

People-Based Safety and Personality:
What are your true colors?

Several Years ago, I had an opportunity to have one-to-one conversations with the top executives of a large Fortune 100 Company. Each VIP office was spacious and uniquely luxurious. I did notice one common feature—atop every mahogany desk was a brass plaque with the executive's name and a colored circle. After three interviews, I realized each color of the nameplate circles was different.

This piqued my curiosity, to say the least, and I asked my host for a rationale. He explained each color identifies one of four distinct perspectives and personalities. In other words, each color represents the person's true character. He then explained the personality characteristics of each color—*Orange, Green, Blue, and Gold*.

My host further told me his company assigns people on project teams according to their primary colors. Why, because he and his colleagues are convinced the most productive and synergistic teams include representation from each of the four personality colors. I review these four personality traits later, but first let's review the basis of this True Colors concept and how the four personality types are measured.

Personality Characteristics

If you were asked to describe your personality, you could undoubtedly list a number of unique qualities you perceive in yourself as compared to others. You might describe particular physical characteristics, likes vs. dislikes, interests, motives, life goals, attitudes, feelings about life events, skills, abilities, and even typical behaviors. The list could be endless.

Moreover, you could also list a number of behaviors, attitudes, and life events that are influenced by your personality, and vice versa. In other words, we cannot deny that certain aspects of our personalities—attributes, dispositions, and tendencies—influence our ongoing

actions and our interpretations of those actions. Personality theory includes defining a generic basis for describing one's personality and then developing a reliable and valid approach to assessing meaningful variations among individuals. A meaningful personality difference is one that predicts reliable differences in people's behavior.

Four True Colors

The most prominent personality theorists and researchers, from Hippocrates to Carl Jung and Myers/Briggs, have classified people into four groupings. In 1978, Don Lowry introduced the notion of four "True Colors," a concept that has become extremely popular worldwide. Thousands of professionals in the U.S., Canada, Brazil, Japan, Costa Rica, Australia, and throughout Europe have been certified as "True Colors trainers." The training materials have been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, French, and Russian.

It's estimated more than 500,000 people are educated annually about the benefits of True Colors within the contexts of business, education, healthcare, criminal justice, mental health, personal and career counseling. The trainers claim understanding your own True Colors and those of your coworkers, friends, spouse, parents, and children will not only increase understanding of yourself and others, but will make you more effective in your interpersonal relationships with these people. Moreover, True Colors is purported to provide a practical schema for understanding and increasing your motivation and that of others.

When I heard these claims from a certified True Colors trainer, I was skeptical. In fact, I attended the four-hour, "True Colors leadership" workshop for university faculty and staff to play devil's advocate. I considered myself the token psychologist who would reveal inaccuracies and/or exaggerations at this "pop psychology" seminar.

To my surprise, I learned a useful typology for defining and understanding individual differences. Ever since attending that workshop last December (2006), I have incorporated the True Colors concept into daily conversations. In fact, my students and I are currently researching methods for assessing an individual's True Colors.

The Assessment Challenge

We took a simple assessment tool at the True Colors workshop, and the results had “face validity.” In other words, the workshop participants verified their True Colors as assessed by the workshop device were meaningful, reasonable, and consistent with their own evaluations of their personality. My own True Colors made perfect sense to me, and explained much of my past and present decision making. Let's consider three approaches to assessing your True Colors, and in the process learn what it means to be *Orange, Green, Blue, or Gold*.

Ranking Illustrations. Study the four illustrations shown here, created by graphics illustrator George Wills. Then rank the pictures according to the degree each reminds you of yourself with regard to your personal interests and/or motives. In other words, rank them in order from “most related to you” to “least like you.” Before interpreting your choices and their connection to True Colors, try the next assessment.

<Insert Figures 1-4 about here>

Ranking Words. Estimate your True Colors from the word pairs as follows: For the three rows of four word pairs, evaluate your relative connection to each pair by assigning a number from 0 to 10 with the restriction the totals across each row must be 10. Thus, if you give the first word pair 5 points, you have 5 more points to assign the next three pairs. If you give one word pair 10 points, the score for the remaining three pairs is 0.

<Insert Figure 5 About Here>

After distributing 10 points across each row of four word pairs to reflect the degree each relates to you, total the four columns and record the results above the respective colors at the bottom. Does this estimate of your True Colors match your ranking of the illustrations? The illustrations appear in the color order given in the sidebar—*Green, Blue, Gold, Orange*.

A Direct Approach

Now, let's take a more direct approach to personality assessment, and in the process learn the meaning of the four True Colors. Specifically, rank these statements from most to least like you: 1) I seek knowledge and understanding, 2) I value integrity and unity in relationships, 3) I respect authority and follow the rules, and 4) I need variety, excitement, and stimulation. Now, rank the following with regard to your core values: 1) Competency, 2) Relationships, 3) Responsibility, and 4) Freedom.

What Does This Mean?

Are you developing an understanding of the four True Colors? Each color represents positive attributes, and it's likely all readers possess some of each. For many people, one color is most dominant and another least prominent. But some people rank all four colors similarly. They are relatively balanced across the four personality types.

Please note the assessment tools given here are neither reliable nor valid. They are exemplary of other tools used at True Colors workshops and presented in True Colors books. However, we could not find assessment devices with evidence-based reliability or validity. Research in this domain is clearly needed.

True Colors and Safety

Even without statistically-sound assessment tools, the concept of True Colors is certainly intriguing and activates provocative conversations about individual differences. It helps people

understand their own and others' perspectives on certain issues and explain the basis of interpersonal conflict.

Consider, for example, *Golds* are rule-governed and responsible, and provide structure and dependability to an organization. In contrast, the *Orange* style is impulsivity, activity, and risk taking. Thus, *Golds* are likely to respect the traditional command-and-control approach to industrial safety. Follow the rules and regulations for injury prevention or face punitive consequences.

In contrast, the *Oranges* are apt to try new approaches to injury control, maybe even impulsively. But, a *Green* member of the safety team will check out the evidence before embarking on a new safety effort. *Greens* will benchmark and carefully consider the various options in order to develop and implement the most effective process.

What about the *Blues*? I believe *Blues* connect best with People-Based Safety (PBS), given its roots in humanistic behaviorism and reliance on empathy, empowerment, interpersonal communication and behavior-based coaching. But leading PBS requires an appreciation of how each personality style provides unique contributions. We need the energy and open-mindedness of *Oranges*, the attention to details and dependability of *Golds*, the ingenuity and competency-focus of *Greens*, and the people-based compassion and inspiration of *Blues*.

In Conclusion

This was obviously a very brief introduction to the True Colors concept. Day-long workshops and entire books are devoted to this topic. Thus, this overview only scratches the surface of this popular personality typology.

Perhaps you got enough here to pique your curiosity to learn more (especially if you're a *Green*) and improve your interpersonal communication (especially if you're a *Blue*). Next month I will explore True Colors further as they relate to interpersonal communication and recognition.

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From Word Choice to True Colors

Curious
Conceptual

Empathic
Compassionate

Practical
Sensible

Competitive
Opportunistic

Competent
Knowledgeable

Harmonious
Communicative

Responsible
Dependable

Dependable
Spontaneous

Theoretical
Ingenious

Tender
Affectionate

Logical
Cooperative

Exciting
Adventurous

Totals:

Green

Blue

Gold

Orange