

Myers-Briggs® tool helps MBAs optimize their potential

The executives who come to the University of Alberta to earn their MBA degrees have different reasons for seeking the distinction, and they come from all sorts of corporate backgrounds. But there's one thing they have in common: with help from the tools of type, they're learning to optimize their potential as they become masters of business administration.

"These are leaders, executives who are likely jumping to higher-stress roles. They're used to being the boss," says Laurie Hillis, executive education specialist in the U of A's Alberta School of Business. "The idea is to help them learn how to be themselves while also being a part of a diverse team."

Hillis has worked with the school's MBA programs for seven years. It was her expertise with Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) tools that led to her being invited to build an MBTI session into the formal curriculum for MBA students. She was certified to use the MBTI assessment by Psychometrics Canada in 1995.

Hillis leads sessions with full-time and part-time students, including senior managers returning to school for the intensive Executive MBA program. For the team-based EMBA program, Hillis delivers the MBTI session during the first week's orientation.

She says learners run the gamut of leadership roles, from the energy sector to finance to information technology, public sector and not-for-profit. Most are mid-career professionals looking to better their future options. "It's about how to help successful people enter new stages of their careers," she notes.

For Hillis, crafting a helpful session comes with two challenges: meeting the high expectations of executives who commit every other Friday and Saturday to the program, and meeting the standard of excellence for one of the world's top-ranked EMBA programs. With that in mind, she tailors the goals of her MBTI sessions to the program's learning objectives: enhancing individual and team dynamics, understanding the stages teams go through, and leveraging the interplay between polarities such as individual and team performance, or positivity and productivity.

The MBTI Step II tool anchors her sessions, but she also employs the Stress Management Report and Introduction to Type and Leadership for those in the EMBA program. For her half-day sessions with groups of up to 150 regular MBA students, who tend to be younger and less familiar with psychometric tools, she draws on Introduction to Type and Communication along with the MBTI Step II tool.

Hillis encourages looking at type as a way to live more authentically. She cites learners describing themselves as "two different people—one at work and one at home"—a personal-professional split that can be a source of stress. "We want to make it easy for people to see that type is about their whole life."

An important outcome is that teams of learners develop a set of shared norms based on MBTI principles, a "cohort culture" of expected behaviour such as showing mutual respect, honouring others' viewpoints and appreciating diversity. These norms guide them over the next two years as they work in different team configurations—including a final-semester module in China, where they're exposed to a global business climate in which cultural norms may differ.

Hillis says one of the most satisfying results of her MBTI sessions is seeing people drop their protective armour and become more vulnerable with each other: "Once they've normalized their fear, they realize they can just be people together. It's an amazing way to start their journey."

To aid the process, she has participants sign a permission slip for themselves, "to ask for help, to be vulnerable, to not have all the answers, to reschedule a team meeting if that's necessary for them to meet a family commitment."

The aim, she says, is to start to build trust. "We use no titles. We survive and thrive as a cohort."

This year, Hillis expanded her half-day EMBA session to a full day for the first time, and she says learners are benefiting from the longer MBTI component. "It's giving us more time to work through the process and go deeper into building trust and developing guiding principles."

Hillis says she appreciates the chance to be part of a top-notch learning experience for executives. "I feel grateful that my job has given me this kind of opportunity, and I feel honoured to help people learn about themselves.

"This work anchors my own goal of helping people be courageous in their leadership."

Sean Townsend

Laurie Hillis is a senior faculty member at the University of Alberta's Centre for Executive Education and the president of a Calgary-based leadership consulting practice in operation since 1992. She is a Certified Human Resources Professional, a Master Practitioner of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® assessment and a professional certified coach. An accomplished writer on leadership and emotional intelligence, she has consulted to organizations in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

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