Putting True Colors to Work:
From insight to action

Last month I introduced True Colors—an extremely popular approach to studying and understanding personality differences. The advocates of this approach claim the four True Colors—*Gold, Green, Blue, and Orange*—personify one's character spectrum. Realizing your primary or dominant color enables useful insight by helping you identify your joys, interests, motivators, and strengths, as well as the sources of your frustrations and distress.

By showing us how we are inherently different from others, the True Colors concept facilitates mutual appreciation and support of people's values, attitudes, and behaviors. True Colors enthusiasts and trainers claim effective work teams need the full spectrum of primary colors in order to maximize productivity and attain synergy. In other words, optimal teamwork is achievable when the participants' perspectives and values encompass each of the four True Colors.

Grouping Desirable Attributes

A particularly attractive quality of True Colors is the use of only positive characteristics. Unlike most other personality theories and assessment techniques, True Colors does not identify negative or unwanted qualities of people. The focus is on people's positive or esteemed distinctions. Let's review the dominant personality types reflected by True Colors, realizing that everyone has an idiosyncratic blend of each.

Golds are well organized, conscientious, and practical, thriving on practicality, regularity, predictability, dependability, and effective use of time. Their core value is responsibility. They are principle-centered and rule-governed, respecting authority and the hierarchical structure of an organization. They tend to have traditional and conservative viewpoints, and live up to their commitments. Regarding industrial safety, *Golds* are detail-

oriented and appreciate the need for governmental rules and regulations (i.e., OSHA and

MSHA), and they support the traditional "discipline" approach to mandatory compliance.

Blues are people-oriented, showing humility, empathy, compassion, and emotional-

sensitivity toward others. They are open, sincere, optimistic, enthusiastic, and communicative,

interacting with others to build harmonious interdependent relationships. They promote

friendship and cooperation over personal victory. As I indicated last month, *Blues* are most

receptive to People-Based Safety, because of its attention to person factors beyond behavior,

including emotions, feelings, interpersonal trust, belongingness, and actively caring.

Greens value intellect, logic, and creativity, often thinking at abstract, theoretical, and

global levels. They are visionary and see the big picture. They are curious and thirst for

knowledge, perfection, and continuous improvement, while striving to be independent and

competent. They seem pre-occupied with gaining knowledge, wisdom, explanation, and

inventive ideas. These are the individuals most likely to question adapting a popular safety

intervention (like behavior-based safety) just because others are doing it. They might question

the credibility of the trainers or consultants, and insist on seeing research-based evidence of

effectiveness.

Oranges grow impatient with delays caused by benchmarking and pilot research. They

want immediate action, especially if the intervention can give them or their organization a

competitive edge. With charisma, proficiency, and an adventuresome and courageous spirit,

Oranges negotiate for beneficial change.

Oranges' decisive leadership to challenge and improve the status quo is advantageous for

work teams and organizations as a whole, but these individuals' make-it-happen mindset, and

energetic desire for spontaneity, flare, expediency, and excitement can put them at risk for taking

injury-possible shortcuts. They need support from the *Green* and *Gold* colors in themselves and others to help them slow down and live in the moment.

Personality Trait vs. State

I've discussed the critical distinction between person trait vs. state in prior *ISHN* articles (e.g., April and May, 2006). This differentiation is clearly relevant for this discussion of True Colors. Based on the same theory and research as the famous Myers/Briggs Type Indicator, True Colors is considered a trait approach to personality. In other words, it's assumed a person's relative ranking of the four colors is consistent across situations and throughout one's life. This is one concept I challenged at the True Colors workshop I attended.

While the true colors typology seems useful for explaining and resolving differences among individuals, it's chancy to assume one's primary color is constant across settings. It's likely many people change their color rankings to fit current circumstances. However, I must admit my own order of True Colors—*Orange, Blue/Green* (tied)*, and Gold*—are quite impervious to situational and interpersonal change. But, I do find myself adjusting natural tendencies in order to be appropriate or relevant for a certain occasion.

<Insert Sidebar about here>

The trainer at my True Colors workshop contradicted the consistency-over-time assumption of True Colors when he showed us the information in the sidebar. Specifically, this table shows how the proportion of primary True Colors changes among people as a function of age. As you might expect, *Orange* is the most popular primary color for youth aged 9 to 17; and then after age 17, *Gold* becomes most prominent.

Daily Application of True Colors

Besides private amusement, what practical benefit can come from learning your own or someone else's True Colors? First, I have found it useful to bring color language into interpersonal conversations. For me, it's been fun to predict the True Colors rankings of my students, friends, family members, and colleagues, and then give them the picture-sorting assessment described in my *ISHN* column last month. I'm hitting about 90% accuracy at predicting an individual's primary color, and most have confirmed their personality matches at least their highest and lowest ranked colors.

Enlightening Conversation

Whenever I do not accurately predict a person's primary color, I activate intriguing conversation and gain fascinating information. For example, I judged my chiropractor's primary color to be *Orange*, because he has a very active and adventuresome lifestyle, from routine biking and weight-lifting to frequent kayaking and rock climbing.

Our conversation revealed, however, his primary color of *Blue* was most consistent with both his profession and general outlook toward people and situations. While engaging in active recreation that pushes the safe-and-secure limits my chiropractor believes he is not a risk taker because he takes every possible safeguard, and he never competes at his sport. Indeed, he takes great delight in introducing others to the individual sports at which he is exceedingly competent (i.e., a *Green* attribute). He does this not to compete or show off his skills, but to share the exhilarating experience with others.

<Insert illustration here—Rock Climbing by a blue>

True Colors Talk

I periodically inject color language in conversations with my graduate students (who have all taken two assessments of their True Colors). I often find myself evaluating a certain

decision or behavior by saying to myself or to others, "Oh, that's the *Orange* in me." Or, I might say to someone, "That's mighty *Blue* of you." Thus, True Colors provides straightforward and meaningful terminology for identifying and appreciating some of the person-based dynamics of human behavior.

Estimating Sources of Frustration

When my graduate students mention their frustrations and concerns, I can often see relationships between their primary color and their verbal behavior. *Golds*, for example, are frustrated by lack of organization, tardiness to important meetings, unfairness, unexpected events, and incompetence. In contrast, *Blues* are distressed by lack of empathy and sensitivity to others, and by judgmental, aggressive, non-communicative, and non-caring behavior.

The *Orange* style is frustrated by boredom, predictability, lack of humor, whining, nagging, time constraints, "couch potatoes", and slow behavior. On the other hand, *Greens* are distressed by incompetence, impulsivity, off-task distractions, ill-informed and/or illogical decision making, and blind acceptance of the status quo.

Finding the Right Recognition

In an earlier *ISHN* contribution (December 1996), I outlined the steps for giving behavior-based recognition, which included giving a universal statement of appreciation after identifying the specific behavior you want to acknowledge. But what kind of general comment should you make?

It can be useful to consider an individual's primary color. Here are some possible ways to acknowledge accomplishment per a person's primary color. *Golds* should like to hear "I affirm your integrity and sincerity", "Your sense of duty and personal responsibility is noticed and

highly regarded", and "Your efficiency, dependability, and loyalty to our organization are admirable".

In contrast, *Blues* would appreciate, "Your actively caring for others is greatly appreciated", "Your compassion for your coworkers is invaluable, and your ability to see potential in others is impressive", "Your interpersonal and group communication makes a difference".

If the person is *Orange*, consider the following universals, "You are a leader who puts ideas into action", "I appreciate your ability to take charge of our group and make things happen", "I admire your passion and enthusiasm to motivate us to go beyond the call of duty".

Contrast these *Orange*-directed kudos with special ways to recognize contributions from *Greens*: "Your analytical abilities are invaluable", "Your benchmarking and critical evaluation enable us to shoot for world class", "Thank you for teaching us to substitute objective data for subjective opinion". "Would you be willing to share your enlightening observations with the entire company?"

In Conclusion

Contrary to the impression given by some books and trainers of personality typology, I do not want you to label yourself as a particular primary color, or to pigeonhole yourself or others into a certain personality type. This is not about putting people into stereotypical boxes. Rather, I hope you use this discussion of True Colors to appreciate the diversity of people's natural talents and propensities to act in certain ways. I hope you view such heterogeneity as enriching a work culture and facilitating the synergistic outputs expected from world-class organizations.

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	AGE			
	9-12 years	13-17 years	College Years 18-22	Post College
Orange	36%	35%	16%	11%
Green	15%	11%	17%	13%
Gold	31%	28%	38%	53%
Blue	18%	26%	29%	23%