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EFFECTIVE TEAMS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

By Sally Mitchell-Wolf & Helen Loveday

How Concepts from Psychology can
Help Establish Positive Team Dynamics



changeosity

Creating Better Leaders. Creating Better Organisations

How Concepts from Psychology can Help Establish Positive Team Dynamics

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Karim is at a loss. This 'A' team which used to have a healthy debate, make a quality decision, and move decisively forward has lost its way. Today was the third attempt to agree on the next steps for the new project. Deadlines are looming and nothing is getting done. Mark now comes to every meeting with all guns blazing. Where previously she helped find common ground, Nerida seems to have adopted the role of naysayer. And Paulo just seems bemused. Not only has the group failed again to take a decision, some of the exchanges today were also getting personal.

WHAT IS GOING ON?

The experience of leading a team where conflict, fracturing or some other kind of dysfunction arises or persists, despite the best efforts of a leader to resolve or neutralise the impacts would, understandably, prompt frustration.

Such an experience is also likely to give rise to questions such as 'What's going on?' and 'Why does this keep happening?'

As readers will be aware, several possible approaches exist when seeking to resolve such situations and create the conditions which produce a high performing team.

Laying blame, recourse to punitive measures, performance reviews or

dismissals may seem decisive responses but are likely to have limited success in realigning the fundamentals which are producing an undesirable dynamic.

When the goal is to shift to a team dynamic which has a positive impact on workplace culture and the bottom line, the challenge of selecting 'the right tool for the job' must be faced.

Not all tools are created equal.

This article discusses options for unpacking and resolving questions of the *what*, the *why* and the *how* of creating an environment where teams are highly effective.

Even when things are going smoothly, the question "How can

my team do even better?” would not be unfamiliar to a leader seeking to push performance to new heights.

Fortunately, human behaviour, conflict, personality types and related concerns are longstanding topics of study within the field of psychology.

Many of the various concepts and models produced from that academic discipline have become embedded in the world of business.

For an astute organisation, particularly in uncertain and turbulent times, drawing on these can offer a range of benefits and advantages.

Any tool or activity which raises self-awareness and encourages appreciation of differences has value.

For leaders grappling with resolving issues arising from conflict or wanting to take a functional team to high performing, the use of Psychometric Assessments, or ‘psychometrics’ for short, most definitely has a place.

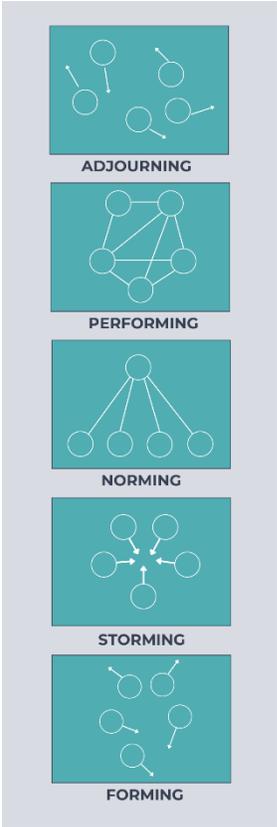
As members of the Changeosity community, we are confident that you already appreciate the vital importance of a holistic approach. In the context of this article, it is pertinent, nonetheless, to also expand a little on the vital role that psychological safety plays in shifting to a positive team dynamic.

LABELLING OR ASSESSMENT?

There are many concepts and models which exist to help to identify and label the state of a team and the nature of a dysfunction.

The reader is no doubt familiar with the Bruce Tuckman’s Stages of Team Development Model. It is an enduring description of five ‘stages’ of team development.

Introduced in 1965, this linear model reminds us that some disagreement and ‘turf battles’ are to be expected in the initial stages of working in a team.



Since its introduction, Tuckman’s model has been usefully drawn on as a basis for suggested leadership actions to support progression to the next stage.

The focus of the model is, however, at the macro level and does not explicitly consider the unique traits of the individuals who form the team.

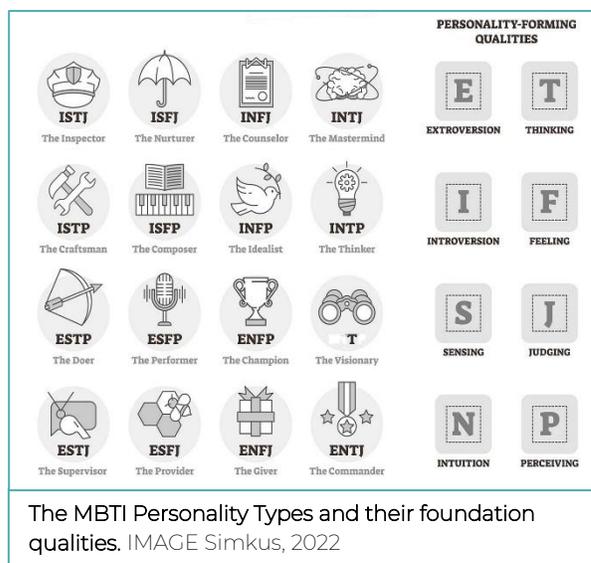
Many tools geared more toward describing or classifying individual personality are available. These include The Big Five, DISC and the widely popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

Inspired by Carl Jung’s psychological types, the tool has individuals respond to a series of forced choice questions which results in classification of their personality as one of sixteen possible MBTI types.

Although some debate and controversy around MBTI exists (Grant, 2013), it can be argued that any tool or activity which raises self-awareness and encourages acceptance of difference has value.

Studies show that the way an MBTI type is displayed in terms of behaviours *is* different in different

cultures. However, MBTI is used globally by several million people annually and is accessible, having been translated into many languages, including Arabic.



When seeking to develop a team, tools which identify a personality type are a reasonable starting point for exploration of interpersonal dynamics.

Typically, such assessments can be completed by the individual in less than half an hour. Time would then need to be dedicated to working with the results to inform reflection and action.

When selecting the ‘tool for the job,’ it is worth reflecting on the facts that different personality type assessments available arise from

different contexts and have different underlying assumptions.

This may be reflected in the terminology used to classify and has some impact on the type of information that is gained from them. Some also have more research to support them than others (Bayne, 2015).

Therefore, the investment in engaging the services of a professional trained in administering and interpreting the assessments means that a leader can be guided in selection and use of a robust, verified tool that suits the need and circumstance.

Further, participants can be supported in interpretation and understanding of the results and their implications. This helps avoid potential pitfalls which may arise

should the process be misunderstood by some.

One benefit of using tools of this kind is their contribution to establishing a common set of terms for thinking and discussion.

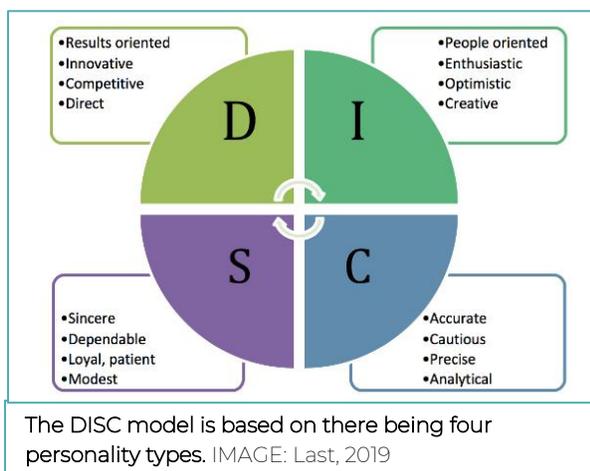
Where the intention is to encourage awareness, resolve conflict, and foster effective communication and collaboration, a common vocabulary is important.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Faced with a dysfunctional team, a logical action may be to undertake ‘conflict management.’ Some models, such as DISC, aim to predict behaviour of different personality types thus enabling management of conflict (Last, 2019).

Undeniably, conflict management techniques are an important set of skills to be able to draw on if needed. However, ongoing management of unproductive conflict consumes both time and energy.

A wise leader will also treat with caution models which oversimplify or label pejoratively. They will recognise that less robust and less holistic tools are likely to further



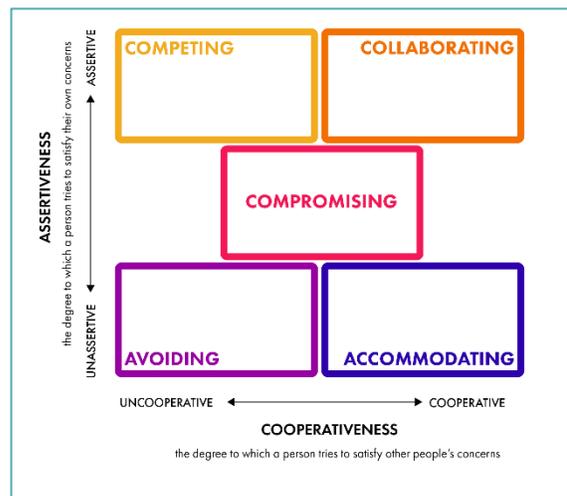
inflame conflict through stereotyping, stigmatising, and become more divisive than remedial.

For example, while the terms continue to be heard in some circles, Friedman and Rosenman's 1976 classification of 'Type A' competitive, aggressive personalities and 'Type B' easy going, patient personalities has been discredited through subsequent research and the need for more sophisticated models recognised (Lufkin, 2018 & McLeod, 2017).



GRIP, introduced by Richard Beckhard in 1972, has been widely applied in sports coaching contexts. IMAGE Last, 2019

Tools such as TKI and GRIP have been developed and expanded beyond conflict management to



Steps for leaders to take have been developed from the Thomas & Kilmann model (TKI), since its introduction in 1974. IMAGE: Thomas-Kilmann 2008

include strategies for leaders wanting to move toward deeper change. (Last, 2019)

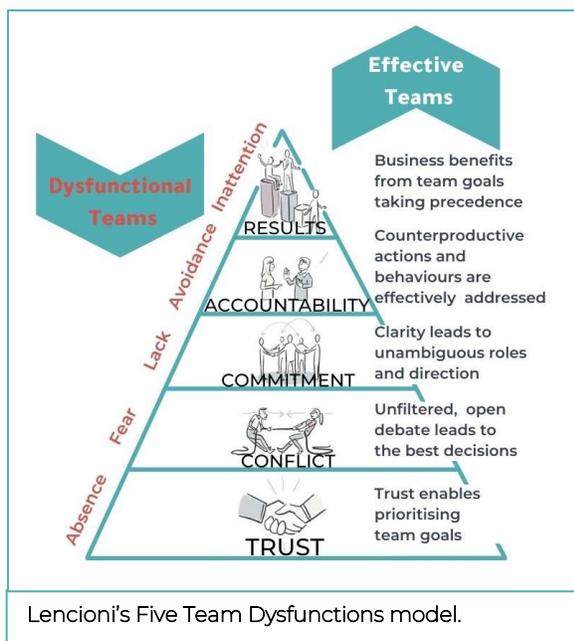
There is an argument for selecting and using a model which makes sense to you as a leader, however as the Type A vs. Type B example demonstrates, some models have greater 'sticking power' than can be justified. Thus some reflection on the tools to be used before proceeding, is worthwhile.

Ultimately, however comforting the ability to label a problem or person may be, a tool or model which results only in classifying, or stating *what*, does not automatically lead to clarity around *why* the team dynamic is in its current state.

Nor does labelling on its own guide one *how* to address an undesirable dynamic and create an effective team.

BEYOND MANAGING CONFLICT

Patrick Lencioni's model of the Five Dysfunctions of Teams is one of the most influential and powerful in this area.



While the model initially focuses on the negatives of absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability and inattention to results, the pyramid also effectively presents a summary of the attributes of a cohesive, successful team. Further, it has been developed to provide some

suggestions of actions leaders can take to address the dysfunctions identified.

At the foundation of the model is trust.

Here several robust and highly effective psychology-based concepts and assessment tools can be applied. Through using the right combination of these, an organisation can significantly switch up the impact leaders have in cultivating effective teams, whatever stage those teams may currently be at.

Additionally, these tools have the richness and potential to bring advantages which far exceed addressing negative work situations.

Therefore, it is pertinent to note they need not only applicable in response to crisis.

TRUST & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In Lencioni's terms, 'trust' is conceptualised as having two aspects.

The less 'meaty' and more commonplace meaning is reliability

or knowing that someone will follow-through.

However, it is the second aspect, vulnerability, has been found to have the greatest impact on team effectiveness.

In action, this kind of trust looks like a willingness to not know, to offer ideas or raise concerns, of being comfortable with acknowledging mistakes, and a dynamic where “individuals are free to focus on collective goals and problem solving rather than self-protection.” (Edmondson and Lei, 2014)

This is not possible without psychological safety. “Psychological safety describes people’s perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular circumstance.” (Edmondson and Lei, 2014)

Research shows this element of a team dynamic has the most significant impact on team performance.

NORMS

unspoken or acknowledged behaviour standards, rules and traditions that govern how a group functions by encouraging deference to the group

Readers may be familiar with the Project Aristotle undertaken by Google. With the goal of understanding what made some teams more effective, the researchers looked at more than 180 teams ranging from 3 to 50 members over a two-year period.

Rather than who a team is composed of, debunking the assumption that the best teams had the best people, the project identified that having group norms which foster psychological safety as the single most important quality of highly effective teams.

After **psychological safety**, *Project Aristotle* determined the next most significant factors are, in order:

- **dependability** of members for high quality completion of tasks
- **structure and clarity** around role expectations, processes, and performance related consequences
- **meaning** or a sense of purpose in the work or output
- **impact** seeing the results of the team’s work makes a difference

To find out more about *Project Aristotle*, you can read Charles

Duhigg's 2016 New York Times narrative account [here](#), or Google's re:Work summary [here](#).

Psychological safety describes people's perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular circumstance

Project Aristotle marked something of a renaissance of interest in psychological safety, a concept explored by Psychologists since the 1960's.

The evolution of research and thinking around this topic has been detailed in publications by Professor Amy Edmondson.

As a contemporary leading thinker and researcher in the field, readers may associate her with one of a great many notable publications, (www.hbs.edu, n.d) including *Extreme Teaming* (2017) and *The Fearless Organisation* (2018).

In an academic review of the historical and recent research into the topic, Edmondson and Lei (2014) identify that research over several decades, spanning diverse cultures and industry sectors, has

consistently highlighted the significance of psychological safety in enabling effective teams and organisations.

Findings show a psychologically safe environment:

enables divergent thinking, creativity, and risk taking and motivates engagement in... learning, thereby promoting team performance

and further it:

helps exploit task conflict to improve team performance, enabling creative ideas and critical discussion without embarrassment or excessive personal conflict (Edmondson and Lei 2014)

In workplaces where employees experience higher levels of psychological safety this encourages the phenomenon of, 'upward communication.'

When not afraid speaking up will make them look ignorant, incompetent, intrusive or negative, employees ask questions, admit weaknesses or mistakes, offer alternative ideas, or criticize the status quo (pulsely.io, n.d.).

In short, psychological safety enables organisational learning

through harnessing the knowledge already ‘in the room.’ It helps produce more novel solutions and navigate periods of uncertainty in intense, complex environments.

POWERFUL TOOLS PROVEN SUCCESS

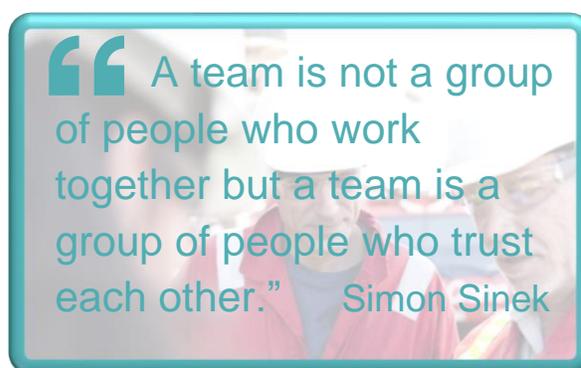
As Charles Duhigg reminds us, “establishing psychological safety is, by its very nature, somewhat messy and difficult to implement.” (Duhigg 2016)

Fortunately, the field of psychology offers several nuanced and powerful methods, including diagnostic assessments, for developing self-awareness as well as mindsets for appreciating others, valuing difference, embracing positive conflict and positive stress (eustress).

All of these contribute to progressing teams toward being more effective and can help build a climate for psychological safety.

The best models and programs incorporate a suite of different tools for different purposes and for meeting specific needs.

Psychometric Assessments or ‘psychometrics’ can be selectively combined with team reports and other analysis tools, such as communication analysis, to empower individuals, leaders, and organisations to make desired changes.



To reiterate, anything that creates awareness is a good starting point.

However, leaders can have more certainty in the efficacy of tools verified through rigorous research and recognised by an appropriate organisation, such as the British Psychological Association.

Additionally, when administered by an accredited practitioner this provides leaders with greater confidence that suitable ethical standards around the processes and data are met.

The team of expert consultants who work with Changeosity includes enthusiastic and experienced Psychologists passionate about helping individuals, regardless of their position in a company, and thus workplaces, to be better.

The two tools below have been used by these experts across very diverse organisations and sectors to achieve positive change.

SAVILLE ASSESSMENTS

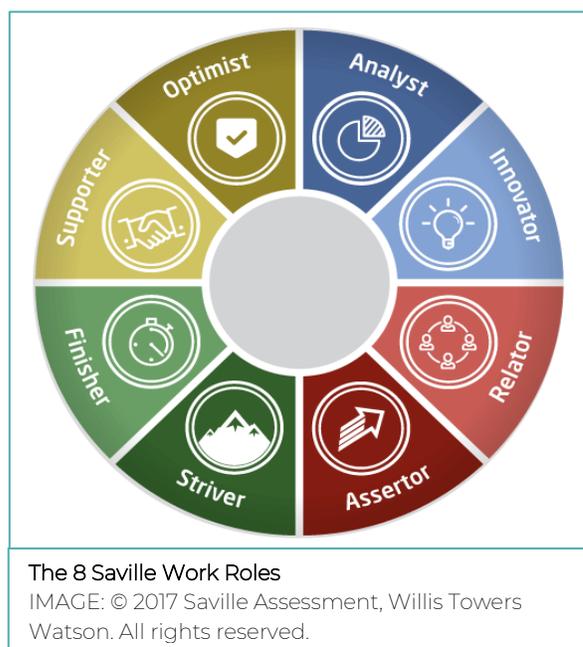
Unlike the tools which focus only on individual personality preferences, and are thus not robust assessments, the suite of Saville assessments interrogate the dimensions of preferences, motives, skills and talents.

It is through its combined approach, and by having specific models and tools for discrete purposes, that Saville can build a multilayered picture and create a powerful base for change.

Additionally, its questionnaires use both normative (rating on a scale) and ipsative (forced choice) style questions. This is a feature of best practice in terms of gathering quantitative data to produce reliable results.

The Work Roles Model is one of the most recognised of the Saville suite. The eight different categories are based on research that identifies the key roles and behaviors that are drivers of success at work.

The model emphasises that people can be successful in different ways, providing different and valuable contributions working in an organization.



It follows, as was found by *Project Aristotle*, that highly effective teams are diverse teams. Work Roles can support a leader in creating diverse teams and team members in appreciating and utilising differences in perceptions and opinions.

All Saville assessments generate a report, provided to participants,

which not only provide explanation and analysis of the responses but suggest implications for consideration and action.

The consultants with whom you work will provide expertise in engaging the participants, administering assessments and providing guidance to understand and act on the insights provided by the reports produced.

Additional reports, assessments and processes are available which can extend psychometrics into actions such as identifying areas for triage or opportunities to dig deeper and supporting deeper transformational change and growth at the individual, team, and organisational level.

To learn more about how [Saville Assessments](#) can help your organisation, contact us.

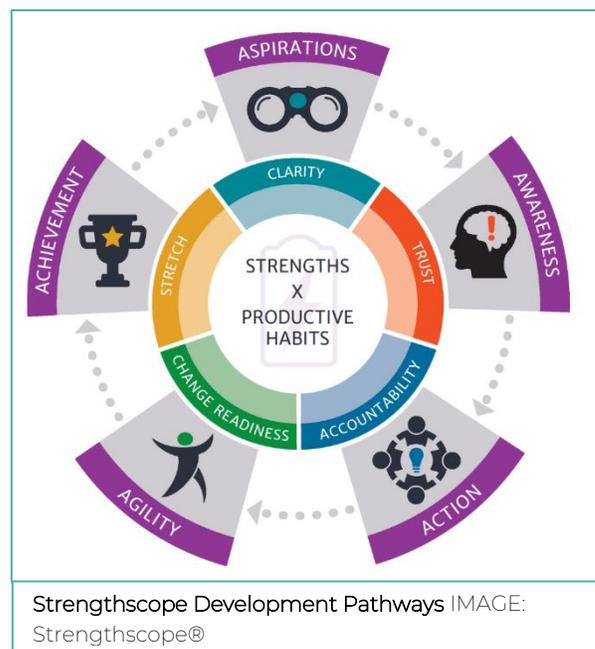
STRENGTHSCOPE®

Strengthscope is another powerful assessment used to “build more diverse, empowered, resilient and agile teams” (Strengthscope, 2019).

Using a different approach, the model explores individual strengths and identifies those things which energise individuals.

Like Saville, Strengthscope incorporates a range of

assessments and reports which an accredited consultant will use according to the individual or organisation’s need or goals.



Independent research has shown that the Strengthscope assessment provides reliable results across a range of different ethnicities and is thus well suited to use in multicultural organisations. (Whitefoot, 2015)

Utilising a concept of ‘Development Pathways’ the process involves supporting teams in becoming aware of the strengths of the members. This leads to understanding the strengths of the team, identifying risks and managing the team dynamic to develop a healthy, productive team which can leverage individual strengths to achieve its goals.

Further, this process can support the development of psychological safety, bringing benefits to the organisation as a whole.

To discover more about how [Strengthscope](#) can empower your team, contact us.

PSYCHOMETRICS HAVE A ROLE

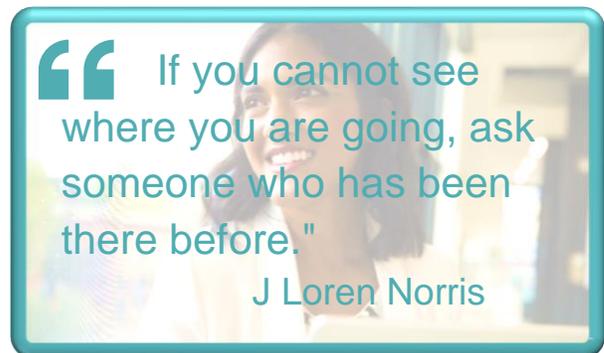
Whichever you choose for your team or organisation, psychometrics are an excellent starting point for developing more effective higher performing teams and more resilient organisations.

As people become more self-aware and willing to "reveal" more of themselves in response to psychometric assessments and activities, vulnerability emerges and eventually, contributes to fostering psychological safety.

In volatile environments where organisations are facing uncertainty including recruitment and retention challenges, organisations may be concerned about ROI in team development using psychometrics.

While it is true that an individual may see some difference in results at different times in their life, the two tools mentioned here are sufficiently robust to provide solid data on which to base short and medium-term actions.

Reassuringly, the data point captured in a properly administered assessment is considered to have a twelve to twenty-four month life.



ENGAGING A CONSULTANT TO WORK WITH PSYCHOMETRICS?

From enabling what are sometimes tricky but worthwhile conversations with individuals, through to guidance and support for implementing sustainable strategies to transform teams and organisations, an appropriately trained and experienced consultant can advise leaders in selecting the right psychometric assessments according to purpose and context.

When engaging a consultant ask about the models and tools they use and confirm they are verified by a suitable organisation and the consultant holds appropriate registrations for work with the tools they are offering.

Psychological information gathered from individuals within your organisation may be of a sensitive

nature, so consider clarifying not only what ethical safeguards are involved in the administration of assessments but also in processing and storing data.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, an expert consultant can provide workshops and activities to

interpret the information gained thus ensuring robust insights and actions follow.

Therefore, discuss where psychometric assessments sit within the broader consultancy process.

The change in the team was remarkable. With deadlines and other pressures on business and the bottom line, Karim had had some reservations about the time and budget allocation required for leadership development workshops.

Now, eight months later, looking across at the group who were lingering to chat after the conclusion of another meeting where debate was intense, almost exhilarating, and all the agenda items had been addressed, it was clear the investment was worth it.

For Karim as a leader, understanding each personality type around the table and what might be going on if someone was disengaging or digging their heels in was incredibly useful. But the capacity of the team to recognise this themselves, have insight each other's perspectives and be comfortable in acknowledging and discussing that had not just got the team back on track, it had really shifted the balance.

No longer feeling like referee and failed coach of a team on a trajectory to the bottom of the championship ladder, Karim now relished being able to be a strategic leader collaborating with a team consistently kicking goals. Closing his laptop, Karim also stops to chat with some of the team before they disperse.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Not only does an investment in psychometric assessments to develop your people and team provide a clear performance advantage, an organisation which is investing in and developing its people is one which will have an edge in attracting and retaining the right people.

Contact us if you believe it would benefit you and your team to explore your team dynamics. Our team works with leadership groups from all sectors helping them through various assessments and workshops.

Helen Loveday

Executive Coach



Helen's Expertise

- Executive coaching
- Leadership & development
- Psychometric assessments

Helen has a strong focus on building trust and rapport throughout her coaching engagements to create valuable thinking space for clients to explore, learn and develop. Helen's clients consistently describe her as warm and empathic yet supportively challenging. They really appreciate her abilities as an insightful thinking partner, helping them reflect from different perspectives and gain clarity to take informed and

decisive action. She takes a very tailored approach with her clients, recognising the uniqueness of their personalities and experience and the industries and organisational cultures within which they operate, and she adapts her coaching methodology accordingly. She has supported leaders in areas such as interpersonal relationships, dealing with complexity and self-belief.

Helen is an executive coach, team facilitator and leadership assessor with over 20 years' corporate experience, including 15 years in the Middle East region. She has coached, facilitated and assessed executives within multinationals, government institutions, third sector organisations and SMEs. Helen has experience with leaders across a broad spectrum of industries including professional services, oil and gas, aviation and healthcare and her client list includes organisations such as Total, Etihad, EY, Visa and New York University.

Alongside her executive coaching work, Helen also conducts assessments for recruitment and development for professionals ranging from young talent to senior executives in diverse organisations such as PwC, ADNOC, Riyadh Bank and Nestle. Additionally, Helen assists teams in developing their effectiveness through her team facilitation expertise. These activities provide her with ongoing valuable insights into leadership capabilities and organisational systems.

Prior to establishing her consulting and coaching business, The People Development Specialists, Helen developed her own leadership expertise through in-house roles running Learning and Development functions and leading multi-cultural travel reservations teams.

Helen has an honours degree in International Management, an ILM Diploma in Management Coaching and Mentoring and is an ACE Certified Coach, Results Certified Coach with the Neuroleadership Institute and an ICF accredited coach. Helen is qualified with the British Psychological Society to use a variety of accredited psychometric profiling tools and is an accredited assessor.

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Nothing we do is more important than hiring and developing people. At the end of the day you bet on people, not on strategies.

Lawrence Bossidy

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