

Why Do You Do What You Do?
Internally-Motivated vs. Externally-Motivated Safety

Behavior is motivated by its consequences, as B.F. Skinner taught us with the well known phrase “selection by consequence.” However, the impact of a consequence on a certain behavior can vary dramatically. Why, because the performers of the behavior interpret consequences differently. In fact, a consequence that motivates some people to change their behavior might not even be noticed by others.

Last month I introduced a personality concept derived from physiological psychology that differentiates people with regard to their sensitivity to positive consequences (rewards) vs. negative consequences (penalties). The article included 12 representative questions from a 67-item assessment device used to categorize people as success seekers, over-strivers, failure avoiders, or people relatively indifferent to rewards and penalties. Success seekers are influenced by rewarding consequences, failure avoiders are motivated to avoid penalties, over-strivers are sensitive to both rewards and penalties, and those in the fourth category are not motivated by positive or negative consequences.

I do not give this fourth category a label. In fact, the labels given the other three categories originate from motivational research distinct from the studies of people’s relative responsiveness to positive vs. negative consequences. The motivational researchers call people in this fourth category: “failure accepters.”

On the surface, this suggests those insensitive to both rewards and penalties are unmotivated or lazy. However, it’s possible an individual indifferent to external or extrinsic consequences is self-motivated. In other words, a low score on both the BIS (for behavioral inhibitory system) and the BAS (for behavioral activation system) items of the survey I

introduced last month could indicate the respondent is self-directed and self-motivated. What kinds of consequences motivate these individuals?

Natural versus Extrinsic Consequences

Natural and extrinsic consequences are external to the individual. They can be observed by another person. Natural consequences are naturally produced by the behavior, as when you fix equipment, draw a picture, plant a garden, wash a car, or participate in a recreational sport. Your ongoing behavior in these activities is followed spontaneously by soon and certain positive or negative consequences – a machine that still doesn't work, attractive art work, productive garden, a shiny car, or golf ball in the rough.

Many safety practices have natural negative consequences, such as discomfort, inconvenience, and reduced efficiency that inherently discourage their occurrence. As a result extra extrinsic consequences are needed to motivate safe behavior. These consequences are added to the situation as rewards (e.g., praise, recognition, credits redeemable for prizes) or penalties (e.g., reprimand, monetary fine, time off from work); and unlike soon and certain natural consequences, they are often delayed and uncertain.

Incentives announce the availability of an extrinsic reward following a desirable behavior, whereas disincentives or threats specify the occurrence of an extrinsic negative consequence following an undesirable behavior. But the impact of activators announcing a behavior-consequence contingency varies among individuals.

Your evaluation of extrinsic consequences influences the future of the behavior. Rewards can increase or maintain the behavior, while penalties can decrease the behavior. However, your relative sensitivity to positive vs. negative consequences influences whether the consequence is

even noticed. And if noticed, the value of a particular consequence can vary markedly from one person to the next.

Perhaps people unresponsive to extrinsic consequences are tuned to the positive natural consequences of their behavior, and don't need extra rewards. But how do these people overcome the natural negative consequences (like inconvenience and inefficiency) that discourage safe behavior (like PPE use). Answer: self-talk and internal consequences.

Internal Consequences

When you listen to music, read a novel or watch television, your listening, reading, and watching behaviors are maintained by consequences inside your head. These consequences are subjective and biased by your perceptions. Some can even be emotional. In these cases, it's difficult or impossible for an observer to know the exact nature of the internal consequences influencing your behavior. However, we do know from personal experience internal consequences and personal interpretations accompany most behaviors and impact motivation and subsequent behaviors.

Of course, I'm talking about thinking or self-talk, and the internal expectations that certain behavior will lead to a particular outcome. Appropriate self-dialogue enables self-motivation. Even when powerful, certain, and positive consequences (like comfort, convenience, and efficiency) motivate at-risk behavior, we can overcome the temptation to take a shortcut with appropriate self-talk.

Some of us are generally more self-motivated than others. Perhaps more commonly, self-motivation is situation dependent. We may be self-directed and internally motivated in some situations (like workplace safety and wellness), but externally motivated in other contexts (like driving on the highway and completing routine work assignments). Most likely, however, we are

always motivated by both external and internal consequences in varying proportions, depending on a number of person factors – from our prior experiences to our personality and self-perception.

Assessing Your Locus of Motivation

My students and I are currently researching individual variability in self-motivation. What does it mean to be insensitive to both positive and negative extrinsic consequences? Are these individuals generally unmotivated or perhaps more self-directed and self-motivated by natural and internal consequences?

We developed an assessment device to measure the degree a person is self-motivated in various situations. Twelve representative items from this 24-item scale are given here for your consideration. Indicating your degree of agreement per each of these items will personalize the motivation concepts discussed here. Plus, you might learn something about the locus (external vs. internal) of your own motivation under varying circumstances.

<Insert Locus of Motivation Table Here>

The first six items refer to your own behavior, whereas the next six items refer to the behavior of others. For every item, except the three with an asterisk, higher scores mean greater external motivation. The first administration of the entire survey to 59 participants at my ASSE workshop last June (2007) revealed an interesting difference between judgments of self vs. others. Specifically, the participants judged themselves to be significantly more self-motivated than other people. In other words, the respondents believe they need less external control than others, especially with regard to occupational safety.

The first three items of the scale given here, as well as items 7 to 9, reflect general work situations; while the other items target safety. Does the situation (general work vs. safety)

influence your degree of internal vs. external motivation? Or perhaps, the type of safety situation determines your locus of motivation. For me, for example, I am generally internally motivated at work, largely because I internalize the natural consequences of my behavior. When it comes to driving, I am self-directed with regard to safety-belt use, but that's not the case for my driving speed. If the external contingencies in place to control vehicle speed were withdrawn, I would likely drive much faster. How about you?

In Conclusion

The "Locus of Motivation Scale" given here has not been tested for reliability nor validity. Thus, it should not be used to categorize people. However, the items can certainly be used to stimulate instructive conversation about the motivational principles presented here.

You may be pleased to see how many colleagues claim they don't need extra extrinsic consequences to motivate them to work safely. Ask these self-directed folks how they motivate themselves to choose the safe way of doing something in the face of natural consequences that motivate at-risk behavior. This conversation could help others develop self-dialogue for internal motivation.

Some participants should own up to needing extra consequences to hold them accountable in certain situations. Ask them why this is the case. Be open to the likelihood most people need extrinsic consequences to keep them motivated under some circumstances. This may be an opportune time to consider ways to weaken or remove natural consequences that motivate at-risk behavior, improve current external contingencies that attempt to motivate safe behavior, and discuss those improbable but sizable natural consequences of an injury we hope to avoid.

Bottom line: People-based safety recognizes the role of individual differences in determining the impact of natural, extrinsic, and internal consequences on safe vs. at-risk

behavior. If you understand and appreciate this summary statement, this article has achieved its mission.

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A Locus of Motivation Scale

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. When I have free time at work, I motivate myself to stay productive.*
2. Much of what I do at work is motivated by external factors like directions, threats, incentives, and rewards.
3. With a different work supervisor, my work behavior could be much different.
4. When I drive within the speed limit, I do so to avoid a speeding ticket.
5. When someone needs to remind me to use certain safety equipment, I am disappointed in myself.*
6. I drive more safely after seeing a police car on the side of the road.
7. People are more productive at work when they are working to achieve a financial bonus.
8. People are more productive at work when their supervisor is holding them accountable.
9. Bonuses and other financial incentives are the best way to increase workers' productivity.
10. Most people need external reminders or support to motivate them to work safely.
11. When using uncomfortable and inconvenient PPE, workers are self-directed and self-accountable.*
12. Most people need safety rules and regulations to avoid at-risk behavior.

* These items are reversed scored by subtracting the scale value from 6. Thus, a score of 4 becomes $2(6-4=2)$. Then higher scores indicate greater extrinsic motivation. Total the first six items for an estimate of one's need for extrinsic consequences, and total the next six items to the extent other people are presumed to need extrinsic consequences.