

***Equity and Personality:
Is it fair and do you care?***

Returning to your work site after lunch, you can't help but notice the magnificent weather. It's the first warm and sunny day of spring, and you are stuck indoors. But, not for long. Realizing no one would miss your absence on this quiet day at work, you slip out through a back exit and into the parking lot without signing out. Suddenly you're in your car and driving home to enjoy the marvelous climate.

As you drive, you think about what you just did. You intentionally sneaked away from work, and will get paid for the full day. You will not be contributing to your work team this afternoon. How do you feel? Do you feel guilty and make a personal commitment to put in extra effort later to make up for this lost time? Or, do you feel vindicated because you often do more than what's required at work? Alternatively, you may feel neither of these emotions, because thoughts of contributing less than others at work this day don't enter your mind.

An Issue of Equity

If you read my ISHN column last month, you noted the concept of "equity" in the opening scenario. Simply put, equity is a perception of relative fairness determined by people's evaluation of their inputs (contributions) vs. outputs (benefits) in a particular situation, relative to the input/output ration of others in the same or similar context. Leaving work early and receiving wages for a full day represents a relatively low input/output ratio compared to those who worked all day. In equity terms, you would be overcompensated for the day compared to your co-workers. How would you feel?

Individual Differences in Equity Perceptions

Last month, I introduced equity with a one-size fits-all approach, assuming that all people are most comfortable and satisfied when their input/output ration is similar to those of their

coworkers. Thus, the inequity or overcompensation situation in the opening scenario is presumed to increase everyone's feelings of guilt, as well as motivation to increase personal inputs on subsequent work days in order to restore equity.

However, readers' answers to the question above might vary substantially. For some, the thought of contributing less than their coworkers on a particular workday elicits no guilt feelings or motivation to increase personal effort on subsequent days. On the other hand, other readers are very sensitive to variations in perceived fairness at work and would feel distress until their perceptions of inequity were eliminated.

This article introduces research-based evidence that perceptions of equity vary substantially among individuals, thereby supporting the supposition that the degree of guilt following an early exit from work would deviate dramatically. Let's consider three different orientations toward equity, and their potential implications for discretionary behavior for safety or actively caring.

Benevolents

Benevolent individuals prefer their input/output ratio to be larger than the input/output ratios of comparative others. These are people who think more about giving than receiving, and are most likely to actively care for the safety and health of others. With social responsibility and empathy for other people, benevolents experience others' needs and are willing to sacrifice their own self-interests for those of others. These individuals would feel the most guilt after skipping a day of work, and would therefore work hard on subsequent days to make up for lost input opportunities.

Entitleds

Opposite to the benevolents are the entitled, who would feel no distress or guilt after sneaking a day off. In other words, entitleds strive for low input/output ratios, and therefore have high thresholds for feeling indebted. Any extra benefit they receive is their due, and they feel minimal obligation to reciprocate. These individuals are least likely to go beyond the call of duty on behalf of the safety or health of another person. Don't expect much actively caring from the entitled.

Equity Sensitives

Equity sensitives subscribe to the norm of equity, and are most content when their input/output ratio at work is equal to that of their coworkers. They feel distress when undercompensated and guilt when overcompensated.

This is the only group that experiences both distress and guilt with regard to equity imbalance. Entitleds feel distress when underworked, but are satisfied when overworked. In contrast, benevolents experience guilt when overrewarded, but feel good when underrewarded.

The Equity Sensitivity Inventory (ESI)

Figure 1 includes a personality scale used to classify people into one of the three equity-sensitivity categories described above. The ESI is easy to administer and score. As indicated in Figure 1, participants merely distribute ten points between two alternatives per each of five questions. Then, the number of points given the benevolent alternatives for each question is summed, which are: 1B, 2A, 3B, 4A, and 5B.

Insert Figure 1

An individual is considered *entitled* if his or her score is less than 29; *benevolent* if his or her score is greater than 32, and *equity sensitive* if his or her score is between 29 and 32. Plus, the degree of an entitled vs. benevolent perspective is indicated by one's score. For example, a

score of 28 is only suggestive of an entitled state, whereas a score below 12 reflects a highly entitled personality.

Lively and informative group conversation can follow the administration and scoring of the ESI. Individuals will be enlightened about their personal equity perspective, and various rationales for certain equity viewpoints could be shared. But most importantly, participants could discuss circumstances and contingencies that can increase a person's ESI score, perhaps transitioning an attitude from *entitled* to *equity sensitive*, or from *equity sensitive* to *benevolent*.

This latter point presumes a person's equity outlook is a mutable state rather than a stable trait. While some researchers consider individual differences a trait, I'm convinced it's a state, varying with changes in the situation as well as other person states. For example, as I've discussed in my ISHN article last September and October, a person's propensity toward benevolence (or actively caring) can be increased by establishing a relevant accountability system and/or by enhancing particular person states (specifically, self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, and belongingness).

I suggest you introduce equity theory to a work team and then administer and score the ESI. The accompanying individual introspection and group conversations can be instrumental in helping people develop an actively-caring mindset, leading to more actively-caring behavior throughout a work place.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply human dynamics to industrial safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller's books on People-Based Safety, including his latest: *The Courage Factor*, coauthored by Bob Veazie. For more information, please log on to www.people-based-safety.com; call SPS at 540-951-7233, or Coastal at 1-800-767-7703, ext 3313

Figure 1: The Equity Sensitivity Inventory (ESI)

The five questions below ask what you'd like your relationship to be with any organization for which you might work. For each question, divide 10 points between the two answers (A and B) by giving the most points to the choice most like you and the fewest points to the choice least like you. You may give the same number of points to both alternatives, and you may use zeros. Be sure to use all 10 points for each question. For example, the distribution of 10 points for the sample question might vary widely, as shown.

I like:

A. Spinach	Or	<u>0</u>	or	<u>3</u>	or	<u>5</u>	or	<u>8</u>
B. Ice Cream		<u>10</u>		<u>7</u>		<u>5</u>		<u>2</u>

IN ANY ORGANIZATION I MIGHT WORK FOR:

1. It would be more important for me to:
 - A. Get from the organization
 - B. Give to the organization

2. It would be more important for me to:
 - A. Help others
 - B. Watch out for my own good

3. I would be more concerned about:
 - A. What I received from the organization
 - B. What I contributed to the organization

4. The hard work I would do should:
 - A. Benefit the organization
 - B. Benefit me

5. My personal philosophy in dealing with the organization would be:
 - A. If I don't look out for myself, nobody else will
 - B. It's better for me to give than to receive