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## How Personality Differences Impact Safety Training Efforts by Douglas Klippel

“It would be a boring world if we were all the same.” This old adage illustrates that people are, in fact, quite different from each other. These individual differences permeate all aspects of life – including the behaviors that individuals display at work, whether on-the-job or in training programs.

There are a number of individual differences (i.e., different personality characteristics) that can impact how individual participants react to your training program – and the ongoing assistance they may need once they return to the job. Listed below are four specific individual differences that can impact training effectiveness – and, which can also influence the behaviors demonstrated by participants once they are back on the job.

### The Conscientious Participant

One of the major differences psychologists find between adults is a personality dimension known as *Conscientiousness*. Individuals possessing high levels of this characteristic are detail-oriented, are good at follow-through, are good planners, and excel in roles where processes and procedures must be carefully monitored. Clearly, organizations with work settings that require strict adherence to operating rules, the specific sequencing of work steps, and/or involve the use of heavy machinery tend to benefit from employees who score high in this particular personality dimension.

But what about employees who score low for Conscientiousness? Typically, these workers are poor long-term fits with jobs that require an extreme attention to detail. Nevertheless, these individuals can benefit from: 1) being made aware of their natural tendencies in this area; and 2) structuring methods to remind themselves to be vigilant at work, including checklists, “work buddies” who remind them of key job activities, and “job aids” that list key work tasks.

Interestingly enough, employees at the upper end of the Conscientiousness scale can even find themselves in trouble. Frequently, these employees are rigid and inflexible, and cannot accommodate last-minute changes to production schedules, changes in priorities, etc. These individuals will need to work on remaining flexible and adaptable, and not becoming flustered (and overlooking process steps) under conditions of change or stress.

In terms of training efforts, participants who score high in Conscientiousness are likely to be good students, and are likely to excel on any training tests that are administered. These individuals are likely to remember letter-for-letter the content of the training program, although they may struggle in applying rules in ambiguous situations. They may also be overly rigid in their application of rules (this is a desirable trait in some operating environments). Participants with low scores on Conscientiousness may struggle with training details, may not perform well on training tests, and are likely to be more flexible and adaptable

when it comes to applying operating rules and procedures (an undesirable characteristic in most structured work environments).

### **Emotional Stability**

*Emotional Stability* is another dimension used by psychologists to differentiate individuals. Persons who score high in this dimension are self-confident, make good decisions under pressure, and largely remain in control of their emotions. Individuals scoring at the lower end of this dimension tend to be self-critical, do not always act confidently, and may make poor decisions under pressure.

Employees with very high scores in this dimension may overestimate their abilities, demonstrate self-assuredness bordering on cockiness, and may enjoy “pushing the envelope” with regard to established rules, policies, and procedures. In some cases, they may even enjoy operating “close to the edge,” and may take unnecessary risks that could easily result in accidents or injuries, and only narrowly avoid a crisis by taking last-minute action. Individuals who score high on the Emotional Stability dimension may also fail to adequately monitor the operating environment around them, which can also be a potential source of accidents.

Employees with low scores on the Emotional Stability scale are susceptible to accidents due to a host of different causes. One of the major problems for individuals low in this scale is their inability to make good decisions under pressure, and their inability to multi-task. Frequently, low scorers in this dimension become overwhelmed with issues or problems that occur simultaneously, and this adds to the feeling of pressure that is experienced by the individual. The person’s ability to make timely decisions, as well as their ability to make well-reasoned decisions, suffers greatly under these conditions.

In a training environment, individuals who score high on this dimension may be falsely self-assured, and overly self-confident. They may feel they have mastered all relevant safety knowledge, and that training programs are beneath them. Low scorers in this dimension may be timid in training classes, may not develop the self-confidence needed in most work environments, and may feel the need for continual re-training (or refresher courses).

### **Openness to Experience (Participants with a “Need for Excitement”)**

*Openness to Experience* is another dimension used by psychologists to classify individuals. Those scoring high in this particular dimension enjoy variety and new experiences in their work, have a certain amount of “thrill seeking” in their persona, and can quickly become bored by routine in the workplace. They tend to be innovative and creative, and enjoy new challenges. Those individuals scoring lower in this dimension are more comfortable with routine, enjoy working according to established rules and guidelines, and do not need a high degree of excitement or new experiences in the workplace.

As you might expect, individuals with a high need for excitement (or a high need for variety) tend to be safety risks in environments that are routine. Some evidence suggests that if these individuals are made aware of their tendencies, they can become better “self-monitors” and remain focused on proper operating rules and procedures. However, the long-term “fit” of individuals with this personality characteristic in highly-structured work environments is suspect.

In a training environment, participants with high scores in this dimension are likely to become bored by the course curricula, and are likely to be restless in training. In a worst-case scenario, they may even daydream and focus on non-training issues. Individuals scoring lower on this dimension are likely to enjoy most safety-related training programs, and are likely to use the course material presented to their advantage when back on the job.

### **Interpersonal Harmony**

Training participants will also differ in the extent to which they value *Interpersonal Harmony* in the workplace. Participants scoring high in this dimension value warm relationships with others, and they dislike tension or conflict. Participants scoring lower in this dimension are described as being cool and aloof, and can be very firm or direct with others.

While the Interpersonal Harmony dimension may not manifest itself in the training environment, it can become a factor once training participants return to the job. For example, participants who are high on this dimension may find it difficult to confront others who are using improper tools or techniques – this can be particularly problematic if the individual is in a supervisory role and is responsible for the rule compliance of others. Conversely, participants with a low score on the Interpersonal Harmony dimension may inappropriately seek-out opportunities to confront others, and/or may confront others in a manner that is overly direct or serves to alienate the person they are dealing with. In addition, individuals with very low scores on this dimension can be a negative factor in the training program itself, as they tend to display a negative attitude about being in the training program, and this is often noticed by other participants.

### **Conclusion**

There are a number of different personality characteristics that can impact a participant's behavior in a training program, as well as their behavior once they return to the job. The list of characteristics described above is not exhaustive – there are other characteristics, such as a person's level of introversion/extroversion, as well as a person's overall level of energy and drive, that can also impact both job performance and training program performance. However, the characteristics mentioned in this article are those most likely to be noticed by trainers, and are the most likely to have a major impact on training performance and on-the-job performance.

Trainers are encouraged to keep the individual differences covered in this article in mind when conducting training programs, as an understanding of these differences can help a trainer modify his or her approach to the subject matter, and can be useful in providing follow-up training to specific individuals. An appreciation of these individual differences can also be used by trainers or supervisors to better understand on-the-job behaviors that are displayed by training participants.

Many organizations are beginning to screen for these personality characteristics when selecting new employees, as well. There are a number of commercially available assessment instruments that can help organizations hire individuals who will be a good "fit" for the demands of the jobs they will be filling – and who will also benefit from later training and development efforts.