

# Here's the Fundamental Difference Between Behavior and Personality



We've all known people who have irritated us. Likewise, we've known people that we enjoyed being around. I've frequently heard some say the difference between the two was because of the personality of the individual. That sounds something like, "They're so pushy," or "needy," or "egotistical," or "critical," or fill-in-the-blank. On one level, there's truth in the idea that these things are related to someone's personality. However, on another, this is inaccurate because when we're around someone it's not their entire personality we see, hear, or are impacted by; it's their behavior. This is the aspect of someone that quickly creates negative or positive perceptions. Behavior is an expression of one's personality but recognizing and understanding the difference between the two is crucial for interpersonal communication (and to avoid ["landing" poorly on others](#)).

To explain this difference, picture the common metaphor of an iceberg. Let's say the iceberg represents your personality. There's a lot that goes into that, right? Family of origin, genetics, life experiences, friends, gender, age, neurological factors, etc. These are all very real and important aspects of who we are and becoming more aware of them and how they have shaped us is essential for growth. But most people aren't nearly as concerned with our

personality as we are. They are focused on the part of the iceberg that is above the waterline—our behavior—because that’s the part of us they can most easily access. It’s the aspect that affects them the most directly.

Even though our behavior (what we do) is a part of our personality (who we are) it certainly isn’t all of it. After all, how many people know the depths of who we are? For most of us, the answer is one or maybe two others. That level of knowledge requires a lot of significant self-disclosure, vulnerability, and trust-building that takes time and many repeated and varied experiences, which is why only one or two people usually feature on that list. But everyone knows our behavior, and probably even better than we do. Have you ever watched yourself on a video and been surprised by how you sounded or acted? That’s not unusual.

## Behavior Is a Choice

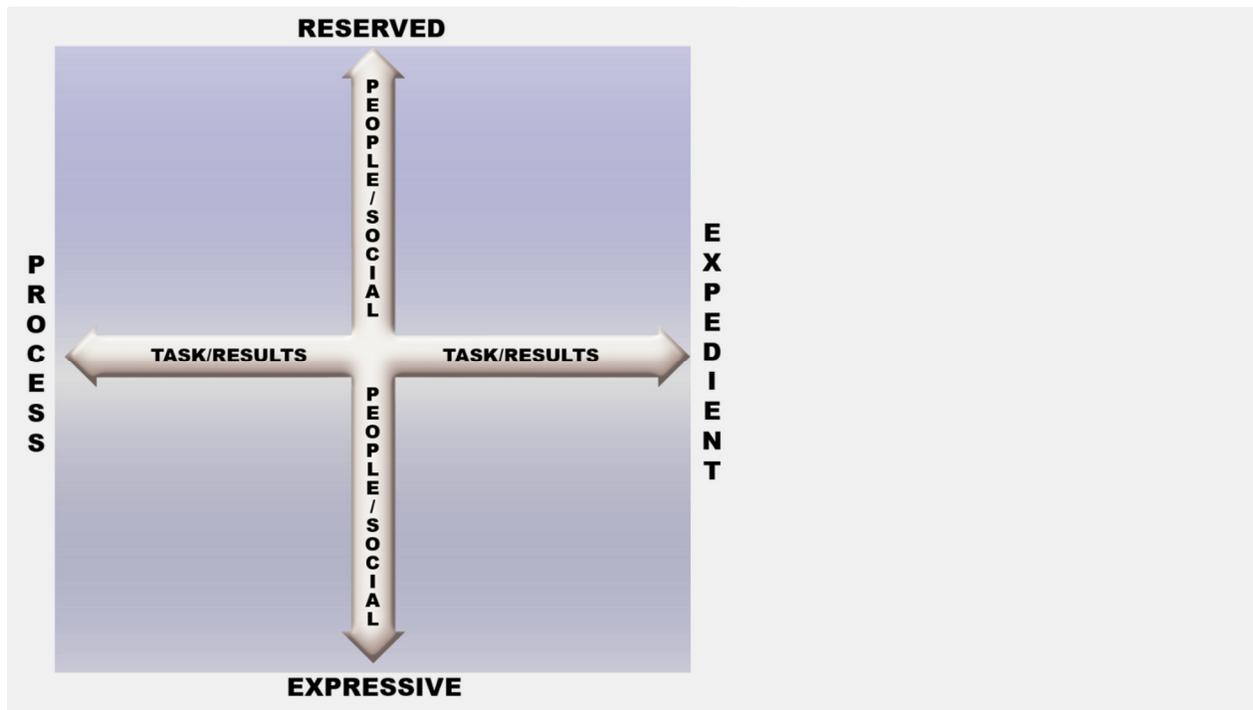
To summarize, most of our personality is “below the waterline” and not readily available or visible to others. Behavior, on the other hand, is “above the waterline” and, therefore, always available to others. Not only that, but this part of us is also a choice in a way the stuff below the waterline is not. In other words, we can, and often do, situationally, intentionally, and temporarily modify our behavior; however, we do not, and cannot, do the same with our personality. Although our personality can be intentionally changed, it doesn’t shift situationally and temporarily, like behavior. Furthermore, an intentional transformation in personality takes a significant amount of time, whereas behavior can be altered instantly. (Note: there are instances when someone’s personality can change quickly, such as when there is a significant emotional experience, but these instances are not frequent and rarely positive.)

To illustrate this, imagine you work on a small team that provides service to clients on-site. You’ve worked together with these team members for a couple years and have become friends, occasionally getting together for social events, which you just did over the weekend. Now it’s Monday afternoon and you’re in a meeting room together, sharing a memory about something funny that happened that weekend. You’re all relaxed and laughing. Suddenly and unexpectedly, a client you provided service to the week before is brought into the room by a coworker. Everyone is startled to see this client, who is known for being direct and determined, and it quickly becomes apparent they are very upset about something that happened recently. My guess is you would immediately stop laughing, become much more serious, and give the client your entire attention. In other words, your behavior would very quickly shift. The entire personality, or who you are, wouldn’t change, but the smaller part that is “above the waterline” would adjust. This adjustment may be unconscious, but it’s still a choice because you could have continued to behave in a more casual, relaxed, and jovial manner.

Changes of behavior like this are appropriate and demonstrate emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence can be defined as demonstrating the appropriate behavior at the appropriate time to meet the appropriate needs of the situation. Imagine what would happen if you continued to be casual, relaxed, and jovial with the upset client? My guess is it would not go over well. One metaphorical way to think of these changes of behavior is as a slight “rotation

of your iceberg,” where you changed what you did but not who you are. In other words, you shifted from your more social, informal pattern of behavior and put a more serious, task-focused pattern of behavior above the waterline. This isn’t about not being authentically who you are, it’s about demonstrating the appropriate behavior at the appropriate time.

## Common Patterns of Behavior



*There are four basic patterns of behavior which can be understood across two dimensions.*

There are four, basic, common, cross-cultural patterns of behavior that can be broken down on a grid with two dimensions. One dimension expresses how you tend to go about completing tasks and the other reflects how you tend to interact with others. It’s a very simple model but extremely helpful when it comes to recognizing how these patterns can impact each other. When we think of these patterns as being primarily about our personality, it means this is who you are, which would be the end of the story. But when we think of them as patterns of behavior, it means this is how you tend, or prefer, to behave, which is quite a different story.

We call these patterns [Behavior Style](#) and it’s where we focus our work.

What we’ve learned in over 40 years of research with hundreds of thousands of people and organizations from around the world is that these patterns of behavior are more [dynamic than static](#). Even though there are preferences, they are generally less about who you are and more about what you do. Most people I know do at least two if not three of the four patterns relatively easily. This is where an important difference manifests between “personality type”

and Behavior Style. Again, we don't change who we are but nearly everyone can and does change what they do.

## It's About Making a Better Impact

If you want to learn all about yourself, we encourage and support that effort. It's a worthy pursuit, and there are some personality assessments in the marketplace that are great to help with that. But since it's your behavior that impacts others, it's equally important to understand that part of you as well. Others are more concerned with your impact on them than your intent (how you think you "land"). People who are easy to be around and who build trust and respect quickly are usually those who not only understand and appreciate the different patterns of behavior but who also know how to change their behavior just enough to [make a better impact](#).

This speaks to the skill aspect of Behavior Styles. I've found that most people are much more interested in becoming aware of and learning about their Behavior Style preference than the Behavior Styles of others. Although this is natural, it's unfortunate because, at the end of the day, our ability to recognize the pattern of behavior in others *in real time* (because behavior can quickly change) is the most important part of Behavior Style awareness and knowledge. It's the skill of knowing how to flex or modify behavior to make a more positive impact that goes a long way towards creating effective relationships, teams, and organizations.

With our assessments and workshops, we don't go into a lot of detail about who you are. We try to provide just enough information about that so you recognize your Behavior Style preference. But the most important reason to learn the model and the four patterns of behavior is so you can build the skill of knowing how and when to modify your behavior situationally—even if only for a few seconds—to make a more positive, productive impact. It takes awareness and some effort, but little things done well over time with the intent of building trust and respect make a big impact.

<https://effectivenessinstitute.com/blog/behavior-styles-personality-difference/>