

## Interview with Cris Wildermuth on the Big Five April, 2019

Caryn: Hello, my name is Caryn Lee and I'm the Managing Partner of Narrative. We partner with clients to focus on people and culture and we also publish the Narrative Big Five Assessment.

I'm here with Dr. Cris Wildermuth. She is an associate professor at Drake University. She directs the Master of Science in Leadership Development. She's also the community chair of Linked:HR. I've known Cris for about 15 years and she's one of my favorite people! We're going to talk about the Big Five and how it has made a difference for Cris in her personal life and professional life. Hi Cris.

Cris: Hi Caryn. I can't believe it's been 15 years. That is making me feel old.

Caryn: Yes, I know. Tell us how you got interested in the Big Five.

Cris: It's one of those serendipitous things. I read a book, *Success for the New Global Manager*, published by researchers from the Center for Creative Leadership. At that time, I was doing a lot of diversity consulting, diversity training, and cultural training - preparation for people who were going to travel abroad or who had to work with people from different cultures. I was interested to know if there were personality assessments out there that could predict or relate somehow to success in expatriate situations or in intercultural relations in general. And I came across this book, *Success for the New Global Manager*, that talked about the Big Five model, that I had never heard of. That's basically what got me interested in the Big Five model. All of a sudden, I started searching on databases and I realized that it was something much bigger than I previously thought it was.

Caryn: There are so many personality assessments, models, and theories out there. What made you decide on the Big Five model?

Cris: I think what really interested me in the Big Five model was the precision, the fact that you would not be told that you were red or yellow, that you weren't a type of person. Instead, you were higher than 80% of the people, or you were lower than 70% of the people on a trait. That kind of information was much better for me to understand, not only how I was personally, or the people with whom I work, but how they related to other people. I remember one of my early projects with the Big Five; I was working with people at a library. Well, the highest extroversion level that we had in that library was in the 50th percentile of extroversion. But that person happens to be significantly more extroverted than everybody else in the group. What's important is not whether you're extroverted or not extroverted, but whether you're more extroverted or less extroverted than the people with whom you work. I was extremely intrigued by that.

The other reason is that I always felt that some of the type instruments were missing important parts of people. One anecdote is, I remember somebody was trying to sell me something. He obviously knew some kind of type instrument. I'm very carefully avoiding assigning names here, but the person was using some kind of a type instrument and the person was treating me as a type person who would be very extroverted, very lively. Therefore, this salesperson assumed that I would not be detail-oriented, that I would

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not be interested in data, and that I would not be interested in proof or details. It was a very bad assumption, especially because he was trying to sell assessments to me. And that was something that I was keenly interested in. I felt like the danger of a type instrument is that it's delightfully simple, and people like simplicity, but people are very complex. When you try to simplify something that's very complex, you could get something that is very simple, but wrong.

Caryn: Yes, exactly. Tell us how the Big Five has affected you personally and professionally.

Cris: Let's start with personally. My daughter is now 20 years old, so when I got acquainted with the Big Five in 2001, she was very, very young. I would say that it's made me a better parent to understand who she was very early on. I could see, for example, that she was very high in agreeableness - very pleasant and very gentle. And I could tell that as a parent, if I was too severe or too rigid, that I would squash her because she would say yes too quickly. Well, the other thing that I did not realize is the fact that she said yes, didn't mean she was going to do it. But anyway, that's another story.

With my husband, we are polar opposites in pretty much every one of the Big Five traits, except for Originality or Openness to Experiences in which we are very, very high. So we connect with the Openness, but we can understand our differences in the other traits.

From a personal standpoint, in terms of understanding my friends, my colleagues at work, it's given me a neutral language to talk about differences. Now mind you, it's not a magic pill. The fact that I can understand that, oh, I'm probably having issues with this person because we're both kind of low in agreeableness and we both want our way. But this person is very introverted and I'm very extroverted. Knowing that does not necessarily make our relationship any easier. And let's not overly simplify it. There is a lot more to us than our personality traits. There are our values, motivations, lived experiences and so on. Knowing the traits doesn't magically make relationships easy, but it allows me to understand colleagues better. For example, if a colleague is constantly very nervous, I would interpret that as somebody who is low in Resilience, instead of thinking this person is unprofessional because they are getting emotional at work.

Caryn: Right. But I find that just knowing it brings the tension down a little bit. There's more understanding and then you can also flip it around to really appreciate what that person brings to the table. Right?

Cris: Yes. It doesn't always work, usually because there are other issues at play, usually values and lived experiences and so on. But just the fact that you can put a name to what is happening that is by itself a neutral name. Saying that somebody is an introvert, for example, is neither good nor bad. It's just different from me. That can at least give you pause and allow you to think and allow you to come up with strategies to approach them, and, like you said, to think of the beauty of both sides.

And that takes me to my consulting side. It's not only that I was introduced to the Big Five; it's working so much with the Big Five. With my students, with my clients, I have

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facilitated countless sessions helping people understand the beauty of each side of the aisle and the beauty of the middle of the aisle. What it is that we all bring to the table and that has become pretty ingrained in me.

Caryn: Right. The last thing I wanted to ask you was about your program as a professor. Tell me about how you use it with that.

Cris: I direct the Master of Science in Leadership Development program. It is a program for leaders and aspiring leaders. It's a Master's program, 30 credit hours, 10 courses. Basically, what I usually say is that it's the people side of business. If you want to be the kind of person who will inspire others, who will understand others and to understand others, we start with personality. It's a competency based program and one of our competencies is developing self. The very first course that we have is called Understanding Self and Others. And we spend quite a bit of time speaking about people's personalities and then connecting personality and leadership. We do not say there are certain personality traits that are better for leadership. We don't go there. What we want people to understand is who they are as a leader and how they can understand their followers.

Then we use that language of personality throughout the program. For example, I teach ethics. We talk about how our personality traits can impact that. One of our courses is global leadership. We explore how our personality can give us strengths or weaknesses, blind spots or eyes wide open. Regardless of what your traits are, they can help you or hinder you in different situations. We keep bringing personality back into the conversation. Just recently, I was talking to my students who are finishing the program, who are working on their capstone. I asked them, what is it that you learned in the program that really stuck with you? And of course we talked about various things. Leading change for us was really impactful on them, the whole discussion on innovation, but they did talk about personality and how they think about personality more and how they think about who people are and who they are. They think about it better now than they did when they started the program.

Caryn: Great. That sounds like a wonderful program. I wish I had the opportunity to participate in a program like that! Thank you so much for sharing your experience with the Big Five and we'll talk to you later.

Cris: All right. Thank you Caryn.