

PSYCHOLOGY OF SAFETY: Seeking success vs. fearing failure

How personality affects safety beliefs

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During my 34 years of university teaching, I've noticed some students possess a "need to achieve," while others portray a "need to avoid failure."

Failure avoiders study only minimally to avoid failure, and are not "happy campers." Those who "work to achieve" enjoy my class much more. They view it as an opportunity to earn a good grade, even an opportunity to learn.

This dichotomy of working to achieve versus working to avoid failure is based on classic research conducted in the 1950s and 1960s by Richard Atkinson and David McClelland. Atkinson's original theory identified four types of individuals: success seekers, overstrivers, failure avoiders, and failure accepters. All four exhibit personality states that will influence the outcome of your safety efforts.

Success seekers are the most desirable participants in your safety improvement plans. 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.

It's generally better to be an *overstriver* than a *failure avoider* or *failure accepter*, but the high fear of failure among overstrivers leads to self-doubt. These individuals experience high levels of distress, low perceptions of personal control, and unstable self-esteem.

As you can imagine, *failure avoiders* have low expectations for success and thus avoid challenges. They are unsure of themselves, and are overly anxious and pessimistic about the future. *Failure accepters* are actually better adjusted than failure avoiders. Their acceptance leads generally to apathy, not anxiety.

So how would you classify yourself in terms of these four person states? How would you categorize coworkers? 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 from one state to another as the result of certain work experiences? Keep in mind that environmental conditions, work contexts, and company cultures determine the number of safety success seekers in an organization.

We need to find ways to put people in this positive, "success" state of mind. My *ISHN* contribution next month will explore research-based strategies to make this happen.

SIDEBAR: Wearing different hats

Research shows that many personality characteristics are states that vary according to what's going on inside us and around us. For instance, when I step in front of my introductory psychology class of more than 600 students, I put on my "extrovert" hat. But when I was drafting this article on the deck of a secluded house on Holden Beach, N.C., I felt very much like an introvert.

I don't put myself in a box with a permanent personality label. I look at personality factors that can bias attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and yes, participation in safety, as changing states, not permanent traits. Be skeptical about boxing in people with labels.