

Using the Myers-Briggs® Personality Type to Create a Culture Adapted to the 21st Century

CASE STUDY AT A GLANCE

Organization

Hallmark Cards, Inc., has earned a reputation and cultivated a culture befitting its positive, uplifting products. Underlying its core mission is a belief in the very best of human nature that shapes its policies, which place people at the forefront of concern.

Challenge

While Hallmark's mission and philosophy have not wavered, the market, workplace, and competitive landscape have become more dynamic, global, and diverse and technology has remade communication. Hallmark's leadership has set a goal to evolve with the times by changing its mind-set from one of a manufacturing organization to one of a consumer-centric company that fully engages key audiences.

Solution

Hallmark employs a program called Steppingstones, which uses the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® instrument and other tools to open the lines of communication by giving managers greater self-understanding and insight into how their actions and communications are perceived by others. The program also provides a framework for a more cohesive work setting by improving communication and understanding of how to interact and persuade effectively.

Results

Steppingstones has contributed to improvements in efficiency and interpersonal communication, as decisions are now reached more quickly and thoughts are conveyed with more clarity. Additionally, organizational knowledge of Myers-Briggs personality type has created a common language, which has enabled Hallmark to work more cohesively toward a unified goal and react to the realities of a global economy and a revolutionized communication landscape.



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A COMPANY MADE OF PEOPLE, FOR PEOPLE

As a company that has helped people celebrate life events, commemorate important occasions, and express their most intimate feelings for nearly one hundred years, Hallmark Cards, Inc.—still privately owned and family run—is an American institution. Over the past century, the company has earned a reputation and cultivated a culture befitting the positive, uplifting products it offers. Not surprisingly, underlying its core mission is a belief in the very best of human nature, including people’s ability to accomplish great things and find deep meaning in relationships. This belief has always shaped Hallmark’s policies, which place people—both within and outside the organization—at the forefront of concern.

CHANGING TIMES

One hundred years is a long time, and although Hallmark’s mission and core philosophy have not wavered, the market, the workplace, and the competitive landscape have shifted dramatically, becoming more dynamic, global, and diverse than ever before. Furthermore, the Internet, mobile technologies, and other innovations have completely remade the communication landscape, connecting people in ways never thought possible. Recognizing how such shifts directly impact a company that earns its revenue by communicating feelings, Hallmark’s top management has made the objective of adapting corporate culture to the realities of this decade its highest priority.

The company has set a goal to evolve with the times by changing its overall mind-set, from one of a manufacturing organization focused on putting product on shelves to one of a consumer-centric company that fully engages its key audiences. In particular, it wants to develop leaders that view situations from multiple perspectives and an agile management culture of accountability in which people work toward each others’ success and build their agendas to support the company’s goals. The new vision includes leaders that inspire the hearts and minds of employees and instill confidence, and an organization capable of efficiently implementing the right ideas at the right time.

STEPPING-STONES TO A BETTER COMPANY

Mary Beth Ebmeyer, HR Manager, Corporate Development, and Michelle Hibbs, Senior HR Specialist, are among those responsible for guiding the company through this shift. Under their department’s direction, the company has employed several initiatives to accomplish this change, including a program called Steppingstones designed to open the organization’s lines of communication by giving mid- and upper-level managers greater self-understanding and insight into how their actions and communication efforts are perceived by others. As greater self-awareness is key to the program’s success, one of its central features is the use of an instrument designed to shed light on how personality shapes thought and behavior—the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*[®] personality assessment.

The Myers-Briggs® instrument, the world's most widely used personality assessment, is based on Carl Jung's personality type theory. According to type theory, we each have an innate fundamental personality type that, while not controlling behavior, shapes and influences the way we understand the world, process information, and socialize. The Myers-Briggs assessment helps individuals determine which one of the sixteen personality types fits them best, a discovery process that can uncover an abundance of information, including factors directly related to work habits, interpersonal relationships, and other elements affecting workplace cohesion. The sixteen four-letter types are based on preferences for Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I), Sensing (S) or Intuition (N), Thinking (T) or Feeling (F), and Judging (J) or Perceiving (P).

A UNIFYING PERSPECTIVE

One of the main goals of the program, which began in 2007, is to align the individual perspective of managers with the overall company perspective. This began with a company overview from 1975 to the present that traces the evolution of the leadership and competitive climate over that period. With the company perspective established, the next step was exploring personal perspective and how it relates to the ability of individuals to affect change within the company. This begins with participants taking the Myers-Briggs assessment, which gives them a foundation for understanding their own personality, along with its unique characteristics, that comes into play throughout the program.

REEVALUATING THE "PEOPLE FILES"

With the perspective-based foundation in place, the program then takes participants through a series of activities designed to help them gain a solid understanding of how they tend to interact and operate within a larger team. One of the key concepts explored during this phase of the program involves the idea of mental "files."

"We tend to place people into 'files' according to our perceptions of them, which are often skewed," said Ebmeyer. "We use the Myers-Briggs instrument to dig deeper into conversations and determine the real intent of the persons engaged. More often than not, the intent is actually positive, even if the delivery comes across as negative."

At one point, for example, participants analyze videotaped sessions of themselves interacting within a group setting. The Myers-Briggs assessment results help shed light on how individuals may be perceived by others, giving participants an understanding of how personality type affects communication style, and how that style may come across to others. This and other exercises give them the tools they need to improve interactions with coworkers, both in expressing their own intentions and discerning the true intentions of others with more clarity.

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—Mary Beth Ebmeyer,
HR Manager, Corporate Development

MANAGING THE “EMOTIONAL HIJACK”

Understanding of intent also comes into play as participants explore the theme of emotional intelligence. They discuss a concept referred to as the “emotional hijack,” manifested during “fight-or-flight” responses, in which the more primitive, emotional portion of the brain takes over its more complex, rational functions. This is often the source of regrettable action, or intensely and persistently negative feelings.

“While the emotional hijack may be necessary if you’re escaping a large predator cat, it is not particularly useful in a business setting, where purely emotional responses are almost never appropriate,” said Ebmeyer.

Understanding Myers-Briggs personality type plays an important role in managing these “emotional hijack” scenarios, as responses are often the result of misconstrued intentions between people with different preferences. For example, someone might be sent “through the roof” by an e-mail he or she perceives as rude or confrontational from another type. The reality, however, may be that the person who sent the e-mail meant no offense whatsoever but was simply expressing a legitimate and well-intended concern in a fashion typical of their own personality type.

“Understanding of Myers-Briggs personality type gives managers the ability to check their perception against reality, often helping them avoid taking offense where none is intended,” said Hibbs.

OPENING THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION THE FIRST STEP : PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

An additional goal of the program is creating an environment in which people feel comfortable expressing contrary opinions.

“We are working to create a culture in which people can have more candid conversations,” said Ebmeyer. “I think the Myers-Briggs instrument has given folks the tools to understand why people may not be responding to their communication attempts and take other, more effective approaches.”

According to Ebmeyer, managers—particularly those who may be dealing with “Introverted” types—need to be aware that those individuals may be shutting down discussion without actually hearing what their team has to say. By understanding personality differences and improving their ability to pick up on type-specific cues, they can open the channels of communication and avoid potential landmines. Additionally, it helps people learn how to speak up and express themselves in ways that elicit positive responses.

“We want people to step outside of their comfort zone and say what they need to say,” said Ebmeyer. “However, we want them to continue to interact in a respectful way—we don’t want to lose the things that we like about our culture.”

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A FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE

Steppingstones, with its emphasis on personality type understanding based on the Myers-Briggs instrument, provides a framework for improving communication and increasing the ability of managers to implement positive change and work toward achieving the company's overall goals by understanding how to interact and persuade

more effectively. It also provides the foundation for a more cohesive work setting, in which much of the unnecessary conflict is avoided and ideas are communicated in ways that people respond to positively.

"This process helps managers understand that just because it's not 'their way' doesn't mean it's wrong," said Hibbs. "As departments integrate these principles into their thinking, it opens people's minds to a myriad of ideas."

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF USING THE MYERS-BRIGGS® INSTRUMENT

Though Hallmark has used the Myers-Briggs assessment for decades, the Steppingstones program has greatly expanded the instrument's use, resulting in a tremendous amount of knowledge regarding personality type companywide. As Hibbs puts it, the company is "steeped" in type understanding, and the tool provides distinct advantages when it comes to cross-functional communication.

FLEXIBLE COMMUNICATION

Awareness of personality type is directly tied to people's ability to present their ideas. For example, in order to effectively relay an idea to an ISTJ, you might have to take a dramatically different approach to convince him or her of its validity than you would for, say, an ENFP. This awareness,

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—Michelle Hibbs,
Senior HR Specialist

according to Ebmeyer, has made its way into Hallmark's meeting rooms. "Often during a cross-functional meeting, managers begin by asking attendees their type. This helps the overall flow of communication and is attributable to our widespread use of the Myers-Briggs instrument."

People, she goes on to say, learn how to "flex their preference," understanding that their instinctual way of doing things might not be most effective in all situations. This comes into play in situations where managers communicate in such a way that encourages staff members of different personality types to express themselves. It also gives managers the awareness to recognize when they are getting only one perspective from those around them and to seek the perspective of someone with a different personality type who may provide an invaluable point of view.

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BRIDGING GAPS

Additionally, the Myers-Briggs instrument has provided a great deal of insight into the nature and character of the organization and its complexities. Particularly noteworthy is the contrast between the “Feeling” preference predominantly expressed in the company’s top leadership, and the “Thinking” preference expressed predominantly in mid- and upper-level management. This, according to Hibbs, has led to some very interesting dynamics within the company.

“You have a situation where ‘thinking’ within upper- and mid-level management skews heavily toward bottom-line- oriented decision making but the policies of the organization are often geared toward the ‘feelings’ of the individual,” said Hibbs. “In this kind of environment you can’t assume that mid- and upper-level management understand the reasons why things are being done the way they are.”

Knowledge of personality type, however, helps bridge this potential gap as managers learn to see the value of perspectives that might not come naturally to people whose preferences are not the same as theirs. It also provides top management with the tools it needs to effectively communicate the reasons for its “Feeling” policies to its “Thinking” management staff.

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A TYPE-BASED STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

Understanding of personality type and awareness of the personality makeup of the organization has also shaped overall implementation of change strategy, placing the emphasis on initiating a program that would approach it in the right way.

“The system had become outdated and cumbersome, and we knew we needed to reinvent ourselves,” said Ebmeyer. “However, we didn’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rather, we wanted to build upon the results- oriented, dedicated work ethic and other positive aspects of our culture and help give our managers a wider vision that would enable them to react more strategically to the situation at hand.”

In particular, this involves taking steps to ensure that people understand the reasons behind the proposed changes.

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“Our company is composed predominantly of STJs, who tend to resist change unless they truly understand why it is called for,” said Hibbs. “For this personality type, it is very important to help them see the logical progression that has led us to the place where we currently are, and why these changes are necessary. This understanding has shaped our approach from the beginning.”

RESULTS

More than 1,000 managers have gone through Stepping-stones to date. According to Hibbs and Ebmeyer, the program and its emphasis on the Myers-Briggs assessment have yielded numerous positive results for Hallmark, contributing to the company’s overall efficiency.

To begin with, decisions are being reached faster, and thoughts are delivered with increased clarity. This

is attributable in part to the communication insights gained through the Myers-Briggs instrument and the Steppingstones program, which help managers avoid misunderstandings that often hamper the decision-making process and learn to “flex” their communication styles to their audience.

Additionally, Hibbs and Ebmeyer notice a major improvement in diversity of thought, as people with different personality types become more comfortable speaking their mind and learn how to communicate in ways that appeal to people of other types. Furthermore, as the company gains greater insight into how personality affects relationships, the ability of staff members to connect meaningfully has improved, positively affecting cohesion, motivation, and other items related to interpersonal communication.

In summary, the Myers-Briggs instrument has created a common language with which Hallmark employees can evaluate and develop relationships, which fundamentally underlies all of the aforementioned changes. All of these improvements are enabling Hallmark to work more cohesively toward a unified goal and react to the dynamic, and sometimes hectic, realities of a global economy and a revolutionized communication landscape.

Ebmeyer is optimistic regarding the company’s direction. “Though we have traditionally been a manufacturing company, we’re moving toward becoming a company that understands that it’s really all about helping people stay connected and meeting the needs of the human spirit.”

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is available from
Psychometrics Canada at www.psychometrics.com