


Are You a  
Seeker,  
or an  
Avoider?

By Mark L. Berman

You can  
change  
avoidance  
behaviors;  
trainers play  
a crucial role.

# It's Monday morning

and John is once again contemplating the upcoming workweek. Nearly overcome with anxiety, he dreads those five days. His thoughts center on what he can do to minimize the negative consequences of anything he might do. He has been operating that way for years. He almost never focuses on positive outcomes he might achieve. Thus, it should come as no surprise that John rarely if ever feels any degree of job satisfaction, nor does he accomplish much. John's overriding goal is survival. One sentence sums him up: John is an avoider. He constantly tries to avoid failure, responsibility, dealing with authority, and negative feedback from his boss.

Avoiders can have a negative impact on their development, their careers, and the overall productivity of the organizations that employ them. And a sizeable number of them exist in the workplace. After having been professionally involved with avoiders for many years, I decided to share my experiences  "Be a Seeker, Not an Avoider" (April 2000 *T+D*). Following that article, I received responses from top executives, mid-level managers, heads of training departments, and others. They were consistent in saying that a high percentage of their employees were operating as avoiders, and they wanted to know how they could deal with that.

One role trainers can play is working directly with organizational leaders to help avoiders develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to become seekers. A seeker is someone who's strongly interested in achieving positive results on the job. I've worked with a number of CEOs and other leaders on this issue. Their depth and breadth of knowledge about avoiders varies considerably, but it's almost universal that they're aware of the presence of such people in their organizations. Most executives have at least an idea of the negative impact that avoiders can have. Some leaders have devoted a lot of time and energy to dealing with avoiders; others just acknowledge their existence.

Here's a sampling of their observations.

**Senior partner of a major law firm:** "Many of our employees work to avoid negative outcomes. The attorneys are essentially positive goal-oriented, but many of the nonattorney staff are geared towards getting their paychecks and not much else. A lot of their on-the-job problems are of their own making because they tend to view going to work as something they have to do rather than something they want to do."

**Psychologist and director of a large mental health clinic:** "My personal goal 100 percent of the time is to achieve positive results, but it's a different story with some of the support staff. I estimate that better than 70 percent of them work primarily to avoid negative consequences."

**Former presiding judge:** "I was in charge of hundreds of people. Judges aside, I found that most of them operated as avoiders, in your parlance."

**Executive director of a large community center:** "It took me more than six months to become aware that most of my employees weren't [seeking positive outcomes] in their jobs; most had little interest in achieving anything other than income."

**Vice president of a major university:** "When I took over this job some years ago, I assumed that essentially everyone under me was going to be goal-oriented. I believed that people were devoting all of their time and energy to being highly productive. Unfortunately, that's not the reality."

Their comments show that avoiders are present in a wide range of jobs and fields. They're just about everywhere.

## An avoider named Jane

How do avoiders view themselves? A woman we'll call Jane only recently became aware of her tendency to operate as an avoider. Before her realization, she did know that her accomplishments were minimal given her considerable formal education and intelligence. But for years, she had no idea that she was functioning in an avoidance mode or how that was affecting her. Now, after gaining insight prompted by input from several co-workers and supervisors, she's working hard to change.

"About two years ago, I read "Be a Seeker, Not an Avoider" in *T+D*," says Jane. "My initial reaction was to feel sorry for people who operated as avoiders. How difficult to go through life like that. But after

reading the article a second time, I began to realize that I shared certain characteristics with those people. I was dismayed and disappointed.”

Jane says that at the time, she wished she'd never learned about how she approached her work. At age 37, she thought she was bright and well educated. But she also knew that she'd made little progress professionally over the past decade. She began to see that her tendency to behave as an avoider played a major role in her underachievement.

Why was Jane an avoider? It's difficult to say with certainty, but she points to her upbringing by a super-critical mother. Consequently, Jane spent a lot of her childhood trying to avoid doing anything that might evoke criticism or punishment. Once the adult Jane became aware of her counter-productive and self-defeating characteristics, she consulted colleagues and a mental health professional. She learned how to identify specific avoidance behaviors, determine what triggers those behaviors, and monitor and modify her internal dialogue to model seeking rather than avoiding.

### A dialogue

Training and HR professionals can intervene with employees who exhibit avoidance behaviors and help them develop seeking behaviors. Example: Maria serves as director of the training division of a U.S.-based corporation. She has had considerable experience in educating managers and other professionals about people who are avoiders. She became increasingly aware that many employees seemed to put most if not all of their energy into avoiding negative consequences resulting from their actions. Their top priority appeared to be to keep their jobs; they showed little or no interest in being productive. Many of those workers resided in the lower echelons of their organizations, but a substantial number were higher up. Maria observed that such people affect themselves negatively as well as the overall output of the organization. She decided to do something about it.

First, Maria shared her observations with high-level executives. Not only did they listen attentively, but they also asked her to spearhead a comprehensive program to deal with the problem. After some research and input from specialists, she began training her HR staff to work directly with managers, supervisors, and other leaders. The sessions targeted such topics as defining the characteristics of an avoider, how to determine whether an employee

exhibits those traits, and effective methods for modifying that employee's avoidance behavior. An additional key emphasis was understanding managers' constraints and how to take them into account during the intervention.

Here's an excerpt from a dialogue between a trainer and a manager, as part of the program to prepare managers to work with avoiders.

**Trainer:** “As a manager, you have a very important role to play in helping avoiders become seekers.”

**Manager:** “Can you tell me what I need to know about avoiders?”

**Trainer:** “First, avoiders tend to have low expectations of themselves and other people. They also tend to misperceive other people's intentions towards them and overestimate their own probability of failure. It's not at all unusual for them to not be aware they're functioning in an avoidance mode.”

**Manager:** “Do you mean that everyone who expects little or nothing from themselves should be categorized as an avoider?”

# The Responsibility Virus

A new book, *The Responsibility Virus* by Roger Martin (Basic Books), purports that companies fail because leaders and followers take too much—or too little—responsibility. The most common model of dysfunction is heroic, take-charge managers and discouraged, passive employees. Also ineffective is a company that pushes most responsibility down the chain so far that it takes eons for critical things to be done. Martin, dean of the University of Toronto's business school, offers various solutions but, above all, advises communication as the key to successful collaboration.

# Every enterprise has or can create opportunities to modify employees' orientation from avoidance to seeking.

**Trainer:** "Not necessarily. Many people have low self-expectations but work hard to accomplish as much as they can."

**Manager:** "I hate to admit it, but I can get really irritated by people who are avoiders."

**Trainer:** "How do you typically deal with them?"

**Manager:** "I tend to be critical when they don't respond to my efforts to get them to take a more positive approach toward their jobs."

**Trainer:** "What do you know about how people become avoiders?"

**Manager:** "Very little. I generally find myself reacting in a knee-jerk fashion. I concentrate on what they fail to do rather than consider the reasons they failed. How do people become avoiders?"

**Trainer:** "Three main routes: 1) a childhood characterized by criticism and punishment, 2) a history of negative bosses, and 3) a critical internal dialogue, for whatever reasons."

**Manager:** "That's interesting. I'd assumed that all avoiders were born that way and that there wasn't anything I could do."

**Trainer:** "I've worked with numerous managers, supervisors, and others, and it isn't unusual for them to know little about avoiders."

**Manager:** "What can we do to help people stop being avoiders?"

**Trainer:** "First, determine whether they're aware of how they're functioning. You also need to assess their interest in modifying their behavior. If they want to, offer to help or suggest a third party."

**Manager:** "Then what?"

**Trainer:** "Constructively point out specific actions you've observed related to avoidance, and determine how much insight they have into how being an avoider affects them and their work."

## Some steps

Essentially every enterprise has or can create opportunities to modify employees' orientation from avoidance to seeking. Here are a few suggestions.

- Objectively and thoroughly assess the organization regarding the forces, factors, circumstances, and conditions—including leadership behaviors—that could be or clearly are contributing to making employees exhibit avoidance behaviors.
- Determine which workers are leaning towards or fully engaged in avoidance. That can be done through interviews, questionnaires, discussions with other people, analysis of past performance, and direct observation. The goal should be positive, with an emphasis on helping employees, not on labeling, blaming, or stigmatizing them.
- Conduct workshops to educate leaders on what constitutes an avoider, how people become avoiders, and how to work with and help them.
- Offer the services of an employee assistance program to people who see themselves as avoiders and would like counseling.

Avoiders have always existed in the workplace. In some organizations, they are overlooked or ignored because there is minimal awareness of their negative impact. Some organizations may not even be aware of the avoiders in their midst. But given the current pressures facing businesses, government agencies, and the like, it's crucial to identify and mitigate avoidance behaviors. Trainers play a crucial role. Simply, you can't avoid it. TD

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