

Seven Suggestions for Managing Personality differences

Differences in culture, gender, life stage and ambition all create a vibrant energy in the academic environment that keeps us from getting stuck in one way of thinking. The International Office provide some excellent resources for understanding [cultural differences](#) and the [Equality and Diversity](#) web pages stimulate thought about the unconscious bias we all have. The suggestions below focus on the personality differences most often raised by academics. Although they appear simple, these are the differences which can be most difficult to articulate and understand.

1 Know thyself

It is difficult to understand other people if we are not conscious of the way that we think, see the world and relate to others. Without standing back and observing ourselves it is easy to assume that we are just normal and everybody who differs from us is not. We are all unique and if you do not appreciate what makes you different it will be difficult to appreciate difference in others. There are many ways of getting perspective on this. One of the best is spending time with trusted peers to gain insight into how other people think and see the world since this throws our own make up into sharp relief. The [leadership programmes](#) run by Staff Development offer a valuable opportunity to work with academic peers in this way.

2 Give space for reflection and discussion

People are energised differently and have differing needs for reflection and discussion. Group leaders tend to set things up the way they prefer them without realising this makes life difficult for others. There are practical things you can do to ensure that needs for both reflection and discussion are met. Make sure that people know what will be discussed in a meeting before you come together. If there are important questions to consider ask these in advance to allow thinking time before discussion. If your preference is for reflection, be mindful that others are energised by discussion and create fora where people can engage in conversations that stimulate their curiosity.

3 Appreciate that ideas are developed differently

It's vital that people work in an environment that nurtures the development of ideas. Some people develop their ideas alone at first, thinking them through fully before they share them. Others develop their ideas by bouncing them off people at a much earlier stage, discussing, building and testing their inspirations from the start. This difference in idea development causes significant trouble if it is not understood. Thinkers of both varieties can be annoyed by the other. Those thinking alone become irritated by others talking incessantly about 'half-baked' ideas and those who flourish by discussing their ideas are annoyed by colleagues unwilling to share them. Develop an appreciation of the strength of both approaches. To release their potential, people need to work in the best way for them, not the best way for you. That said there is an increasing need for people to share ideas in collaborations and researchers can go a long way down the wrong track if they are not encouraged to share ideas early enough. There is no harm in asking people to share the theme of their thinking at an earlier stage; be sure to explain you are not asking for a fully-fledged idea.

"Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding about ourselves." Carl Jung

4 Consider both logic and values

When we make decisions we adopt a process to decide between options. Some people favour objective criteria that allow choices to be evaluated logically for their pros and cons. Others prefer to make decisions based on their values and strive to make the decision that sits best with them and which will create harmony for all the people involved. Although everybody uses both objective logic and personal values in decision making, we tend to default to one of these first. Try to become aware of which mode you feel most comfortable using and which you respect more in others. Both are entirely rational and valuable decision-making processes. When you are trying to influence or persuade others you will need to demonstrate that a decision is both logical and in alignment with people's values. Very often people make a compelling logical case and cannot fathom why people won't buy into it. Usually the answer is that it does not resonate with their value system.

5 Look for the gift and the challenge

Every talent and every foible has a flip side. The most visionary pioneer offers the gift of imagination and possibility but it can present a challenge for them to be asked to focus on the current details. The most obtuse pessimist is a challenging colleague when they deflate ideas before they have taken flight, yet they offer us a gift of sober realism that can prevent us from falling when we attempt to fly too soon. The best leaders look for both the gift and the challenge that someone presents and think about how they can make the best possible contribution to a team.

6 Don't pigeonhole anybody

While it is wonderful to align people with work they will excel at, be careful not to box them in without opportunities to try new things and develop other areas. It's important not to assume that the quiet person won't want to do the presentation or that the gregarious one loves attending conferences. It is sometimes good for people to do things that they are not comfortable with; we are usually a little uncomfortable when we are learning something new.

7 Try tight-loose management

Some people like plans and structure, others prefer things to be open ended. Big problems can arise when you have people with opposite approaches working together. With tight-loose management you define the goal (what is to be achieved), the boundaries (finite amounts of time, resource, people etc) and any points in time where people's work intersects or there is a need to pass on information. Once this is defined you let everyone get on with their work in their own way. People lose energy if they are forced to work against their natural patterns.

