



Predicting Specific Types of Behavior Impact of Different Personality Traits on Safety Practices

BY RYAN ROSS

Do you know Tim? Tim is the guy everyone knows around the warehouse – he meets customers on the dock and calls them by name. He’s the guy to count on when you’re short-handed and there are still three more trucks to load. He’s everyone’s best friend, and doesn’t mind helping out or giving advice on how to double-stack a load.

He’s also the guy who just broke his neck falling off the third tier in the warehouse. Now, Tim is the guy who’ll never again toss a softball to his daughter; instead he’ll spend nine months just relearning how to talk.

What happened? Tim’s been on this job for five years. He knew better than to be up so high without tying off. He knew not to stand out on the forks. He just knew better. Tim’s problem was that he had done this same thing numerous times before.

He had never fallen before, he had never been coached to stop, and no one ever held him accountable — even though his peers saw him do it all the time. As you are well aware, safety is key in the reduction and elimination of more than 90 percent of workplace accidents. For years, employers and design engineers have worked to modify work situations to minimize the strain on humans and maximize productivity. The problem? Few have specifically focused on the characteristics of safe workers, and subsequently used that knowledge to predict future workers behavior and performance.

The modern industrial world knows a lot about accidents and injuries. Billions of dollars are spent annually on workers’ compensation and insurance premiums, not to mention the billions in lost earnings and training dollars that companies endure.

Fearless, self-assured thrill-seekers are a major factor in these costs. One critical way to reduce accidents and safety-related issues is to reduce the risk-taking behavior within your organization. This can be done in several ways, including selecting safer

employee candidates, training and developing existing staff in safer practices, and creating a culture of safety awareness – where everyone holds each other accountable for their workplace behavior.

Regardless of how you’ve optimized your control rooms, modernized your truck cabs, implemented material handling courses and the like, industry has been unable to truly remove the key component in unsafe workplace behaviors – people. More so than faulty machines, cheap parts or environmental factors, the human element plays the largest role in workplace safety concerns.

Risk is a recurring theme within organizations. While many people associate high-risk occupations with fishing on the Bering Sea, working atop an oil derrick, or heavy manufacturing work, few consider the risks of working in healthcare, retail, and even office environments. Our view is simply that personal characteristics (i.e., personality) impact a person’s safety related behaviors regardless of the industry, occupation or workplace setting.

Let’s break down the idea that personal characteristics are key to understanding and reducing workplace accidents. By now, the existence of “personality” is a universal truth. It’s just up to the people around us to say if it’s any good or not.

Researchers over the last two decades have consistently shown that personality characteristics help differentiate the top and bottom employees across organizations. These same researchers have shown that personality impacts an employee's willingness to follow the rules – hence their compliance with safety policies and procedures (remember Tim?).

Research from Hogan Assessment Systems shows that safety-related personality characteristics can be broken down into six areas that predict specific types of behavior. These characteristics are applicable to a wide range of industries, and focus on an individual's work style and overall safety orientation, in an attempt to identify high-quality, safety-conscious employees. Once identified, these characteristics can be used to both hire the right person as well as develop current employees who may be at risk because of their personal tendencies.

These tendencies can be defined as:

- Defiant – Conforming: Following standard operating procedures (SOPs).

Example: A low-scoring power plant technician might

ignore safety procedures and policies, leaving him/herself open to injury.

- Anxious – Confident: Handling stressful conditions when they occur.

Example: A low-scoring air traffic controller may lose his/her cool when encountering an emergency, putting others' lives at stake.

- Overreaction – Emotional control: Maintaining emotional control when under duress.

Example: A low-scoring law enforcement agent who loses control of his/her emotions in a stressful situation risks getting self and others harmed.

- Distractible – Vigilant: Focusing one's attention on the task at hand regardless of distractions.

Example: An assembly line worker who is easily bored may lose concentration when working on repetitive tasks, risking injury or mistake.

- Reckless – Careful: Avoiding unnecessary risks over time.

Example: A roughneck who is reckless and may play around at work or fail to wear the proper safety equipment, endangering himself and others.

- Arrogant – Trainable: Engaging in training and development opportunities.

Example: A welder may not engage in active learning with training programs for new techniques in the field, overestimating his competence.

Now, these characteristics sound good, but how do we know they actually predict anything? How do we know that they will prevent Tim (who is coming to work in a few hours) from becoming just another statistic?

We know that organizations using personality assessments to identify risks in employees are seeing the benefit; they're experiencing a reduction in accidents and injuries from employee groups. Within a recent safety study, a large mid-western transportation company experienced a 55 percent accident reduction in a "low risk" employee group over a 12-month period, when compared to an "at risk" group during the same period.

Also, organizations are using these characteristics to focus on further training and development initiatives. SSA Consultants in Baton Rouge, LA has designed safety training programs that align with each of the six dimensions.

For example, working with refinery employees to maintain vigilance and focus, even on tasks an employee may engage in twenty times a day.

These strategies help to modify an employee's behavior, their response style, and their awareness to the situation. Their research has shown that training programs have positive benefits for organizations; however, targeted, behaviorally specific programs designed for at-risk employees have even more impact.

Organizations are notorious for trying to identify the right "leaders to lead." It makes sense, then, that they would also put a priority on identifying safe, careful, and diligent employees. Smart risk takers are a pleasure to have on the team; it's the not-so-smart ones that lead to sad stories like Tim. FSM

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