

## “Psychological character traits in business:

### **Part 3: Two traits often ignored: ‘Conscientiousness’ and ‘Openness’ by Dr Mark Granitto & Mr Graham Guest**

This article is the final article of a three part series highlighting six psychological character traits in business. In Parts 2 & 3 of this series, there were four personality traits that were discussed. In this final part, we will discuss ‘conscientiousness’ and ‘openness’ of the individual.

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

Managers sometimes very superficially see employees as either able to do the work successfully or cannot do so because of the employee’s own incompetence. If they are not as successful as they would like employees to be, managers have either selected poorly and/or managed poorly. Allocating fault always to the employee is an inferior management/leadership trait. An effective leader/manager needs to accept fault for their actions or inactions. The debate of whether someone is a manager or leader is a subjective lengthy discussion but suffice to say, that leadership is a subset of management, according to the literature. Management is ‘planning, **leading**, organising and controlling’. A politician described as an effective leader is not necessarily an effective manager. Ineffective leaders are sometimes clever enough at spinning, misleading, waffling and manipulating people, situations and populations. Authors and researchers have made a career of defining and lecturing on the subject of leadership and have somewhat successfully attempted to differentiate leadership from management. Yukl (1999) defines leadership as “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives.” Leadership is being able to influence people towards the achievement of goals but a manager with leadership qualities would also fit that definition. Yukl’s definition is somewhat adequate but rather limited.

In Parts 1 and 2 of this series, we discussed some negative personality traits that people have. Narcissistic people for example, can **sometimes** be corporate psychopaths; leaders that destroy organisations and sometimes slowly over time; until they are finally exposed.

Most of the time, corporate psychopaths are corporate bullies; railroading their agendas and sacrificing the organisation’s corporate objectives to satisfy their own personality inadequacies.

Then there are the effective managers that are effective leaders and those people are the most sought after by organisations. Conclusively, our view is that management and leadership are interwoven organisational constructs. This then is the preface to the two positive personality traits discussed in this final article. Two traits that leaders AND managers must have to be effective.

#### **The Big 5 Personality Traits (“Big 5”):**

The five-factor model of personality traits is commonly known as the ‘Big 5’. It expresses the five personality traits in five dimensions and they are:

1. Openness;
2. Conscientiousness;
3. Extraversion;
4. Agreeableness;
5. Neuroticism.

If you note the first letter of the Big 5, you will be able to form the commonly known acronym describing those traits as ‘OCEAN’.

A very good descriptor for each trait is provided by [pip.ori.org](http://pip.ori.org) which are summarised below:

• **Openness to Experience (O)** is the personality trait of seeking new experience and intellectual pursuits. High scorers may day dream a lot. Low scorers may be very down to earth.

• **Conscientiousness (C)** is the personality trait of being honest and hardworking. High scorers tend to follow rules and prefer clean homes. Low scorers may be messy and cheat others.

**Extroversion (E)** is the personality trait of seeking fulfilment from sources outside the self or in community. High scorers tend to be very social while low scorers prefer to work on their projects alone.

• **Agreeableness (A)** reflects much individuals adjust their behavior to suit others. High scorers are typically polite and like people. Low scorers tend to ‘tell it like it is’.

• **Neuroticism (N)** is the personality trait of being emotional.

## **'CONSCIENTIOUSNESS AND OPENNESS'**

Two Big 5 factors that are critically important for effective managers (and all employees) are 'conscientiousness' and 'openness'.

Rothmann & Coetzer, (2003) state that conscientiousness refers to self-control and the active process of planning, organising and carrying out tasks (Barrick & Mount, 1993). The conscientious person is purposeful, strong-willed and determined. Conscientiousness is manifested in achievement orientation (hardworking and persistent), dependability (responsible and careful) and orderliness (planful and organised).

Hassan and Hoshino (2016) conclude that "conscientiousness encompasses dependability, responsibility, achievement orientation and deliberation. It entails following established rules and includes people who are persistent and organized [sic] (Perrewé and Spector, [128]; Judge et al., [118]; De Hoogh et al)".

Rothmann & Coetzer (2003) state that "Barrick and Mount (1996) reported, that conscientiousness positively predicted supervisor performance. Conscientiousness was also associated with task performance and creativity. It makes sense that conscientious employees perform better compared to less conscientious employees (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick et al., 1993; Borman et al., 1991; Hough et al, 1990)".

Rothmann & Coetzer (2003), also state that openness includes active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, attentiveness to inner feelings; a preference for variety, intellectual curiosity and independence of judgement. People scoring low on openness tend to be conventional in behaviour and conservative in outlook. They prefer the familiar to the novel, and their emotional responses are somewhat muted. People scoring high on openness tend to be unconventional, willing to question authority and prepared to entertain new ethical, social and political ideas. Open individuals are curious about both inner and outer worlds, and their lives are experientially richer. They are willing to entertain novel ideas and unconventional values, and they experience both positive and negative emotions more keenly than do closed individuals.

Research has shown that openness to experience is related to success in consulting (Hamilton, 1988), training (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Vinchur et al., 1998) and adapting to change (Horton, 1992; Raudsepp, 1990).

McCrae & John (1991) state that "open people are inquisitive. If they are also conscientious, their curiosity may take the form of sustained and systematic study of a topic".

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

Despite what may appear obvious to some readers, we can make some safe and substantive reflections about the conscientious and openness Big 5 traits:

1. How much does an organisation trade-off where an individual has a high score for conscientiousness and openness compared to other traits?
2. Which of the Big 5 traits would be of paramount importance to an organisation when recruiting a manager for the purposes of effecting change?
3. Can conscientiousness and openness be easily taught to an individual?

For our part, conscientiousness and openness traits are often seriously overlooked in individuals. Successful organisations, particular in today's environment of continual change, must be 'learning organisations'. Therefore the sum of the parts (the individuals) must be learning individuals (open) and provide organisational commitment (conscientiousness) to succeed or sustain their or the organisation's success.

Organisations need 'visionaries' not 'dreamers' and 'implementers of strategy' not 'obstructionists'. Measures for conscientious and open individuals should rank high for organisations when recruiting. Decide what is missing in your organisation, what needs to be done and how well it needs to be done; otherwise, you risk in doing the work yourself.

Conscientious and open individuals tend to show more organisational commitment and will look for ways to resolve issues, to develop and ameliorate the organisation.

***Mr Graham Guest is a Clinical and former Organisational Psychologist. For the past 30 years he has worked in private practice consulting with individuals, organisations and other health professionals.***