



Exploring the Reservoirs of Drivers and Blockers (Conscious and Unconscious): Big Five Personality Traits

*You cannot defeat darkness by running from it, nor can you conquer
your inner demons by hiding them from the world. In order to defeat
the darkness, you must bring it into the light.*

Seth Adam Smith, in Rip Van Winkle and the Pumpkin Lantern

Personality can be defined as “an individual’s characteristic patterns of thought, emotion and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns” (Funder, 1997, pp. 1–2). These patterns communicate one’s choices, likings and wishes and impact behaviors which are stable across contexts and which differentiate one individual from another (Vakola, Tsaousis, & Nikalaou, 2004).

Self-awareness, as discussed earlier, refers to one’s ability to be aware of the features of self (Hall, 2004), and personality traits constitute an important component of the self. We believe that understanding and recognizing variations in personality can provide crucial insights for leadership development, enabling people to identify and mitigate the gaps between what is required of them and their capacity to deliver; find solutions that will nurture them; and manage or avoid stressful situations. These directly relate to potential drivers and blockers.

Therefore, in this chapter, we review literature on the Big Five personality traits: (agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness). Our field research shows that these are most likely to act as

drivers or blockers in an individual's change efforts. Each of these is explained in turn, and the hypothesized associations between these and a person's change efforts, drivers and blockers, are discussed.

5.1 PERSONALITY TRAITS: THE FIVE FACTOR MODEL

The role of the personality Five Factor (agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness) Model (FFM)¹ in predicting people's motivation and behavior is well demonstrated by research (Hogan & Holland, 2003; Judge & Ilies, 2002). Classic and current studies in a variety of disciplines acknowledge the FFM as a comprehensive model which sums up and explains the crucial and consistent individual variations in personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009; Judge, Simon, Hurst, & Kelley, 2014). With regard to change, research (e.g. McCrae & Costa, 1986; Vakola et al., 2004) has employed the FFM model to examine individual attitude toward change.

A detailed overview of the Big Five personality traits, including descriptions as well as relevant previous research, is provided in Table 5.1. We also provide direct examples from our own research of how these personality traits act as drivers or blockers in a person's change efforts. Based on our review of the research, we believe that these five personality traits can encourage individuals to direct, accept and oppose change. In other words, they can act as drivers as well as blockers in determining people's change efforts. However, they might work together with other factors such as emotions, values, worldviews and the like, and potential interrelationship is an area we identify in our conclusion for further research related to drivers and blockers.

Beyond the "Big Five", there are a number of other personality traits, dispositional variables and characteristics that are associated with change, assumptions and forces that can also act as drivers and blockers, which we explore in the next chapter.

¹We use the NEO-PI version of the FFM for this book. In addition, in Sect. 10.5, we provide a comparison for reference, with the Myers-Briggs personality indicators because that instrument is so widely used in managerial training and development.

Table 5.1 Big Five personality traits—drivers and blockers examples from our research

Agreeableness	
Description	Previous related research Agreeableness is associated with a positive attitude toward change (Vakola et al., 2004). Studies suggest that individuals with higher agreeableness levels are more hesitant to oppose change and are more inclined to adopt new procedures and policies (Lee-Baggley, Preece, & DeLongis, 2005; McCrae & Costa, 1986). Research, however, suggests that agreeableness is not a predictor of job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991) and is also not significantly correlated to leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002).
Examples of higher and lower agreeableness as blockers	Examples of higher and lower agreeableness as drivers (b) Alex (Example 8) is an associate in a professional services organization, whose objective is to maintain commitment to the team that he has been recently assigned to, replacing one of the previous members. Since Alex is new in the team, he's considered an "outsider" and has been intentionally excluded from a few informal team meetings by some of his team members. However, because of his agreeable and flexible nature, he has been able to put aside the negatives and focus on achieving the team objectives. This personality trait is serving as a driver in maintaining his engagement with the team.
(a) Higher agreeableness, however, can act as a blocker too. Emma (Example 7) is an executive in the banking sector, whose objective is to manage her time and boundaries and not give in to all requests. Emma has a helpful and compassionate personality (i.e. her agreeableness) that makes her feel bad when taking the right decision if she sees that decision affecting someone negatively. The personality trait of higher agreeableness is acting as a blocker in her change efforts. (c) Kenneth (Example 9), a banking executive, is very rational but lacks agreeableness and is often perceived as unsympathetic. Once called a "jerk at work", he tends to be overly critical and dismisses any proposed ideas, feedback, information and change. With this approach, he cuts off the communication lines between himself and others. His disagreeable nature acts as a blocker leading to a lot of issues and negatively affecting the workplace dynamics.	(d) Ali (Example 10), a physician, has a very high reputation as a doctor but at the same time is seen as cold and unfriendly. Ali believes that it is important to be "to the point" with his patients who otherwise start giving him a "whole bunch of irrelevant stories", which affects his efficiency. He believes that if he is friendly with his patients and shows his compassion, it would interfere with the way he operates as a doctor. In his case, low agreeableness acts as driver helping him work in an efficient and clinically focused way.

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Table 5.1 (continued)

Extraversion	Description	Previous related research
<p>The extent and magnitude of social engagement and activity. It specifies the degree to which one is sociable, assertive and outgoing versus quiet, shy, reflective and solitary (McCrae & John, 1992; Vakola et al., 2004). The extraversion/introversion distinction is also seen in relation to the source of mental energy, where introverts are seen drawing energy from within, whereas extraverts obtain it from others and the external environment (Leonard & Straus, 1997).</p>	<p>Extraversion is associated with a favorable attitude toward change (Vakola et al., 2004). There is a consensus in the literature that the demonstration and communication of positive emotions lie at the heart of extraversion (Watson & Clark, 1997). Individuals with positive emotions are more supportive of change than the ones with negative emotions (Vos, 2006). Research suggests extraversion as a positive predictor of job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Bing & Lounsbury, 2000; Johnson, 1997) and leadership emergence and effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002). However, studies also show that introverts are better leaders than extraverts in unpredictable environments and in leading proactive teams (Grant, Gino, & Hofmann, 2010).</p>	
Examples of extraversion/introversion as blockers	Example of extraversion/introversion as drivers	
<p>(e) Martin (Example 11) is a general manager in a consumer goods organization, whose development objective is to be a better networker and who is trying his best to make this change. Martin accepts that <i>“being more socially engaged will help him gain better access to quality information, which will help him create more value for himself, his business and others”</i>. He, however, finds it <i>“unnatural to reach out to people for no apparent reason”</i> and does not make the time for social engagement. Martin scores <i>low on extraversion</i>, he is an introvert. This trait is acting as a blocker in his attempt to make this change.</p>	<p>(f) Thomas (Example 12) is an executive in an energy organization, whose development objective is to develop his business unit by encouraging “out of the box” thinking. Thomas regularly arranges meetings with junior associates and managers in his unit to discuss ideas and do brain storming. However, in these meetings, he does more listening than talking, a norm which he follows even in his personal life. He is able to leverage the talents of the people around him and trains them to improve on their thinking and reach their full potential. Thomas scores <i>low on extraversion</i> and sees it as the reason for his increased engagement with his employees. This trait of his allows ideas from his business unit to blossom into new products. About a quarter of the company’s new products come from their unit. His introversion acts as a driver helping him accomplish his objective.</p>	

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Table 5.1 (continued)

<p>(g) John (Example 13), a business head in the banking sector, sees introversion and extraversion as “powerful” mechanisms that impact people’s approach toward work. He admits being an extravert and acknowledges that he often comes across as “<i>powerful and dominating</i>”. His extravert nature makes it difficult for him to deal with his extravert peers, who also seek to dominate discussions. He humorously describes their interaction as “<i>every now and then there is an explosion</i>”. In case of John and his peers, extraversion is acting as a blocker in their efforts to work together and actively listen.</p>	<p>(h) Fred (Example 14), an operations executive in the financial services sector, had been given a responsibility to head his organization’s restructuring initiative in a subsidiary located in a different country. Fred was advised on the importance of building networks and personal relationships with the key contacts in the host country before he started in his new role. This way of working was different to the one Fred was used to, which didn’t require him to build networks to get work done. However, his outgoing extravert personality which facilitates an active social interaction acted as a driver for him to build his network and achieve his objective.</p>
<p>Conscientiousness</p>	
<p>Description</p>	
<p>Conscientiousness: The level of perseverance, organization and drive in one’s behavior oriented toward accomplishing tasks. It describes the degree to which one is efficient, reliable, organized and diligent versus disorganized, careless and indolent (McCrae & John, 1992; Vakola et al., 2004).</p>	<p>Previous related research</p> <p>Conscientiousness is associated with favorable attitude toward change (Vakola et al., 2004). Research has shown conscientiousness to be a significant factor in how people evaluate and react to stressful situations (e.g. Lee-Baggley et al., 2005). High conscientiousness has also been related to performance (most stable predictor) (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Salgado, 1997), commitment to challenging goals (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993) and the use of effective coping mechanisms (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). However, some studies suggest a negative correlation between conscientiousness and managerial promotability (linked to factors like flexibility, innovation, persuasiveness), which is different to performance (Robertson, 2000).</p>

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Table 5.1 (continued)

Examples of higher and lower conscientiousness as blockers	Examples of higher and lower conscientiousness as drivers
<p>(i) Laurel (Example 15) is a manager in a software organization, whose objective is to facilitate her team's development and finish projects on time. As it happens, Laurel is a quite disciplined, hardworking individual who has high standards. She is often seen as a "perfectionist". Because of this trait, her team members are hesitant and delay approaching her when they experience problems which further leads to work delays. This trait acts as a blocker, making it difficult for her to achieve her objective.</p> <p>(k) Richard (Example 17) is a case writer, whose objective is to meet his deadlines for submission of cases and other related research work. Richard however concedes that he is quite disorganized and is "a procrastinator". As such, he focuses less on working and finishing tasks "leaving things to tomorrow". Being low on conscientiousness acts as a blocker, delaying his submissions and affecting his performance.</p>	<p>(j) Returning to the Example 14 case of Fred (Example 16) here. Being given the opportunity to head his organization's restructuring initiative, Fred was very aware that "it will not be an easy task" and that he will not be welcomed by the subsidiary organization. However, Fred took it as a challenge to prove himself to the top management team. The high conscientiousness levels in Fred which makes him disciplined and achievement-oriented acted as driver helping him achieve his objective.</p> <p>(l) Christina (Example 18), a system analyst, scores low on conscientiousness. Although she is frequently disorganized, she is highly regarded by her peers for creativity and spontaneity. Her manager wants her to take more responsibility for a new project development, so that she can use her sense of creativity and spontaneity to arrange a series of IT experiments with her team. Being aware of her deficiencies, she has been given an administrative support to work closely with her. For her, the trait of low conscientiousness manifested through her creativity and spontaneity acts as a driver to enjoy the process while achieving results.</p>

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Table 5.1 (continued)

<p>Neuroticism</p>	<p>Description The propensity of an individual to experience negative emotions, for example, anxiety, uncertainty, fear, anger and depression. It is also referred to as emotional stability and defines the extent to which an individual is fearful, anxious and stressed versus calm, stable and self-assured (McCrae & John, 1992; Vakola et al., 2004).</p>	<p>Previous related research Research suggests that neuroticism is associated with negative attitude toward action and an inclination toward inaction (Ireland, Hepler, Li, & Albarracín, 2014). Negative attitude toward action however is mediated by anxiety in individuals who score high on neuroticism (Ireland et al., 2014). Furthermore, studies found a negative correlation between neuroticism and job satisfaction (Judge & Locke, 1993; Tokar & Subich, 1997), job performance (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999) and leadership effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002). However, research also suggests that highly neurotic individuals can perform better than their stable colleagues when expending large amounts of effort (Smilie, Yeo, Furnham, & Jackson, 2006).</p>
<p>Examples of higher and lower neuroticism as blockers</p>	<p>(m) Mary (Example 19) is an administrative staff member in an educational institution. Mary’s objective is to develop herself and be more collaborative with her colleagues. Mary, however, is a pessimist and tends to over-react in most situations. As such, her coworkers see her as an “<i>oversensitive</i>” individual—someone who is difficult to work with and therefore avoid dealing with her. This trait contributes as a blocker in her efforts to improve her collaboration with her colleagues and to develop herself.</p>	<p>Examples of higher and lower neuroticism as drivers (n) In Mary’s case, although she is viewed as “<i>oversensitive</i>” and “<i>temperamental</i>” by her colleagues, she is a hardworking and an organized individual. Her feelings of insecurity and anxiety—the fear of performing badly—are able to also serve as a driver for her, making her work hard on her projects and thereby develop herself.</p>
<p>(o) Peter (Example 20), an investment banker, is a self-assured individual who is excessively certain at times to the extent of being over-confident. Being self-assured and very calm acts as a blocker for him as he does not invest time in monitoring and planning and therefore frequently fails to evaluate the riskiness of his valuations and investment decisions.</p>	<p>(p) Victor (Example 21), a senior project lead, is a very calm and emotionally stable individual who has developed and maintained an aura of approachability with the people around him. His nature helps him maintain positive working relationships at work, thereby driving success. Being low on neuroticism acted as driver for him during the recent economic crisis, when his team looked up to him for assurance and hope.</p>	<p>(continued)</p>

Table 5.1 (continued)

Openness to experience	Description	Previous related research
	<p>The tendency to actively look for novel experiences. It defines the degree to which one is curious, flexible, artistic and creative versus being cautious and enjoying following routines (McCrae & John, 1992; Vákola et al., 2004).</p>	<p>People who are less open tend to have strong opinions and remain committed to those opinions (Flynn, 2005). With regard to change, research has linked openness to change to adapting to and dealing with change. In particular, research (e.g. McCrae & Costa, 1986) shows a positive relationship between openness to experience and using effective coping mechanisms. As such, openness to change, as an aspect, is related to favorable attitude toward change (Vákola et al., 2004). Research also links openness to task performance and creativity (Raudsepp, 1990; Rothmann & Coetzer, 2003). To the contrary, research by Hayes, Roehm, & Castellano, (1994) found that successful employees scored less on openness to experience in relation to less successful employees.</p>
	<p>Examples of higher and lower openness to experience as blockers</p>	<p>Examples of higher and lower openness to experience as drivers</p>
<p>(q) Laurel (Example 22), because of her strong discipline, is less flexible and less open to experience, which negatively impacts the entrepreneurial spirit and creativity of her team members. Being less open to experience acts as a blocker in her efforts to develop her team.</p>	<p>(r) Kathy (Example 23), a senior operations executive in the logistics and supply chain management sector, is very routine-oriented and structured. She was given responsibility to manage a major restructuring initiative that involved implementation of a new logistics infrastructure in her organization. With her strict adherence to structure, she made sure that all the deadlines were met, tasks were clear and every team submitted a weekly progress report to the management. This trait acted as a driver in helping her ensure smooth functioning as the new initiative was implemented.</p>	

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<p>(s) Greg (Example 24) is a senior sales executive in a machinery and equipment industry, working for an engineering company dealing with a variety of clients. Greg has a risk-taking attitude, which stems from his openness to experience trait. His working approach is less detail-oriented, making him pay less attention to the standard working procedures. Openness to experience acts as blocker for him in dealing with his company's clients with strong protocol adherence such as hospitals and army.</p>	<p>(t) Mark (Example 25) is a writer, whose objective is to continue publishing new and interesting pieces. Mark is fascinated by different cultures and life styles. He habitually travels a lot to increase his knowledge and experiences which help him produce works that are new and inspiring. Being highly open to experience serves as a driver, which helps him achieve his objective.</p>
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See Sect. 10.1 for the source of the examples