

HBR.ORG Harvard Business Review



MARCH 2013
REPRINT R1303L

MANAGING YOURSELF

Do You Play to Win— or to Not Lose?

Know what really motivates you.

by Heidi Grant Halvorson and E. Tory Higgins

MANAGING YOURSELF



ILLUSTRATION: JAKOB HINRICHS

Know what really
motivates you.

by Heidi Grant Halvorson
and E. Tory Higgins

In what kinds of situations are you most effective? What factors strengthen—or undermine—your motivation? People answer these questions in very different ways, and that's the challenge at the heart of good management—whether you're managing your own performance or someone else's. One-size-fits-all principles don't work. The strategies that help you excel may not help your colleagues or your direct reports; what works for your boss or your mentor doesn't always work for you. Personality matters.

In business the most common tool for identifying one's personality type is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. But the problem with this and many other assessment tools is that they don't actually predict performance. (In fairness to Myers-Briggs, it doesn't claim to.) These tests will tell you about attributes—such as your degree of introversion or extroversion, or your reliance on thinking versus feeling—that indicate what you like to do, but they tell you very little about whether you are good at it, or how to improve if you're not.

Fortunately, there is a way of grouping people into types on the basis of a personality attribute that does predict performance: promotion focus or prevention focus. Although these types are well known among academic psychologists and marketing and management researchers,

word of them has not yet filtered down to the people who we believe could benefit most: managers keen to be more effective in their jobs and to help others reach their full potential as well.

The Two Types

Motivational focus affects how we approach life's challenges and demands. Promotion-focused people see their goals as creating a path to gain or advancement and concentrate on the rewards that will accrue when they achieve them. They are eager and they play to win. You'll recognize promotion-focused people as those who are comfortable taking chances, who like to work quickly, who dream big and think creatively. Unfortunately, all

The promotion-focused are engaged by inspirational role models, the prevention-focused by cautionary tales.

that chance taking, speedy working, and positive thinking makes these individuals more prone to error, less likely to think things through, and usually unprepared with a plan B if things go wrong. That's a price they are willing to pay, because for the promotion-focused, the worst thing is a chance not taken, a reward unearned, a failure to advance.

Prevention-focused people, in contrast, see their goals as responsibilities, and they concentrate on staying safe. They worry about what might go wrong if they don't work hard enough or aren't careful enough. They are vigilant and play to not lose, to hang on to what they have, to maintain the status quo. They are often more risk-averse, but their work is also more thorough, accurate, and carefully considered. To succeed, they work slowly and meticulously. They aren't usually the most creative thinkers, but they may have excellent analytical and problem-solving

skills. While the promotion-minded generate lots of ideas, good and bad, it often takes someone prevention-minded to tell the difference between the two.

Although everyone is concerned at various times with both promotion and prevention, most of us have a dominant motivational focus. It affects what we pay attention to, what we value, and how we feel when we succeed or fail. It determines our strengths and weaknesses, both personally and professionally. And it's why the decisions and preferences of our differently focused colleagues can seem so odd at times.

Most readers will be able to identify their dominant focus immediately. But if you can't, here are some signs to look for in yourself or your colleagues:

Promotion-focused people

work quickly
consider lots of alternatives and are great brainstormers
are open to new opportunities
are optimists
plan only for best-case scenarios
seek positive feedback and lose steam without it
feel dejected or depressed when things go wrong

Prevention-focused people

work slowly and deliberately
tend to be accurate
are prepared for the worst
are stressed by short deadlines
stick to tried-and-true ways of doing things
are uncomfortable with praise or optimism
feel worried or anxious when things go wrong

Simply identifying your own type should help you embrace your strengths as well as recognize and compensate for your weaknesses. To some extent people do this intuitively. Studies show that prevention-focused individuals are likely to take up what organizational psychologists call "conventional and realistic" work, as administrators, bookkeepers, accountants, technicians, and manufacturing workers. These occupations require knowledge of rules and regulations, careful execution, and a propensity for

thoroughness—they are jobs in which attention to detail is what really pays off.

The promotion-focused are likely to pursue "artistic and investigative" careers, as musicians, copywriters, inventors, and consultants. These tend to be think-outside-the-box jobs, in which people are rewarded for creative and innovative thinking, and being practical isn't emphasized.

Your focus might also steer you toward a particular industry. Promotion-focused leaders tend to be most effective in dynamic industries, where it's important to respond rapidly and innovatively to stay ahead. Prevention-focused leaders are most effective in more stable industries, where avoiding catastrophic error is often the key to success.

Creating Motivational Fit

Once you know your focus, you can choose role models, frame goals, seek or give feedback, and provide incentives that will strengthen your motivation or your team's. Motivational fit enhances and sustains both the eagerness of the promotion-minded and the vigilance of the prevention-minded, making work seem more valuable and thus boosting both performance and enjoyment. When the motivational strategies we use don't align with our dominant focus, we are less likely to achieve our goals.

Choosing role models. Storytelling has long been touted as a motivational tool. But different types of people need varying kinds of stories. Studies show that the promotion-focused are more engaged when they hear about an inspirational role model, such as a particularly high-performing salesperson or a uniquely effective team leader. The prevention-focused, in contrast, are impressed by a strong cautionary tale about someone whose path they shouldn't follow, because thinking about avoiding mistakes feels right to them. As an individual, you naturally pay attention to the kind of story that resonates most with you. But as a colleague or a boss, you should think about

When Personalities Don't Match by Andrew Kakabadse and Nada K. Kakabadse

What happens when differing personality types work together yet don't appreciate each other's strengths? Over the past 20 years we have done research with leaders in more than 12,500 private, public, military, and government organizations across 21 countries. Here's what we've found:

**PROMOTION BOSS
+
PREVENTION EMPLOYEE
=
UNDERPERFORMANCE**

When Jane Promotion manages Joe Prevention, she rarely sees him as a threat. But she may overlook and underutilize his strengths and fail to encourage him with defined tasks and clear objectives.

**PROMOTION EMPLOYEE
+
PREVENTION EMPLOYEE
=
TENSION**

When both individuals are subordinate, their contrasting approaches lead to tension. Joe Prevention sees Jane Promotion as a threat, while Jane gets frustrated by the barriers Joe creates and may openly challenge him.

**PROMOTION BOSS
+
PREVENTION BOSS
=
POWER STRUGGLE**

When Joe Prevention and Jane Promotion are both bosses, a power struggle may develop. Jane will emphasize successes, undermining Joe, while Joe heaps on criticism, often behind Jane's back.

**PREVENTION BOSS
+
PROMOTION EMPLOYEE
=
POWER PLAY**

Even when Joe Prevention manages Jane Promotion, he may feel threatened by her and seek to limit her activity and opportunities as a result. She will resent the micromanagement and may eventually leave.



Andrew Kakabadse is a professor of international management development at Cranfield University's School of Management in the UK. **Nada K. Kakabadse** is a professor of management and business research at the University of Northampton's Business School in the UK.

whether the stories you share with others are motivational for them.

It's also important to seek out mentors and, when possible, future bosses whose focus matches your own and, if you're a manager, to subtly adapt your style to suit each employee's focus. According to recent research, promotion-minded employees thrive under transformational leaders, who support creative solutions, have a long-term vision, and look for ways to shake things up. The prevention-focused are at their best under transactional leaders, who emphasize rules and standards, protect the status quo, tend toward micromanagement, discourage errors, and focus on effectively reaching more-immediate goals. When people find themselves working for a leader who fits, they say that they value their work significantly more and are less likely to want to leave the organization. When employees and bosses are mismatched, enjoyment of and commitment to work declines. If no one works to counteract the tension, serious problems can arise. (See the exhibit "When Personalities Don't Match.")

Framing the goal. Sometimes even minor tweaks in how you think about a goal or the language you use to describe

it can make a difference. One of our favorite studies on this subject comes from Germany. Coaches in a highly regarded semiprofessional soccer league were told to prep their players for high-pressure penalty kicks with one of two statements: "You are going to shoot five penalties. Your aspiration is to score at least three times." Or "You are going to shoot five penalties. Your obligation is to not miss more than twice." You probably wouldn't expect a small change in wording to affect these practiced, highly motivated players. But it had a big impact. Players did significantly better when the instructions were framed to match their dominant motivational focus, which the researchers had previously measured. This was especially true for prevention-minded players, who scored nearly twice as often when they received the don't-miss instructions.

In another study that used framing, students were assigned to write a report, for which they would be paid, and deliver it by a certain date. They were asked to make a specific plan, detailing when, where, and how they would write the report.

One version of the instructions was designed to fit a promotion focus:

Imagine a convenient time when you will be able to write your report.

Imagine a comfortable, quiet place where you might write your report.

Imagine yourself capturing as many details as you can and making your report vivid and interesting.

The other version was designed to fit a prevention focus:

Imagine times that will be inconvenient for writing your report so that you can avoid them.

Imagine places that will be uncomfortable or have lots of distraction so that you can avoid writing your report there.

Imagine yourself not forgetting any details and being careful not to make your report bland or boring.

Remarkably, students who received instructions suited to their dominant motivational focus were about 50% more likely than others to turn in their reports. So when you are trying to keep yourself or someone else motivated, remember that promotion-focused people need to think about what they are doing in terms of positives (what they aspire to, how best to accomplish the task) and prevention-focused people should instead think about negatives (potential mistakes, obstacles to avoid).

Seeking or giving feedback. Once goals are set in a way that creates motivational fit, you must sustain the fit by seeking out—or, as a manager, giving—the right kind of feedback. Promotion-focused people tend to increase their efforts when a supervisor offers them praise for excellent work, whereas prevention-focused people are more responsive to criticism and the looming possibility of failure. For instance, in one study we found that the promotion-focused were more motivated and tried harder in the midst of a task when they were assured that they were on target to reach a goal as opposed to when they were told that they were below target but could catch up. For prevention-focused people the reverse was true: They tried harder when told they weren't on target; in fact, being assured of success undermined their motivation.

We aren't suggesting that you seek out false praise or unwarranted criticism, or offer up either one as a manager. But if you're promotion-minded, you can look for people who will give you the positive, inspirational message you need. And if you're prevention-minded, you should routinely ask colleagues for constructive criticism.

As a manager, you should always give honest feedback, but you might want to adjust your emphasis to maximize

motivation. Don't be overly effusive when praising the prevention-focused, and don't gloss over mistakes they've made or areas that need improvement. Meanwhile, don't be overly critical when delivering bad news to the promotion-focused—they need reassurance that you have confidence in their ability and recognize their good work.

Providing incentives. Tangible incentives are another way to sustain motivational fit. This is not as simple as “rewards are motivating,” because incentives vary according to personality type. You can create your own incentives (“If I finish this project by Friday, I will treat myself to a spa day,” or “If I don't

Don't be overly effusive with the prevention-focused or overly critical with the promotion-focused.

finish this project by Friday, I will spend the weekend cleaning out the garage”), and you can push to make sure your employees' incentives create fit.

It's also important to avoid incentives that aren't aligned with focus, because

they can be demotivating. For example, after the Gulf of Mexico oil spill and the public relations disaster it created for BP, the company's new CEO, Bob Dudley, changed the rules governing employee bonuses: Increasing safety would be the sole criterion on which they were calculated. One well-known shortcoming of this approach is that it can lead to the underreporting of problems rather than to an actual increase in safety. But a second important flaw is probably now also obvious: Rewarding people for safety is a poor motivational fit. The thought of a bonus makes people eager and willing to take chances (promotion), which is the opposite of being vigilant and avoiding mistakes (prevention). On the other hand, penalties—such as taking bonus money away—for not meeting new safety standards would provide the right kind of motivational fit.


WE BELIEVE that a promotion focus and a prevention focus are two legitimate ways of looking at the same goal. You may think your business should concentrate on creating new opportunities for advancement, while your colleague thinks the emphasis should be on protecting your relationships with existing clients—and you are both right. Promotion-focused and prevention-focused people are crucial for every organization's success, despite the potential for infighting and poor communication. Businesses (and teams) need to excel at innovation and at maintaining what works, at speed and at accuracy. The key is to understand and embrace our personality types and those of our colleagues, and to bring out the best in each of us. ♥

HBR Reprint R1303L

A Word About Promotion-Prevention Hybrids

Most people have a dominant focus, but some seem to wear both hats equally often.

To create motivational fit and enhance performance for these hybrids, you must remember that no one can wear both hats at the same time. Hybrids will adopt one focus or the other, often as a function of which motivation is best suited to the task at hand—so let that be your guide. Create fit for tasks involving safety or accuracy by using prevention feedback and incentives, but use the promotion variety for tasks involving creativity or advancement.

 **Heidi Grant Halvorson** is a social psychologist and the author of *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2011). **E. Tory Higgins** is a professor of psychology and management and the director of the Motivation Science Center at Columbia University. They are the authors of *Focus: Use Different Ways of Seeing the World to Power Success and Influence* (Hudson Street Press, forthcoming).