Diagnosing Managerial Characteristics

This exercise is designed to give you practice in diagnosing differences in others’ styles and inclinations. Being aware of the styles, values, and attitudes of others will help you manage them more effectively. Below are brief descriptions of four successful managers. They differ in values, learning styles, orientations toward change, and interpersonal orientation. After reading the scenarios, form small groups to discuss the questions that follow.

Michael Dell

Michael Dell is the kind of guy people either love or hate. He is worth more than $13 billion, loves to go to work each day, and is as likely to tear a computer apart and put it back together again as to read a financial report. More than 15 years after he started assembling computers in his dorm room, Michael is still fascinated with the hardware. Despite his billionaire status, “if anyone believes that he is not the chief technologist in this company, they are naive,” says Robert McFarland, vice president of Dell’s federal sales group. Although Dell Computer is the quintessential lean-and-mean company, Michael does not play the part of the whipcracker. After recently receiving an award from the Austin, Texas, Chamber of Commerce, for example, Michael and his wife stayed long after the program was over to chat with everyone who wanted to meet him. He has been described as shy and quiet and not inclined toward public hyperbole. “Michael has a genuine shyness . . . he is a genuinely mild-mannered, low- key person who was very focused on reaching his objectives,” says Brian Fawkes, a former Dell employee. Admittedly, Dell has experienced several missteps and losses, but Michael has been unafraid to learn from missteps. “Michael makes mistakes. He just never makes the same mistake twice,” says Mark Tebbe, president of a firm Dell recently acquired.

Patrick M. Byrne

As president and chairman of Overstock.com in Salt Lake City, Utah, Byrne was a Marshall Scholar who received his PhD in philosophy from Stanford University. His management style, personality, and core values are illustrated in his interview with Fast Company: “Learning philosophy has been useful in teaching me how to get to the heart of things—to be able to deconstruct what the real issues are. People think we’re endless debaters, but what we’re really doing is refining concepts in order to reach agreement. With negotiations, instead of trying to fight someone on every one of the issues, most of the time it turns out he cares about a whole bunch of things that you don’t care about. Make those trade-offs, and he’ll think you’re being too generous when in fact you’re just giving him the sleeves off your vest. Ultimately, philosophy is about values, and that definitely has its place in business. I consider myself a far outsider to Wall Street. There’s a whole lot of obfuscation involved. In August, I spoke out on how the Wall Street system was corrupt and how the financial press was co-opted. Because of it I got called a buffoon and wacky; then a lot of lies came out about my being gay, taking cocaine, and hiring a stripper. That’s sort of the fifth-grade level we’re operating on. It doesn’t bother me. When you decide to stand for things, you have to be prepared to face criticism, mockery, and derision.”

Maurice Blanks

When Maurice started architecture school, one of the professors said that only 25 percent of the students would make it. Sure enough, Maurice dropped out in his forties after oper- ating his own office in Chicago. He moved to Minneapolis to devote himself full time to Blu Dot, a company he helped create. His discussion about architecture reveals a great deal about his personal attributes. “Architecture is about keeping track of thousands of pieces of information and making sure they’re all covered in the design. The implications of failure are pretty high if you don’t—people could get hurt. Therefore, you learn that you must be very efficient with information and organization, which naturally translates to running the day-to-day operations of a company. It’s funny how the word ‘sell’ is never used in architecture school, but to me the critiques were kind of informal lessons in sales. For exams, you’d present your work to a jury—professors, peers, local architects, and so on. Their job was to shell you; your job was to defend yourself. It’s pretty brutal. Tears are not uncommon. But it taught me how to communicate ideas quickly and tailor information to an audience.”

SOURCE: Adapted from Fast Company, 2005.

Gordon Bethune

Gordon Bethune has been described as the other earthy, exuberant, hard-drinking Texas CEO who turned around an airline that is now famous for good service, happy employees, and admirable profitability. Herb Kelleher at Southwest Airlines is the best known, but Gordon Bethune at Continental Airlines is the most successful. A high school drop- out mechanic who spent years in the Navy, Gordon took over a twice-bankrupt airline in 1994 and led it from a $960 million loss to more than $600 million profit in five years. Even from his early years as a Navy mechanic, Gordon was known as superb motivator of people and a network builder. “He had a web of relationships that enabled him to get whatever he needed,” said a former commanding officer. At Continental, Gordon turned around a culture where morale was in the pits, on-time performance was abysmal, and everything from the planes to the meals were a mess. Part of the turnaround was due to Gordon’s personal attention to employees—for example, he attends the graduation ceremonies of every new class of flight attendants, hands out candy canes to employees during the Christmas season, shows up regularly at employee birthday parties, and holds a monthly open house in his office to encourage employee communication. “Anybody who’s worked here longer than two months can recognize Gordon,” says a baggage handler in Newark. When he walks through an airport, employees wave and call out his name. Whereas Gordon is known as an irreverent and wild guy, he demands precision and standardized levels of service in every place in the company. When he discovered slightly larger white coffee cups in a Houston airport lounge, for example, he was told that they were needed to fit the new coffee maker. He demanded that the coffee maker be changed so that the standard blue cups could be used. No exceptions.”

Discussion Questions

1. Rank these individuals from highest to lowest in terms of:

■ Emotional intelligence

■ Values maturity

■ Tolerance of ambiguity

■ Core self-evaluation Justify your evaluations in a discussion with your colleagues and compare your

scores.

2. What is your prediction about the dominant learning styles of each of these individuals? What data do you use as evidence?

3. If you were assigned to hire a senior manager for your organization and this was your candidate pool, what questions would you ask to identify these individuals’:

■ Cognitive styles

■ Values orientations

■ Orientation toward change

■ Core self-evaluation

Which one of these people would you hire if you wanted a CEO for your company? Why?

4. Assume that each of these individuals were members of your team. What would be the greatest strengths and weaknesses of your team? What kinds of attributes would you want to add to your team to ensure that it was optimally heterogeneous?