

# THE BIG FIVE

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## An Introduction to the Five-Factor Model of Personality for Human Resource Professionals

### INTRODUCTION

The terms Big Five and Five-Factor Model are, to our understanding, interchangeable. This empirically-based model provides researchers with common language to identify and describe the individual traits that determine human behavior. Psychologists and personality researchers are using it as the primary means of understanding and interpreting personality. Here are some comments from the research community:

*“We believe that the robustness of the Five-Factor Model provides a meaningful framework for formulating and testing hypotheses relating individual differences in personality to a wide range of criteria in personnel psychology, especially in the subfields of personnel selection, performance appraisal, and training and development.”* – Barrick & Mount (1991)

*“Currently the most popular approach among psychologists for studying personality traits is the Five-Factor Model or Big Five dimensions of personality.”* – Scott Acton (2001)

*“There are a variety of different perspectives in the field of personality, including psychoanalytic and cognitive interpretations. However, the most commonly used and accepted is the Five-Factor descriptive model.”* –Piers Steel, Joseph Schmidt, and Jonas Shultz (2008)

### BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Personality theories, or models, are metaphors for describing something indescribable--the human personality. Some metaphors are more vague than others. A PET brain scan is less vague than a paper and pencil questionnaire like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The history of the study of personality has been one of minimizing vagueness.

Language is the one ingredient that all theories have in common. It is from language itself and not theories, that we extract the source metaphor for describing personality. This was the insight that propelled researchers Tupes & Christal in the 1950's into the research that led to what we know today as the Five-Factor Model (FFM). Subsequent exhaustive lexical studies using high speed computers confirmed the existence of these five factors that account for the variance in personality trait descriptors.

Each dimension in the Five-Factor Model is like a bucket holding a set of traits that tend to occur together. The definitions of the five ‘super’ traits describe the common element among the traits, or subtraits, within each bucket. The supertraits are:

- Need for Stability (N)
- Extraversion (E)
- Originality (O)
- Accommodation (A)
- Consolidation (C)

Each of these traits is described in detail in the following sections.

### NEED FOR STABILITY (N)

The Need for Stability refers to the degree to which a person responds to stress. More resilient persons tend to handle stressful workplace situations in a calm, steady, and secure way. More reactive persons tend to respond in an alert, concerned, attentive, or excitable way, thus creating the opportunity to experience more workplace stress than others.

The four main correlated traits which comprise the need for stability “bucket” are listed and defined in the table below:

Subtraits – Need for Stability	RESILIENT (N-)	RESPONSIVE (N=)	REACTIVE (N+)
<i>Worry</i>	At ease most of the time	Some concern from time to time	Frequently worries
<i>Intensity</i>	Usually calm	Occasionally heated	Quicker temper
<i>Interpretation</i>	More optimistic	Realistic explanations	Less optimistic
<i>Rebound Time</i>	Rapid rebound time	Moderate rebound time	Longer rebound time

### *Levels of Need for Stability*

At one extreme of the need for stability continuum, we have the *Reactives*, who experience more negative emotions than most people and who report less satisfaction with life than most people. That is not meant to place a value judgment on reactives, however, as the susceptibility to the need for stability in the workplace provides the basis for shaping extremely important roles in our society such as social scientists, customer service professionals, and academicians. However, extreme reactivity (high need for stability) can interfere with the performance of many jobs, such as pilots and surgeons.

On the other extreme of the need for stability continuum, we have the *Resilients*, who tend to be more rational at work than most people and who appear rather impervious sometimes to what's going on around them.

Of course, along the Need for Stability continuum from reactive to resilient is the vast middle range of what we call *Responsives*, who are a mixture of qualities characteristic of resilients and reactives. Responsives are more able to turn behaviors from both extremes on and off, calling on what seems appropriate to the situation. A responsive, however, is not typically able to maintain the calmness of a resilient for as long a period of time, nor is a responsive typically able to maintain the nervous edge of alertness of a reactive (as, for example, would be typical of a stock trader during a session).

### **EXTRAVERSION (E)**

Extraversion refers to the degree to which a person can tolerate sensory stimulation from people and situations. Those who score high on extraversion prefer being around other people and involved in many activities. Low extraversion is characterized by preference to work alone and is typically described as serious, skeptical, quiet, and a private person.

Six Subtraits of Extraversion	INTROVERT (E-)	AMBIVERT (E=)	EXTRAVERT (E+)
<i>Warmth</i>	Holds down positive feelings	Demonstrates some positive feelings	Shows a lot of positive feelings
<i>Sociability</i>	Prefers working alone	Occasionally seeks out others	Prefers working with others
<i>Activity Mode</i>	Prefers being still or in one place	Maintains a moderate activity level	Prefers to be physically active
<i>Taking Charge</i>	Prefers being independent of others	Accepts some responsibility of others	Enjoys responsibility of leading others
<i>Trust of Others</i>	Is skeptical of others	Is somewhat trusting of others	Readily trusts others
<i>Tact</i>	Tends to speak more directly	Exerts moderate care in selecting words	Carefully selects right words

### *Levels of Extraversion*

On the one hand, the *Extravert* tends to exert more leadership, to be more physically and verbally active, and to be more friendly and outgoing around others than most people tend to be. This extraverted profile is the foundation of many important social roles, from sales, to politics, to the arts and the softer social sciences.

On the other hand, the *Introverts* tend to be more independent, reserved, steady, and more comfortable with being alone than most people are. This introverted profile is the basis of such varied and important social roles as production managers and the harder physical and natural sciences.

In between these two extremes are the *Ambiverts*, who are able to move comfortably from outgoing social situations to the isolation of working alone. The stereotypical ambivert is the Player-Coach, who moves upon demand from the leadership demands of Coach to the personal production demands of the Player.

## ORIGINALITY (O)

Originality refers to the degree to which we are open to new experiences and new ways of doing things. Highly original people tend to have a variety of interests and like cutting edge technology as well as strategic ideas. Those low in originality tend to possess expert knowledge about a job, topic, or subject while possessing a down-to-earth, here-and-now view of the present.

Four Subtraits of Originality:	PRESERVER (O-)	MODERATE (O=)	EXPLORER (O+)
<i>Imagination</i>	Implements plans	Creates and implements equally	Creates new plans and ideas
<i>Complexity</i>	Prefers simplicity	Balance of simplicity and complexity	Seeks complexity
<i>Change</i>	Wants to maintain existing methods	Is somewhat accepting of changes	Readily accepts changes and innovations
<i>Scope</i>	Attentive to details	Attends to details if needed	Prefers a broad view and resists details

### *Levels of Originality*

On the one hand, the *Explorer* has broader interests, has a fascination with novelty and innovation, and reports more introspection and reflection. Explorers are not unprincipled, but they tend to be open to considering new approaches. The explorer profile forms the basis for

such important social roles as entrepreneurs, architects, change agents, artists, and theoretical scientists (social and physical).

On the other hand, the *Preserver* has narrower interests, is perceived as more conventional, and is more comfortable with the familiar. The preserver profile is the basis for such important social roles as financial managers, performers, project managers, and applied scientists.

In the middle of the continuum lies the *Moderate*. The moderate can explore the novel with interest when necessary, but too much would be tiresome; on the other hand, the moderate can focus on the familiar for extended periods of time, but eventually would develop a hunger for novelty.

This trait is not really about intelligence, as explorers and preservers both score well on traditional measures of intelligence, but it is about creativity.

### ACCOMMODATION (A)

Accommodation refers to the degree to which we defer to others. High accommodation describes a person who tends to relate to others by being tolerant, agreeable and accepting of others. Low accommodation describes someone who tends to relate to others by being expressive, tough, guarded, persistent, competitive or aggressive. Low accommodating people may come across to others as hostile, rude, self-centered, and not a team player.

Four Subtraits of Accommodation:	CHALLENGER (A-)	NEGOTIATOR (A=)	ADAPTER (A+)
<i>Others' Needs</i>	More interested in self needs	Interested in needs of others and self	More interested in others' needs
<i>Agreement</i>	Welcomes engagement	Seeks resolution	Seeks harmony
<i>Humility</i>	Wants acknowledgement	Likes some acknowledgement	Uncomfortable with acknowledgement
<i>Reserve</i>	Usually expresses opinions	Expresses opinions somewhat	Keeps opinions to self

### *Levels of Accommodation*

At the one end of the continuum, the *Adapter* is prone to subordinate personal needs to those of the group, to accept the group's norms rather than insisting on his or her personal norms. Harmony is more important to the Adapter than, for example, broadcasting one's personal notion of truth. The adapter profile is the core of such important social roles as teaching, social work, and psychology.

At the other end of the continuum, the *Challenger* is more focused on his or her personal norms and needs rather than on those of the group. The challenger is more concerned with acquiring and exercising power. Challengers follow the beat of their own drum, rather than getting in step with the group. The challenger profile is the foundation of such important social roles as advertising, managing, and military leadership.

In the middle of the continuum is the *Negotiator*, who is able to move from leadership to followership as the situation demands. Karen Horney described the two extremes of this trait as "moving toward people" (adapter) and "moving against people" (challenger). The former, known as tender-minded, in the extreme become dependent personalities who have lost their sense of self. The latter, known as tough-minded, in the extreme become narcissistic, antisocial, authoritarian, or paranoid personalities who have lost their sense of fellow-feeling. In one sense, this trait is about the dependence (or altruism) of the adapter, the independence (or egocentrism) of the challenger, and the interdependence (or situationalism) of the negotiator.

### CONSOLIDATION (C)

Consolidation refers to the degree to which we push toward goals at work. High consolidation refers to a person who tends to work towards goals in an industrious, disciplined, and dependable fashion. Low consolidation refers to someone who tends to approach goals in a relaxed, spontaneous, and open-ended fashion. Low consolidation people are usually capable of multi-tasking and being involved in many projects and goals at the same time.

Five Subtraits of Consolidation	FLEXIBLE (C-)	BALANCED (C=)	FOCUSED (C+)
<i>Perfectionism</i>	Low need to continually refine or polish	Occasional need to refine or polish	Continual need to refine or polish
<i>Organization</i>	Comfortable with little formal organization	Maintains some organization	Keeps everything organized
<i>Drive</i>	Satisfied with current level of achievement	Needs some additional achievement	Craves even more achievement
<i>Concentration</i>	Shifts easily between on-going tasks	Can shift between tasks	Prefers completing tasks before shifting
<i>Methodicalness</i>	Operates in a more spontaneous mode	Does some planning	Develops plans for everything

### ***Levels of Consolidation***

On the one hand, the *Focused* profile exhibits high self-control resulting in consistent focus on personal and occupational goals. In its normal state, the focused person is characterized by academic and career achievement, but when focusedness turns extreme, it results in workaholicism. The focused person is difficult to distract. Such a profile is the basis for such important social roles as leaders, executives, and, in general, high achievers.

On the other hand, the *Flexible* is more easily distracted, is less focused on goals, is more hedonistic, and is generally more lax with respect to goals. The Flexible is easily seduced from the task at hand by a passing idea, activity, or person. Flexibles do not necessarily work less than focused people, but less of their total work effort is goal-directed. Flexibility facilitates creativity, inasmuch as it remains open to possibilities longer without feeling driven to closure and moving on. This profile is the core of such important social roles as researchers, detectives, and consultants.

Towards the middle of this continuum is the *Balanced* person, who finds it easier to move from focus to laxity, from production to research. A balanced profile would make an ideal manager for either a group of *Flexibles* or a group of *Focuseds*, providing just enough of the opposite quality to keep *Flexibles* reasonably on target without alienating them and to help *Focuseds* relax periodically to enjoy life a little.

## APPLICATIONS AND BENEFITS

Organizations have used assessments based on the Five Factor Model for purposes such as:

- Personnel selection
- Team building
- Project team identification
- Diversity training
- Research on work-job “fit” and employee engagement
- Leadership development
- Succession planning
- Coaching and career development

The following are possible benefits of adopting a five-factor-model based assessment:

- **Precision** – unlike major “type” instruments, a five-factor model based assessment provides users with a specific position within a series of personality “traits.” This allows for greater precision in interpretation. Type instruments are likely to misclassify individuals with “middle of the road” traits.
- **Balance of simplicity and complexity** – Practitioners often seek “simple” instruments, which can be easily interpreted. The problem is: Personality is a highly complex topic. While simple “four-type” models may seem attractive, the reality is that there are more than “four types of people.” The five-factor model allows for a good balance of simplicity (so that professional practitioners can adopt it readily) and complexity (so that individual differences are respected and well described).
- **Credibility** – A quick “Google” search reveals thousands of scholarly articles based on the five-factor model. This is a serious and well researched model, leading to more defensible interventions (of course, seek *valid and reliable* five-factor model instruments!).

## ABOUT CENTACS

CentACS is a leader in applying the Five-Factor Model of Personality to work and educational settings. Dr. Pierce Howard and Jane Mitchell Howard are the authors of the *WorkPlace Big Five Profile™ 4.0* and the *SchoolPlace Big Five Profile 4.0™*; our primary assessments.

Please visit our website at [www.centacs.com](http://www.centacs.com) for more information. If you are interested in a complimentary tryout of the *WorkPlace Big Five Profile™ 4.0*, contact Ruchi Shah ([rshah@centacs.com](mailto:rshah@centacs.com)) for more details.

You can read Dr. Pierce Howard's blogs on LinkedHR at <http://linkedhr.com/users/dr-pierce-howard>.