

DO YOU THINK LIKE A HEDGEHOG OR A FOX?

There are basically two types of person: one that believes that there are two types of person, and another that doesn't. Despite having reservations about over-simplistic categorization, there are some theories which carry both practical wisdom and managerial relevance.

One of the inspiring ones is the distinction between hedgehogs and foxes made by British philosopher Isaiah Berlin. He distinguishes between people who strive for a coherent world view with logic and an organizing principle (hedgehogs), and others who are comfortable with loose ends and with not relating things systematically to a bigger picture (foxes).

In essence, this animal metaphor describes fundamental differences in human beings, concerning their preferences regarding organizing and processing information and experience. Above all, it teaches us not to blame others for not seeing the world "correctly". The metaphor, instead, urges us to respect different styles of relating to the world around us.

Referring to the famous line by ancient Greek poet Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing", Berlin identified a number of writers and

thinkers as hedgehogs and foxes. He sees, for example, Dante, Nietzsche and Hegel as hedgehogs, while he considers Shakespeare, Goethe and Molière to be foxes.

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In a famous study on the judgment of political experts in predicting future events, published in 2005, US professor of psychology Philip Tetlock found that while foxes outperform hedgehogs, the latter receive more public acclaim. In today's world, the animal metaphor unfolds still with great power. In 2014, *The Economist* wrote: "The problem is that, like the fox, the West knows lots of different things but is not sure what it really wants, while Mr Putin is like the hedgehog that knows just one big thing, namely that Ukraine, especially in the south and east, is really part of Russia's world."

Analyzing real world problems from the hedgehog-fox-perspective is also attractive to others: we can easily detect that Scottish moral philosopher and pioneer of political economy Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), was aware of what we have come to define as hedgehog traits: "The man of system, ... is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it."

Jim Collins, in his management bestseller *Good to Great* (2001), argues for a hedgehog concept as a key success factor for companies. Famous management writer John Kay has also deployed the idea, describing how effective decision makers recognize the limits of their knowledge. Hedgehogs, too often, seem to know an answer before hearing the question. Statistical data guru Nate Silver has argued that hedgehogs are too often caught up in their models. In our research, we found that, in top management positions, there are many more hedgehogs than foxes. In turbulent times, this might not be the optimal choice, since foxes are more able to sense ambiguity and paradox (Gomez and Meynhardt, 2012).

In today's multi-stakeholder and shared-power world, we may need both hedgehogs who see patterns



Self-awareness fosters an effective use of personal skills and increases managers' sensitivity towards individual perspectives and ways of relating to the world, write **Timo Meynhardt, Carolin Hermann** and **Stefan Anderer**

ILLUSTRATION: GONALO VIANA

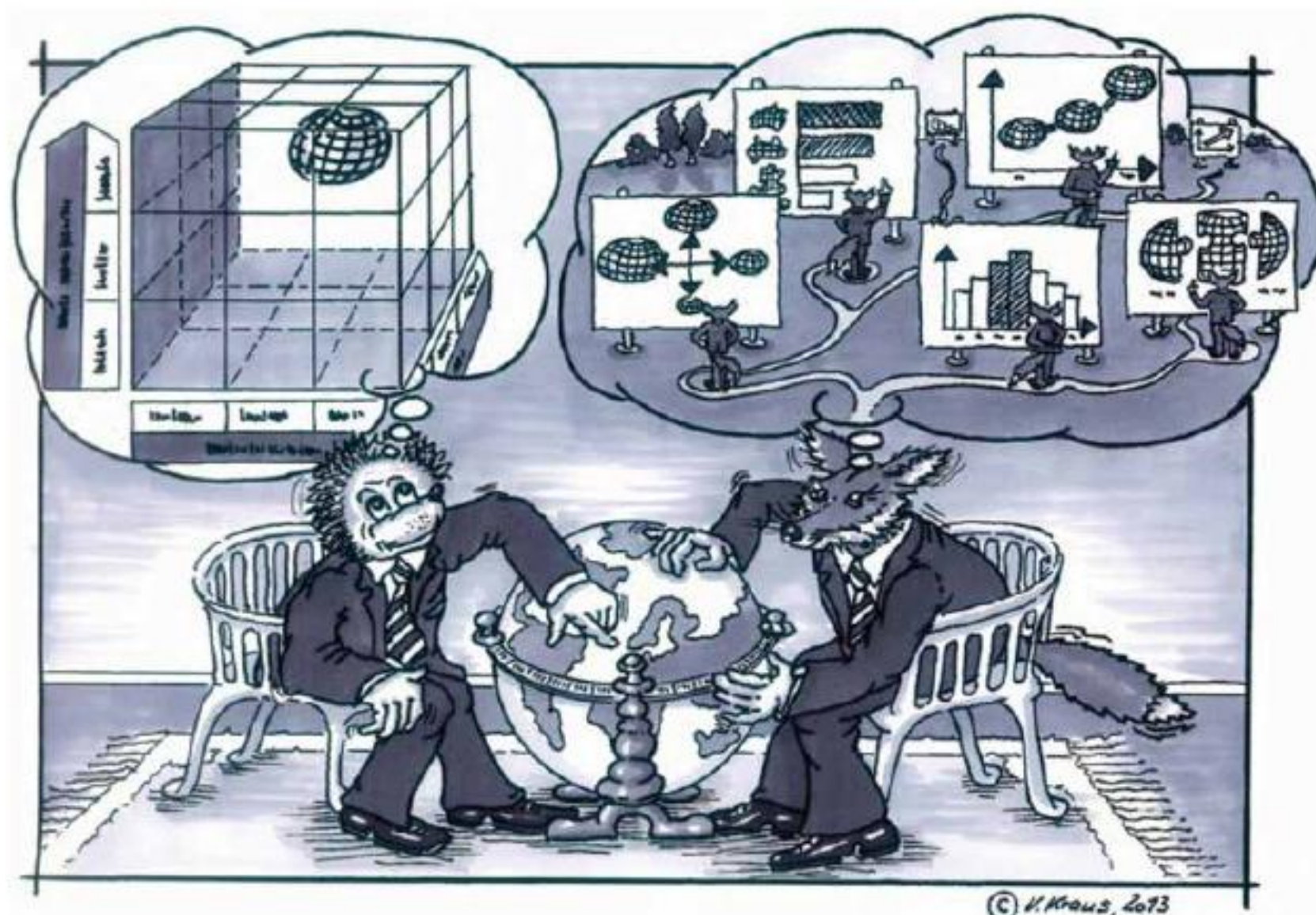


Figure 1: Hedgehogs and foxes see the world differently

and connect the dots, and foxes who are able to absorb the complexity without a “nothing-else-but” attitude of generalization that is based on past experience.

This holds particularly true when managers talk about value creation. Being confronted with changing expectations in society, new political conflicts, and a totally changed transparency culture, we need to boost our mental capacities by exploiting the power of diversity.

Figure 1 (above) displays the hedgehog, whose world view is associated with one overarching frame-

work and one coherent organization principle.

Clear rules govern his or her thoughts. This allows the hedgehog to indulge in confident decision making and action. On the downside, he or she

might be portrayed

as having a complex and yet mechanistic, world view. In extreme forms, the need for coherence and clarity and devaluation of real world complexity

can lead to inappropriate information processing or even an inability to incorporate new ideas and information into thoughts and actions.

Conversely, the fox recognizes several world views. As illustrated, he or she acknowledges multiple truths and frameworks. The way foxes think reflects a systemic, and sometimes inconclusive, perspective, so ambiguity and information overload may lead to confusion and an inability to act. The different routes or detours open to him or her can easily lead to paralysis.

What about you?

To understand your preferences better, ask yourself about the role of rule and order in your life and your openness to new ideas and experiences. Do you sometimes feel angry when people fail to “get it” or do not communicate “clearly”? Do you accept that different routes may lead to Rome?

In spring 2014, we interviewed 4,500 people in Switzerland to develop a tool that facilitates the assessment of differences in decision making and information processing. Those cognitive styles can be defined as the ways in which people think about, and perceive, information and how they interact with the people around them.

The focus lies not so much on the person’s cognitive ability, but rather on the process and personal strategies via which information is analyzed. People were asked to agree or disagree with statements such as: “I normally make important decisions fast and confidently” or “In most conflict situations I do understand both sides.”

Our sample was representative of the German-speaking section of Swiss society and included respondents from various educational and professional backgrounds, working in different industries. The study results were surprising: the prevalent rigid differentiation of people as foxes or hedgehogs is short-sighted. We clearly identified hedgehogs and foxes, but also people with no dominant profile, and with a dual profile. We found individuals can demonstrate characteristics of hedgehog and fox. Only the extent to which a dimension is predominant varies. We should be talking not only about hedgehogs and foxes but about hybrid creatures and people without a dominant profile. The four different types of person and their distribution in our sample are illustrated in figure 2 (opposite).

Individuals with a stronger tendency towards hedgehog-like characteristics show a preferences for clear rules, fast decision making and goal attainment. Scoring high on the foxiness dimension indicates openness to ambiguous opinions and an active desire for multiple viewpoints. If a person reveals strong preferences for both dimensions and neither outweighs the other, as with the hedgefox, you may question how one individual can exhibit those seemingly contrary characteristics simultaneously.

Recent studies point out that thinking styles may not be set in stone; individuals might be flexible in terms of the style they use, according to situational factors. The working context may demand certain methods of information processing and personal experience plays a significant role and can shape the application of different types of cognitive preference.

This implies that actively switching between cognitive styles might be

a strategy in which people could be trained, to an extent.

There is certain stability in the way in which people think about and perceive the world. However, we know from psychology that our preferred way of thinking is manifested through its application over a life's course rather than being a pre-determined way of looking at the world.

Most of us can learn to think, perceive, judge, act or perform more like a fox and/or more like a hedgehog. For instance, training that fosters "foxiness" can expose participants to multi-faceted and diverse realities and develop awareness of complexity and help participants to become more competent in dealing with paradoxes and ambiguity. In contrast, "hedgehogness" training can increase forward-facing proactive qualities.

Self assessment

A starting point could be self-assessment with the HedgeFox tool, which we recently developed; please contact the authors for further information. Self-awareness not only fosters an effective use of one's unique skills, it increases managers' sensitivity towards individual style in general. When it comes to strategic decision making, knowing one's individual style preferences is crucial for team composition or staff selection.

We also developed a management tool (the Public Value Scorecard) to help team members with diverse styles to find a common language. In other words, we enable the fox to put his ideas in a nutshell, and we try to stimulate the hedgehog to open up to more than his or her perspective.

But let us also be pragmatic: there is no need to change your innate

"foxiness" or "hedgehogness", or to apply new tools in order to profit from it already here and now. Opening yourself up towards more hedgehog- or fox-like characteristics is fruitful, but should not be at the expense of losing your authenticity. Be who you are.

FURTHER READING

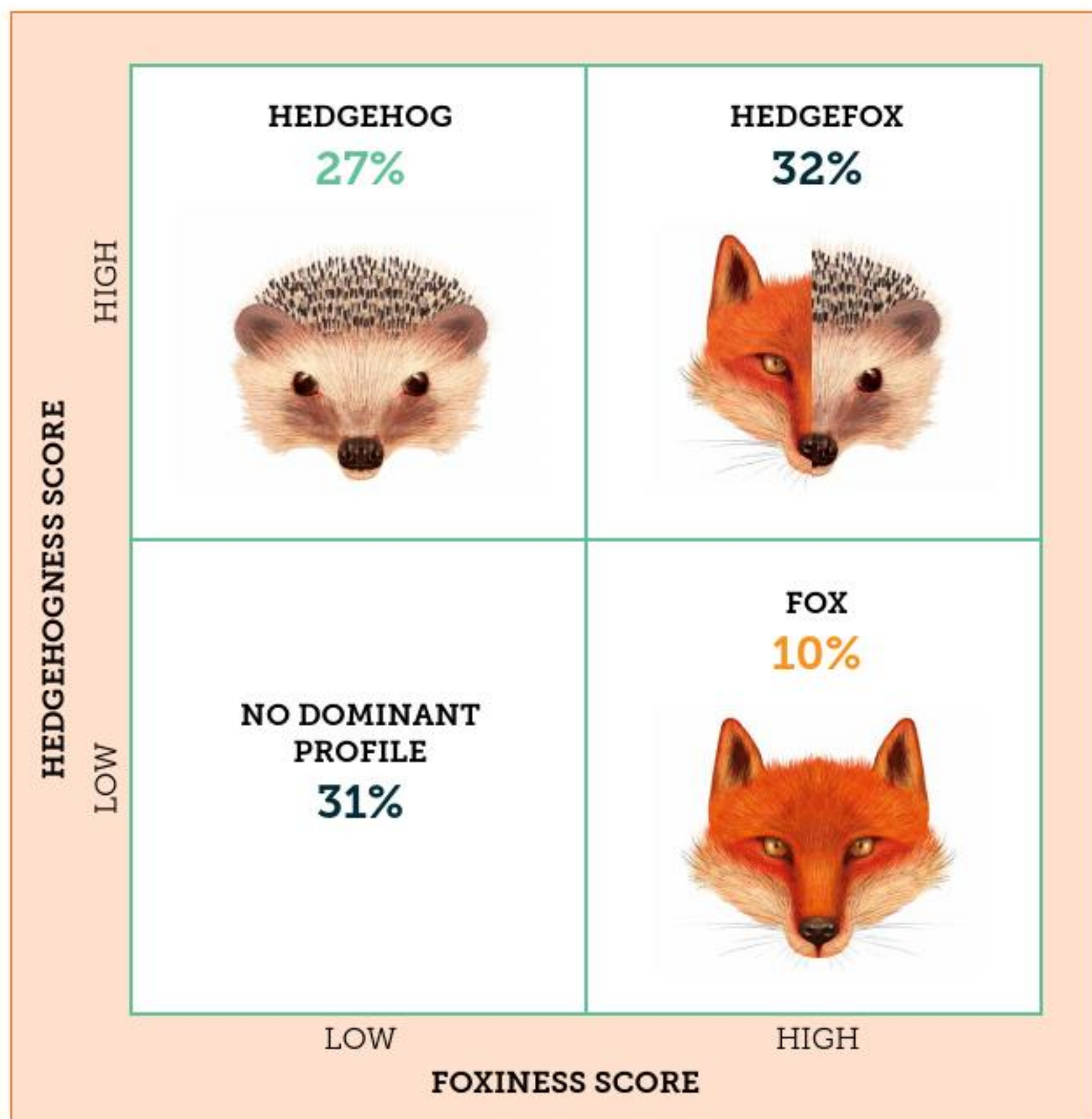
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To find out more about the HedgeFox tool, email: timo.meynhardt@unisg.ch

Figure 2: Hedgehog-Fox Matrix, (top 33% and low 33% of the data used to display high versus low Foxiness and Hedgehogness, n= 1810)



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