

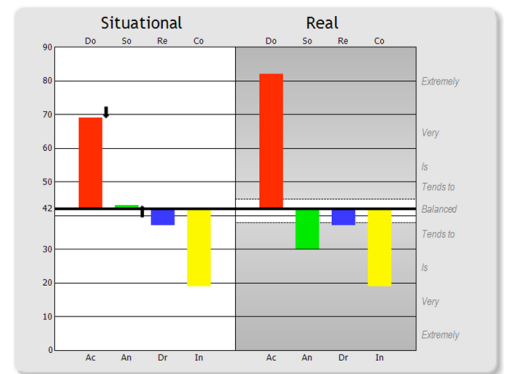
Living outside your Comfort Zone – Coping with Pressure & Stress

“You can adjust all of your behaviour some of the time and some of your behaviour all of the time.

But you cannot adjust all of your behaviour all of the time”.

Cormac McGrane

As McQuaig Psychometric System Users we are all familiar with the ‘Situational’ and the ‘Real’ Profiles and those subtle or not so subtle differences between the two graphs. These differences can tell us a lot about an individual as we know when the report indicates *stretching, holding back or transition*. Sometimes the differences are not so clear cut, but to an experienced user and interviewer, they can still tell a story. So what do these movements tell us? What might be causing these differences



Part 1: The Situational Profile

‘In part one of the form, they describe “How you think other people think of you in your work environment”. Obviously they can’t get inside these other people’s minds to describe accurately how they are perceived. Instead, they do the next best thing; they describe how they feel they behave in the workplace taking all of the influencing factors into account. They describe their current situation. The Situational Profile is fluid and can change rapidly in response to changes in their working environment.

Part 2: The Real Profile

In part two of the form they

describe their “Real” preferred behavioural patterns. This side of the graph is much more stable, as they have already taken into account in part one, how they adjust their behaviour to accommodate the needs of their workplace. They describe how they would behave in an ideal world, where they could achieve their potential.

So from a McQuaig perspective we can consider someone whose Situational and Real profiles are similar, to be working in their *comfort zone*. Of course, there is always the possibility that their profiles are similar because they do not make changes to meet the environmental demands of their job, but these Ronseal Tinmen are

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a different story.

The quotation; *“You can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time”*, has been variously attributed to P. T Barnum, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain and others.

I like to twist this expression for McQuaig Factors to read; ***“You can adjust all of your behaviour some of the time and some of your behaviour all of the time, but you cannot adjust all of your behaviour all of the time”***.

This viewpoint suggests that we can modify our behaviour to meet the challenges or adjust to the pressures of our environment for varying periods of time. We cannot change significantly for a long period of time, because we would eventually run out of steam and become a victim of Stress.

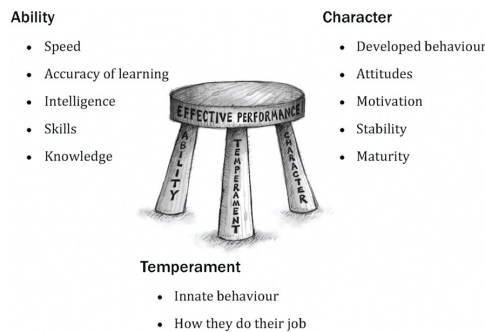
Some people move from their comfort zone to stress quite rapidly, while others appear to handle inordinate levels of pressure that would cause most onlookers to collapse.

Why might this be?

Back to McQuaig basics.

High Performers

We look at High Performance as being a three legged stool. The three legs are Ability, Character and Temperament. Assuming that your employee has the basic Skills & Knowledge along with some Experience, we can



take it that they can actually do the job. But as we know, sustained performance requires more than just these latter three factors.

Ability, or Aptitude and Capacity to Learn as measured by The McQuaig Occupational Test® (MOT) gives us a strong indication of a person’s ability to develop competence or mastery over their skills and knowledge. In other words, they have the capacity to learn on the job and strengthen their experience. Individuals with lower MOT scores tend to favour routine and repetitive tasks, so if the demands of their job change, or they work in a dynamic environment, they will have

difficulty in adapting their skills and knowledge to meet the needs of their role.

We sometimes find that 5 years experience may be no more than one year’s experience repeated five times, which is a lot different to five years of active learning and adapting.

Such individuals will struggle to meet the demands of their role and we will typically see this struggle reflected in their performance and in their Word Survey profile as a pressure response, Holding Back, or as a Stress response – Transition.

Individuals with higher scores will be able to absorb the pressure and adjust their skills and knowledge or quickly take on new skills and knowledge. Temperament is pretty much fixed, we enter the workforce with an established set of core behaviours that in most cases do not change, or do so slowly. The behavioural component of the Job Description is critical in ensuring that an individual is not put under undue pressure or stress by having too big of a gap between their natural temperament and the temperament they must display to deliver the expected performance in the role.

Pressure and Stress

Again, going back to the advice of Lincoln or Barnum, we can adjust all of our behaviours for a short period of time under pressure, but if this timeframe becomes extended, pressure can quickly turn to stress.

The critical difference between Pressure and Stress is that a person under pressure can perform beyond their normal level but under Stress a person's performance becomes erratic, sometimes above expectations and sometimes failing to meet expectations. Ultimately, they will spend less and less time meeting expectations.

When a person is comfortably coping with pressure, we get a picture of Stretching on the Situational side of their profile. They may be showing more of their Dominance Trait and more Drive or Independence than would be normal for them. Similarly in Specialist roles, we may see more Acceptance and Relaxed or Compliant behaviour, as they immerse themselves further in their task or project and take on more detail and direction.

What is *stretching* for a Generalist profile may be a *pressure* or *stress* indicator for a

Specialist or Expert. In the same way *stretching* for an Expert, may be a problem for a Generalist. In either case, *stretching* as a longterm activity is ultimately draining and inevitably leads to a collapse in performance.

In more problematic situations, *holding back* has more immediate consequences. Here the individual is operating outside of their normal range, but while the successes and positive feedback associated with stretching supports a longer presentation of positive behaviours. *Holding back* has none of the upside. People who are holding back typically are in receipt of negative comment on their performance, or are expecting such comment shortly.



I find that *holding back* is most commonly associated with a skill or knowledge deficit, the simple inability to actually do the job to expected performance levels. However, it may also be due to a conflict with the boss or colleagues on a more personal level than simply performance. Or in some cases, it is simply down to a bad fit between the behavioural requirements of the job and the individual's own temperament; a Specialist promoted to a Generalist role is a fairly common example.

Right Role?

Sometimes the role itself may be poorly structured and those designing the role have unwittingly designed a role that contains conflicting behavioural requirements. Again, this underlines the value of The McQuaig Job Survey® in ensuring a good fit. If the Job Profile comes up with a Transition pattern then you need to go back to the drawing board and explore your options.

Character

Moving on from Ability and Temperament, the third leg of the stool is the most complicated - Character. Within

The McQuaig Model we describe Character as being made up of a number of largely qualitative factors:

- Attitudes & Values
- Self Motivation
- Stability & Persistence
- Maturity
- Judgement

These Character Traits have a significant impact on Temperament and the way in which a person can adjust their core behaviours to meet differing situations.

For example, *maturity and judgement* may lead an individual to temper their Dominance or Social behaviours for a better longterm outcome or result. Character traits are largely Learned Behaviours. They are a result of how a person was brought up and the feedback and guidance they received on the display and outcomes of their preferred behaviour.

Married people typically adjust their behaviour in the presence of their parents-in-law. Mature judgement tells them that uncontrolled display of their natural behaviour may lead to uncomfortable outcomes for themselves and their partner or

a row with their partner when they are alone together. Similarly in the workplace we adjust our behaviour in the presence of the boss or in the presence of sensitive colleagues or perhaps most readily recognised; in the presence of an angry customer. These are lessons learned during early childhood from parents, extended family and peers. Learned behaviours help us to adjust our core temperament to meet the needs of the family, community and society as a whole. They take years to learn and have become habit. In the workplace these traits are invaluable. The way in which a person can adjust their core behaviour to fit in with the dynamic demands of the job can greatly extend their range of capabilities and level of performance along with their resistance to workplace pressures and stress.

The role of coaching and mentoring

Coaching and Mentoring on the job can help an individual to explore their limitations and develop further coping skills or character. Coping Skills are just another way of looking at

Character. We typically talk about introducing coping skills where the character trait is weak or absent. Coaching and Mentoring is an excellent way of building on a person's existing character.

A generational challenge?

On a side note, Generation X & Y, the produce of the last few generations have not had the same levels of feedback and guidance in character development that earlier generations had, due to changes in society and family structures. We live in increasingly anonymous communities, out of touch with those who matter in our lives such as family and old friends. The old feedback and reinforcement loops that once held communities together may well be gone for ever. A replacement mechanism is badly needed.

The value of coaching

The McQuaig Self Development Report® is perhaps the ideal tool to kick off a Coaching Programme designed to help an individual to cope better with the demands of the job, where the skills and knowledge itself is not the issue.

In this report, a person will find a clear and comprehensive description of their core temperament that will enhance their awareness of their potential and more importantly; the tips and guidelines that will help them to make more of their inner strength and at the same time minimise the impact of their natural limitations.

We must think of these “limitations” as natural partners to their strengths, you cannot have one without the other. However, not all limitations are relevant to their job or role. It is important to point this out, because otherwise a person may become overwhelmed by the document. Equally, not all relevant limitations will be of equal importance to their job, some will rank higher than others.

By ranking a person’s development needs, you can, or they can plan a programme of personal development that is focused on the most important needs first. They can get some quick critical wins early on to give them the momentum to see the programme through.

This type of development planning can over time bring an individual to a whole new level of performance. But Coaching and Mentoring is a whole other topic. I won’t go any further than to say that it can provide a person with the best protection against workplace stress.

Emotional Intelligence

The McQuaig Self Development Report® is also an important foundation of the pathway to that other business buzz word,

Emotional Intelligence. EI is simply a combination of Ability, Character and Temperament, where their Self Awareness has let to the development of the Coping Skills to extend their potential. **This is the pathway to Leadership in its many forms.**


About the author


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Tips

1. Start in a focused way
2. Encourage people to share their own reports
3. If there is some resistance to assessment, start from a non-threatening area
4. Try it out on key people – including yourself
5. The quality report is key to getting buy-in.