

Improving the US retirement system by accelerating team performance

Three of the five co-founding team members had worked together at a large company before forming ForUs. This led to some work-style challenges as they transitioned to a small start-up environment and partnered the two other co-founders. How could the team improve cohesion in the pressure-cooker environment of the start-up world?

Ask the folks at ForUs about their mission and they won't hesitate: the company aims to improve the U.S. retirement system by helping individuals prepare for the future.

ForUs is developing a retirement planning service for “the rest of us” and has created a technology solution that enables individuals to understand their benefit options and make good choices, while providing a simple way to put them into action. These are people who believe in their cause, and they are working to make an impact. ForUs is a small startup company composed of five co-founders, three of whom—Shin Inoue, David Ramirez, and Dave Boudreau—had been working together for more than three years in the retirement industry.

Feeling that they could provide a better retirement solution, they decided to form their own company. Sergey Zelvenskiy met Shin and David at a Meetup designed to introduce developers to small startup companies. After creating the online platform for a large

Business Challenges

- Improving cohesion between team members with different backgrounds
- Transitioning to a start-up environment
- Improving teamwork between team members

Company Profile

ForUs is a five-person startup company headquartered in San Francisco whose mission is to help Americans navigate the shift—from employer to employee—in funding and managing their retirement and health care. ForUs helps them make informed choices about their retirement savings and health insurance by translating and clarifying workplace benefits.

ForUs

retailer, Sergey was very interested in doing more meaningful work. Cindy Bloch had recently begun looking for ways to provide retirement planning support to individuals who were not being served by traditional financial planners. She was introduced to Shin through a mutual friend who thought that their goals and interests were in sync. Cindy joined ForUs in September 2012.

As the company strives to dramatically improve the lives of many, stakes are high for the ForUs team to coalesce and achieve its maximum potential. Sensing the importance of coming together and making the best use of all their talents, they enlisted the help of The Myers-Briggs Company [formerly CPP, Inc.] to come together as a team and make the most of all their talents.

Solution

The Myers-Briggs Company's organizational consultant Michael Segovia met with the founders of ForUs and led them through a training session designed to shed light on how ForUs functioned as a team— identifying what they were doing well, what could use some improvement, and what might be holding them back. Segovia used the MBTI® tool to offer ForUs a penetrating look at its styles of work, communication, learning, and other functions, at both an individual and team level.

By amalgamating insights provided by members' individual MBTI assessments, he offered a view of the "personality" of the entire team, enabling it to benefit from an overall understanding of the sum of its styles, strengths, and blind spots.

The fact that more than half of the team had worked together extensively before forming the company was an overall benefit. However, as Inoue points out, there are challenges associated with working with people you've worked with before—particularly when the new environment is radically different. "The dynamics change when you take people who formulated working relationships in a larger organization and place them into a company with only five people." Furthermore, the infusion of two new personalities created some fascinating team dynamics.

Solution

- Use MBTI framework to understand personality types
- Focus on work style, communication, learning, and other functions
- Discuss personality type on both individual and team levels

“ It was extremely helpful to gain some insight into how the core team communicated and worked together—it enabled me to understand the original team members better... ”

Cindy Block,
Co-founder,
ForUs

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Segovia's training based on the Myers-Briggs instrument helped everyone take a step back and view the team's interaction in a more objective light.

Results

The assessment process revealed that four members of the team had a preference for Introversion and only one for Extraversion. This imbalance was creating some tension, something Segovia addressed during the training session. The Extraverted team member tended to be more outspoken during meetings, and he was perceived at times by other team members as "dominating the conversation." Before the training, that tendency was unsettling to the rest of the team and sometimes even a cause for resentment. The four team members with a preference for Introversion didn't always feel they had ample opportunity to express themselves and be heard.

During the session, team members gained insight into the reasons behind each other's communication styles and learned how to manage Extraversion-Introversion differences. Segovia was able to show the Introverted team members how the meetings were perceived by their Extraverted colleague, who sometimes felt alone in his efforts to spur communication. In fact, during the session it became clear that the Extravert was often the one most frustrated during meetings, feeling that he wasn't getting any feedback from the rest of the team during discussions. Ironically, this would prompt him to be even more vocal, leading others to perceive he was increasingly trying to dominate the conversation.

From his vantage point, however, he was simply trying to prompt a flow of communication where interaction appeared to be lacking. Now the team understands that he would like to see more enthusiasm and interplay from them during conversations.

They now know that he is being more vocal because he perceives that no one else is willing to step forward, not because he wants to dominate. Segovia introduced a few techniques for those with a preference for Introversion to ensure that they are able to

Results

- Identifying and addressing Introversion/Extraversion differences makes meetings more productive
- Increased communication of values to prospects and customers after realizing it was a blind spot
- Better team cohesion and self-awareness of strengths

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adequately express their thoughts during meetings. “To be heard you have to be deliberate—you have to be more assertive,” says Bloch.

During the session, the ForUs team learned that its individual personality types were actually quite similar. While the team’s strengths were generally supportive of the company mission, Segovia brought to their attention some interesting findings regarding the Sensing–Intuition dichotomy.

Individuals who prefer Sensing tend to take in information by focusing on concrete facts and details and immediate actions that need to be taken. Conversely, those who prefer Intuition tend to look at the big picture, taking in information by focusing their attention on abstract patterns and meanings as well as possibilities. As it turned out, the team discovered that it was composed entirely of Intuitive types. As a result of this general orientation, the team was predisposed to focus on the larger picture of what it hoped to accomplish. This insight helped the team realize the need to develop a more analytical and detail-oriented focus to find the absolute best solutions possible.

On the other hand, Intuitive types can be somewhat less inclined to pay attention to immediate steps required to achieve goals, or the practical here and now. One area where this worked against productivity was in some of the conversations that would arise among team members, which had a tendency to veer off-point. “We tend to get distracted,” Block admits. “But now that we’re aware, it only takes one person to speak up to get us back on track. He or she might say, ‘We don’t need to solve that problem today.’”

Additionally, Bloch reports, it seemed like things weren’t getting done within the planned time frame. As she puts it, the team tended to underestimate how long things were going to take. Once again, this related to the Intuitive types’ predisposition for big-picture thinking, as the ability to meet deadlines requires attention to immediate action items.

The team’s self-awareness of the need to focus on what needs to be done in the near term prompted them to make the goal of “committing to and delivering on a smaller focus” a top action item. Passionate friction can be especially pronounced in the startup world, where teams deal with tremendous pressure to deliver a solution to an often complex problem, usually within very strict financial constraints.

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“It’s very different from the corporate world,” Bloch explains. “Resources are allocated by fundraising rather than direct budgeting, because you’re creating a product that isn’t going to immediately generate revenue.” In the end, enthusiasm for the product can make financial and time constraints even more difficult to deal with. While the company is for-profit, according to Inoue it’s definitely not monetary compensation that drives the team, but rather its mission to solve a social problem. The passion for the end product that fuels the company also makes it ripe for time-consuming debate. For example, according to Inoue, sometimes discussions “just keep going,” to the point where participants lose sight of why they were discussing the topic in the first place. “In the moment you feel like these things are very important for others to know or understand, but in reality they’re not critical.

As a team entirely preferring the Intuition function, we lack that ‘checking’ mechanism that enables us to discern the difference in the moment.” The MBTI assessment, he says, helps team members understand why others are passionate about a particular topic and why they’re approaching it the way they are. Understanding how others approach certain topics— particularly understanding their decision-making process— helps reduce the unnecessary back and forth that often gives way to lengthy debate. It also helps team members maintain the self-awareness necessary to ask themselves objectively whether a certain item truly warrants a lengthy discussion.

Simply understanding the personality breakdown of all five members provided value, Bloch says. “Understanding where our team fell along the 16 personality types helped shed light on why we’re doing what we’re doing—developing a holistic solution to a very complex and overwhelming process.” The sessions also brought to light some of the organization’s blind spots.

For example, it became apparent that the team lacked a member with a natural ability to communicate effectively the value of what he or she is doing. Simply becoming aware of this, according to Bloch, provided value, persuading the group to adopt a goal of “communicating purpose to customers and investors.” This has increased their patience with each other, their clarity of communication, their camaraderie, and their productivity in numerous ways.

“There are a lot of uncertainties in the start-up world— much more so than within established businesses,” says Inoue. “Increased understanding of how people

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deal with uncertainty is extremely helpful in a world where there is often no single 'right' answer. The MBTI tool has given me the context now to value how other team members with different preferences think about these things." Following the training, Bloch noted an immediate impact on clarity of communication, which in turn boosted productivity. "We had a planning session the day after our training—it was extremely productive. I would suggest this to everyone, and for startups I would recommend that this kind of training take place early on."



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