

Response Focus

Often, a respondent to the DiSC assessment will ask, “How should I fill out this form?” What people really want to know is if they should focus on a specific environment or just “answer as they really are.”

Whenever this issue arises, many facilitators tell respondents to think about their work setting, familial life, or some other precise environment when answering. In contrast, other practitioners say that only a broad focus will assure accurate results. Still others simply hedge their answers when confronted with this question.

The debate over focus has advocates on all sides. And like any aspect of the DiSC model, practitioners want to know what to do.

Practice and Theory

Much of the debate on this issue may stem from confusion between theory and practice. To start, let’s sort out these differences.

In the practice of assessment, the issue of context often arises. When respondents to DiSC are asked to answer the questions, they simply want to be clear on the task. Since the questions ask about “how I act”, “I need to understand what situation or circumstance you want me to answer in?” So at this point, the issue is in the realm of “practice” and experience has shown that clear instructions are vital to avoid confusion and frustration for the respondent. That is, it is important to give respondents a clear idea of what mindset we are asking them to assume so that they understand the task at hand. Furthermore, the report that will be generated from the responses are largely written to reflect a workplace setting, since the great majority of DiSC profiles are administered as part of a workplace initiative. So as a practical matter, it is probably best to ask the respondent to think of “how they are at work.” Emphasis may be placed on answering “how you are, not how you want to be, or, think you are supposed to be”. If instead, we ask the respondent to simply reply “as you really are” there can indeed be slight differences in the results, depending on a number of factors. However, these differences are usually small and may not even be due to the respondent’s focus.

It’s not uncommon to hear DiSC practitioners advocate for the use of a narrow response focus on the grounds that people act differently in different environments. A common example is that “we all know that a person may act very differently at home than at work”. It follows that it would be nice to account for these shifts in behavior by telling respondents to answer the assessment with a definite environment in mind. Or that since we act differently (which may or may not hold true to any significant degree for a given individual) we must, of necessity, focus on the environment being considered. But this is where the issue crosses over into the realm of “theory”.

There are many conceptual issues that would need to be resolved in order to assure meaningful differences in the measurement of DiSC by situation. We would need to know how much people really do change from one context to another, how much it varies across specific contexts, and how much it varies across individuals. We would need to draw conclusions on long-running scientific debates about situational vs. cross-situational dispositions.

From the perspective of assessment theory, we would need to evaluate how well the respondent can master a number of cognitive requirements relating to the clarity, intensity and consistency with which the specific response focus can be established and maintained. In other words, how well how can a particular person be expected to accomplish this task. On a measurement level, most psychological instruments are probably not sensitive enough to detect the relatively minor influence of situational factors, especially when they are driven by a small change in instructions.

Indeed there are a great number of factors that need mastering to use DiSC to measure situational differences, but for all practical purposes, this is unnecessary. What needs to be understood from all of this is that, at best, you should expect no more than a weak connection between changes in the response focus and changes in profile outcomes between most situations for a given individual. Many factors affect a person's profile results, and the response focus is most likely not a significant one. We do recommend telling people to respond "how you are at work.", but this is only for the practical reasons that were mentioned above. The theoretical issues will continue to be debated by academics, statisticians, and psychometric experts for years to come.

At this point, however, if we refocus our discussion away from the measurement issue, we find that this topic is replete with interesting and relevant ideas that can help us to better facilitate DiSC. Marston had a great deal to say about the influence of our environment on DiSC. In fact, some of Marston's most important innovations explored the influence of environmental factors on our emotional and behavioral responses.

Marston spoke about the influence of our environment in two important ways. First, he wrote that our immediate situation influenced the likelihood that we would behave with a given D, I, S, or C response. Although we have a general inclination to give a certain DiSC response, we all know that no one DiSC response is appropriate for all situations. For instance, a person might have a general inclination to act in a very dominant fashion, but might not be very dominant when the CEO steps into her office. Marston wrote at length about our free will and our ability to choose to act differently in a given situation. Modern DiSC practitioners carry the spirit of this basic assumption into the heart of their work. They work with people to help them understand how they can choose to behave differently in different situations. Although they have a stable style that influences their preferences and tendencies, people can alter the expression of that style in a way that boosts personal effectiveness and builds stronger relationships.

Second, Marston spent time writing about the aspects of our culture and our society that strongly push us to distort our true selves and adopt a public mask that conforms to the

pressures of our situation and our environment. In his book, *The Emotions of Normal People*, he wrote that we each have a public self that we consider normal and healthy, but most of us also have a private self that we hide from the rest of the world. We have a secret inner conviction that this private self is abnormal, possibly unhealthy and shameful. However, Marston powerfully argues that it is, in fact, our private self which is our “normal” self. Problems and dissatisfaction arise when we spend too much effort suppressing that natural, private self in a misguided effort to fit in with other people. Consequently, he writes extensively on the need to provide people with an “emotional re-education”. This process of re-education would allow people to embrace their natural inclinations and preferences, and accept themselves for who they are. We might extend these once revolutionary ideas to our current practice of DiSC. If we can help people understand the situational pressures that they face and how these pressures influence their behavior, we can give people a better insight into what will make them truly successful and what will make them truly happy.

In summary, our environment (e.g., at work, at home, with friends) does play an important role in our understanding of DiSC. The true power of this idea, however, isn't in how we measure DiSC... It's in the application of DiSC. Ultimately, this idea can help people gain the knowledge and the courage to change.