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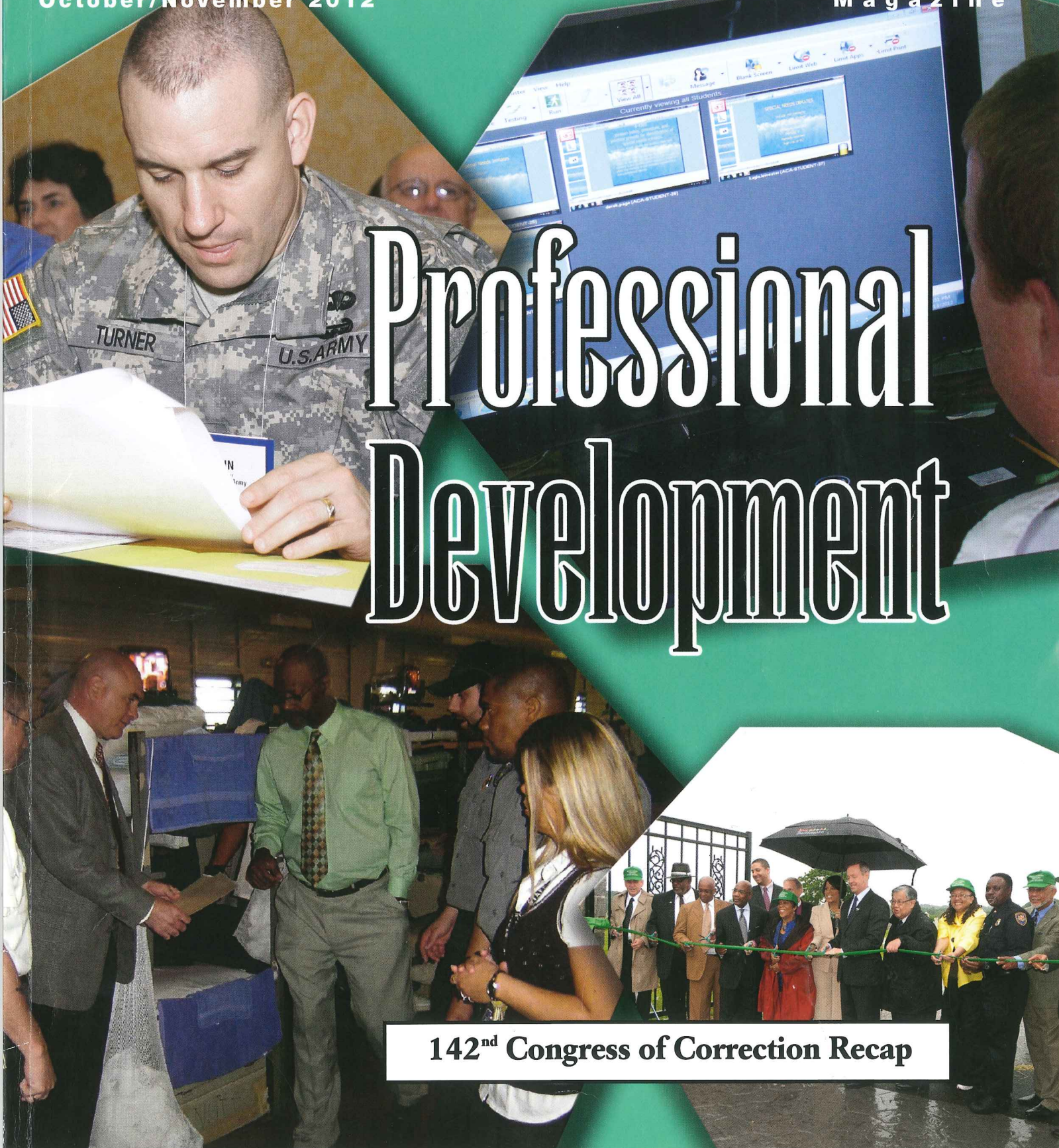
142nd Congress of Correction Recap

Survey Identifies Learning Styles of Law Enforcement and Corrections Personnel

By Darla Rothman and Bernice McCarthy

Nearly 3,000 police, corrections and probation trainees in Alaska, Maryland and Missouri during a 10-year period took a learning style survey developed by Bernice McCarthy, Ph.D., to measure four major and very different ways people approach learning.[1] Darla Rothman, Ph.D., and other law enforcement and corrections trainers answered questions concerning their reasons for administering the survey and commented on the ramifications of their results. They discussed how and why they used the survey and the reactions of the trainees at discovering their favorite learning patterns. This article reports on their results and briefly describes the learning model that formed the basis for the survey. It also offers suggestions for possible directions for additional training.

The Basis of the 4MAT Model and the Learning Type Measure (LTM) Survey

Everyone uses four processes to learn, and these four processes form the parameters of how people learn. First, they experience and feel; then they reflect; then they form conclusions from their experiences and reflections, and they act on them. It is simple and common sense. It works like this:

- One starts with feelings;
- One reflects on them;
- One thinks about them and makes judgments;
- One acts on those judgments;
- One returns to newer and more enhanced feelings; and
- One gets smarter, and learns.

Figure 1. The 4MAT Model

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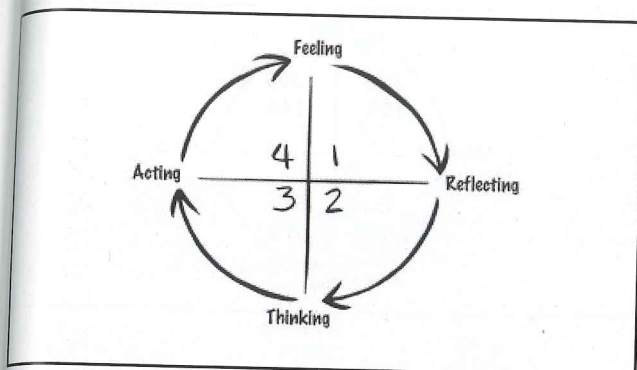
While everyone utilizes these four learning styles, most people favor one part of the cycle more than the other three. They literally hang around in one quadrant more than they do in the others. This "hanging around" forms one's particular learning style. While situations which individuals find themselves in alter their patterns, research indicates that most people retain these same favorite ways of learning throughout their lifetimes. Type 1 learners favor feeling and reflecting, Type 2 learners favor thinking and reflecting, Type 3 learners favor thinking and acting, and Type 4 learners favor acting and feeling. The following are brief descriptions of these four major learning styles.

Type 1 learners — the parameters of feeling and reflecting:
- Great at listening;
- Seek meaning;
- Need to be personally involved;
- Learn by discussing and sharing; and
- Function through social interaction.

Type 2 learners — the parameters of reflecting and thinking:
- Great at digging into complex things;
- Seek facts;
- Need to know what the experts think;
- Learn by thinking through ideas; and
- Function by adapting to experts.

Type 3 learners — the parameters of thinking and acting:
- Great at solving problems;
- Seek usability;
- Need to know how things work;
- Learn by testing theories; and
- Function through pragmatic common sense.

Type 4 learners — the parameters of acting and feeling:
- Great at inventing new ideas;
- Seek hidden possibilities;
- Need to know what they can do with what they learn;
- Learn by self-discovery; and
- Function by trying new experiences.

Each of these learners is equally intelligent. There is no hierarchy — they are just different. They approach experiences, make judgments, and reflect and act in different ways. Research conducted in this article and The 4MAT Research Guide, a synopsis of research, articles and studies that have been published on 4MAT,[2] indicates that a team would have an advantage if all four types of learners were present and if they understood and honored the nature of their differences.

The Survey

The survey has some interesting results with equally interesting ramifications. A total of 2,786 law enforcement, corrections and probation trainees took the LTM survey. It is a 15-question, self-reporting survey that describes particular ways people perceive and process information. The survey can be completed in about 10 minutes and has excellent validity and reliability statistics. The statistics were gathered by Marcus Lieberman, Ph.D., statistics professor at Harvard, and are available in the validation manual that goes along with LTM. The purpose of LTM is to seek out the differences in how people learn, and raise awareness of the strengths of each style while indicating possible directions for further growth. All four of these preferences are equally intelligent and valuable. Corrections workers need to be aware not only of their most comfortable style, but also the styles of other learning types they deal with on a daily basis. Teams in corrections that would equate to co-workers on a tier or a specialty group include tactical teams, contraband, K-9 drug, vehicle and drug searches, special operations and intelligence (gangs).

The following are samples of a few of the questions and responses from eight law enforcement and corrections trainers who are using LTM.

With what group of individuals are you using LTM? Some responses included:
- "Police, correctional officers and other public safety workers. Our data is mixed. We don't separate police from corrections;"
- "All staff who deliver training programs;"
- "I use it with an adult learning and generation class. The purpose [is] to demonstrate that regardless of someone's age/generation, learning still occurs in one of four styles;" and
- "I use it with police officers and probation officers."

Are you finding correctional officers favor one style over the other? All responders answered "yes."

Are you finding administrators or managers favor one style over the other? Most respondents said, "Yes … In my experience, all three of these categories favor Type 3 learners." There was one survey exception to the finding that the trainees favored Type 3 learning, and that was from a trainer who used LTM in adult/generation training.

What impact have you observed as a result of trainees understanding their learning style preferences and the preferences of others? Some responses included:
- "You have to know yourself before you can teach others, and LTM lets them see how other "types" see things;"

- "I have observed better understanding of how to design and deliver training that addresses all learning styles;" and
- "At times, they become more patient in their reactions because of an understanding about how others respond in different learning situations."

What are the most surprising things your trainees are discovering about their styles? One responder said, "Threes can't fathom that anyone could possibly be any different. This ends up being quite humorous, since the very large majority of our participants fall into the Type 3 learner category. There is often discussion that follows between the different groups as they contrast the learning types as to why one way is 'better,' which can lead to strong learning points for all, regardless of the learning type." In the authors' experience, the Type 3 learners are the only learner types among all four types who are surprised that everyone is not a type three. According to another responder, "They are surprised at how true the styles' descriptions are of themselves. They are surprised at how they can adjust themselves in several different quadrants depending on what is happening in their lives at the time. Work type might be different from home type." The authors believe there is truth to this statement as well. The situational variable is the strongest one for moving people into a different style, but over time, the favored style appears to hold true. One example might be a Type 2 learner who tends to be reflective and organized, and not prone to acting without good planning, but in a crisis will respond as necessary.

What is your opinion on how this knowledge will benefit your trainees? One responder said, "We train instructors and field training officers. LTM gives them experience in viewing learning activities from other learners' points of view. This is useful when teaching and coaching others." Another remarked, "Many of my students are instructors who have become caught up in one specific style." A third responder said, "The understanding to not teach to only one style. Traditionally, our trainees teach to only the Type 2 learners; this knowledge helps to ensure they will address all four types."

The Results

Figure 2 shows the learning style percentages for the 2,786 police, corrections and probation trainees who completed the survey. According to LTM research, other groups that are high in Type 3 learners include master chiefs in the U.S. Navy, engineers in multiple cultures and physicists.[3]

Figure 2. Learning Style Percentages
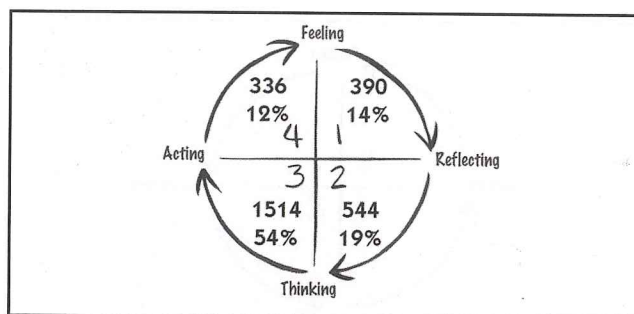
Ramifications From Survey Results: Areas of Possible Growth

There are two important benefits of awareness of one's learning style: the understanding of one's own style and the legitimacy of the other ways of learning; and the knowledge that the learning cycle that comprises the four styles is a complete way to learn. In other words, there is great growth in traveling the entire cycle. That does not mean changing one's preferred style, but rather adapting to all four dimensions on the cycle so one can feel, reflect, think and act with expertise while still maintaining one's own preferred way of being and acting in the world.

The high percentage of law enforcement and corrections personnel who are Type 3 learners means that correctional leaders should capitalize on the skills of these learners, which include problem solving and pragmatic common sense, as well as offer additional training for skills in completing the entire cycle. The communication competencies of Type 1 learners, with their authentic and open dialogue and relationship building; the critical thinking competencies of logic and reason where the Type 2 learners excel; as well as the innovative and risk-taking propensities of the Type 4 learners can all be of great benefit together, and can form a complete learning and training program. This would result in higher learning performances.

ENDNOTES

[1] For more information about the LTM survey, visit www.about learning.com.

[2] To access *The 4MAT Research Guide*, visit http://www.about learning.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article& id=235#aboutteaching&Itemid=103.

[3] Ibid.

Darla Rothman, Ph.D., is the curriculum development coordinator for Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions. Bernice McCarthy, Ph.D., is the founder of About Learning and the developer of the Learning Type Measure and the 4MAT Model Instructional Design.