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You Are Here!

Taking the Birkman

When we come to know and accept ourselves, we become free to accept others and appreciate how they complement us. At the heart of the Birkman Method is the philosophy that you have to treat people the way they want to be treated in order to help them become comfortable, confident, and able to function at their best.

This may sound logical, but it goes against our own instincts, which tell us that the conclusions we came to from our own vast experiences are what are normal and right, that what we need is what everyone else needs, that what led us to success will surely lead others there, and that the way we want to be treated is the way everyone else wants to be treated. It's the Golden Rule, after all. But people are complicated. Not only do they behave in ways that are contrary to our preferred actions, but they also act in ways that contradict even their own apparent styles. This is because our outward behavior doesn't always reflect what we need inside from others. Often

our behavior was made to conform long ago to a standard demanded by our work or other social pressures.

The Birkman is a guide to how to get others to help us meet our true needs in exchange for our doing the same for them. If we can accomplish this, we can become our best selves, do our best work, and help others do the same. When the Birkman is introduced to members of a group that interact with each other in the workplace or any other setting, it opens a new dialogue that is more nurturing for each individual's interpersonal needs.

A common Birkman anecdote about the need for improved understanding and communication is hearing a client say, "I thought the person I worked with was trying to get under my skin to get ahead of me, but after I saw that person's Birkman, I understood it was just another perspective. It had nothing to do with me."

TAKE MY GOOD SIDE

You might ask about the Birkman questionnaire, "What are you going to assess: me at work, me at home, or me with friends? If it's work, will it show how I act in front of my boss, with the people I lead, or with my colleagues?"

The answer is yes: it will address all of those aspects. The Birkman was designed for people in the workplace and is sophisticated enough to capture all of those relationships as part of the many layers and hidden nuances of your personality.

"It is head and shoulders above any instrument out there because it is applicable to normal, productive human behavior, as opposed to many other assessments, which gravitate toward clinical or abnormal behavior. Everything I learned in

grad school was looking at abnormal behavior,” says consultant Dana Scannell of Newport Beach, California, who has a PhD in psychology. “The Birkman allows us to look at human behavior in terms of who people really are inside, as opposed to the fear of who they might be found out to be. Even when people do have things that aren’t according to the norm, we say it gives us insight into understanding that person.”

The Birkman will show the way you relate to those around you, your interests, your strongest points, where your comfort zone lies, and, perhaps most important, how you can recharge your energies. It helps you understand in a concrete way the conundrum that the flip side of defining your strengths is recognizing your weaknesses. As any athlete will tell you, your best attribute is also your most vulnerable point. You have to recognize when your strengths aren’t being put to their best use, or they will be your undoing. If you’re a tennis player or a drummer, ultimately you’re going to have issues with your elbows because that’s what you use the most. A boxer doesn’t have to worry about laryngitis, but an opera singer does. Someone whose strength is a tireless work ethic is also the most likely to suffer burnout.

TAKE THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Now it’s time to take the Birkman questionnaire, so set aside a comfortable, uninterrupted thirty to forty minutes. You can access the questionnaire at <http://www.birkman.com/book>. Along with your complimentary Life Style Grid Report, you can also choose to receive one of several additional topic-driven reports that are included with your purchase of this book. Select your additional free report, and then click the Start button to begin.

Have fun taking the survey: relax, and go with your first hunch on the answers. Don't try to game it. The 298-question survey is sensitive enough that it can detect unnatural answers and will reject them in the final results.

After completing and submitting the questionnaire, your report will be e-mailed to you. Please provide us with a valid e-mail address when prompted. If you need assistance with accessing the questionnaire, please complete an online form at <http://support.birkman.com>.

The test you are taking is the authentic Birkman assessment. Your resulting report is an abbreviated, free-of-charge version of the full Birkman feedback report. After completing the assessment, you might consider purchasing a full Birkman feedback or one of dozens of specialized formulations addressing your specific needs. The Birkman offers many different ways to see your unique information, relating it to two major categories: career and interpersonal. All such reports are derived from the original assessment that you submit. Anyone who wishes to speak with a certified Birkman consultant or who would like a full report or any one of a number of the specific feedbacks can contact Birkman International through its website (<https://www.birkman.com>) or by telephone (713-623-2760). The many variables and interpretations of a Birkman survey are beyond the scope of this book and best approached with experienced consultants.

The next chapter explains in detail the elements of your profile. The rest of the book then goes beyond the parameters of the free report to explain the complete, detailed Birkman analysis that has been perfected over the decades.

Remember that there is no pass or fail for the Birkman. When we say there are no wrong answers to the survey, we

mean it. The Birkman is used to identify the preferences, motivations, and needs that best suit you for meaningful work. Remember too that no single test can ever capture the whole of any person's experience and wisdom. Nevertheless, going through this assessment can give you a degree of greater self-awareness and the vocabulary to express that knowledge. The Birkman aims to help you seek the best course of action to meet your inner requirements even as they change over time. Throughout the book, you will read examples of how people used the assessment to get to the bottom of a variety of problems and then applied their greater understanding of their environment to work past anger, gain a new perspective on their ordeal, and begin the dialogue and action needed to correct the situation.

YOUR BIRKMAN RESULTS

When you approach an unfamiliar park or building complex, you sometimes find at the entrance an overview map that shows you a symbol pointing to a location stating, "You are here!" You can use the Life Style Grid to get such an aerial view of yourself or your company, organization, or even family. In broad-brush terms and with a simple visual, the grid helps to define your personality and where you fit into the overall population.

The Life Style Grid is a summary report that contains these elements and the symbols that represent them:

- A four-color background that represents the landscape of society as a whole, based on the basic personality types of the general population.

- Four symbols representing your Interests (asterisk), Needs (circle), Usual Behavior (diamond), and Stress (square) as they fit on that color landscape. Needs and Stress together form one point.
- A triangle drawn from these basic pillars of the assessment, presented over the four-color graph. The exact shape is another clue to your unique personality.

Taken as a whole, your grid profile shows your interests and socialized styles based on a model of how people behave in general. In other words, it is you in relation to society as a whole. The summary can help you see your communication style, reveal whether you are task oriented or people oriented, and help you discover your unique strengths.

For consultant Tony Palmer of Atlanta, one of the most appealing aspects of the Birkman profile is the way it focuses on strategy rather than tactics in clarifying work-related goals. “Tactics are all the things you hear about,” he says. “Is my résumé right? How do I network? How do I negotiate my salary? Strategy—what you want to do with your life and what you’re best suited to do—that’s what the Birkman answers. The biggest breakdown in career development can come when people skip the strategy piece and focus only on the tactical. They end up going to work at something just because their uncle did it or their husband or wife told them to do it.”

Tony likens the process to taking a trip: “You can’t pack your bag until you know where you’re going. You’ll pack differently for San Francisco than for Cancun. The Birkman will point a way to get to where you want to be.”

And the Birkman will help to ensure that you will always find your ideal position in any organization no matter what

combination of colors you might be shown to be in your report. That aim is well within your reach, because the four colors should also be thought of as representing the natural, linear process that every endeavor uses as a means to accomplish its goals. Blues start with an idea; Greens get the buy-in; Reds get it done; and Yellows keep it going by maintaining the order and the system.

THE BIRKMAN AT WORK: YOUR RIGHT PATH

The Birkman helps give people direction at various critical junctures in their careers: deciding on a field of study, getting hired, getting promotions, and the biggest midcareer hurdle: the realization after years of success that “what got me here won’t get me there.” It is particularly useful in bringing order to some of the more chaotic aspects of the workplace. That is because your unique Birkman feedback report builds on layers of self-awareness you may not have been able to discern yourself and suggests how to apply them to real-life situations to reduce stress and focus on what makes you productive and enjoying what you do. Professionals have a consistent need for road maps, such as when they find themselves lost in a career without a forward plan or want to find a direct route to a new position. The goal is to be prepared when an opportunity for advancement presents itself.

The Right Career

Anne Morriss was at a low point in her career, unhappy in her job at a Washington, DC, nonprofit. She had worked five years in Latin America managing public health services in rural areas, a job she had loved but saw as a stepping-stone. She had moved to Washington for a fundraising job for the nonprofit, which specialized in global development work. “I thought I was just in the wrong organization, that there was a perfect place for me in the nonprofit world, maybe not in global health, but in another bleeding-heart initiative,” says Anne. “That was my self-diagnosis, but my diagnosis was way off. So I thought, ‘Let’s bring in the experts!’”

She was introduced to a Birkman consultant and completed the questionnaire. Anne found the message clear,

concise, and provocative. “No one with this profile ends up making these choices,” the consultant, Barbara Robinson, told her. “You have needs that are not being met—a need for challenge and purpose, as well as for concrete rewards and a certain amount of risk.”

People with such needs, she continued, typically pick roles in highly competitive private industries. But Anne had grown up in a family of academics, lawyers, and teachers. No one had talked about the business environment as being rewarding. She had no role models in that area and so began to network to get a look at the business world. At Barbara’s encouragement, she also took her GMATs and earned a master’s in business administration at Harvard. After graduation, Anne started working at a for-profit company, but one with a mission. Any company she worked for, Anne says, had to have “a purpose to the entity that is bigger than making money.” Such a choice would be essential for someone with such a high Interest score (90) in Social Service, Barbara adds. Eventually she joined a company helping entrepreneurs in emerging markets develop business strategies, sometimes dealing with the heads of states of those countries. It was a perfect fit. “The Birkman sped up the working process,” she says. “I would have gone on the trial-and-error path, but this let me make a pivot earlier than I would have, and I’m really grateful for that.”

A Hidden Talent

Consultant Cy Farmer, an international representative at Cru, a religious organization based in Germany, offered to give the Birkman to one of his daughter’s high school classmates. The teenager had decided to be a nurse, but after one year at school, she returned home to tell her father: “Nursing just isn’t what I expected.”

Cy told her that the Birkman had her pegged as having a strong affinity for accounting. “Where did that come from?” she said, rolling her eyes, the consultant recalls. But after giving it some thought, she decided to try an accounting course, as Cy advised. She did and found it to be a perfect fit.

“She probably would have been a good nurse,” Cy says, “but she would have been the nurse who kept the stats—and not feeling as fulfilled.”

Many Interests, One Career

Consultants report that demand is growing significantly at the earliest stages of career planning. As tuitions at major colleges continue to soar, parents want to know that the money is going to be put to its best possible use for their child. Up to 80 percent of students entering college say they aren’t sure what they want to major in, even if they have initially declared a major, and up to 50 percent change their majors at least once before graduation—some several times, according to Michael J. Leonard in the division of undergraduate studies at Pennsylvania State University.¹ And despite complaints that schools are turning into vocational education schools, far too many graduates feel they are set adrift after study.

Wendy Andreen, PhD, a Houston-based college and career counselor, says it’s a mistake to spend so much effort preparing students academically for college yet so little time “to help them discover who they are—interests, personalities, potential careers—and supporting those talents.” Her son plowed through four majors at the University of Texas, Austin—first in architecture, then architectural engineering, then chemical engineering. When the school’s career center gave him the Birkman assessment as he was graduating, it showed him with

high interests in music, science, mechanics, and literature. Just as important, it pointed to a high affinity for outdoor activity and a feeling of freedom. “Sitting behind a desk in a traditional office wasn’t going to work for him,” his mother says.

Michael was thrilled with the information: “It was the most objective analysis of myself that I’d seen, and I couldn’t argue with it,” he wrote in an e-mail to Wendy. “That was liberating, and I finally felt like I had the license to go and change my direction.”

He changed his major to English with minors in math, science, and business, so he could graduate quickly. He entered the University of Texas, Dallas, and earned his master’s in fine arts in what his mother calls his true calling: video game design. He was asked to stay and join the inaugural PhD program for arts and technology, specializing in game sound design.

Wendy was so impressed by the Birkman’s role in helping her son that she became a Birkman consultant herself and has been working since as a counselor to college-age students.

Before the Birkman assessment, Michael had been stubborn about his choice of major, wanting to major in “something concrete.” His parents, meanwhile, were trying to get him to follow his heart. “If they’re fighting what they love, somewhere down the road they’re going to be unhappy,” says Wendy.

Wendy tells students to think of Birkman as a compass. Adults, she says, should think of it as a road map. No one wants students to stop exploring different classes or fields of work. But students will want to avoid ending up in jobs that don’t suit them.

