



# MIND GAMES

**Social dynamics that embrace a variety of personality types can be critical to a board's success, say Brunswick's **ROBERT MORAN** and **SARAH SALKY****

**W**HAT SORT OF TRAINING do board members believe would be most useful for them? Succession planning? Negotiation skills? Leadership development? According to a 2014 survey by the International Finance Corporation, a unit of the World Bank, most directors want to improve their “ability to deal with different personalities” – a sentiment shared by three out of every four who were polled.

This makes sense: we prefer working with people who are similar to us. Yet leaders should be wary of the inclination to see difference as an obstacle. Easy agreement, with little or no debate, can blind directors to important alternatives.

“I’m always amazed at how common groupthink is in corporate boardrooms,” Jeffrey Sonnenfeld of the Yale School of Management says in a 2002 *Harvard Business Review* article. “Directors are, almost without exception, intelligent,

accomplished and comfortable with power. But if you put them into a group that discourages dissent, they nearly always start to conform.”

An abundance of research suggests diverse boards outperform homogeneous ones. Traditionally, diversity has been defined by categories easily seen and measured: experience, gender and ethnicity. And these certainly do help create a balanced, inclusive leadership team. But diversity in appearance does not always translate into diversity of thought, particularly where differences of opinion are not properly valued and encouraged.

The ability to appreciate such personality differences can run counter to human nature. For instance, a study by the *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* journal found that while only half of the general population are extroverts, 96 percent of executives display extroverted personalities. Given that most boards are

staffed by former or current executives, the ratio in boardrooms is fairly similar.

Yet introverts have proven to be exceptional leaders. Both Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi are considered to have been introverts, based on their writing as well as the observations of their contemporaries. Research indicates that introverts also serve as a counterbalance: they invite more conversation, exercise more caution and entertain more analysis than their risk-prone, extroverted counterparts.

Even such a cursory look at these broad types of personalities and the ways they interact can be beneficial to the interactions of a group. Psychiatry pioneer Carl Jung first observed this when he classified people as extroverts or introverts in the 1920s. Building on Jung's work, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator was created in 1943.

Myers-Briggs proposed 16 distinct personality types that describe the way people interact with the world. These are still widely known and used today. But while they can provide interesting insights into patterns of interactions between personalities, they are far from a definitive predictor of how such interactions will fare.

"Myers-Briggs is information that is used to facilitate development and discussion," says Thomas Saporito, Chairman and CEO of management psychologists and consultants RHR International. "Those tests can be really helpful, if used in the right way. But they should never be used as the basis for a hiring decision."

Plenty of other tests have been created since Myers-Briggs. *The Wall Street Journal* reported in 2014 that workplace personality testing was a \$500 million dollar industry, growing between 10 and 15 percent per year. A Swiss startup, Karmagenes, is even experimenting with DNA testing to determine aspects of personality.

Yet none have definitively solved the issue of personality screening, even for low-level employees. And creating a good mix of personalities in the boardroom is a far greater challenge.

"What we know from our experience and from our research is that the dynamics of the board are the differentiators," Saporito says. A board functions best when its different personalities are in tune with one another, regardless of personality, he says. "The devil is in the dynamics."

Sonnenfeld, in his *Harvard Business Review* article, goes further, placing concerns for dynamics above even those of corporate governance. "The key isn't structural, it's social," Sonnenfeld writes. "The



Leaders should be wary of the inclination to see difference as an obstacle

most involved, diligent, value-adding boards may or may not follow every recommendation in the good-governance handbook. What distinguishes exemplary boards is that they are robust, effective social systems."

For executive assessments, Saporito and his team rely on rigorous strategies, often involving psychometrics and cognitive functions analysis. To avoid disturbing the nuanced dynamics of the boardroom, however, keen professional judgment needs to be employed in a less clinical approach.

"So, what would we interview for? It would depend on the dynamics of that particular board," he says. "There is no standard checklist."

The foundation is a clear, detailed company strategy, he says, with the overall board makeup always in mind. "Strategy drives leadership models, drives culture, and ultimately drives the question of fit," Saporito says. "Not only how this person will fit the company and the culture as it is today, but also the culture as it needs to evolve."

Obviously, a difference in personality or point of view alone isn't enough, he says. Executives who "like to fly solo," for instance, without regard for the opinions of the group, should be flagged. "Good board members bring a point of view and they know how to debate that point of view in a way that helps advance the discussion, as opposed to creating a dissonant atmosphere," he says.

If there's one thing leaders could do to ensure that the conversations of its board are constructive, Saporito says, it would be to appoint a "wise, inspired and trustworthy lead director." Open communication can unleash the power of the board, he says, and the lead director is "the key to focus the complex underlying dynamics."

The results from the International Finance Corporation study suggest that directors appreciate the importance of social dynamics in the boardroom. But it also shows they need to aim for a standard higher than simply being able to work together and "deal with" those who they deem different.

In the survey, board members seemed to equate "different" with "difficult." Training might be a good idea, but the truth is that different personalities should not be seen as a problem to overcome, but an advantage to be embraced.

.....  
**ROBERT MORAN** leads Brunswick Insight, the firm's public opinion research function and is a Partner in Brunswick's Washington, DC office.  
**SARAH SALKY** is an Associate in New York.