



The following interview with Dr. Steven Flannes, Principal of Flannes & Associates, appeared in the January 2006 edition of *Automation World*, a publication focusing on intelligence for the business of automation.



BUSINESS SKILLS

People Skills Primary for Project Managers

Being a good communicator, which includes listening and speaking clearly, is the key people skill any project manager (PM) needs, believes Andrew Boyarsky, practice consultant in project management for the American Management Association, New York.

Good communication also includes understanding the listener's point of view, as well as being able to write well and make effective presentations, he adds. "Good presentations inspire you. Bad ones make you want to flee the room." And while certain people are born communicators, communication skills can be taught, he says. "As long as people are willing, they can improve on the skill with which they communicate."

What other common values and attitudes do effective PMs have? "He or she is happy, a good negotiator, empathetic and good at dealing with conflict," Boyarsky says. He adds that PMs must also possess good leadership qualities.

Identify differences

Steven Flannes, Ph.D., principal of Flannes & Associates, Oakland, CA, believes the key requirement for PMs is being able to identify differences among team members. That's because PMs tend to assume that if all team members have the same technical back-ground, each must be the same kind of person. While that's true on one level, Flannes says, each team member has a preferred communication method, decision-making style and method of conflict resolution. And each may be motivated differently.

To find those differences, PMs need to engage in an informal conversation with each team member, says Flannes, co-author of the books, "People Skills for Project Managers," and "Essential People Skills For Project Managers." He encourages managers to make that a very explicit conversation, too, and take nothing for granted.

Interview team members in a fairly structured conversation when the team is formed, he advises.

But that's not a one-time event, because people and circumstances change, Flannes cautions. "What might've been motivation for me at the start of a project may no longer be, once I've been there and done that. And if external circumstances change, what may be motivating for someone may be security, for example, rather than doing something wildly exciting." Other reasons for ongoing conversations include getting data on how the individual team members, as well as the project, are doing, Flannes explains.

Employing different leadership roles – leader, manager, facilitator and mentor – is the second key requirement for any skilled PM, Flannes believes. The leader de-fines the project's big vision. The manager tracks deadlines, deliverables and budget issues. The facilitator goes to bat for the team. "You need to go out and butt heads to get what you need for your team," he explains. And the mentor finds ways to develop the team's members. "You're trying to use your experience as a leader to model behaviors that your team members may need, to achieve what they need to achieve," he notes.

To those four roles, Flannes adds counselor. "You're the favorite uncle, passing on knowledge and wisdom." But he notes, too, that it's rare that any PM is equally comfortable in all of these roles. So he advises PMs to examine them-selves and ask: "Which can I do with my eyes closed and feel more comfortable about, and which do I need to develop?"

And though not everyone is a natural people person, a good PM with good people skills can be trained, including the crusty PM who may have a history of alienating team members, says Flannes. "By developing a few interaction techniques they didn't have, project managers can achieve exponentially greater levels of effectiveness."