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Shaffer Title Uses Myers-Briggs to Develop Common Corporate Language, Jump-Start Growth

By Amy Ferris

Founded in 1990 and headquartered in Chesapeake, Va., Shaffer Title and Escrow Inc. provides title insurance and real estate settlement services to home buyers and real estate professionals. Like many family-owned businesses, the company was created when its owners recognized a need in the community — one they shared — to provide a more cost-effective and efficient closing process. Currently Shaffer has six branch offices and 35 employees, and with more growth expected, the company has found great value in using assessments such as Myers-Briggs to facilitate communication.

When the company was founded, Jarett Shaffer was at sea with Operation Desert Shield. He wrote the company business plan while deployed, and wife Susan launched the company back home in Virginia.

"In this area of the country, only attorneys were serving real estate transactions, and they were charging a lot — up to 1 percent of the sale price for closing fees," said Susan Shaffer, president of Shaffer Title. "This meant many people were priced out of the market. We were a small family dependent on a military income, and we knew there had to be an alternative so more families like us could buy homes and be empowered to do so."

The Shaffers set out to offer an alternative for real estate closings and to fill a niche they knew needed filling by creating a closing experience that was more comfortable and respectful, and less threatening and expensive. Agents deserved to be treated as professionals, and buyers deserved to be treated with integrity and respect. With that in mind, the Shaffers built their company around three core values: dependability, old-fashioned manners and professionalism.

Once the company had its customer service and technology platform perfected, it was time to grow the business and open new branch offices. To do that effectively, Shaffer Title knew it would need a common language to help its people talk to one another and to its diverse customer base, as well as to improve teamwork and leadership.

"Based on my research, I found that companies can fall apart quickly if they don't have that 'glue of communication' to hold them together," Shaffer said. "Without a common language, core values and promises go by the wayside."

Communication Glue

The company turned to the Myers-Briggs assessment — a personality inventory designed to give people information about their psychological preferences. Originally developed in the early 1940s by Isabel Briggs Myers and Katharine Cook Briggs, the Myers-Briggs assessment was created to make Carl Jung's theory of human personality understandable and useful in everyday life.

As Shaffer Title began its fast-track growth in 2004, it incorporated the assessment with the assistance of CPP Professional Services consultant Shanna Teel, Ph.D., focusing on executive coaching, team building and organizational development. Teel and Susan Shaffer collaborated to develop team-building seminars, to be held twice a year, and introduced the entire Shaffer Title team to the MBTI assessment. Employees completed the assessment through SkillsOne.com, CPP's online assessment delivery system. Then, at the company's off-site training center, Teel led employees through a workshop on personality type and interpreted their results.

She used the analogy of rooms in a house to explain the 16 different personality types that describe people. To make her point, Teel figuratively placed each employee in a different room in the house and then explained how everyone had to be comfortable walking from one room to the next — dealing with all eight of the personality preferences: Extraversion–Introversion, Sensing–Intuition, Thinking–Feeling and Judging–Perceiving.

Since its introductory workshop, the company has continued to incorporate the MBTI framework into its off-site programs.

Assessment and Understanding: Enhancing Professional and Personal Lives

Reactions to the assessment's implementation varied.

"Initially, our employees had a great deal of resistance to something they thought might pigeonhole or categorize them," Shaffer said. "They wanted to know what it meant to their jobs."

In response, Shaffer said she spent a lot of time explaining to them that the goal of the MBTI tool is to create an atmosphere of understanding and improved communication. She also said the assessment would be used ethically, not against them in any way, and she assured them it would be used to their benefit, not to stereotype people or to assign good and bad characteristics. Though many factors combine to influence an individual's behavior, values and attitudes, the MBTI description summarizes underlying patterns common to most people of that type.

"The MBTI assessment gives us a way to describe why people do what they do," Shaffer explained. "We have it fully integrated into our culture now. In any area of the company, at any moment in the day, you might hear someone saying 'My Perceiving preference is off the chart today; I need to get back into focus,' or, 'I'm a Sensing type; I need more concrete information.' It has become a really valuable way for us to connect to one another. In fact, it is not a judgmental system: It is a benign, neutral way of explaining the cause and effect, or the 'why I do what I do when I do it.'"

Shaffer said the MBTI assessment is the perfect instrument for Shaffer Title because it mirrors the company's core values and can provide benefits, not just in the workplace but throughout employees' lives.

"I'm an Intuitive type, and Jarett is a Sensing type," Shaffer said. "We would come to classic clashes of not understanding where the other person was coming from, and it was inhibiting the growth of the company. Just learning the basics of 'this is how I think, this is how he thinks, and it doesn't make him right or me right' opened up understanding. And that blossoming of perception has allowed us to do many things with and for the business."

Shaffer said she has long believed people sometimes have trouble understanding each other due to basic differences in how they take in information and make decisions about it. Once immersed in the MBTI instrument, she said she realized having a clear understanding of the basics of personality type and type development would help her gain greater understanding of herself and others, and of the impact type has on daily interactions.

When the company is locked in a leadership meeting, the participants often remind themselves not to get too lopsided on the Thinking side, making decisions based solely on logic and objective analysis. They often ask for feedback from the Feeling types, who focus on values and subjective evaluation of person-centered concerns. Just as important, when they find that the Extraverts are doing all the talking, they ask the Introverts for their ideas and impressions.

The MBTI Assessment Day to Day


Shaffer said she sees the impact of the assessment every day in communications between staff members and between staff and the company's diverse customers, who may include anyone from a first-time home buyer who has just drained his piggy bank to empty nesters scaling back for retirement and real estate professionals with a range of experience levels. To ensure the company remains true to its core values and mission — providing superior customer service, a combination of modern technology and old-fashioned standards of manners, integrity and respect — Shaffer's employees are even beginning to "type watch" customers on the phone to help improve communications.

"We take the time to learn how to talk to customers in the way they want to be talked to," Shaffer explained. "It all gets back to our focus on old-fashioned values and manners. If we hadn't found the MBTI tool, there would be no common language, no common pool of meaning and a lack of cohesiveness in how we could grow those relationships."

Shaffer Title also uses the MBTI instrument as a core element of its development and performance management activities, even using type concepts to provide feedback in performance reviews. At its leadership workshop in October 2007, the company used assessment data to help develop conflict management solutions and improve productivity and job satisfaction.

Impressed with the MBTI results so far, the company plans to go on to the next level, the MBTI Step II assessment. The MBTI Step II instrument builds on the insights provided by Step I, introducing a unique and complex understanding of personality, which enables clients to explore a multiplicity of individual variations within type. Particularly effective in leadership development and executive coaching, the MBTI Step II instrument breaks down each dimension of the Step I types into five facets, giving individuals a more detailed appreciation of their type. This approach can highlight how people of the same Step I type can be different and explore similarities between people with contrasting Step I preferences.

Shaffer said she hopes this second instrument will give employees more insight into their behaviors and even more clarity about their type.

"The MBTI framework has been very, very beneficial," Shaffer said. "We have received a lot of positive feedback from employees on how they use it in talking to our customers and when they are having difficult conversations. Most important, we are all learning how to talk to people so they can really hear us. It really does have a language around here." 

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