

A Primer on Movement Pattern Analysis

by Carol-Lynne Moore

Rudolf Laban was ahead of his time in recognizing bodily movement as a psychophysical phenomenon. This awareness influenced his analyses of blue and white collar labor, conducted with F.C. Lawrence during the 1940s and early 1950s (Laban and Lawrence, 1947). While their initial studies focused on improving the efficiency of movement in manual labor, they soon progressed to studying clerical and managerial work. They found that, although more subtle, bodily actions were also discernible in the execution of mental tasks. This led Laban and Lawrence to conceptualize mental effort — such as problem solving and decision making — as embodied processes that unfold through time and space like a dance (Laban, 1971). This insight provided the foundation for Movement Pattern Analysis.

Through his observations of hundreds of managers, Laban's protégé, Warren Lamb has elaborated the decision-making dance as a dynamic sequence (Lamb and Turner, 1969). When a problem must be solved, the first step involves giving Attention by probing the situation and considering alternative approaches. Once sufficient information is obtained, the decision-maker must form an Intention about how to proceed. This involves assessing the pros and cons of what is being considered and building resolve to push on. In the final stage, the Intention to act must be transformed into a genuine Commitment, by finding the most opportune moment to begin and by guiding the course of implementation with an eye on the consequences.

Each individual moves from Attention to Intention to Commitment in a different way. These individually distinctive decision-making dances can be perceived through the observation of patterns of body movement, described using Laban's taxonomy of effort and shape. For example, the first step in decision making (giving Attention) involves scanning and probing information deeply (Investigating with space effort) and surveying and collecting ideas broadly (Exploring with horizontal shaping). The secondary stage (forming an Intention) involves building resolve firmly and resiliently (Determining with weight effort) and establishing the relative value of information and potential courses of action (Evaluating with vertical shaping). The final stage (making a Commitment to action) involves adjusting the pace of implementation (Timing with time effort) and adroitly guiding progressive stages (Anticipating with sagittal shaping) (Davies, 2006).

Individuals embody these decision-making processes in different ways, giving more emphasis to some efforts and shapes than to others. Systematic analysis of these effort/shape patterns can be correlated with the decision-making processes and used to construct individual profiles. The relative emphasis on each stage of decision making in relation to effort and shape is represented by simple percentages, as shown in the following chart.

Sample MPA Profile Chart

Jane Doe	% of total initiative
Investigating	25
ATTENTION	
Exploring	9
Determining	7
INTENTION	
Evaluating	6
Timing	28
COMMITMENT	
Anticipation	22

Movement Pattern Analysis profiles are idiographic. There is no normative standard against which individuals are compared. Nor are “ideal profiles” specified for particular jobs, since there is more than one way to do any job effectively. Rather each feature of an individual’s decision-making profile has potentially positive and negative features relative to the work context. The Movement Pattern Analysis consultant helps the client maximize the positive and minimize the negative to enhance both performance and job satisfaction.

Collaboration is one of the recommended ways to maximize individual decision-making prowess. Through their work with thousands of individuals and hundreds of management teams, Movement Pattern Analysts have identified key factors that make groups effective, as well as characteristics that can impede effectiveness (Moore, 2005).

For example, teams consisting of individuals with similar decision-making profiles usually enjoy working together because they develop an unspoken understanding based upon the similarity of their movement patterns. However, such collegial cohesion is not always a good thing. Teams can become too like-minded and fall prey to “groupthink” (Janis, 1981). In Movement Pattern Analysis terms, strong stages in the decision-making process are reinforced and weak areas become blind spots. When this occurs, team members begin to suppress dissenting views. Assumptions are made about the purpose of actions, and these are not questioned. Warnings about potential negative outcomes tend to be discounted. As a consequence, the group develops a sense of invulnerability, and this can lead to risky decision making and disastrous outcomes (Moore, 1982).

In contrast, teams that collaborate successfully over time are composed of individuals with different decision-making profiles. Patterns of movement are linked to action motivations (Investigating, Exploring, Determining, Evaluating, Timing, Anticipating). Groups benefit from having individuals who are motivated to take different sorts of initiatives. For example, Attention-oriented team members make sure that decisions are based on accurate information and a broad consideration of options. Intention-oriented team members contribute discipline and clarity, and can maintain morale when the group must prevail against difficult odds. Commitment-oriented individuals make sure that the team is able to respond to opportunities in a timely way, progressing towards long-term goals while avoiding pitfalls along the way.

Such teams are not conflict free. Commitment-oriented individuals who are eager to go dislike being slowed down by their more Attention- or Intention-oriented colleagues. In contrast, Attention-oriented team members need time to investigate and explore, and resent being rushed into action without sufficient preparation. Similarly, Intention-oriented teammates need time to deliberate the pros and cons of a plan. They can seem judgmental to Attention-oriented colleagues, and obdurate to Committers who are ready to take action. In short, there are many ways that diversity of decision-making style can rub members of a team the wrong way. Yet this is a necessary friction, for such counter-tensions support a balanced approach to making decisions and ensure that no processes are overlooked (Ramsden, 1973).

To summarize, decision-making is an embodied process that unfolds in stages. Based upon different effort and shape emphases visible in postural body movement, profiles of individual decision-making patterns can be made by qualified Movement Pattern Analysis consultants. Such profiles enable individuals to regard their own decision-making patterns more objectively, and provide a means for conceptualizing differences with colleagues in a non-judgmental way. Since the most effective teams are *not* composed of people with the same decision-making profile, appreciation

of difference is essential; for when people make decisions in different ways, conflict in viewpoint is inevitable. Yet such conflict can be used judiciously and creatively, allowing a team to be adaptable in a variety of contexts. In hundreds of businesses over the course of the last four decades, Movement Pattern Analysis has helped individuals and teams become more successful by drawing intelligently on their most valuable asset – human motivation.

References

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