

Problem Solving Style: A New Approach to Understanding and Using Individual Differences

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In our work on Creative Problem Solving (summarized in a recent issue of this publication), managing change, and inventive thinking, recent work on personality and learning styles sent us in a new direction that has proven to be very rewarding. Instead of asking “How creative is this person?,” we have learned to ask “How is this person creative? What are his or her strengths? How do people channel and direct their creative and inventive energies?”

As a result of nearly a decade of research and development, we believe that problem solving style is a very important dimension of creative and inventive productivity. We define problem solving styles as consistent individual differences in the ways people prefer to plan and carry out generating and focusing, in order to gain clarity, produce ideas, or prepare for action when solving problems or managing change (Selby, Treffinger, & Isaksen, 2002).

Some inventors and creators seek to improve on ideas, products, processes, or services that already exist— polishing them, “adding new twists,” making them better, or extending their applications in new directions. Others prefer to direct their efforts to breaking totally new ground— “going where no one has previously trod.” Through our research and development efforts, we have now published a new instrument that will help us gain a richer and deeper understanding of these differences, and in a broader sense, of the role that one’s personal style preferences play in creativity and inventing. The instrument is

VIEW: An Assessment of Problem Solving StyleSM. This article will describe VIEW and its principal dimensions.

VIEW seeks to represent and assess three dimensions of style preferences that are unique and important in understanding and guiding the efforts of individuals and groups to manage their creative problem solving or inventive efforts effectively.

Orientation to Change. The first VIEW scale provides an overall indication of the person's perceived preferences in two general styles for managing change and solving problems creatively. We identify this as "Orientation to Change;" its two contrasting preferences are the "Explorer" and the "Developer." Although it is convenient to characterize each of these preferences using descriptors of people with extreme scores, most people share some preferences associated with each style. How a person emphasizes these approaches in her or his typical individual behavior across varying contexts and over a sustained period of time, and the consistency or clarity of our preferences, contribute to the location of the overall preference score along the Explorer—Developer continuum. As the person's behavior and preferences are more clear, certain, and consistent, the total score moves away from the mean, toward either the Developer or Explorer style preference. If the style described by that score is accurate, the person will find that style description very natural and comfortable.

The Explorer style. Lower total scores on this VIEW dimension reflect the Explorer preference. In ordinary use, an "explorer" is an individual who thrives on venturing in uncharted directions or seeks to break new ground and follow possibilities wherever they might lead. Webster's definition of explore includes,

“to travel over new territory for adventure or discovery.” Explorers enjoy initiating a broad range of tasks, and thrive on new, ill-defined, and ambiguous situations and challenges. Explorers seek to create many unusual and original options that, if developed and refined, might provide the foundation for productive new directions (although they may prefer to leave the refining and developing to others as they move on to other new challenges). Explorers are good at seeing unusual possibilities, patterns, and relationships, which may be difficult for others to understand or embrace initially. They tend to “plunge” into a situation, feed on risk and uncertainty, and improvise their planning as the situation unfolds. They often find external plans, procedures, and structures confining and limiting to their imagination and energy.

The Developer style. Higher total scores on the Orientation to Change dimension reflect the Developer preference. In ordinary use, a “developer” is an individual who brings tasks (which might be ideas, problem statements, action plans, products, or programs) to fulfillment, who begins with the basic elements or ingredients and then organizes, synthesizes, refines, and enhances them, forming or shaping them into a more complete, functional, useful condition or outcome. Webster’s definitions of “develop” include “setting forth or making clear by degrees or in detail.... to move from the original position... to one providing more opportunity for effective use,...[or] to come into being gradually.”

Developers are concerned with practical applications and the reality of the task, and they use their creative and critical thinking in ways that are clearly recognized by others as being helpful and valuable. Developers are good at finding workable possibilities and guiding them to successful implementation.

They are often careful, methodical, and well-organized, and seek to minimize risk and uncertainty. They are comfortable with plans, details, and structures, and find those helpful in moving any task or project forward in an efficient, deliberate manner.

Processing. The second dimension of VIEW, Processing describes the person's preference for working *externally* (i.e., with other people throughout the process) or *internally* (i.e., thinking and working alone before sharing ideas with others) when managing change and solving problems.

Deciding. The third dimension of VIEW describes the major emphasis the person gives to *people* (i.e., maintaining harmony and interpersonal relationships) or to *tasks* (i.e., emphasizing logical, rational, and appropriate decisions) when making decisions during problem solving or when managing change.

VIEW is a practical and useful tool for anyone who wishes to understand his or her own approach to change, problem solving, or inventing. VIEW is easy to administer, score, and interpret. It is a 34-item inventory that individuals can complete in approximately 10 minutes. VIEW has strong internal consistency and stability. It is the result of more than four years of research and development, involving more than 3,000 subjects from a variety of contexts and settings, and ranging from ages 12 – 80. Additional technical information is available upon request.

We are interested in research and practical applications using VIEW in a variety of practical settings, and we would welcome inquiries from local or state inventors' organizations who might be interested in learning more about VIEW, offering a program on problem solving style for their members, or engaging in research on the relationships between inventors' personal style preferences and

their unique inventing interests and methods. To learn more about VIEW, please contact us at the Center for Creative Learning, P. O. Box 14100, Sarasota, Florida 34278, or by phone (941.342.9928), by fax (941.342.0064), or email (cclofc@gte.net).

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