

Outside the Box

When I submitted my first paper for publication in the early 2000s, Web-based editorial-management systems were in their infancy. I posted via regular mail 3 hard copies of my manuscript—with a neatly handwritten cover letter—to the editor in chief of the *American Journal of Physiology*, who sent copies to 2 reviewers (contacted by e-mail, but also often at that time by phone or mail!). I then had to wait for a couple of months for those annotated copies to be returned . . . with the final decision being . . . rejected. At this time, irrespective of the outcome, submitting a paper and getting it reviewed was already an achievement. The procedure in itself was a lesson of patience and humility, which likely made academics think twice before starting the process. Today with electronic platforms, submissions can be completed in 15 minutes, and reviewers secured with a few clicks. Considering the ongoing development of new technologies that facilitate data collection and, more important, the increased need for achieving academic advancement and the associated “necessity” to publish, the number of research-paper submissions has never been so high. The acceptance rate in well-ranked journals ranges from <10% (eg, *Nature*) to 20–30%. Of the 822 papers submitted to *IJSP* in 2016, only 202 were accepted and made it into print. Overall, getting papers published has never been so competitive.

An even greater level of competitiveness can be seen when it comes to working as a practitioner in high-profile institutions and clubs. Back in the days, these positions were mainly accessible for former top athletes, who would drag with them the practitioners who had worked with them during their careers. With the expansion of individual athlete care in elite structures and the development of sport analytics as a new field, some of these jobs are now also accessible to people from outside the sport itself, further increasing the competitiveness of those positions. Every year, several hundred sport-sciences and/or strength and conditioning master’s students graduate in each European country (eg, >1000–1500 in the UK)¹; the number of available positions, in contrast, likely stagnates or may only grow at a very slow rate.

So, how do researchers get their papers within the 10–25%? How do aspiring coaches and sport scientists get the job everyone dreams of? The answer is simple: They break from the pack, make the choice to become a “linchpin,”² and surpass their peers while doing differently and better. They do what the others are not prepared to do. In addition to the necessary levels of knowledge, skills, and experience that make great researchers and practitioners, some specific character traits are required to make an impact.^{3–5} Here, I wish to further discuss this topic, using the example of 3 personality archetypes in relation to people’s ability and willingness to grow, share knowledge, collaborate, and adopt an open-minded attitude. The archetypes are based on the idea that people’s mind-set travels continually back and forth through an infinity-shaped loop (Figure 1), between more and less comfortable zones, and it is where people sit for most of their time that defines their profile and enables them to make a substantial difference . . . or not.

- *Type 1.* Type 1 is a balanced profile that reflects the mind-set of the majority of people. Type 1 people spend most of their

time in their comfort zone (Figure 1) but can, when required or when pushed by others, step out transiently to grow and make substantial progress. Most of them nevertheless stay on the left side of the loop for a long time through laziness and/or naively believing that “it will be okay.” Others miss a strong drive for improvement or self-confidence to make the type 3 profile. Their chances to make the 10–25% are real but limited; those for the good jobs are almost null.

- *Type 2.* Type 2 people often have been working in high-level positions for a long time, as both academics (eg, head of faculty or department, journal editor) and practitioners (eg, head coach, head physio, strength coach). They have chosen to *be* rather than to *do*, even though this has meant compromising their integrity at some stages. This is not a problem for them, as long as their titles, salary, and public roles are secured and allow them to feel unique and important. Centered on themselves, they check the boxes and continue in the same looping circle (or their own orbit⁶) that keeps them in their own comfort zone (Figure 1). They purposely avoid challenges and cannot be bothered listening to others. They are more comfortable with old problems than they are with new solutions.⁷ When it comes to giving lectures, they teach what they know, not what the students need. They want to have their names on papers as last authors, but they would not be able to collect the data or discuss the stats and study findings. Their blindness keeps them away from the recent literature and the reality of journal requirements (ie, topics, quality, and designs), which inevitably leads to inappropriate and irrelevant submissions likely to be directly rejected by editors. In high-performance sports, these people don’t read research papers either and never update their skills and methods. They avoid use of new technologies and keep delivering outdated programs. To protect themselves, they purposely do not share what they do. Their focus on their own personal comfort is so prevalent that it often derails the optimal training or recovery process of the athletes they oversee. “They want to wear the tracksuit but not run the laps.”³ Providing any advice to help these people is a waste of space here, since they will not be reading these lines anyway. While they made some of the 10–25% or got some of the good jobs by luck and opportunism, their future is wedded to their political and survival strategies.
- *Type 3.* Type 3 people are the complete opposite of type 2s and present the ultimate progression from type 1 toward the right side of Figure 1. These people are selfless, open-minded, curious, ambitious, and accountable for their actions and show a critical mind. They well know that getting “out of the box” is necessary to learn, grow, innovate, create, and, ultimately, succeed. They understand that life is continuously brought into question and are always willing to do better. They have embraced the uncomfortable truth that natural assets and talent can be outmatched through consistent efforts, deliberate practice,⁸ and, in turn, skill development. They are open to constructive criticism.⁹ They listen more than they talk. They are not afraid to ask for help. They accept and acknowledge

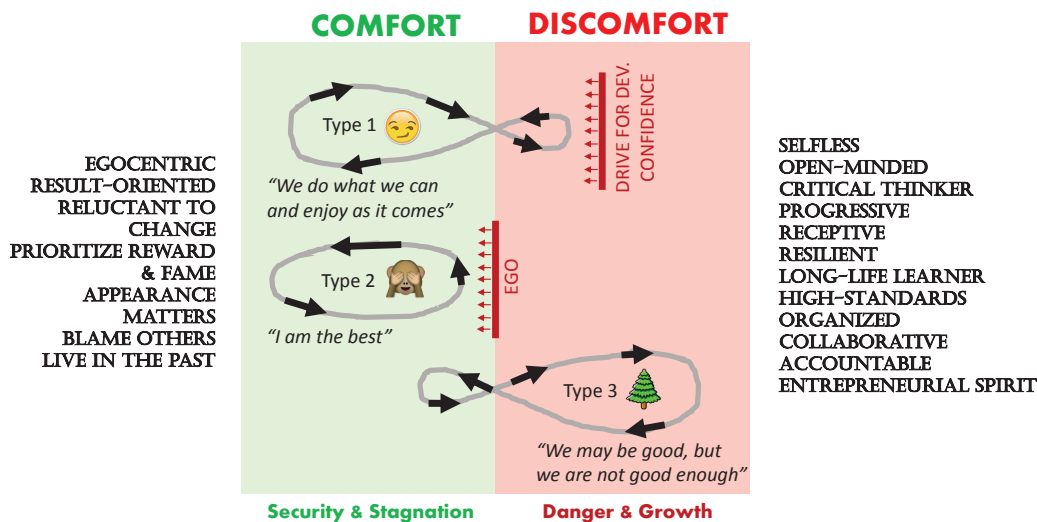


Figure 1 — Schematic representation of the 3 personality archetypes. The archetypes are based on the idea that people's mind-set travels continually back and forth through an infinity-shaped loop between more (left) and less (right) uncomfortable zones. Abbreviation: DEV., development.

their errors to learn from them. In fact, they set very high standards for themselves, apply strict self-discipline, and tend to be lifelong learners¹⁰: They read daily, listen to podcasts from various fields, travel, seek information from different disciplines, and always say yes when it comes to sharing experience and knowledge. They are more concerned with process than results. They are interested in “doing” and act to keep their integrity. They treat everyone the same, regardless of their status.¹⁰ They are the most likely to make the 10–25% and to obtain highly competitive jobs.

Everyone is free to take the life path they want, and there are likely as many ways to follow as there are people. While I will never feel entitled to give lessons to anybody, I feel that less ego, more open-mindedness, and more collaborative work (ie, type 3 archetype) should help produce more high-quality papers and deliver better programs to athletes. Successful people manage to enjoy life daily and keep doing what they want, which helps them realize their potential either at the academic level or in the practicing field. “Getting out of the box” is likely essential to achieve this in the long term.

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