Neuroticism is an unfortunate word for Nettle to have used, as it is not about being neurotic in the popular sense. Your position on the scale for neuroticism comes out in how you react to threats, dangers and stress. The ones low on 'neuroticism' hardly notice these situations.

The fifth trait, openness, is about adaptability, ideas, concepts and the unknown. If you’re low on the openness scale, you’re most likely to be practical, resolutely pragmatic, not one to change the world, and enjoy structure and regularity. At the other end, you may battle with this structure and regularity.

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Tale of two bureaucracies

For the sake of thinking aloud, I like to distil organisational cultures down to two types I call mechanistic and ecologic. They are idealised extremes of bureaucracy culture, and you see elements of each all over the place.

Mechanistic organisations emphasise and religiously value empirical reporting, prescribed accountabilities, streamlining, command structures, measurement, and production line approaches to employee culture.

Mechanisticism holds these as primary over the things more important to ecologic organisations, such as less hierarchy, more self assessment, fewer boundaries, encouraging creative and random connections, and harnessing the community nature of workforces, which operate according to their own ground rules not just the corporate ones.

Ecologic organisations are the ones that might measure happiness first, then performance.

The optimum manager

I found it revealing to use Nettle’s “big five” personality traits as a lens to see what kind of people are best suited for management roles in these idealised organisations.

Let’s take the mechanistic organisation. My guess is that, in this kind of management culture, the optimum manager would be low on agreeableness; highly conscientious; a closet extrovert (check the shirt and tie); unflappable; and cautious with new ideas. Sounds like a military role really. People suited to command structures.

Now take the ecologic organisation, where there are similar reporting outcomes and processes, but the responsibility and accountability is shared around, employees operate more autonomously, they have a collegiate connection with all hierarchical levels, and perhaps take their lead from end users more than from their superiors.

The optimum ecologic manager would rate highly for agreeableness because there’s a greater need to collaborate and operate within a fluid set of interdependencies. They’d be lower on the conscientious scale, in that a dose of spontaneity would be a useful trait for a manager to harness the creativity, crossovers and self-motivation around them.

This management culture might exhibit more extroversion. Enthusiasm and sociability breeds the same in others. Unflappability is probably the one trait appearing in any description of the optimum manager. Management in a government environment is often played out under pressure, in adversarial or competitive conditions, and for narrowly defined or inflexible outcomes. So having a hard hide, a healthy sense of self-righteousness and a low stress physiology is definitely an asset.

Openness is a trait in lovers of wild ideas and big pictures, and useful for gaining trust. It would be a great advantage if bent on innovation, redefinition and capitalising on creativity.
complex little community in itself. They also tend to have a strong focus on internal process, to be accountable. The style, method, measures and pressures by which the manager is held accountable and rewarded by their manager superiors sets the tone for management culture. And as already noted, management culture sets the mood for everyone else.

Mechanistic imperatives
We regulate, we administer, we operate within the bounds of policy and law. We report to the community, to councillors, to state government and to each other. Sometimes, we are even washed away by politics, but must pick up and carry on as usual straight after.

No surprises then that I think our council bureaucracies lean to the mechanistic to deal with all this. The types of personalities operate best in mechanistic organisations will gravitate to those ranks.

To lead or to manage
Over the years, I have been regularly bombarded with corporate and organisation development talk about leadership in the work place. Recently, I came across research on leadership published by some eminent scientists, Stephen D Reicher, S Alexander Haslam & Michael J Platow of respectively St Andrews University Scotland, University of Exeter England and the Australian National University. This pretty well put the “what makes a leader” debate to bed for me.

Leadership is contextual. How a leader operates is determined by the culture and norms of the followers. The notion of the best leaders sharing a particular personality is not the case, and there’s a spectrum of traits and behaviours you might find in a leader. The optimum leader articulates the group’s identity, and does this as both servant and steward of the group’s cultural norms. See the table How Leaders Operate for more about this.

Loosening up
These modern approaches to psychology highlight some of the limitations to the nature of management cultures in council organisations. There is a bias towards the personality profiles that work best within inflexible structures where, at the end of the day, the job is to do as you’re told and to not surprise your bosses.

The personal qualities an organisation needs in their managers comes out in the culture of the management team, and thus creates and perpetuates the kind of place it is to work in. No wonder our municipal bureaucracies have such great difficulty with organisation change programs – the people who tend to gravitate into the management tier are by and large good at following direction and managing upwards, but are not natural change agents.

Is it inevitable that Local Government breeds management cultures that are best at following orders, sticking to process and reinventing the wheel? Maybe not, if our council bureaucracies could loosen up a bit. I believe the answer lies in how we link and engage with the community, but that’s another article.

References


Verne Krastins is a freelance public servant, and wonders if this article will influence his employability. You’re invited to get in touch and debate the matter... Tel: 0411 258 455. Email: vrostik2@yahoo.com.au. For other PROFile articles by Verne Krastins, please visit www.sectorconnector.com.au

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<tr>
<th>HOW LEADERS OPERATE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Responsible for the group’s identity</td>
<td>Servant of the group’s culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leaders shape what followers want to do.</td>
<td>Leaders are in a symbiotic relationship with followers.</td>
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<td>Leaders influence followers to see the group’s interests as their own.</td>
<td>Leaders position themselves amongst the group, not over it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leaders understand the values and opinions of followers.</td>
<td>Leaders do not necessarily conform to group norms, but they must understand these norms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leaders “exemplify what makes the group distinct from and superior to rival groups.”</td>
<td>Leaders do not enforce compliance, others do that.</td>
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<td>Leaders understand what actions the group “estems and finds legitimate”.</td>
<td>Leaders demonstrate fairness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leaders maintain a dialogue with followers about the group’s identity.</td>
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