

Acting 'out of character' in the workplace

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Creative Company Conference 2011. Credit: Sebastiaan ter Burg (Flickr Creative Commons)

Look around your workplace – and ask yourself which colleagues you'd describe as extravert and which as introvert. Perhaps your most talkative workmate is actually an introvert? Research by Sanna Balsari-Palsule, a PhD candidate in the Department of Psychology, investigates the ways in which people act 'out of character' – and how the consequences play out in the workplace.

We are often typecast as introverts and extroverts. People do have biological propensities to behave in certain ways; some of us are naturally more talkative and sociable while others prefer more time alone. But, according to Canadian-born research psychologist Professor Brian Little, our traits are by no means fixed. Little is now collaborating

with Cambridge University PhD candidate Sanna Balsari-Palsule on an in-depth study of 'free-traits'.

In his new book [Me, Myself and Us: The Science of Personality and the Art of Well-Being](#), Little suggests that we are often able to override our biological make-up through the adoption of free-traits which allow us to act in different ways to our natural selves. We call on these free-traits to meet the demands of different situations and achieve projects and goals that are important to us.

Little recommends that we might usefully think of ourselves as amateur scientists. We are continually exploring and testing the world around us to discover what works and what doesn't. We do things, say things, and then we observe the reactions and unconsciously store the results. We apply what we learn from our 'experiments' to the advancement of what Little describes as our 'personal projects' – a description he devised back in 1983 to describe the goals and pursuits that underlie people's behaviour.

The personal projects in question might be big ones (such as career ambitions) or small ones (like cleaning the car) but they form the bedrock of our day-to-day behaviour and our relationships with our friends, family and workmates. Sometimes our personal project pursuit requires us to engage in free-traits; other times, we can just be ourselves. Little proposes that the successful pursuit of 'core projects' that are meaningful, manageable, supported by others and generate positive feelings can greatly impact our happiness and the quality of our lives.

Since 2010, Little has lectured in the Department of Psychology and Cambridge Judge Business School. The course he teaches is based on his lifetime's research covered in *Me, Myself and Us* – and it offers undergraduate, graduate and executive MBA students the chance to reflect on their own personality. In 2011, Little taught a group of

graduate students that included Sanna Balsari-Palsule.

"I loved the idea that acting is not something restricted to the stage, but that we are so often faced with the need to perform in daily life. With the amount of time spent in our jobs, our occupations hold such a prominent place in our lives. In an ideal world, one's job would fit one's traits perfectly, but that's very rarely the case. As so much can hinge on how we behave with others in the workplace, I became fascinated with exploring what happens when people push the limits of their ability to act out of character. Do they experience detriments in their well-being or work performance and does this increase their chances of burnout?" said Balsari-Palsule.

In collaboration with Little, Balsari-Palsule has been conducting projects that explore the experiences of [employees](#) in organisations. Initial results from the first stage of research in a large marketing company are intriguing. The findings suggest that extroverts initially experience advantages over introverts in terms of getting noticed and promoted more rapidly. However, when introvert employees higher up in the organisation act out of character and become extraverted ('pseudo-extroverts'), they have equal performance ratings as extroverts, and do not report feeling drained.

Little and Balsari-Palsule offer an explanation: introvert employees make frequent use of 'restorative resources'. These are spaces in the workplace designed to allow employees to read quietly or simply relax in order to recover their equilibrium after a strenuous session of acting out of character that would otherwise drain their energy. However, if the same employees were expected to act out of character for more prolonged periods, without the chance to recover, the benefits could quickly turn into costs.

In the same study, however, extroverts report strikingly different, and

much less rewarding, experiences of acting out of character. It appears that more outwardly confident personality types find it extremely hard – and stressful – to rein back their personalities and act as if they were introverted ('pseudo-introverts').

"We found this difference was most common among younger employees. It may be that introverts are generally so accustomed to acting extrovertly in situations outside of the workplace that it becomes a relatively easy force of habit, particularly in Western cultures where extroversion is often highly valued. On the other hand, extrovert employees at the beginning of their careers are much less used to being isolated in an office for long periods of time, so may feel like caged animals, needing to feed off the energy of others in order to thrive," said Balsari-Palsule.

In the second stage of research, Balsari-Palsule is looking into the idiosyncrasies of people's work projects and how the work environment plays a vital role in supporting or, in some cases, constraining them. For example, highly competitive [work environments](#), that place strict demands on employees to conform to certain types of behaviour, may leave little time for employees to pursue their personally important and valuable core projects, which could eventually be detrimental to their well-being. She expects that a closer look at the influences of different factors in the work environment in conjunction with how people behave will shed more light on when the costs and benefits of acting out of character are drawn out.

The practical implications of this research are numerous. Balsari-Palsule suggests that it would serve employers well to not disregard the costs of free-trait acting as compromised psychological well-being and physical health can quickly translate into costly reductions for productivity and performance and increases in absenteeism. Instead, organisations must adopt policies and build work environments that are supportive of free-

trait expression but also provide the spaces for people to be themselves.

She said: "Management should rely less on handing out personality questionnaires that pigeonhole employees into introvert and extrovert categories, but instead be aware of the powerful driving force of core projects on personality in the workplace."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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