



## **Building a Culture of Personality: Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games**

**Written by Sean Townsend**

As director of Workforce Engagement and Communications for the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC), Erin Sills is responsible for leadership and culture development, change management, team effectiveness and internal communications. These are demanding roles in any organization, let alone an Olympic committee comprising nearly 1,400 paid employees and 25,000 volunteers, along with a full contingent of sponsors and contractors. But by helping her colleagues to understand and respect diverse personality types, she is helping them achieve results through relationships, overcome the unique stresses they face, and create a culture that reflects both Olympic values and Canadian values.

### **Unique rewards, unique challenges**

For Sills, the most rewarding aspect of working with VANOC is “knowing that we are all contributing to hosting the world here in 2010. This is a pinnacle moment for the world’s best athletes, and our job is to create an environment for exceptional competition—one where the spectators are entertained and inspired, the athletes perform at their best, and the workforce is engaged.” She is also inspired by the values of the Olympic Movement: “The search for excellence, fair play, the joy of effort, respect for others, and harmony between body and mind. Imagine—what could be possible if these values were espoused by a broader collective?”

But with these rewards come daunting challenges: “We go through the complete organizational life cycle in five years. From start-up to complete dissolution—all while the world watches. There is an enormous amount of change that we go through in getting ‘games ready,’ not to mention a timeline that has zero flexibility, and increasing public interest in what we’re doing. This can create some tense moments filled with extreme pressure. We know that there have been and will be moments where people’s characters are tested, where styles under stress emerge. Yet this is the stuff that learning is made of, and our team will leave here stronger and more resilient than they were coming in.”

### **Personality types: Encouraging individuality and inclusiveness**

An important aspect of that learning mirrors a defining theme of Vancouver 2010: respect for both individual achievement and collective diversity. To Sills, that means helping VANOC build a unified culture that values performance while respecting differences in learning and communication styles. She has found that by helping people and teams understand their personality types and interpersonal needs, she gets the best of both worlds.

With her own team, her understanding of personality types—through her use of assessment tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation—Behavior (FIRO-B)—has given her valuable self-awareness. “I put a lot of time and effort into building trusting relationships. I have a firm belief that results don’t happen in isolation, they happen in relationship. As a leader I trust and empower my team to lead their own initiatives and projects. This requires a lot of letting go, and for someone with high inclusion needs (FIRO-B), it takes constant work on my part!

“Instinctively I look for the connections between leadership, culture and strategy, and I help others navigate at the intersections of these three areas. I am drawn to the big picture (as are most



people who share my MBTI preference for intuition). In our case it's delivering an extraordinary Games experience, and this helps in delivering strategic and unique programs that connect people to our vision and values. I like diversity and creative ideas, so my team is always looking for new ways to deliver our work.

"I encourage my team to have a full expression of their preferences, while also expanding and practicing those underdeveloped parts of themselves. As a team, we are great at creative ideas and spontaneity—and we've all had to stretch [in terms of structure and decision making] to match the time-oriented and project-based environment we're in. I've also learned to trust my instincts in hiring decisions, with a constant eye to team dynamics and fit, along with skills and experience."

Beyond her own team, Sills says that looking at personality types makes her better able to coach leaders, relationships and teams through the highs and lows inherent in a project environment: "It creates permission for us to look inward. At VANOC, with the pace we're operating at, it's not often that people have time to slow down enough to do that. It also helps to highlight areas that individuals or teams need to shift or adapt—the different muscles they need to strengthen to be more efficient in their work."

As a leadership coach, she uses personality type assessments "to provide insight into how the leader's type impacts their leadership style at work—what their strengths and areas for improvement are, and what they need to be aware of when they're operating at an increased stress level."

Sills works with staff at all levels, from senior executives to front-line employees, and with new and existing teams. Though the specific goals vary, the overall intentions are similar: "We want to ensure people are working at their best with each other, that they're communicating effectively with each other—understanding that there is a difference in people's preferred ways of sharing information."

She has seen the benefits of this approach for VANOC: "We've learned how to work better under stress and to realize when people are 'in the grip.' It has provided staff members with an understanding of how stress affects their work and communication style, and it has provided techniques on how to counter the effects of stress. Plus it has taught or reminded members of our organization that people have different preferences and to consider these when working with them."

Shawn Bakker, a Psychologist with Psychometrics Canada, a leading assessment publisher and consultant for the development and selection of people, reinforced Sills experiences saying, "with the help of the 'personality type' managers can better understand themselves and their staff, allowing them to improve communication, employee engagement and motivation. This leads to higher performance and employee retention."

### **The value of passion**

One thing that unites VANOC employees of all personality types is the Vancouver 2010 vision, "A stronger Canada whose spirit is raised by its passion for sport, culture and sustainability." But as Sills points out, it takes awareness, trust and leadership to channel that passion in productive ways: "I think the key is to harness the good in every situation and every person. Fundamentally I believe that authentic leadership, where we balance self-awareness and differentiation with relational competence, is the right type of leadership for these times. I work with leaders to take advantage of their strengths and personality, while making tweaks to enhance their overall style



**Feature Article appearing in the January 13, 2010 e-letter**

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and impact on others. When we lead from a place of authenticity, others are more likely to rally along with us.”

“Passion is critical to all that we do. We don’t settle, and at VANOC everyone expects the best of themselves and of others. The flip side of this is that we’ve also attracted a highly competitive workforce. Competition without trust can be deadly, so we’ve worked tirelessly to continue to build a culture of trust. Every new hire that joins our organization has gone through a screen for complementary values to our five core values: team, trust, excellence, creativity and sustainability. These five values together create an exceptional mix of drive, determination, compassion, collaboration and innovation. Because of the team we have, these Games will be something that Canada can be proud of.”