People Skills for the Technical Person

By Art Schoeck

How many times today do we hear "They really know what they are doing technically, but they simply have no people skills" during the discussion of a coworker's career? We would like to have the best of both worlds—good technical skills and good people skills—but a survey of today's managers quickly concludes it is all too rare we find such an individual. Why?

Though companies base 80% of their hiring decision on the technical skills —education, skills, training and experience—85% of turnover is due to BEHAVIORAL incompatibility. That is, we hire people whose technical skills are sufficient, but we fail to identify or analyze the people skills required. Compounding the problem is that the behavioral style most comfortable for the more technical positions is naturally less comfortable in the people skills department. That is, what makes a person enjoy technical work is the desire to look at "things" logically (versus emotionally). If we are logical, we make a decision by first, gathering all the facts. Then we study and analyze the data, research, test, check the details, and finally make a decision that is incapable of being incorrect. The most important goal is to be correct, the biggest fear—to be wrong!

Other styles may value beating deadlines at all costs, keeping people happy and motivated, keeping things the same to avoid conflict. But to the more technical people - being correct and accurate takes all precedent—it's only logical.

Most people who view "things" very logically also view "people" the same way. While most Americans fall into the group that views "people" (as well as "things") emotionally, most technicians view both people and things logically. This influences the way they both perceive and communicate with others. Instead of the emotional factors of optimism, warmth, enthusiasm, inspiration and extroversion, they have the logical factors of reflection, facts, incisiveness and skepticism (matter-of-fact). "People might talk a good game, but prove it to me; actions speak louder than words." Since they assume that this approach is logical, and therefore correct and appropriate, they are surprised when others describe them as somewhat aloof or cold. They can point to the good relationships they do have, but further examination usually reveals that those relationships are limited to others with their same style - other engineers, scientists, computer enthusiasts, auditors, and quality-control people. They indeed share the common value of a drive to always be logical—perfection. Relationships outside their styles are far more uncommon and usually the result of friends of a spouse or relative of different style.

The technician's lack of people skills can be self-correcting within his/her own natural behavioral style - a style which requires gathering and analyzing data. The technician gathers and analyzes input on behavioral styles different than his/her own to understand how to better communicate with and motivate others.

Learning how to identify different styles and how to adjust their styles to better communicate and motivate is the prime directive.

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