

On the Job with the Enneagram

By Thomas Condon

There is an old story about a man who finds a bottle on a beach. He uncorks it and out comes a genie who offers the man a choice between a colossal amount of money or infinite wisdom. The man thinks hard for a few minutes and then chooses infinite wisdom. Days later several friends of the man see him sitting on a park bench shaking his head and talking to himself. Knowing he now has infinite wisdom they move in closer to hear what he is saying. Over and over they hear him repeat: "I should have taken the money, I should have taken the money."

Integrating the wise with the profitable is the chief reason for learning about the Enneagram and introducing it into the culture of your business or organization. Although the name sounds exotic the Enneagram is something very practical – a psychological system that describes nine basic personality styles and their very different ways of seeing the world. The Enneagram is about people – how we are the same, how we are different, what makes us tick. It describes personality styles in a penetrating way, detailing the inner workings, thought patterns and basic beliefs of each one. No style is presented as better than another, and each has a range of healthy and unhealthy potentials – special strengths, talents and advantages as well as limits, pitfalls and blind spots.

Like the people it portrays, the Enneagram is complex, subtle and dynamic. The system pinpoints our unconscious worldview and self-image, our inner motivation and habits of processing information. Newcomers to the Enneagram often recognize themselves and their friends with a clarity that amazes them, while those who use the system over time are struck by how endlessly revealing it is. The Enneagram will help you understand current and past relationships and make it easier to avoid conflicts at work and at home. It will also clarify a lifetime of intuitions and lessons you've learned about human nature and explain why you work well with some people and have trouble with others.

Learning about your own personality style will help you better define your own strengths and weaknesses, both on the job and at home. It gives you a powerful tool to assess how your unconscious assumptions and reactions contribute to or impede your continuing success. Learning about your own personality style will also help you loosen rigid stances, shed old defenses and free you to react to new challenges in new ways.

On the Job

In businesses and organizations the Enneagram's insights have dozens of positive uses from understanding relationships to improving communication to handling difficult people. Learning to recognize the influence of personality styles in your workplace will help you resolve conflicts, reduce office politics and manage people well. It is especially useful in teamwork, where group members can learn to non-defensively appreciate each other's differences and take responsibility for their individual blocks and limitations.

Within an organization, some personalities are driven by power and control while others are reform-minded. Some are like missionaries for their own cause, trying to force their standards on others within the company. Others are followers or idea people or strong at sales or focused on procedure. When you know someone's personality style, you can accurately predict how they will act

and interact with other styles. More important, you will understand why they do what they do, their unconscious motivation and probable concerns. You may discover that someone's behavior that you always took personally never was personal; they were just acting blindly out of the premises of their world view.

Who Uses the Enneagram?

Businesses and organizations who successfully employ the Enneagram generally have several things in common:

- * They are seeking to change or want to better integrate the ability to change into their company culture. This can be prompted by new market pressures, a need to internally reorganize, to correct an old ineffective way of functioning or for leadership, team and staff development.

- * Someone progressive and influential – usually the head of the company or a department – has already been exposed to the Enneagram and sees the system's potential value to their employees and coworkers.

- * Management is willing to go first, to lead by example by revealing their Enneagram styles and possibly exposing their struggles and issues. This is not always easy to do, especially in large corporate settings, but it is essential. Otherwise the system can seem like an intrusive tool imposed from above.

- * The company or organization is people and service oriented. They could manufacture chemicals or widgets but still have an ongoing clientele whom they must please and satisfy. The Enneagram helps them communicate better and more accurately define and respond to a customer's precise needs and criteria.

- * The organization may want to pass along the benefits of a system like the Enneagram to their long time customers or distributors who in turn use it with their organization or sales force.

- * The organization is not service oriented in that they don't work with customers directly but still want a framework of self understanding to get along well with each other.

- * The company culture equates self-knowledge with professionalism in the sense that being professional means putting your ego aside and getting out of your own way.

- * Believing that positive personal change has positive professional impact, the company's policy is to invest in its people. Giving employees tools to improve their overall quality of life is tied to their developing a self-responsible sense of leadership on the job. Often there is an entrepreneurial element in the company culture and standing opportunities for promotion and job migration.

Applications

Over the years I've had the occasion to consult, coach and train for a variety of businesses, from software companies to banks to manufacturers. Along with the Enneagram, I employ methods from various disciplines related to promoting organizational and individual change. While every job is a custom job – depending on the character of the organization and its needs at a point in time – there are many ways to apply the Enneagram's insights. Some brief examples – there are many others:

Team Building. On its own the Enneagram is a poor hiring tool. There are too many other variables in evaluating a prospective employee – relevant experience, specialized training, who the person is, how they relate to others, their degree of emotional intelligence and social skills.

With established employees, however, the Enneagram is a big help in understanding group dynamics and creating teams for problem solving and developing new projects. It is very good for assessing strengths – sometimes evoking latent ones – and matching people with jobs that take advantage of their natural abilities. Although there are plenty of exceptions, certain personality styles are often simply better at certain tasks.

Take Brainstorming, the group creativity technique designed to generate ideas for solving a problem. It generally has four steps: researching and defining the problem, coming up with the ideas, critically rejecting most of the ideas and then implementing the few remaining good ones. These four steps match closely with Enneagram styles Five, Seven, One and Three (see descriptions below). Assigning people with those styles to take charge of those steps generally makes the technique more effective and powerful.

After employing the Enneagram to choose team members or assign roles you can also use it to keep the team focused on its goal as well as resolve disputes and overcome inhibitors. Among other things, the Enneagram helps team members speak the same language and stay mindful of each member's unique contribution.

Decoding Behavior. Someone's outer behavior is obviously motivated by their inner beliefs and imperatives, and this is particularly evident when that behavior is dysfunctional or provokes conflict in the workplace. Understanding the Enneagram gives you a secret decoder of the motives behind people's behavior; it functions sort of like a pocket translator. When style number Eight acts aggressive it probably means they unconsciously feel vulnerable. When style One becomes judgmental they are often secretly attracted to what they are judging. When style Three becomes competitive and rivalrous they are almost certainly worried about their self worth and are trying to conceal their insecurities. Understanding the Enneagram helps you listen with a "third ear" and speak to the concerns behind someone's difficult behavior.

Coaching. I call coaching "therapy without jargon or tears." In a business context the purpose of coaching is generally tied to someone's work-related goals. Often there are inherent limits on how overtly "psychological" a coach can be. Instead of probing someone's childhood for an understanding of their present day patterns of reaction – a valid, logical approach for most psychotherapists – a business coach is comparatively indirect, focused on changing behavior and producing tangible results.

The root of most problem behavior, however, is usually buried in a client's emotional history, related to old defenses that once were necessary and now produce difficulties. The Enneagram provides coaches and their clients with a non-threatening framework for delving deeper without requiring that the client has psychological self-knowledge or prior experience with therapy. It essentially says: "You are not your behavior. You have a pattern just like everyone else. It is normal to have themes and challenges in your life. Some of them do indeed come out of childhood and can be altered if need be." Used gently, the Enneagram can make self-exploration safer and offers a way to be honest without making clients feel defensive.

Personal Change. Even without personal coaching, learning about the Enneagram at work invariably has a positive spillover effect into people's personal lives. Some of the nicest moments for me as a consultant have come when someone says, with real feeling, that learning the Enneagram has improved their marriage or their relationship with their children or changed their life in other meaningful ways. They got more than they expected; something they were required to learn at work had great side benefits at home, improving their quality of life in major ways. And, of course, this invariably results in a happier professional life.

Business Profiling. Learning the Enneagram will also help you identify the personality style of the organization you own or work for. Organizations, like people, develop basic beliefs and values – both conscious and unconscious – that support its collective worldview and drive its behavior. In most organizations a specific personality style will unconsciously predominate; usually it is the personality style of the founder or owner. Marc Andreessen, founder of Netscape, captured this idea when he wrote: “Companies are like organisms. It's as if you took a DNA sample from the chief executive and blew it up to monstrous size. The founder and the company all share the same strengths and the same weaknesses.”

At times, I've used the Enneagram to create a psychological profile of a business to determine how well it interacts with its customers and performs the functional imperatives of doing business. Understanding the Enneagram style of your organization will help you identify the assumptions and procedures that everyone takes for granted and either support or sabotage the organization's success.

I have occasionally been stunned by how directly a company's problems mirror the unhealthy expression of its owner's Enneagram style. To get the business on a corrective course I approach organizational change in the same way I would work with an individual, using the interventions and methods for change that work best for that particular style.

Training and Support Materials. The Enneagram is easy to learn but takes time to master. It has often been helpful to develop support materials as part of a coaching-training package so that people can absorb the information over time at their own pace. I have existing books plus audio and video products that I can drop into the mix but many times businesses have requested additional material that specifically applies the Enneagram's insights to their unique personnel and clientele.

I've found that a customized manual is a great way to both address this need and engage all parties concerned. The format of the manual includes lengthy descriptions of each Enneagram style, combined with information gleaned from an onsite assessment of the business and interviews with executives, managers and employees. The manual is then circulated and additional feedback from all involved parties is incorporated into the finished product. The result is an in-house reference guide to using the Enneagram on the job – dense with information, reminders and recommendations – that employees can reach for when they need to.

Other possibilities: In a company with a large, experienced sales staff we collected the best sales people's stories – the metaphors and anecdotes they used to make points when talking to customers. We then created a cross referenced library of stories grouped according to their relevance and appeal to different Enneagram styles as part of an effort to create training materials for future trainees.

When the budget has permitted I have also worked with businesses to help make instructional videos using the Enneagram. For example, we filmed panels of people with the same Enneagram style, speaking to various facets of the business and describing how their style influences their performance.

Bad News and Good News

When people first identify their personality style it can be a shock. For starters, it means that the way we see reality isn't reality and that our most cherished assumptions about the world are relative. Some of our more deeply held beliefs may be more like neurotic defenses than true ideals. The Enneagram names our illusions and shows us our personal foibles in unflattering detail. In addition, the system implies that our personal limitations are entirely our own creation, that we engineer our difficulties and get in our own way.

After the shock comes the good news: you don't have to take your own behavior so personally. Character "flaws" that seem ingrained are shared by many other people and have an understandable internal logic and subjective purpose. Since your limitations are your own creation then you have more power than you realize; on some level you are making choices and can learn to make new ones. You also have an array of abilities and aptitudes that are natural to your Enneagram style. Even the limitations of your style suggest ways to work with it, marking out an obvious path to growth, self-development and greater emotional intelligence. In this way the system functions like a treasure map, offering many clues about where to find your gold. And as a guide to understanding human behavior and motivation the Enneagram simply has no peer.

Excerpt from *Enneagram Applications* available here as an ebook:

<http://www.thechangeworks.com/cwproducts/ennapps.html>