

Law Firms and Psychological Type Working and Thriving in a "Thinkers" Environment

by Joseph Shaub

Many of you are familiar with the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® and know if you are an “ENFP” or an “ISTJ”. This knowledge is shared by many in the legal community, both attorneys and non-professional staff. The popularity of the *MBTI* has grown dramatically over the past few years. One recent estimate quoted in the *Willamette Law Review*, stated that over 2.5 million people are administered the *MBTI* annually. You can’t turn around without seeing references to it in legal journals (e.g. Larry Richard’s *ABA Journal piece of 9/93* and Susan Daicoff’s excellent law review piece *Lawyer Know Thyself* found at 46 Am.U.L.Rev. 1337) and bar seminars (e.g. WSBA’s March, 2000 Law Office Management Intitute). Law schools, from Harvard to University of Oregon and Columbia offer the *MBTI* as part of their menu of placement services.

Studies have explored the most common psychological types among attorneys and law students and the national registry which collects statistics on the millions of people throughout the country who have taken this test, has determined the most common types among judges and legal secretaries, as well. The differences between lawyers and legal secretaries provides remarkable insight into the divergent ways these twin foundations of the law firm environment view their lives and their work.

Let me begin by briefly summarizing the four different scales of the *MBTI*. Each continuum measures the extent of an individual’s preference for (1) orientation of energy (either outward for **E**xtraverts or inward for **I**ntroverts); (2) perceiving the world (either through their five senses for **S**ensing types or through intuitive connections and abstractions for **i**ntuitive types); (3) making decisions (either based on logic for the **T**hinking types or based on personal values and the impact on others, for the **F**eeling types) and (4) basic attitude toward the world (either as a **J**udging type, who likes to have things organized and settled, or as a **P**erceiving type who prefers to keep options open and to continue to take in information). Needless to say, the qualities of each preference, and the resulting combinations brings fascinating and valuable insights about human nature and personal interaction which far exceeds the space available here. (For a more thorough discussion of the *MBTI*, you can read my article in the January, 1995 edition of the *Washington State Bar News*.)

Studies of lawyers and successful law students (non drop-outs) reveal that the *one overriding quality* which arises in far greater frequency among lawyers is the preference for Thinking over Feeling. This is particularly interesting in our culture since, of the four continua, the only one which demonstrates a strong gender bias is the T-F scale. Of the millions of people who have completed the *MBTI*, roughly 65% of the men have preferred Thinking and about the same percentage (65%) of the women have preferred Feeling. Turning to the studies of lawyers, approximately 75% of the attorneys were Thinkers (about 60% of the female lawyers were Thinkers - in contrast to the 35% found in the general population). To appreciate the significance of this, we have to understand the basic differences between these two preferences - and how strong Thinkers and strong Feelers view each other.

Thinking types trust logic above all else in making their decisions. They tend to be impersonal in their judgments and are most concerned with notions of “truth,” “fairness” and “justice” in forming conclusions. Thinking types tend to work from paradigms of the way something ought to be - thus a Thinker can tend to be very critical because she is viewing reality in comparison to an ideal - and, therefore, the faults will be highlighted. Thinkers are said to be “firm-minded” and analytical.

Feeling types, by contrast, are concerned with the interpersonal impact of decisions. They are described as “sympathetic”, are good at understanding people and are naturally empathic. While a Thinker strives for objective truth, a Feeler’s goal is interpersonal harmony. Obviously, a person with a strong Thinking preference will find the Feeler to be overly “soft” and the strong Feeler will find the Thinker to be “cold” or “heartless.”

One consequence of this difference is regrettably in the law firm environment. There is a striking absence of affirmation. Work is quite naturally criticized rather than complimented. Outright compliments, or other displays of emotion, make Thinking types uncomfortable - they find such expressions mawkish. This is not to say that they,

like the Feelers among them, do not appreciate and benefit from affirmation, it's just that they are less apt to notice the positive and are uncomfortable verbalizing it. They are also less inclined to notice the impact of their decisions on others - it is a natural role for the aggressive litigator who cares not for the impact of his combative position on the opposition. This, of course, impacts the manner in which the hard-charging Thinker deals with others in his life, be it the secretary, associate or spouse.

Studies of legal secretaries demonstrate a much higher proportion of Feeling types in their ranks. This may account for the lawyer's justifiable reliance on her secretary in many instances to act as an effective buffer with the public. It may also account for secretaries' frequent frustrations with their attorneys for failing to acknowledge a job well done or for their far greater comfort with handing out criticism than with a compliment. A lawyer's recognition of this difference will go a long way toward improving the outlook, satisfaction and productivity of support staff.

Oftentimes, suggestions that attention be paid to the more personal aspects of the law firm environment are dismissed (by Thinkers) as being too "touchy-feely." While the practice of law will *always* emphasize logical, impersonal analysis over personal sentiment, and for good reason, the clear trend in the profession is toward accommodation of *all interests* if possible (through the mediation and the ADR movements) and strengthening of the powers of empathy and the attendant need to create a harmonious environment that fosters personal loyalty. Firms have found that, while compensation is obviously important to lawyers, it is not enough to create a cohesive and stable organization. The elements of commitment to personal values and acknowledgment of an individual's importance and accomplishments (both within and outside of the practice of law), long the hallmarks of the Feeling orientation, are increasingly recognized as the factors which create personal loyalty toward the law firm and greater interpersonal satisfaction and superior productivity among professionals and staff.