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Observe others—not just yourself—to be an effective leader

By Kara Benedict, MHA, BSN, RN

Kara Benedict (kara.benedict@choosecovenant.org) is Associate Vice President, Governance Risk & Compliance, for Covenant Care in Pensacola, Florida, USA.

“It must be exhausting to constantly battle the parts of your personality that really don’t fit a compliance officer.” Those words, said to me in a recent executive coaching session, rattled around inside my head for weeks. It wasn’t a criticism but was intended as an acknowledgment that certain aspects of my personality have the potential to negatively influence my job performance. As part of our executive coaching, we completed the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator assessment. We were reminded that this test indicates our *preferences*, not our skills or capabilities; while our natural inclinations are important, they do not determine our success or failure as a leader. Accepting the idea that there are no good or bad personality preferences is quintessential to our development, and our ability to recognize and understand preferences both in ourselves and others is a key factor in professional growth.^[1]

With these principles in mind, I began contemplating the concept of leadership and the job of a compliance officer on a deeper level. Are there certain personalities that are better suited for this job, or is this question simplifying something that is far more complex? Perhaps when we say a certain personality is more suited for a job, we are really saying that some inborn characteristics make performing a particular job easier, but this may not be true. While I do believe individuals with certain temperaments may be more drawn to the role of compliance officer, leadership success in business today requires a different mindset that challenges all of us to develop a broad set of skills. Regardless of how we are internally wired, a compliance officer cannot achieve across-the-board success leaning only on the preferences of their inborn personality.

Authoritarian by name

The nuts and bolts of defining improvement is having something objective to measure and a benchmark to which it can be compared. Compliance officers are given an outline of fundamental ideas, and we are told if we apply these concepts correctly, bad things won’t happen. There is no shortage of opinions on how to best build a compliance program, but when the litmus test for success is the absence of something, it will always be a challenge to measure. We know lack of reporting does not indicate a lack of problems, and this underscores the influence the organizational culture has on compliance.

Twenty-plus years ago in healthcare, we faced the harsh reality that we were making mistakes at an alarming rate, and fraud, waste, and abuse were on the rise. Knowing the airline industry had made sweeping strides in a short amount of time, researchers raced to understand how this was done and to translate it into something actionable in healthcare. We quickly learned that fears of retribution, blame, and punitive action are so powerful, they will silence the bravest person, even at the cost of harm to another. And the research demonstrated how authoritarian leadership catastrophically failed to establish the needed organizational culture, which forced a paradigm shift in the industry.

The playbook for a successful compliance program includes phrases such as *establish rules, comply with federal*

laws, effective discipline. Peppered with words like *offenses, detection, and enforcement*, our manual reverberates an authoritarian, militaristic approach to compliance. Renowned author and leadership expert John Maxwell tells us the lowest level of leadership is when people follow you because they must.^[2] And yet the very name of our job implies the *exact* style of leadership now credited with contributing to historic disasters in the airline, space, and marine industries. How can a compliance officer resolve the glaring incompatibility of knowing our job is to be a commander even if it perpetuates a culture of fear, eroding any hope of detecting and preventing errors or wrongdoing?

Self-improvement should be the answer...but it's not

The concept of self-improvement is thrown around so much it gives us whiplash. Articles, entire magazines, expensive health programs, personal life coaches, wellness centers, countless books, and more are all dedicated to teaching us how to improve ourselves. It's a marketing frenzy targeting every thought, insecurity, or idea we have. In fact, if done well, they successfully target thoughts we did not know we even had.

Early in risk and compliance, it seemed logical that I should improve myself by bettering my lesser-developed personality traits. I talked too much, so I focused on listening more. I thrived on schedules and closure, so I worked on cultivating a more flexible mindset that focused less on my checklist and more on building relationships. I found strong leaders around me with different leadership styles, and I observed them carefully. While I agree those efforts made me a better person and professional, I've come to believe that focusing on self-improvement is not the most important part of being a good compliance officer. In fact, it's not even in my top three.

Self-awareness

Self-improvement is not the same as self-awareness, because when engaged in self-improvement, we are focusing on *ourselves*. Conversely, self-awareness requires that we shift our attention to those around us and pay attention to how our personal tendencies affect others. When we become skilled at self-awareness, we automatically begin to adapt to minimize the negative and promote successful communication. Self-improvement does not automatically mean we become self-aware, but if a person exercises self-awareness, it's almost impossible not to improve.

Let's play out an example. I am an extrovert by nature. When investigating, if I am too friendly or talkative, I may inadvertently lead someone with my line of questioning. Being too genial may dilute the seriousness of the investigation and even encourage people to tell me what I want to hear rather than their own opinions. My tendency to process information out loud could cause confusion. From this, one could conclude that being extroverted might not be a great trait for a compliance officer.

On the flip side, the introverted compliance officer may tend to say less and think more. To some, they may appear relentless in pursuing the facts, thus perpetuating fear and intimidation, which often lead people to lie, withhold information, and avoid answering questions altogether. Their quiet demeanor can come across as judgmental, putting the other person on the defensive. So being an introvert might not be great for a compliance officer either.

The compliance officer's personality traits, however, are not as important as their level of self-awareness. If they lack self-awareness, then their natural tendencies may or may not play in their favor, and that will depend heavily on the temperament of the other person. Whereas if they possess a high level of self-awareness, their natural tendencies become less important as they adjust to the needs of the other person.

Humility

When I refer to humility, I think of it as meaning “unassuming” and “unpretentious.” *Merriam-Webster* defines humility as “freedom from pride or arrogance.” Over time, experience as a compliance officer will increase your self-confidence, but confidence can easily morph into arrogance if we are not careful. Even the slightest tendency to be presumptuous will alter your objectivity, which will threaten your credibility.

Furthermore, if we believe our job is more important than other jobs, it will resound loudly in our interactions. Yes, the compliance program plays a crucial role in the company since failure of the business can be catastrophic on a large scale, but if we believe our roles outrank others, that self-perception will be a barrier to success. Conversely, when we consistently approach every situation unassuming and judicious, we reinforce the integrity of our position. Humility allows us to easily admit when we are wrong, promotes careful analysis, and builds trust.

Humility has forced me to approach every situation with an open mind, allowing myself to assess without bias. Whether I am firm minded by nature or I lean toward being sympathetic, exercising humility means operating with an understanding that my personal tendencies create an unintentional bias. In other words, my natural tendencies become less relevant. Coupled with self-awareness, humility helps ensure that any unintentional bias is mitigated.

Resiliency

Years ago, if you asked me if I was resilient, my answer would have been, “Oh yes. I adapt very well to change.” I thought resiliency meant that I could easily adjust, so as a skilled critical care nurse, I was the queen of adjusting on the fly. When I worked for a nursing agency and traveled, I would say, “Put me anywhere, and I can acclimate myself and get to work.” I wore my resiliency like a badge of honor, but I quickly learned I was not as resilient as I thought.

In my first manager position, I encountered a very difficult human resources issue that shook my confidence to the core. I ruminated on my decisions, doubting myself out loud until my executive director candidly said, “You cannot logic this to death. It’s done, so decide if you can move past this and stop talking about it.” She was not harsh, but she was incredibly direct, and I remember limping away from that meeting with my tail firmly tucked.

For a few hours I was convinced she was just insensitive, but I quickly realized she was right. Resiliency is the ability to both (1) adjust to change easily and quickly, be it positive or negative, and (2) quickly recover from the adjustment and return to a balanced state. Reflecting on that conversation, I now appreciate that she was teaching me the second part of resilience—recovery.

Infinite variables coming together

Anyone who has spent more than two days in compliance will tell you:

- The first story is never right.
- At every turn in an investigation, be prepared for yet another curveball.
- The truth lies somewhere in the middle.
- Disruption, confusion, and complexity are normal in every investigation. Expect it, and you won’t get frustrated by it.
- No matter how nice you are, nobody wants to hang out with the compliance officer.

- If you do your job well, it is a lonely job.
- Never assume. Seriously, just don't.
- If you think you have the answer, just give it a minute, and someone will say something that will make you question yourself again.
- “Let me look into that, and I will get back to you” is the song of our people.

On my team we find humor in the chaotic nature of our work, and we remind ourselves that our sole purpose is to deal with complications. In our department of four people, we have four unique personalities offering different perspectives, yet we find balance in the diversity. I believe this is because we try to diligently exercise humility, resilience, and self-awareness. And we are not afraid to hold one another accountable when we stray from those principles.

While it sounds cliché to say, “Success is a journey, not a destination,” nothing rings truer in the world of compliance. The infinite variables, endless scenarios, and countless people you encounter in this field make it nearly impossible to articulate what makes a compliance officer successful. Because much like the compliance program itself, it's easier to describe what a good one looks like than write out a formula for how to make one.

Don't spend too much time focusing on which behaviors you think will make you a good compliance officer. Rather, spend your time understanding yourself and how your natural tendencies affect others. When humility guides your efforts, you will be the best version of yourself in every scenario. And remember, no matter how quickly you can adapt to change and how hard you try to live these ideals, you are human. So, reflect, learn, and return to a state of balance, never allowing the pursuit of perfection to stifle your professional growth.

Takeaways

- Personality traits are merely preferences, and personal tendencies alone will neither drive nor prohibit our long-term success in the world of compliance.
- The nature of our role and the principles of good leadership create a paradox we must understand and overcome.
- While it may seem intuitive to simply develop alternate skills, genuine success requires a deeper look inside ourselves.
- Consistently exercising humility and self-awareness balances the scales in our favor, no matter what the situation demands.
- In a world of constant hindsight bias, cultivating a true spirit of resilience is essential to continued growth and professional fulfillment.

¹ Jean M. Kummerow and Sandra Krebs Hirsh, *Introduction to Type in Organizations* (Sunnyvale: Consulting Psychologists Press Inc., 1998).

² John C. Maxwell, *The 5 Levels of Leadership: Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential* (New York: Center Street, 2011).

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