

# MBTI® Step II™ Facets: Neuroplasticity and the Adaptable Brain

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Many people who take the MBTI® instrument will ask whether or not their psychological type can change. According to type theory, basic type preferences for perception or judgment are inborn and do not change. However, it is also known that people, as a result of interacting with their environment and through life experiences, also develop behaviors, habits, and strategies that are *not* consistent with their type description. It is *not* uncommon to hear a client say, "I used to be an INFJ, but now I am an ENFJ." Or, "I am an introvert but I enjoy parties and nights on the town." How can this be?

The first Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, also known as Step I™, was an instrument to identify individuals who have similar preferences leading to an assigned personality type. The terms INFJ or ESFP are well-known to many individuals. However, even when these general tendencies are validated, it is still clear that certain people *within a type* could have out of preference characteristics. An example would be a *questioning* ENFP, with *questioning* normally being a facet associated with a thinking preference. It is true that ENFPs *tend to be* accommodating, valuing harmony above all, versus finding flaws in their own views, as well as the views of others. However, some ENFPs may develop differently as a result of living with questioning thinking types or as a skill that is required at work. There are 20 such variations known as *facet poles* (5 for each dichotomy) that are possible and they are identified in the MBTI® Step II™ instrument (Form Q).



**Ann Holm, M.S. C.CC (ENFP)**, is a cognitive specialist and life coach. Since 1986, she has coached brain injured clients in recovering and maximizing cognitive skills, leading to greater competence and life satisfaction. Encouragement from clients and their families led Ann to become a life coach which makes it possible for her to offer individualized and dynamic plans which combine principles of learning and behavioral change with the latest in brain science.

annholm@comcast.net

As an MBTI practitioner, I noticed these variations and apparent changes in reported personality type. Also, a client's development of Step II facets in response to environmental demands may give the client the impression that their type has *changed*. However, what would explain this change if our innate preferences for introversion-extraversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving were hard-wired? I stumbled upon what I consider to be the best brain-based explanation of this phenomenon when I attended a conference on *neuroplasticity*, or the notion that *mental experiences and mindfulness can change the structure and function of the brain*.

This is what made the explanation so compelling: in order for neuroplastic change to take place, some sort of dampening down of the usual mind map has to take place. So, for example, if you were going to learn a new language, you would have to eliminate as much use of the native language as possible so the *new* language can build resilient neuroconnections in the brain. The brain does not like competing stimuli; that is why language immersion programs work so well. Similarly, if you were relying on your sense of touch to get around in a dark room, you would immediately switch to your *preferred* modality, sight, to get around, if the light switch was turned on. In other words, the preferences that were present *first* take precedence but if they are greatly attenuated, then new pathways can develop. Likewise, an ENFP whose natural preference is to be casual about schedules, may *develop* a more scheduled approach as a result of working in an environment that demands a more structured day. However, if the ENFP ultimately left that structured environment, it is likely she would be comfortable with her natural preference for a relaxed schedule once again. When I discuss these type variations with clients, they often say, "I HAD to do it that way at work" or "my family was that way."

Also, a *deliberate* development of a non-preferred facet can bring about a resilient change in the brain. For example, one of the facets of extraversion is “expressive” versus its opposite which is “contained”. Basically, this is the “chatty” facet and it describes an individual who talks often but who may not be *aware* that certain situations call for a more contained approach, or more listening and less talking. A deliberate or *mindful* monitoring of behavior can create a self-awareness that one has to talk less and, over time, a resilient change in the brain can take place. Another example would be a natural introvert learning to extravert in many situations so that it may even feel like a natural preference at times. At the conference on neuroplasticity, examples of the mindful, deliberate approach were shown to alleviate

symptoms of a host of mental disturbances. Either through self-driven intent or therapeutic guidance, the brain can adapt to the demands placed upon it.

So, why is this significant? First, you may have *natural* preferences (innate tendencies) that are not fully utilized or have been suppressed that can be accessed and developed to bring about a more fully functioning self. Second, you may have facets of your personality that you would like to modify so that you do not fall into the same bad patterns time and time again. The elegance of type theory is that it introduces a dynamic system that *acknowledges and encourages* an individual to change as a part of healthy type development (even as one’s basic type theoretically does not change). There is emerging evidence from the neuroplasticity stud-

ies that either the environment or deliberate intention can indeed bring about these changes. As a life coach, this is very good news indeed! ■



## “Oh, That Explains It!” – Using Type Dynamics to Assist Clients

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mental process. Because we’re describing normal, effective personalities, it’s clear that there needs to be a part of this theory that recognizes that everyone needs to extravert (interact with the outer world) and everyone needs to introvert (consult stored information, insights, values, principles). According to this picture, your second middle letter is the supporting function and is the part of your type that you use in your “non-favorite world” – that is, those whose favorite part is introverted will use their supporting part to extravert; those whose favorite part is extraverted will use their supporting part inside, when they introvert.

“The top of your type description – the title – identifies these two functions for your type; e.g., ESTJ is titled “Extraverted Thinking with Introverted Sensing. Discuss with a partner how those two work together for you.” Again, you can refer them to the “Characteristics of . . .” section.

For the extraverted types, the primary learning is that they need to be sure they allow time for their introverted supporting function to operate. For the introverted types, the learning is that others typically see and interact with their extraverted supporting function.

### RESOURCES

Examples help. To expand your learning, the following booklets address and apply this information:

*Introduction to Type® Dynamics and Development* (Myers and Kirby), especially pp. 14-17 on the dominant functions.

*Introduction to Type® and Leadership* (Richmond) which explains type dynamics simply and thoroughly, integrating this perspective into the discussions of leadership styles and leadership development.

*Introduction to Type® and Change* (Barger and Kirby), especially pp. 18-20 and 24-26.

### TRY IT!

If you have been shying away from type dynamics, it is time to try it out. You will be excited about the increased depth, complexity, and clarity it brings to your work with type, and your clients will think you are brilliant! ■