Are you a Success Seeker or a Failure Avoider?

Piles of research in psychology show that personality factors influence

behavior. In fact, the first application of psychology to safety focused on finding

the injury-prone personality. This research occurred in the 1950's, and was not

very successful, partly because the assessment techniques were not sufficiently

reliable nor valid; and because individual differences were overwhelmed by

situational factors (like environmental hazards and ineffective, inconvenient, and

uncomfortable protective equipment). Plus, safety promotion was dominated by

a top-down, enforcement-focused mindset, as reflected by the common

corporate slogan – "safety is a condition of employment".

The Low-Hanging Fruit

These environmental and management-systems strategies did not fail.

They tackled the low-hanging fruit and prevented numerous injuries and fatalities

as a result. However, today the context has changed for many leading-edge

companies. With environmental conditions and management systems more

safety relevant, appropriate attention to the human dynamics of safety will reap

observable benefits. This includes a consideration of certain individual

differences or personality factors.

Safety professionals still demean the 1950's search for the "injury-prone"

personality (see, for example, the *ISHN* Viewpoint by Ted Ingalls published last

July, 2003). My column this month was not written to critique that common

perspective nor to specifically support the alternative view of injury proneness.

Rather, this article introduces one personality dimension that influences both

attitude and behavior, and likely impacts the quantity and quality of employee participation in safety-related efforts. I am not proposing we attempt to measure this research-based factor among employees. Instead, I propose we develop an understanding of this individual-difference factor, and then implement strategies to change this human dynamic in directions that can benefit occupational safety.

Changing More Than Ourselves

Yes, I am assuming some personality characteristics can be changed by others (especially motivating and de-motivating mood states). Contrary to the vocal stance of numerous "pop psychologists" and keynote speakers, we **can** influence the behavior, attitudes, and cognitions of other people. How do I know? Empirical research tells me so.

Think about it. If the only person who can change (and improve) oneself is the victim, clinical psychology and psychiatry would have been out of business decades ago. These fields are burgeoning because situations, interventions, and contingencies can be established to move people – their attitudes, behavior, and cognitions – in beneficial directions. Yes, we do have a long way to go to get this basic principle appreciated among safety pros. Can I influence **your** opinion about this one?

Traits vs. States

People are obviously different in many ways. However, it's unfair and invalid, for example, to place people in two gender categories, as in "men are from Mars and women are from Venus."   Furthermore, the 16 personality types identified by the popular Myers-Briggs Typology are grossly insufficient to

account for relations between personality and behavior. In fact, the basic premise of the Myers-Briggs Typology – that we are born with certain personality traits – can be detrimental to human initiative and can limit possibilities. If I believed, for example, my introversion score was an immutable personality trait, I might have selected a profession other than university teaching and public speaking.

Person States

Research has shown that many personality characteristics are states that vary according to the interpersonal situation or environmental context. Thus, when I step in front of my introductory psychology class of more than 600 students, I put on my extroversion "hat". But, while I draft this article on the deck of a rather secluded house on Holden Beach, NC, I feel very much like an introvert. I do not limit myself with a certain personality label – a permanent trait that supposedly biases my attitudes, perceptions, intentions, and behaviors.

Have I influenced you to at least be skeptical about personality inventories that give people labels they are advised to use when planning, executing, and evaluating their actions?

Two Types of Students

During my 34 years of university teaching, I've noticed two different person states students bring to my class. But of course, my class environment also influences these states. Specifically, some students seem to possess a "need to achieve," while others portray a "need to avoid failure". I make this distinction by listening to students' verbal behavior. For the failure avoiders, my

class is a requirement they must fulfill in order to get by. They study only minimally to avoid failure, and feel controlled by negative consequences. Generally, they are not "happy campers," unless I cancel class or end a class early (which I rarely do).

Those who "work to achieve" enjoy my class much more than the "failure avoiders". They view my class as an opportunity to earn a good grade. Some actually view my class as an opportunity to learn. These students feel more influenced by positive than negative consequences, and thus perceive more personal control, self-efficacy, and optimism. These person states influence more achievement which, in turn, feeds these person states. Thus, we have a productive behavior-attitude spiral that continuously improves human performance.

Four Types of Students

The person-state dichotomy of working to achieve versus working to avoid failure is based on classic research conducted in the 1950's and 1960's by Richard Atkinson and David McClelland. These investigators developed a reliable assessment tool, and then with students' test scores predicted their course selections and class performance. However, this popular bipolar categorization is an overly simplified version of Atkinson's original theory which identified *four* types of individuals, as illustrated in Figure 1. This typology of person states classifies people as success seekers, overstrivers, failure avoiders, and failure acceptors.

A substantial amount of research has identified personality characteristics related to each of these four categories. A complete discussion of these is beyond the scope and purpose of this

Figure 1. *High versus Low levels of Success Seeking and Failure Avoiding define four Personality States.*
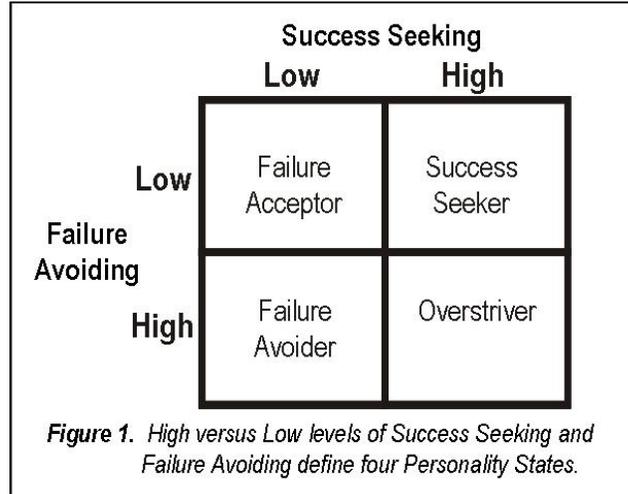
presentation. Here it's only critical to understand why the success-seekers category is most desirable. These individuals show the highest levels of self-efficacy, personal control, and optimism, and are more likely to actively care for the safety and health of others. Although it's generally better to be an overstriver than a failure avoider or failure accepter, the high fear of failure among overstrivers leads to self-doubt about personal abilities. These individuals fear personal evaluations and work hard to escape negative feelings of guilt, shame, incompetence, and anxiety. They experience high levels of distress, low perceptions of personal control, and unstable self-esteem.

As you can imagine, failure avoiders have low expectancy for success and thus, they avoid challenges. They are unsure of themselves, and are overly anxious and pessimistic about the future. Interestingly, failure accepters are better adjusted than failure avoiders. They accept failure in the particular situation, and are generally apathetic or indifferent.

Relevance to Safety

I hope the relevance to safety is obvious. How would you classify yourself with regard to these four person states? Can you place certain coworkers in one of these categories? Would you place some people in one category with regard to safety, but in another category when it comes to production or quality? Have you seen people, perhaps yourself, change categories as the result of certain work experiences?

Bottom line: It's best to be a safety success seeker, and we need to find ways to put people in this state. My *ISHN* contribution next month will explore research-based strategies to make this happen.

In Conclusion

This presentation introduced the role of personality characteristics as a determinant of safety-related attitudes and behaviors. The critical distinction between a personality trait versus a person state was discussed, with the purpose of convincing readers to view personality factors as transient states rather than inborn and permanent traits. Then, the classic person-state distinction between success seeking versus failure avoiding was explained, with the identification of four different research-based typologies – success seeker, overstriver, failure avoider, and failure accepter.

The success-seeker state is the most desirable, facilitating self-efficacy, personal control, and optimism. In turn, these person states provoke more positive motivation for success. It's clear we need more success seeking for safety. Environmental conditions, work contexts, and company cultures determine the number of safety success seekers in an organization. Next month

I'll review the latest research that addresses ways to increase the success-

seeker state and reduce overstriving, failure avoidance, and failure acceptance.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions help people develop, refine, and implement interventions that prevent workplace injuries and facilitates an achievement focus toward industrial safety and health. For more information about related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.