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## Professional standards research: cognitive styles

### Fiona Beddoes-Jones: developing the 'thinking performer'

Understanding one's own thinking style is the first step toward gaining an understanding of how others think and can lead to improvements in the way an organisation works as a team

"Cognitive styles" or "thinking styles" are the ways in which people process information. "Metacognitive awareness", meanwhile, is an understanding of our own and others' thinking styles and mental strategies.

Having an interest in understanding different thinking styles from a psychological perspective is not new. The psychologist Gordon Allport used the term "cognitive style" in 1937 when investigating and describing personality, suggesting that labels sometimes

original cumulative list, adding further responses after reflection.

Asked what they had learnt from the exercise, teams' immediate responses included: valuing people; understanding ourselves; realising how many thinking styles there are; viewing people differently; changing our perception of others.

To the question "What are the benefits and value of what you have learnt?", immediate team responses included: awareness of others' styles; tolerance; realisation of team potential; improved communication and hence a better working environment; and the ability to change our way of relating to each other by understanding people's reactions and our own reactions.

thinking processes. In turn, this increased their tolerance and regard for people with thinking styles different from their own.

Qualitative evidence suggests that the workshop led to more effective communication, greater respect for colleagues, an improved working environment and better teamworking. This was particularly evident after changes in the composition of a team and where team dynamics were difficult.

The short-term findings are consistent with prior research by Dorothy Leonard and Susaan Straus in 1997. They used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI) to explore how cognitive preferences influenced the effectiveness of team managers in terms of creativity and innovation. The longer-term benefits of understanding and appreciating our own and others' thinking styles have never before been evaluated, so this research is particularly valuable.

The first step towards becoming a thinking performer is awareness of one's own thinking styles. Using a metacognitive instrument such as Thinking Styles can give an initial understanding. Becoming aware that other people think similarly to, or differently from, ourselves is the next conscious progression. The third step is the deliberate integration of this understanding into team processes and people management.

In the research study, at least two of the four teams took this third step and integrated their understanding into their daily working lives, leading to marked improvements in communication and teamworking.

Increasing people's understanding of their own and others' thinking styles can be integrated into their working lives to become a normal part of team and departmental processes. This research is so valuable because it shows that real long-term benefits can be realised at the operational and strategic levels within organisations.

### Qualitative evidence suggests that the workshop led to more effective communication and better teamworking

used to describe personality are actually descriptors of cognitive style: for example, "creative" or "logical".

Our research explores one way to develop "thinking performers" within an organisation. It identifies some significant benefits to increasing people's understanding of their own and others' thinking styles and provides qualitative evidence regarding the short and longer-term effectiveness of one-off training.

Four teams from a public-sector organisation completed the occupational psychometric 'Thinking Styles' and took part in a one-day group workshop. The immediate benefits of the workshop for individuals and teams were identified by participants in a plenary exercise. No subsequent training interventions relating to the areas of thinking or metacognitive awareness were made. After a 12-month period, participants were contacted again and asked to review the

Participants' comments one year later were also encouraging. "The workshop encouraged teamwork and we have been more aware of different personalities, which is an advantage," said one participant. "There is better communication and people understand themselves and others better."

One team leader lamented the lack of follow-up after the original workshop and hoped that the research would rekindle interest in the development of flexible thinking strategies within the organisation. However, another team leader said: "We use it as part of our planning process for team workshops, so we have integrated it into our teamworking."

Another added: "It has helped us understand the impact of thinking styles on behaviour."

Evidence suggests that, for individuals, receiving their Thinking Styles profile and the workshop feedback contributed to a greater understanding of their own and others'