



## Personality vs Behaviour

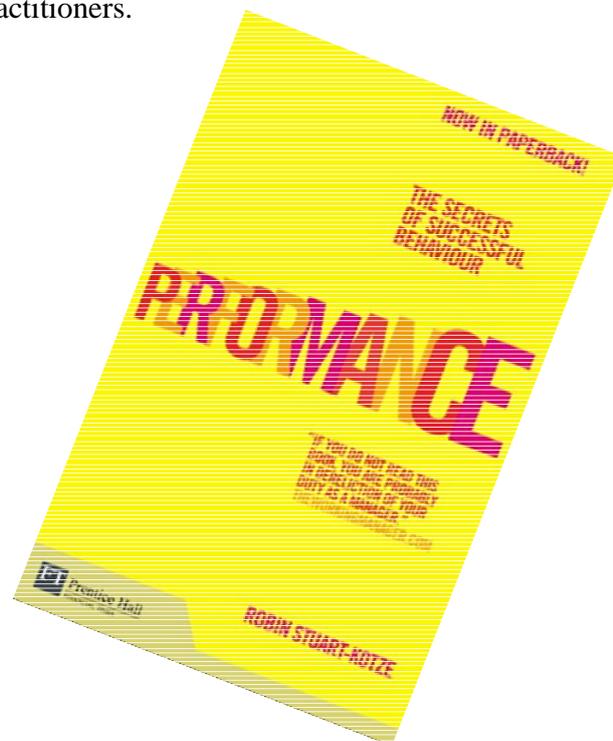
At **PRISM Brain Mapping** we are often asked the following questions:

*‘What is the difference between personality and behaviour?’*

*‘Why should anyone interested in improving business performance look at behaviour rather than personality when seeking to create organisational change and to encourage high team and personal performance?’*

Professor Robin Stuart-Kotze is an eminent Canadian organisational psychologist who has published numerous books and articles. He also has a BA in economics and an MBA. He was awarded a Chair in Organisational behaviour in 1980 and has held Professorships or Visiting Professorships at a number of universities in Canada and at Warwick, Aston and Oxford in the United Kingdom. He has taught extensively in the areas of organizational behaviour and corporate strategy at MBA and Executive MBA level, and has been an advisor and examiner at the doctoral level.

His book **‘Performance: The Secrets of Successful Behaviour’** reveals the secrets of behavioural change that have helped successful people, teams and managers around the world to get ahead, and *stay* ahead and the following excerpts should help to answer the questions that we are frequently asked by our Practitioners.





## WHO ARE YOUR BEST PEOPLE?

In terms of finding and measuring top talent, Professor Stuart-Kotze says:

“Ability and capability are not about traits, personality or genes - they are about **behaviour**. Unlike genetics or personality, behaviour can be described, observed, measured and changed. As a result, both ability and capability can be increased.

Rather than talk about talent, which is a word loaded with a number of connotations, I use the term ‘Best’. **‘Best occurs’ when the individual’s behaviour matches the behaviour demands of the job.**

The answer to the question: “*Who are your best people?*” is straightforward. It is those people who do precisely what is required to perform their jobs excellently. Because this is about behaviour that is observable and measurable, the assessment of ‘Best’ is rational and objective.

Job role specifications outline the **what** (goals, targets, objectives). To create ‘Best’ performance, an additional element is required - a job behaviour specification (the **how**).”

## BEHAVIOUR DRIVES PERFORMANCE

“The thing that drives performance is behaviour - how you act. It's what you do that matters, not what you are or who you are. Behaviours are the actions you take and the decisions you make. You can control these things: you can decide what to do and when to do it. And because you can decide what to do in any situation you can determine your performance. High-level performance results from doing the right thing at the right time.

### What is the difference between behaviour and personality?

It's what you do (behaviour) that determines your performance, not what you are (personality). It is absolutely critical not to confuse behaviour with personality. To repeat: personality is what you are; behaviour is what you do, and it's what you do that makes a difference.

However, most people believe that personality determines how individuals act, and it's very difficult to shake that belief. Personality testing is widely used in recruiting, with the underlying assumption that it will predict how people will behave in a job, and therefore will determine their performance. But if personality were the key to performance, then how can you explain the success of three people with very different personalities?

A critical difference between behaviour and personality is that your personality is essentially fixed at an early age and after that you can't really change it. Given that we live in an age of continuous and rapid change, unless the job you are in remains completely static you're in trouble. Until quite recently it has been accepted that personality is basically established



somewhere around the age of five. The precise age has been the subject of discussion. However, a major study published by Caspi et al. in 2003 showed that the personalities of a thousand children (a sample size that makes the conclusions of the study fairly robust) tested at age three and then re-tested 20 years later had not changed. You are what you are by the age of three and it doesn't change after that.

But although you are what you are and you can't change your personality, you can change what you do. The major determinant of performance is behaviour. Personality gets the headlines because people would like to find a secret key to success that does not require work and effort.

The reason that the idea of classifying people by personality types is so attractive is because it means that instead of having to deal with an almost infinite array of differences we only have to deal with a small number. The assumption is that if you fall into a particular personality type you will behave just like everyone else who is that type. It's really not that different from astrology. And as far as predicting or determining performance is concerned, it's about as effective.

### **Personality is a poor predictor of performance**

One of the reasons we find it hard to accept personality as a poor predictor of performance is that we are constantly bombarded with all kinds of information to the contrary. About four million people a year complete the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, one of the most widely used personality tests in the world. They must think it's worth their while to do it. And lots of influential people in companies must think it's useful because 89 of the Fortune 100 companies use it. There's an excellent chance you've completed a Myers-Briggs or some other personality inventory at some stage in your career.

The proponents of personality tests claim that they make people more sensitive to how they behave, and how other people behave and the result is therefore greater work effectiveness. However, in their book: *'In the Mind's Eye: Enhancing human performance,'* Daniel Druckman and Robert Bjork, two eminent psychologists, comment that "Unfortunately, neither the gains in sensitivity nor the impact of those gains on performance have been documented by research".

The definitive research into the relationship between personality and behaviour was conducted by Stanford professor, Walter Mischel. Studying the correlation between personality tests and people's actual behaviour, he found that less than 10 percent of the variance in a person's behaviour is explained by personality. The driver of people's behaviour, he observed, is in fact the situations in which they find themselves — and most importantly, that their behaviour changes as the situation changes.

We want to believe that there is a simple way of categorizing people. Descriptions of personality types are excellent subjects for what psychologists' term 'projection': that is, projecting one's feelings, beliefs, attitudes, etc. onto something. The classic experiment that proved that this is exactly what happens was conducted by Dr Bertram Forer, a clinical psychologist. He gave a group of individuals a personality test and then handed them back their results - ostensibly the



results from the test, but in fact randomized astrological forecasts from a book he had bought at a nearby news-stand. When he asked the individuals how accurate they found their profiles, on a scale of 0 (poor) to 5 (perfect), 40 percent gave a perfect 5 and the average score for the group was 4.2.

Personality is a very poor predictor of performance because people are actually highly adaptable and far more flexible than personality typing gives them credit for. Personality tests cannot and do not predict how people will act in a variety of roles or situations. Nor are they able to predict how behaviour changes over time. These are the immutable facts.

We do things that, given the situation, work for us, and to do that we unconsciously assess the situation and make a judgement. When we do that we're using a part of the brain that is known as the adaptive unconscious. Like it or not, you adapt your behaviour to different situations. People who don't adapt their behaviour to the situation stand out as misfits.

Personality typing often gives people an excuse not to adapt their behaviour to changing situations. 'I'm not good at detail. It says so in my personality profile. So you just have to understand that I can't deal with a job that requires attention to detail.' Rubbish! If that individual were trapped in a burning building and it was necessary to perform some detailed operation to get out, they would be able to focus on the minutest of detail.

### **If it's not your personality, what determines your success?**

To perform any job or role well means that certain specific things must be done. Jobs all have what might be termed 'behavioural demands' -i.e. specific behaviours that are necessary to manage the job effectively. Every job has its own set of particular behavioural demands. For instance one job may require detailed attention to planning, another may require that all involved parties contribute to decisions, and still another may require that a single individual sets a clear example of behaviour that people will follow and emulate. These are very different collections of behaviours. If a job requires its' incumbent to involve people in decisions and that individual is continually mired in creating detailed plans that don't involve others, things are not going to go well.

Therefore, to perform a role effectively you need to have a clear picture of the behaviour required by the role in order that you can do the right things - i.e. the things that lead to performance improvement - and not the wrong things.

The effectiveness with which an individual manages their job - i.e. the level of performance that is achieved - is dependent on the degree to which their behaviour matches the behavioural demands of the job. The greater the overlap or match, the higher the level of performance."

**Professor Robin Stuart-Kotze**

**'Performance: The Secrets of Successful Behaviour'**