



The following is an excerpt from **“Psychological Testing at Work”** written by Edward Hoffman, Ph.D., published in 2002 by McGraw-Hill.

“How to use, interpret, and get the most out of the newest tests in personality, learning styles, aptitudes, interests, and more!”

The Kolbe Index

A second highly influential assessment tool for problem solving is provided by the Kolbe System, developed by organizational theorist Kathy Kolbe over the past decade. The daughter of the vocational pioneer, E.F. Wonderlic, Kolbe has presented her approach in two cogent books, *The Conative Connection* and *Pure Instinct*, with a third, *Workplace Liberation*, in progress. Though her psychological measures are just beginning to spark academic research, her roster of major corporate clients includes American Express, IBM, Xerox, and Intel.

Similar to Kirton, Kolbe has generated her ideas, and related forms of assessment, from applied organizational work rather than academic theory. Based on over 500,000 individual datasets, she has amassed considerable evidence that our problem-solving tendencies are independent of intelligence, personality, training, and education, and are highly stable and resistant to change. In Kolbe’s view, this realm involves “an executive function of [the] mind: something innate, action-oriented, subconscious, protective, definitely not learned, and clearly a necessity.”

Whereas Kirton identifies a single continuum (i.e., innovator versus adaptor) by which all people can be assessed, Kolbe specifies four different modes: (1) fact finder, (2) follow thru, (3) quick start, and (4) implementor. These all refer to task accomplishment in everyday life; what we *do* to solve problems, challenges, and new situations, and not how we *feel*.

Thus, *fact finder* refers to the realm of probing and information gathering, *follow thru* to patterning and scheduling, *quick start* to innovating and risk taking, and *implementor* to physically demonstrating and constructing. These modes are all rooted in what Kolbe terms the *conative* (from the dictionary, referring to striving or volition) aspect of our mind.

The Kolbe System encompasses several assessment instruments. The foundation is the Kolbe A Index, evolving out of the Test of Creative Thinking over several years and refinements, as its author became convinced she was, indeed, measuring conation. On the Kolbe A, individuals are asked to choose one of four answers reflecting how they would be most—and least—likely to respond to 36 problem-solving scenarios.

For each of the modes---fact finder, follow thru, quick start, and implementor---the individual's scores are tabulated in a 10-interval scale that reveals one's natural tendencies to either: (1) initiate action, (2) respond to needs, or (3) prevent problems in that mode. Thus, Kolbe has identified 12 distinct *impact factors*, or problem-solving methods, seemingly universal. "While every individual can operate through all twelve methods, four—one in each action mode—are natural talents, or a person's innate abilities." The composite of these drives determines the individual's *modus operandi* (MO).

Kolbe emphasizes that our problem-solving domain is innate—and as such, is resistant to external attempts to change or modification. In this important context, conative functioning appears linked to mounting evidence on the role of biological *temperament* in human development. She suggests that individual variability among the impact factors is evidenced as early as infancy and is measurable by elementary school age. Her studies have decisively shown that employees' MOs are not significantly altered even through intensive training programs.

Like Kirton, Kolbe persuasively argues that employees are more productive both as individuals and team members when empowered to tackle tasks in their preferred style, and that strain and conflict result when thwarted from doing so. In her view, a great deal of workplace rage and stress, highlighted earlier in this book stem directly from the frustrations that employees feel in being denied the opportunity to address problems in their own way.

Kolbe emphasized that individuals can be creative in any mode, and therefore, there is no "better" or "worse" score for one's problem-solving mode—quite unlike both cognitive and personality testing, in which a high IQ is certainly more desirable than a low IQ, and high self-esteem or achievement motivation is

preferable to low self-esteem or low achievement motivation. For example, as insisting Fact Finder, who looks closely at historical fact and details, might be a huge asset on certain work teams, whereas a resisting Fact Finder would be advantageous for others. Similarly, accommodating Fact Finders could serve as effective bridges when gaps exist between individuals or groups.

Not surprisingly, Kolbe has directly tied conation to enlightened management theory, contending, for instance, that our striving instincts, “propel us toward personal productivity [and] form the inner self that struggles for freedom, that cries out for self-actualization.”

As predicted by Kolbe’s theory, successful employees in similar jobs tend to have MOs that fall within a specific “range of success.” In this regard, supportive data have been found for wide-ranging occupational groups, including accountants, attorneys, engineers, marketing managers, manufacturing salespersons, and commercial pilots. It should also be noted that MOs have been found nonassociated statistically with ethnicity, gender, and race, an important aspect that makes the Kolbe selection process unbiased by EEOC guidelines.

When utilized together, the Kolbe A, B, and C instruments have proven valuable for maximizing organizational productivity. By identifying one’s particular MO (Kolbe A) and comparing it with one’s perception of job characteristics (Kolbe B) and the supervisor’s perception of it (Kolbe C), it becomes possible to determine “the right employee fit.” Over the past decade, Kolbe has found that approximately 70 percent of employees in many organizations are in the wrong position for their MO---to the detriment of both personal and organizational productivity.

Kolbe stresses that her approach isn’t aimed merely at career guidance, but perhaps more crucially, offers a means for enhancing work group functioning. Expanding upon Maslow’s concept of *synergy* as the ideal A (where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, like a basketball team), Kolbe provides practical assessment of synergy’s existence on a team through an Internet-accessible set of algorithms tied to performance with forecasting programs that have proven over 80 percent accurate in predicting profitability, on-time delivery, and other performance criteria.

Kolbe has analyzed a host of factors that undermine team success, including conflict, polarization, inertia, and loss of will. Such dysfunctional interrelations are almost inevitable unless conative factors are carefully balanced. As Kolbe explained in a recent management training seminar, “It doesn’t really matter if you have an extravert and an introvert working together on a

marketing project. These are personality traits, and if they offer any 'real-life' relevance, it's basically off-the-job; so, maybe the extravert and introvert won't become best friends."

"But the conative dimension is vital to on-the-job productivity, and therefore, it impacts on profitability. For example, if you pair an insisting Fact Finder with a resisting Fact Finder to implement a record-keeping system, or assign a trio of resisting Quick Starts to initiate a new marketing campaign, you're courting disaster. Why? Because in the first case, direct conflict will result, and in the second case, the group will sink into inertia. The potential for achievement is crippled."

When viewing a group in terms of Kolbe dynamics, it's first vital to assess: Is the group really a team? In the strictest sense, a group of people actually comprises a team when three criteria are met:

1. Members work collectively to achieve agree-upon, measurable goals that are specifically assigned to the group.
2. Members are responsible to each other for their productivity.
3. Each member has influence in the group and makes a commitment to its goals. If each member's contribution is not merely valued, but vital for the decision-making process, all of his or her instinctive energy becomes available through commitment to the group.

Both Kirton and Kolbe astutely emphasize that a focus on cognition and personality has too long dominated assessment efforts. Rather, psychology has got to broaden its perspective as to what people do most effectively on the job in tackling tasks and finding solutions to problems. With a convincing track record in organizational intervention, this approach offers a fresh, "third way" of measuring and optimizing individual employee and team achievement.