultant, I can then suggest a variety of strategies to improve the leader's effectiveness.

Recommended Reading

Schutz, W. (1994). "The Human Element." San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Thompson, H. (2000). "Introduction to Element B in Organizations."

Watkinsville, GA: Wormhole Publications.

Recommended Training

Contact my friends, Dr. Dick Thompson and Debra Cannarella, at High Performing Systems. Inc. They offer the best available Element-B Certification workshop. They can be reached at 800-535-8445 or at www.hpsys.com.

Conclusion

The FIRO Element B instrument is only one instrument used by executive coaches. For more information on the FIRO Element B and other assessment instruments check out chapter 6 of Mike's book, "Strategic Organizational Learning."

<http://www.strategic-organizational-learning.com/>

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