

Using Myers-Briggs® personality type to create a culture for today

As a company that has helped people celebrate life events, commemorate important occasions, and express their most intimate feelings for more than one hundred years, Hallmark Cards, Inc.—still privately owned and family run—is an American institution.

Over the past century, the company has earned a reputation and cultivated a culture befitting the positive, uplifting products it offers.

Not surprisingly, underlying its core mission is a belief in the very best of human nature, including people's ability to accomplish great things and find deep meaning in relationships. This belief has always shaped Hallmark's policies, which place people—both within and outside the organization—at the forefront of concern.

Changing times

One hundred years is a long time, and although Hallmark's mission and core philosophy have not wavered, the market, the workplace, and the competitive landscape have shifted dramatically. The business environment has become more dynamic, global, and diverse than ever before, and technological innovations have completely remade the communication landscape. They connect people in ways never previously thought possible.

Business Challenges

- Need to change the company mindset from manufacturing to consumer-oriented
- Radically changed communications environment

Company Profile

Founded in 1910, Hallmark Cards, Inc. is the oldest and largest greeting cards manufacturer in the United States. Based in Kansas, it has more than 27,000 employees globally. Underlying its core mission is a belief in the very best of human nature. This shapes its policies, which place people at the forefront.

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Recognizing how such shifts directly impact a company that earns its revenue by communicating feelings, Hallmark's top management put adapting corporate culture to the 21st century as its highest priority.

The company set a goal to evolve with the times by changing its overall mind-set. It wanted to change from being a manufacturing organization that puts product on shelves to being a consumer-centric company that fully engages its key audiences. Hallmark wants to develop leaders who view situations from multiple perspectives, and an agile management culture of accountability in which people work toward each other's success and build their agendas to support the company's goals. The new vision includes leaders who inspire the hearts and minds of employees and instill confidence, and an organization capable of efficiently implementing the right ideas at the right time.

Solution

Mary Beth Ebmeyer, HR Manager, Corporate Development, and Michelle Hibbs, Senior HR Specialist, are among those responsible for guiding the company through this shift.

Under their department's direction, Hallmark has employed several initiatives to accomplish this change. One of these is a program called Steppingstones, which is designed to open the organization's lines of communication. It does this by giving mid- and upper-level managers greater self-understanding and insight into how their actions and communication efforts are perceived by others. As greater self-awareness is key to the program's success, one of its central features is the use of an instrument designed to shed light on how personality shapes thought and behavior—the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® personality assessment.

Solution

- Focus on interpersonal communication training for managers
- Use MBTI instrument to raise managers' self-awareness and understand how they are perceived by others

“ We use the Myers-Briggs instrument to dig deeper into conversations and determine the real intent of the persons engaged.”

Mary Beth Ebmeyer,
HR Manager, Corporate Development

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A unifying perspective

One of the main goals of the program, which began in 2007, is to align the individual perspective of managers with the overall company perspective. This began with a company overview from 1975 to today which traces the evolution of the leadership and competitive climate over that period. With the company perspective established, the next step was to explore personal perspective and how it relates to the ability of individuals to affect change within the company. This begins with participants taking the Myers-Briggs assessment, which gives them a foundation for understanding their own personality and its unique characteristics.

Re-evaluating the “people files”

With the perspective-based foundation in place, the program then takes participants through a series of activities designed to help them gain a solid understanding of how they tend to interact and operate within a larger team. One of the key concepts explored during this phase of the program involves the idea of mental “files.”

“We tend to place people into ‘files’ according to our perceptions of them, which are often skewed,” said Ebmeyer. “We use the Myers-Briggs instrument to dig deeper into conversations and determine the real intent of the persons engaged. More often than not, the intent is actually positive, even if the delivery comes across as negative.”

At one point, for example, participants analyze videotaped sessions of themselves interacting within a group setting. The Myers-Briggs assessment results help shed light on how individuals may be perceived by others, giving participants an understanding of how personality type affects communication style, and how that style may come across to others. This and other exercises give them the tools they need to improve interactions with co-workers, both in expressing their own intentions and discerning the true intentions of others with more clarity.

Results

- Better efficiency through quicker decision-making
- Improved team cohesion through using a common language

“Understanding of Myers-Briggs personality type gives managers the ability to check their perception against reality, often helping them avoid taking offense where none is intended.”

Michelle Hibbs,
Senior HR Specialist

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Managing the emotional hijack

“Understanding intent also comes into play as participants explore the theme of emotional intelligence. They discuss a concept referred to as the “emotional hijack,” manifested during “fight-or-flight” responses, in which the more primitive, emotional portion of the brain takes over its more complex, rational functions. This is often the source of regrettable action, or intensely and persistently negative feelings.

“While the emotional hijack may be necessary if you’re escaping a large predator cat, it is not particularly useful in a business setting, where purely emotional responses are almost never appropriate,” said Ebmeyer.

Understanding Myers-Briggs personality type plays an important role in managing these “emotional hijack” situations, as responses are often the result of misconstrued intentions between people with different preferences. For example, someone might be sent “through the roof” by an email he or she perceives as rude or confrontational from another type. The reality, however, may be that the person who sent the email meant no offense. They were simply expressing a legitimate and well-intended concern in a fashion typical of their own personality type.

“Understanding of Myers-Briggs personality type gives managers the ability to check their perception against reality, often helping them avoid taking offense where none is intended,” said Hibbs.

Opening the lines of communication

An additional goal of the program is creating an environment in which people feel comfortable expressing contrary opinions.

“We are working to create a culture in which people can have more candid conversations,” said Ebmeyer. “I think the Myers-Briggs instrument has given folks the tools to understand why people may not be responding to their communication attempts and take other, more effective approaches.”

“Often during a cross-functional meeting, managers begin by asking attendees their type. This helps the overall flow of communication and is attributable to our widespread use of the Myers-Briggs instrument.”

Mary Beth Ebmeyer,
HR Manager, Corporate
Development

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According to Ebmeyer, managers—particularly those who may be dealing with “Introverted” types—need to be aware that those individuals may be shutting down discussion without hearing what their team has to say. By understanding personality differences and improving their ability to pick up on type-specific cues, they can open the channels of communication and avoid potential landmines. Additionally, it helps people learn how to speak up and express themselves in ways that elicit positive responses.

“We want people to step outside of their comfort zone and say what they need to say,” said Ebmeyer. “However, we want them to continue to interact in a respectful way—we don’t want to lose the things that we like about our culture.”

A framework for the future

Steppingstones provides a framework for improving communication and increasing the ability of managers to implement positive change. It helps them work toward achieving the company’s overall goals by understanding how to interact and persuade more effectively. It also provides the foundation for a more cohesive work setting, in which much of the unnecessary conflict is avoided and ideas are communicated in ways that people respond to positively.

“This process helps managers understand that just because it’s not ‘their way’ doesn’t mean it’s wrong,” said Hibbs. “As departments integrate these principles into their thinking, it opens people’s minds to a myriad of ideas.”

Though Hallmark has used the Myers-Briggs assessment for decades, the Steppingstones program has greatly expanded the instrument’s use, resulting in a tremendous amount of knowledge regarding personality type companywide. As Hibbs puts it, the company is “steeped” in type understanding, and the tool provides distinct advantages when it comes to cross-functional communication.

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Flexible communication

Awareness of personality type is directly tied to people's ability to present their ideas. For example, in order to effectively relay an idea to an ISTJ, you might have to take a dramatically different approach to convince him or her of its validity than you would for, say, an ENFP. This awareness, according to Ebmeyer, has made its way into Hallmark's meeting rooms. "Often during a cross-functional meeting, managers begin by asking attendees their type. This helps the overall flow of communication and is attributable to our widespread use of the Myers-Briggs instrument."

People, she goes on to say, learn how to "flex their preference," understanding that their instinctual way of doing things might not be most effective in all situations. This comes into play in situations where managers communicate in such a way that encourages staff members of different personality types to express themselves.

It also gives managers the awareness to recognize when they are getting only one perspective from those around them and to seek the perspective of someone with a different personality type who may provide an invaluable point of view.

Bridging gaps

Additionally, the Myers-Briggs instrument has provided a great deal of insight into the nature and character of the organization and its complexities.

Particularly noteworthy is the contrast between the "Feeling" preference predominantly expressed in the company's top leadership, and the "Thinking" preference expressed predominantly in mid- and upper-level management. This, according to Hibbs, has led to some very interesting dynamics within the company."

You have a situation where 'thinking' within upper- and mid-level management skews heavily toward bottom-line-oriented decision making but the policies of the organization are often geared toward the 'feelings' of the individual," said Hibbs. "In this kind of environment, you can't assume that mid- and upper-level management understand the reasons why things are being done the way they are."

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Knowledge of personality type, however, helps bridge this potential gap as managers learn to see the value of perspectives that might not come naturally to people whose preferences are not the same as theirs. It also provides top management with the tools it needs to effectively communicate the reasons for its “Feeling” policies to its “Thinking” management staff.

A type-based strategy for change

Understanding of personality type and awareness of the personality makeup of the organization has also shaped overall implementation of change strategy, placing the emphasis on initiating a program that would approach it in the right way.

“The system had become outdated and cumbersome, and we knew we needed to reinvent ourselves,” said Ebmeyer. “However, we didn’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rather, we wanted to build upon the results-oriented, dedicated work ethic and other positive aspects of our culture and help give our managers a wider vision that would enable them to react more strategically to the situation at hand.”

This involves taking steps to ensure that people understand the reasons behind the proposed changes.

“Our company is composed predominantly of STJs, who tend to resist change unless they truly understand why it is called for,” said Hibbs. “For this personality type, it is very important to help them see the logical progression that has led us to the place where we currently are, and why these changes are necessary. This understanding has shaped our approach from the beginning.”

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Results

More than 1,000 managers have gone through Steppingstones to date. According to Hibbs and Ebmeyer, the program and its emphasis on the Myers-Briggs assessment have yielded numerous positive results for Hallmark, contributing to the company's overall efficiency.

To begin with, decisions are being reached faster, and thoughts are delivered with increased clarity. This is attributable in part to the communication insights gained through the Myers-Briggs instrument and the Steppingstones program, which help managers avoid misunderstandings that often hamper the decision-making process and learn to “flex” their communication styles to their audience.

Additionally, Hibbs and Ebmeyer notice a major improvement in diversity of thought, as people with different personality types become more comfortable speaking their mind and learn how to communicate in ways that appeal to people of other types. Furthermore, as the company gains greater insight into how personality affects relationships, the ability of staff members to connect meaningfully has improved, positively affecting cohesion, motivation, and other items related to interpersonal communication.

In summary, the Myers-Briggs instrument has created a common language with which Hallmark employees can evaluate and develop relationships, which fundamentally underlies all the aforementioned changes. All these improvements are enabling Hallmark to work more cohesively toward a unified goal and react to the dynamic, and sometimes hectic, realities of a global economy and a revolutionized communication landscape.

Ebmeyer is optimistic regarding the company's direction. “Though we have traditionally been a manufacturing company, we're moving toward becoming a company that understands that it's really all about helping people stay connected and meeting the needs of the human spirit.”



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In our fast-changing world, your edge lies in harnessing 100 percent of your talent – whether you're at work, home, college, or anywhere in between. Your success and sense of fulfillment aren't just about what you know and what you can do, they hinge on your relationships and interactions with others.

The Myers-Briggs Company empowers individuals to be the best versions of themselves by enriching self-awareness and their understanding of others. We help organizations around the world improve teamwork and collaboration, develop inspirational leaders, foster diversity, and solve their most complex people challenges.

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