



## Most Work Conflicts Aren't Due to Personality

by Ben Dattner

Conflict happens everywhere, including in the workplace. When it does, it's tempting to blame it on personalities. But more often than not, the real underlying cause of workplace strife is the situation itself, rather than the people involved. So, why do we automatically blame our coworkers? Chalk it up to psychology and organizational politics, which cause us to oversimplify and to draw incorrect or incomplete conclusions.

There's a good reason why we're inclined to jump to conclusions based on limited information. Most of us are, by nature, "cognitive misers," a term coined by social psychologists Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor to describe how people have a tendency to preserve cognitive resources and allocate them only to high-priority matters. And the limited supply of cognitive resources we all have is spread ever-thinner as demands on our time and attention increase.

As human beings evolved, our survival depended on being able to quickly identify and differentiate friend from foe, which meant making rapid judgments about the character and intentions of other people or tribes. Focusing on people rather than situations is faster and simpler, and focusing on a few attributes of people, rather than on their complicated entirety, is an additional temptation.

Stereotypes are shortcuts that preserve cognitive resources and enable faster interpretations, albeit ones that may be inaccurate, unfair, and harmful. While few people would feel comfortable openly describing one another based on racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes, most people have no reservations about explaining others' behavior with a personality typology like Myers-Briggs Type Indicator ("She's such an 'INTJ'"), Enneagram, or Color Code ("He's such an 8: Challenger").

Personality or style typologies like Myers-Briggs, Enneagram, the DISC Assessment, Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument, Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument and others have been criticized by academic psychologists for their unproven or debatable reliability and validity. Yet, according to the Association of Test Publishers, the Society for Human Resources, and the publisher of the Myers-Briggs, these assessments are still administered millions of times per year for personnel selection, executive coaching, team building and conflict resolution. As Annie Murphy Paul argues in her insightful book, *The Cult Of Personality Testing*, these horoscope-like personality classifications at best capture only a small amount of variance in behavior, and in combination only explain tangential aspects of

adversarial dynamics in the workplace. Yet, they're frequently relied upon for the purposes of conflict resolution. An ENTP and an ISTJ might have a hard time working together. Then again, so might a Capricorn and a Sagittarius. So might any of us.

The real reasons for conflict are a lot harder to raise — and resolve — because they are likely to be complex, nuanced, and politically sensitive. For example, people's interests may truly be opposed; roles and levels of authority may not be correctly defined or delineated; there may be real incentives to compete rather than to collaborate; and there may be little to no accountability or transparency about what people do or say.

When two coworkers create a safe and imaginary set of explanations for their conflict (“My coworker is a micromanager,” or “My coworker doesn't care whether errors are corrected”), neither of them has to challenge or incur the wrath of others in the organization. It's much easier for them to imagine that they'll work better together if they simply understand each other's personality (or personality type) than it is to realize that they would have to come together to, for example, request that their boss stop pitting them against one another, or to request that HR match rhetoric about collaboration with real incentives to work together. Or, perhaps the conflict is due to someone on the team simply not doing his or her job, in which case talking about personality as being the cause of conflict is a dangerous distraction from the real issue. Personality typologies may even provide rationalizations, for example, if someone says “I am a spontaneous type and that's why I have a tough time with deadlines.” Spontaneous or not, they still have to do their work well and on time if they want to minimize conflict with their colleagues or customers.

Focusing too much on either hypothetical or irrelevant causes of conflict may be easy and fun in the short term, but it creates the risk over the long term that the underlying causes of conflict will never be addressed or fixed.

So what's the right approach to resolving conflicts at work?

First, look at the situational dynamics that are causing or worsening conflict, which are likely to be complex and multifaceted. Consider how conflict resolution might necessitate the involvement, support, and commitment of other individuals or teams in the organization. For example, if roles are poorly defined, a boss might need to clarify who is responsible for what. If incentives reward individual rather than team performance, Human Resources can be called in to help better align incentives with organizational goals.

Then, think about how both parties might have to take risks to change the status quo: systems, roles, processes, incentives or levels of authority. To do this, ask and discuss the question: “If it weren't the two of us in these roles, what conflict might be expected of any two people in these roles?” For example, if I'm a trader and you're in risk management, there is a fundamental difference in our perspectives and priorities. Let's talk about how to optimize the competing goals of profits versus safety, and risk versus return, instead of first talking about your conservative, data-driven approach to decision making and contrasting it to my more risk-seeking intuitive style.

Finally, if you or others feel you must use personality testing as part of conflict resolution, consider using non-categorical, well-validated personality assessments such as the Hogan Personality Inventory or the IPIP-NEO Assessment of the “Big Five” Personality dimensions (which can be taken for free here). These tests, which have ample peer-reviewed, psychometric evidence to support their reliability and validity, better explain variance in behavior than do categorical assessments like the Myers-Briggs, and therefore can better explain why conflicts may have unfolded the way they have. And unlike the Myers-Briggs which provides an “I’m OK, you’re OK”-type report, the Hogan Personality Inventory and the NEO are likely to identify some hard-hitting development themes for almost anyone brave enough to take them, for example telling you that you are set in your ways, likely to anger easily, and take criticism too personally. While often hard to take, this is precisely the kind of feedback that can help build self-awareness and mutual awareness among two or more people engaged in a conflict.

As a colleague of mine likes to say, “treatment without diagnosis is malpractice.” Treatment with superficial or inaccurate diagnostic categories can be just as bad. To solve conflict, you need to find, diagnose and address the real causes and effects — not imaginary ones.



Ben Dattner is an organizational psychologist and the founder of Dattner Consulting LLC in New York City. He is also the author of [The Blame Game: How the Hidden Rules of Credit and Blame Determine our Success or Failure](#). He can be reached at [ben@dattnerconsulting.com](mailto:ben@dattnerconsulting.com)