

The Notes and the Melody, Part I

A Simple and Pragmatic Approach to the Enneagram

By Mario Sikora

Pragmatism: 1: a practical approach to problems and affairs; **2:** an American movement in philosophy founded by C. S. Peirce and William James and marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief.—Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary

As readers of "The Enneagram Monthly" may know, Barbara Ehrenreich's book, "Bait and Switch," describes the author's meeting with a "career coach" referred to as "Morton" and his nine dolls representing the Enneagram types. She goes on to harshly criticize Morton (rightly, I believe, if her depiction of their meeting was accurate) and say some negative things about the Enneagram in general.

Ginger Bogda's fine series of articles addressed the ethical uses of the Enneagram in business (which appeared in recent issues of *EM*). I would like to address another question raised by Ehrenreich's book: What should a model of the Enneagram look like in order to be appropriate to the business world, specifically, and to others outside of the traditional psycho-spiritual audiences that have already embraced the system?

Let me state my bias at the outset: I make my living teaching the Enneagram to people in business. When the opportunity arises I present to non-business audiences as well. While the needs of my business audience have shaped the model of the Enneagram I present, I consider it a model for pragmatists—people who are seeking growth but uninterested in the mystical, psycho-spiritual elements so often associated with the Enneagram.

The blessing and the curse of the Enneagram of Personality is that, unlike other typologies, nobody owns it and there is no "official" body of knowledge. Instead, there are a number of Enneagram models (such as Riso/Hudson's, Helen Palmer's, and

Hurley/Donson's) that have risen to the top and become dominant. People wanting to teach the Enneagram to others have either had to receive education in an existing model and then license the creator's intellectual property or create their own independent models.

This article addresses four fundamental principles that underlie my approach and should be considered by anyone constructing a model of the Enneagram to present to business. Future articles will cover the model itself (see box on page 7).

Please note that this is not an effort to pass judgment on other models of the Enneagram; it is an examination of appropriateness for specific audiences. Many of the existing models, such as those mentioned above, have much to offer and I have learned from each of them.

However, if the Enneagram is ever going to be taken seriously as a tool for business use or even become more widely accepted as a self-help tool, practitioners and teachers must become more conscious of the needs of those audiences and the language with which they are comfortable.

Principle One: Less is More and Simple is better than Complicated.

Corollary: Give them the notes; let them play their own melody.

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.—attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes

One of the attractive things about the Enneagram of Personality, at least to some audiences, is its richness and complexity. Various authors explore a multitude of approaches to the model comprising a vast array of topics: type, subtype, wings, levels, vices, virtues, essential aspects, directions of movement, various groupings of the types; the list goes on and on. One could spend a lifetime

studying the details and various characteristics of the types.

One of the *unattractive* things about the Enneagram of Personality, at least to some audiences, is its richness and complexity. Type, subtype, wings, levels, vices, virtues... It's enough to make your head hurt.

There are few people who would not benefit from the increased self-awareness that can be achieved through exploring the Enneagram of Personality; at the same time, most people have neither the time nor the inclination to be the dedicated "seekers" that are often found in Enneagram circles.

This dilemma is at the heart of one of the challenges I've faced in my work as a consultant. There is no better tool than the Enneagram for achieving one of the things I need my clients to achieve—deep and useful self-awareness—but it must be achieved relatively quickly and be easily remembered by people who have tremendous demands on their time and attention. Too much detail causes their eyes to glaze over; they want something that has the biggest payoff in the shortest amount of time.

Of course, it is not possible to solve complex personal or interpersonal challenges in a short time. Insight grows over time and deeper insights yield greater benefits. Someone presenting the Enneagram can, however, construct their model in a way that provides precise, easily remembered insights that can be applied in a variety of ways.

The Pareto Principle is useful here: 20% of the investment (whether it be time, energy or money) usually provides 80% of the dividend (when it is the "right" 20%); the other 80% of the investment provides the other 20% of the dividend. Thus, it is important to remember this fundamental principle of leverage when constructing a model of the Enneagram: focus on the information that provides the biggest payoff in the shortest time and leave the rest for another day.

As you will see in the articles of that follow, my Enneagram model is pretty simple, primarily focusing on the interplay of the Nine strategies that Robert Tallon and I discuss in our book, "From Awareness to Action." When a client can remember that they get into trouble when they overdo their preferred strategy and under-do their neglected strategy,

they can gain a lot of benefit. When they can remember the preferred strategy of a coworker and infer the significance of that preferred strategy ("Harry is an Eight and Eights strive to be powerful, therefore I should remember that..."), the client can reap huge dividends from a small investment.

An Enneagram model that is too complex or too detailed, or a presentation that provides too much information and seeks to address every situation that a client might face, will end up being far less effective than a model that presents fundamental principles and examples of how to apply them.

I've long been impressed with my clients' abilities to take the Enneagram information they receive from me and apply it in clever and creative ways. Therefore, my goal is to enable them to extrapolate in their own style. A great analogy (thanks to my friend Teri Meehan for this) is "the notes and the melody." Teach them the notes, and give them examples of how they might create a melody, then get out of their way and let them compose for themselves.

A user of the Enneagram must also understand its strengths and its limits. It is not a model that explains the whole of the human condition. It does not effectively or precisely track to other models of the psyche such as Myers-Briggs; object relations or attachment theory; Freud's model of the ego, id, and superego; or the work of Karen Horney. It can be used as a complement to any of these models, but they all measure different things. Attempts to directly correlate them ultimately seem forced or contrived, ultimately making the model more complicated than it needs to be.

A pragmatic model of the Enneagram must make its way to the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Principle Two: A "secular" and scientific Enneagram is needed for the business world.

"However splendid our languages and cultures, however rich and subtle our minds, however vast our creative powers, the mental process is the product of a brain shaped by the hammer of natural selection upon the anvil of nature." –E.O. Wilson "On Human Nature"

Note: In our climate of culture war, the word "secular" is highly charged for many people. I am not making any judgment on the

value or utility of religion or spirituality in this article. I am merely addressing the language and content that should be used for a specific audience.

Since many people who are drawn to the Enneagram have a spiritual or psychological bent, the models of the Enneagram that often get taken into the business world are framed in language that is either blatantly or subtly tinged with spiritual or psychological overtones. This is often a problem. While many individuals in corporations may be interested in spirituality or psychology, corporate people are resistant to such talk at a macro level. Put another way, you can often talk about spirituality and psychology with a client one-on-one, but they start to cringe when you try to do it in a group.

Further, individually or collectively, people outside of the classic Enneagram audience tend to be more challenging and expect greater precision. Soft and fuzzy language, words like "Being," "Essence," "Presence," etc., are too nebulous to be useful in that environment.

Likewise, language pertaining to virtues and vices, "the spiritual dimension," ancient wisdom, etc., evoke images of religion and mysticism that are unappealing to the pragmatic audience. In addition, the myth that the Enneagram of Personality is in some way "ancient wisdom" further undermines its credibility to a pragmatic audience by being unproven. I have yet to see any evidence of links to the Enneagram as process model that pre-date Gurdjieff. Nor have I seen any evidence of the Enneagram as a model of personality that pre-dates Oscar Ichazo's work or the more fully developed work of Claudio Naranjo. The 1960's hardly qualify as "ancient."

Speaking of Naranjo: If my house was on fire and I could only grab one Enneagram book (including my own), it would be Naranjo's "Character and Neurosis." Unfortunately, his focus on neurosis and his technical language, which are understandable for a psychiatrist and appropriate for his target audience, make his book unusable for a pragmatic audience. Even the work of Riso and Hudson, with the construct of "Levels of Development" and focus on "healthy, average, and unhealthy" behavior, will send most

human resource people scurrying for cover. When I began using the Enneagram in business, I gave my clients Riso and Hudson's "Personality Types" to read. Before long, people were labeling each other in terms of health. Usually, the person talking was emphasizing his or her own "healthiness" and pointing out someone else's "unhealthiness." In addition to the ethical problem with labeling others as "unhealthy," there are significant legal considerations regarding this language in the workplace.

In addition to secularization, a pragmatic approach to the Enneagram will benefit from relying on the latest science rather than "ancient wisdom." Recently, someone writing in the pages of *EM* suggested that anyone teaching the Enneagram should immerse themselves in Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, the Desert Fathers, etc. I would counter that if you really want to understand how the mind works, immerse yourself in Charles Darwin to give you the right context, then dive into E. O. Wilson's socio-biology classic "On Human Nature" and Richard Dawkins' "The Selfish Gene" before moving on to Matt Ridley, Joseph LeDoux, Antonio Damasio, Paul Bloom, Steven Pinker, Timothy Wilson, and some other the other brilliant and accessible authors writing about genetics and neuroscience. I love reading Gurdjieff and the Sufis as much as the next person, but—and I apologize in advance—they are the theoretical equivalent of the Commodore 64: an interesting part of the history of the study of the mind, but the technology has moved on.

Pragmatic audiences, especially business audiences, expect the latest technology. In the study of the mind, the latest technology is not found in the desert; it is found in the laboratory.

Validation of both type assessments and the fundamental suppositions of the Enneagram (i.e., agreed-upon definitions of commonly shared characteristics of the Enneatypes) are also critical to the further acceptance of the Enneagram by pragmatic audiences. Despite Ehrenreich's comments in "Bait and Switch," Jerry Wagner's WEPPS assessment has very strong validation and reliability support and I have found it to be the most accurate and corporate-friendly of the popular Enneagram-type assessments. Riso

and Hudson have done important work in beginning to validate the "realness" of the types. More needs to be done, however.

By a "scientific approach" I also mean that one's model of the Enneagram must hold up to the scientific method: hypothesize, test, observe, and conclude. What you teach must be internally consistent and rigorously tested for accuracy.

Unfortunately, typical Enneagram workshop audiences are "soft" audiences—they have been dazzled by certain insights and want to agree with the person conducting the presentation. They may also see the system as all-inclusive: if one part of it is right, the rest must be right as well. Or they may fall into a pattern of only seeing confirming evidence, ignoring assertions that are not consistent with their experience or observations either unconsciously or out of simple politeness.

Therefore, some of the ideas that make it into the Enneagram literature are not particularly solid, and they go unquestioned by the teacher taking them into the business world. Witness our friend "Morton," for example, who told Ehrenreich that her type (which reads like a Four), would not be a good writer. It is easy to dismiss this as a ridiculous misuse of the system unsupported by data, but there are prominent Enneagram teachers who make assertions such as "Fours always wear purple or black," "Fives tend to bathe less than other types," and "Nines like self-help workshops and camping." Only a soft audience would allow these untested generalizations to go unchallenged.

Business audiences are not soft audiences, however. In fact, they tend to be challenging and skeptical, and on average probably a lot smarter than the presenter. They sniff out inaccuracy, inconsistency, and fuzziness and will either tune you out (if you are lucky) and begin catching up on email on their Blackberries or they will turn on you like sharks that sniff blood. If you can spend a day teaching the Enneagram to a group of 30 engineers or lawyers and survive, your model is solid.

One way to ensure that your model is solid is to apply the scientific method to what you learn and what you teach. Does an idea hold up in your experience? Does it hold up when applied to a statistically useful, non-

Enneagram indoctrinated sample? If so, use it; if not, toss it.

The Dalai Lama, when asked what would happen if science proved to contradict some basic tenets of Buddhism, replied "We would have to change Buddhism." Enneagram teachers must hold themselves to the same principles of logic, reason, and rigor. If the evidence contradicts the theory, the theory must change.

One final comment in this area:

Models of the Enneagram that revolve around science fiction, cartoon, or fairy-tale characters as exemplars are simply inappropriate for the business world. Shakespeare, Homer, movies aimed at grown-ups, etc. are generally better, though the references will probably be unfamiliar to the classic business audience.

A simple rule of thumb is: justly or not, if it would get you ostracized in high school it will get you ostracized in the corporate world. And, please, leave the dolls home.

Principle Three: Remaining Static is the problem; becoming Responsive is the solution.

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."—Charles Darwin

Here, we get to the "So, what?" query of the pragmatic audience. What is the value of this to me? How can it help me in my daily life? Why should I spend my time listening to you while work is piling up on my desk?

The case for the practical benefit of your Enneagram model must be made.

Darwin's comment, of course, refers to biological adaptation through mechanisms that generally take millennia to occur, but the concept applies at a micro level as well. As individuals, we are successful when we adapt (respond) to the changing demands of our environment; we are unsuccessful when we try to hold on to an unchanging set of behaviors and attitudes that have outgrown their usefulness or are inappropriate for our circumstances.

Let's be sure to clarify what I mean by "successful" here—for the sake of this article I am not necessarily talking about material success, market primacy, athletic conquest,

etc., (though these are fine things). Rather, I mean the ability to flexibly respond to your environment in a way that allows you to develop efficacy in your dealings with the world, harmony in your relationships, and contentment in your heart. (Accomplish this and you will have accomplished a lot.)

The Enneagram can serve as a map on how to move from resistance to responsiveness. As I will explain in the next article, the inner triangle of the Enneagram can serve as a metaphor for the process by which we become stuck in ineffective habitual patterns and how we can become unstuck. The nine Ennea-types are the specific patterns we can become stuck in. More specifically, the nine strategies are the themes that underlie the patterns. Thus, the most important lesson for a One is that he tends to get into trouble when he overdoes his preferred strategy of "striving to be perfect." When he goes off track he can look for the problematic behaviors or attitudes that stem from this strategy and then modify them accordingly.

It's not always that simple, of course, and I often explore other aspects of the mind addressed by this model. The key idea, however, is to give the client simple, logically connected concepts (the notes) that can be used in a variety of ways to creatively address the everyday challenges they face (the melody).

Principle Four: Focus on growth rather than dysfunction.

Corollary: You can't change who you are, but you can change who you will be.

"Think what you would be; then do what you must."—Epictetus

The language of "the Fall" permeates the Enneagram literature, as it does most of western tradition. The common view holds that we are dysfunctional versions of what we *should* be rather than "in-progress" versions of what we *could* be.

Theories of human flaw—the Christian tradition of original sin, the Freudian "id" needing to be reigned in, etc.—are deeply rooted in our psyches despite a modern focus on self-actualization, positive psychology, and the like. We believe that we have gone to sleep and must wake up (though we see ourselves as more awake than other people). We say that we have forgotten our true selves and must

remember our true nature or contact with our Essence.

We feel like we should be somehow "better" than we are and then beat up on ourselves for falling short. Consciously or not, we tend to see ourselves as disappointments and failures. In short, we see ourselves as angels fallen.

Instead, we should see ourselves as primates evolved. Rather than see ourselves as sinful, sleeping, or stupid, perhaps we should see ourselves as marvels of nature who are sometimes ineffectively programmed.

The language of the Fall not only keeps us mired in feeling bad about ourselves, it is simply inconsistent with what we now know of how the brain, and thus the mind, works. The "you" that is reading this right now is the cumulative result of a set of genes actualized into neurons and synapses shaped and reinforced in the crucible of experience.

"Consciousness" is the activity and interactions of those neurons and synapses. It should be understood as a verb rather than a noun, as what our brain does rather than who we are. This may seem bleak and overly materialistic to some, lacking the richness of spiritual language (though I would disagree), but it is a view more conducive to growth and development than the language of the Fall.

Let me explain:

Change is difficult and when we try to change we often fail—and we fail repeatedly in the beginning. If we see our failed attempts as shortcomings, as signs of our deficiency, we berate ourselves and then we stop trying. (No one likes a scold, even if it resides between our own ears. The best way to make a scold stop berating us is to rob it of ammunition. The best way to do that is to simply stop trying to change.)

The deficiency model tends to be, therefore, counterproductive to growth.

A more effective way to grow is to understand that our habitual patterns are a productive of the initial and ongoing hardwiring of our brains. At the risk of oversimplification, we perform a behavior because a stimulus activates a specific part of our brain. That part of the brain sends a message through synaptic connections to another part of our brain, which executes a response to the stimulus. (For example, a

snake crosses my path; one part of my brain registers the snake and sends a message to another part of my brain; I run.)

The more frequently we execute a specific response, the stronger the synaptic connections become, making it more likely that we will execute that reaction again in the future. The synapses literally become denser and more insulated, making the transfer of information easier. Thus, behavior becomes habitual. The brain is taking the path of least resistance to solve a problem.

Personal change and growth is an exercise in neuroplasticity. "Neuroplasticity" is the ability of the wiring of the brain to change overtime. The repetitive practice of a new thought or behavior strengthens the synapses connecting the part of the brain that receives a stimulus and the part of the brain that issues a new response. This means that the new behavior becomes "easier" over time. At the same time, the synaptic connections linked to the "old" behavior start to atrophy due to decreased use. Eventually, the new behavior becomes the default response.

Change has occurred.

It is not enough to realize that "You are not your personality" and begin embracing your essence. There may be more to you than

your personality, if you define personality as the behavioral face you show to others. You are not, however, some mystical essence that exists external to the sum of your biology and your experiences. You are who you are, but by acknowledging the way the brain really works and exercising its potential for plasticity, you can become who you want to be.

The language of "the Fall" may seem richer and somehow deeper than all this talk of neurons and synapses, and I find that many people invested in a spiritual path sometimes resist it as somehow lacking in majesty. But I disagree. If you want majesty, look at pictures of magnified synapses and neurons and study how the most sophisticated three pounds of matter in the universe really works.

As Hamlet said, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

A model of the Enneagram aimed at pragmatists should abandon the language of the Fall, let go of the past, and focus on systematic growth.

Future articles will focus on the components of a pragmatic model of the Enneagram.

A Pragmatic Model of the Enneagram

Future articles will address the model of the Enneagram that I teach to my corporate clients and the people who attend my public workshops.

The components of the model are:

The Instincts—These are the three fundamental instinctive drives—self-preservation, social, and sexual (or intimacy)—often discussed in Enneagram literature as either the “subtypes” or the “instinctual variants.” The instincts are at the root of our values and therefore affect everything we do.

The Inner Triangle—The inner triangle of the Enneagram (which connects points Three, Six, and Nine) is used to represent both:

- The process by which ineffective behavior becomes conditioned in us (I call this “Creating the Story”) and
- The process by which we can modify those behaviors (the “Awareness to Action” process).

The Strategies—The core of personality type. The strategies are the cognitive, affective, and behavioral themes that underlie each type’s approach to their world.

The Basic Qualities—The nine Basic Qualities are inherent aspects of human nature. They are part of “who we are” from the beginning, but in an immature form. Their development and nurturance become stunted through the socialization process. Nurturing the maturation of the Basic Qualities is fundamental to growth.

The Accelerators—The nine Accelerators are practices that help to nurture the maturation of the Basic Qualities.

Note:

I generally cover only the Inner Triangle and the Strategies when presenting the Enneagram to a business group, because of time constraints and complexity. When coaching a corporate client, I teach the other elements of the model as they are appropriate.

While I will write about each of these elements in future articles in this series, Robert Tallon and I have covered the Strategies and the Awareness to Action Process in our book, “From Awareness to Action.”