Fear of Success

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Similar experiences have probably occurred to others who have had golden contacts unexpectedly refuse to proceed any further. It's only a natural inclination to wonder what precipitated the dramatic change in attitude. Unfortunately, there is no simple formula which can reliably explain the makeup of such a decision.

According to some human behaviorists, however, one reason for the sudden change might be attributed to a relatively new phenomenon which has been simply dubbed "fear of success". This idea has received considerable publicity recently in popular periodicals such as Harper's Bazaar, Seventeen, Mademoiselle, and Vogue as well as numerous professionally-oriented journals. The general notion is that some people are so frightened of attaining success that they sabotage themselves just as they are about to achieve the desired goal they are pursuing. That is, they avoid behavior which would lead to success.

The concept fear of success was first characterized by Martina Horner (1968:1972) and grew out of an effort to define achievement for women as a theory. She believed that fear of success was acquired, that it inhibited performance, restricted level of aspiration, and was an expression consistent with the developed self-concept. According to the Harvard psychologist, the motive to avoid success was a psychological barrier.

Pappo offers a more formal definition by saying fear of success is "a psychological state which leads to withdrawal in the presence of a consciously understood, subjective or objective goal which is perceived by the individual in the moment of withdrawal." (Pappo, 1972, page 3.)

It seems for some individuals the probability of success causes internal tension. The tension is aroused because demands and role expectations are assumed (which are incidental to the success) and when the possibility exists that they will succeed certain reactions occur, one of which might be withdrawal or repudiation (Meggert, 1976).

Fear of Success vs. Fear of Failure

There seems to be a fine distinction between fear of success and fear of failure. People who possess a dominant fear of failure will not subject themselves to achievement activities. They are unwilling to engage in activities where the outcome may be doubtful. Fear of failure happens when people have the feeling they will never achieve because of the impossible goals or that they will never measure up to the standards because they generally perform badly anyway.

People with a dominant fear of success are achievement oriented, but when goal is probable, they begin to participate in self-defeating behavior designed to protect themselves from expectations. If individuals are about to suc-
ceed, they believe untenable things will happen. Thus conditioned to fear success, they actually inhibit the opportunity to succeed. To them, the outcome associated with the success is more stressful than a less-prized alternative.

In general, then, fear of failure evokes refusal to participate, or perhaps a perfunctory performance, while fear of success motivates striving and participation with intensity, but substitutes self-imposed detours in response to stress. A distinguishing characteristic between the two forms of motivation is the perceived personal reason for repudiation of competence.

This is not to suggest that the answer has now been found describing why people divorce themselves from an esteemed objective. But it is a possible factor to consider when dealing with human behavior. Such a proposition runs counter to the general notion that everyone is inclined to strive for success. Nevertheless, there is growing evidence that people sometimes preempt their propelling movement toward favorable outcomes, the likelihood of which is fearful (Hoffman, 1974; Mettee, 1971; Curtis, Zanna and Campbell, 1974).

Implications for Latter-Day Saints

Interpreting these findings for the Latter-Day Saint population suggests that the expected demands for people may be traumatic whenever new roles are perceived to be at variance with their self-concept. Recognizing that people could feel a personal discomfort relative to opportunities may provide keener insight as to why some investigators who seemingly know the Church is true still refuse to accept its teachings, why some singles prefer to remain single, why some teachers teach less than capably, and why some potential never quite reaches its promise.

Success-avoidance doesn’t imply a true fear of success, per se, but rather fear of the things that will happen. It seems to conjure in the mind the possibility of unwanted values, unpopular paths, rejection of friends, great demands, etc.

Since the gospel touches all aspects of life, it's crucial to recognize that certain people may unwittingly inhibit their own potential for growth and development. Persons who thus behave “inappropriately” may actually be unable to tolerate what success might foster. The existence of this incongruity poses the immense challenge to help people perform well in spite of themselves.

References


