

Effective People Skills for the Project Manager: A Requirement for Project Success and Career Advancement

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ABSTRACT

Technical and software professionals must achieve the triple constraint of bringing projects to completion according to budget, schedule and technical specifications. Unfortunately, project completion often relies too strongly on technical tools and methodologies, often at the expense of a consideration of the people issues that are always involved.

Projects are always technical problems with significant human dimensions. As projects increase in complexity (virtual teams, involving cross cultural variables and the need to achieve more with less), increasing emphasis is being placed upon the need for the technical professional to develop competencies in specific, tangible "people skills." Importantly, people skills are also crucial for career advancement. These people skills can be defined, practiced, and continually improved, and are best learned experientially.

This paper describes an innovative approach to articulating these people skills, which involve the abilities to: communicate effectively on interpersonal levels, develop and apply an approach to conceptualizing individual differences, apply need-specific leadership roles, craft tailored motivation strategies for individuals and teams, resolve conflicts using issue-appropriate conflict resolution approaches, successfully manage levels of professional and personal distress, and actively manage one's own career.

INTRODUCTION

Dramatic changes are taking place in the field of technology leadership and practice. There is a growing awareness that the soft skills of leadership and project management are required competencies to compete in a technology world that is rapidly evolving, is trying to emerge from its recent economic downturn, and is being conducted on a global stage.

Adding to this complexity is the trend for more and more work to be done under the rubric of project teams, often virtual and cross cultural in nature, consisting on independent free agents brought together as needed for the completion of distinct pieces of work. Charles Grantham, Ph.D. (2000) speaks to this trend when he describes the workplace of the future, one that will be highlighted by a distributed workforce. And as this trend towards distributed work models increases, the complexity of managing the human component of the work will increase in orders of magnitude not yet identified.

This importance of managing the human component of technology work is being seen in number of contexts. For example, I am a co-author of *People Skills for Project Managers* (Flannes and Levin, 2001), a book that describes tangible people skills required for enterprise success. This importance is also seen in the education of project managers and technical leaders, where the Project Management Institute (PMI) (www.pmi.org) regularly provides workshops on a global level that address the need for the development of the people side of technology leadership and practice.

Similarly, the articulation of this need for the development of people skills can be seen in the content of thought leader gatherings in geographical centers of technology innovation. At a yearly conference held near Stanford University in June, 2003, a number of chief executive officers from major technology companies gathered to discuss the topic of how to create a renaissance in Silicon Valley. The gathering was sponsored by the HR Forums (www.hrforums.com), a human resources think tank operated by Mr. Aryae Coopersmith. Among the speakers at this conference were chief executive officers or chairmen of Agilent Technologies, Palm, 3 Com, BEA Systems, and Caspian Networks. Their comments about what was needed for this technological and economic renaissance in Silicon Valley stressed the need for leadership qualities grounded in people skills. These business leaders spoke to the need to develop a number of people skills, including the abilities to communicate clearly with stakeholders, find ways to engage people, operate with

styles that build trust, display behavior that is congruent with stated values, and treat employees with respect. In other words, growth and expansion of technology companies is being described by these high profile leaders, not just in terms of product development and the identification of new markets, but as being dependent upon employees/leaders who have the ability to apply people skills to achieve business goals.

This coupling of people skills to business success is also captured very acutely in a recent article by the leadership thought leader and author Tom Peters. In the January, 2004 edition of *PM Network*, a publication for members of the Project Management Institute, Peters (2004) has an article entitled "Nix the Spreadsheet." Calling on technology leaders, particularly in the field of project management, to spend more time focusing on the people aspects of leadership, Peters writes:

"These days, it's the people skills that matter and will increasingly determine an organization's success."

And he adds that in the future, teams will coalesce globally to solve difficult problems, and that:

"Project managers-those with a knack for people skills-will be the glue that holds these teams together."

So, the trend is established; people skills are receiving more and more attention in terms of being distinct leadership competencies required for success in the technical fields. Technical competency is no longer sufficient on its own (if it ever was) to successfully complete projects and advance one's career. People skills are equally important.

WHAT ARE "PEOPLE SKILLS?"

People skills, when discussed in leadership circles, are unfortunately often defined in general terms, rather than with any specificity about the behaviors or skill being described. For example, leaders are encouraged to "share the vision," team members are encouraged to be "serviced oriented," and relationships with customers or vendors are to be conducted in a "win-win" atmosphere. Most people nod in agreement when hearing these goals, but very few people ever really take the time to operationalize what is meant by these types of people skills.

This paper is grounded in a discussion and conceptual expansion of seven specific people skills (first described by Flannes and Levin, 2001) that are crucial to enterprise success and career advancement. These seven skills involve the abilities to:

- Employ four distinct interpersonal communication techniques (that facilitate the transfer of information) when communicating one-on-one and in groups
- Conceptualize and apply four distinct leadership roles, each one applied based upon the current needs of the project or the stakeholder
- Use a framework for identifying personal style and individual differences (so that tailored approaches can be crafted for communication, motivation, and conflict resolution applications with all stakeholders.)
- Craft tailored, multi-factored motivation strategies (for individuals and teams)
- Productively manage BOTH conflict and agreement on project teams
- Mediate and manage one's own levels of personal and professional distress
- Demonstrate competency in six, active career management skills

While this paper will not focus in detail on methods for the acquisition and development of these people skills (as that is the subject for another paper or for developmental settings such as workshops and coaching), a few general points on this subject will be offered. A primary belief is that these people skills can be taught and refined, and no one is excluded from the pool of potential practitioners of these skills. Granted, these skills come easier to some than others, but everyone can develop basic competency provided that he or she is willing to do three things. These three things are: be willing to experiment and practice these skills (and suspend that self-imposed drive for perfection!), use a sense of humor with yourself and not take yourself too seriously, and learn from those around you about what works for them.

ABILITY TO EMPLOY FOUR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

The four interpersonal communication techniques that will be described below should be viewed as the fundamentals for any collection of people skills. (These techniques surface from years of research on effective communication plus my practical experience of 24 years of work in consulting in workplace

communication and team dynamics.) No one will be viewed as having good people skills unless these four foundational skills are in place in the individual's behavioral repertoire.

CROSS CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

However, before delving into a detailed description of these skills, two cautionary points must be made. The first of these cautionary points states that the successful application of these skills must consider cross-cultural sensitivities. Some of these techniques work best in certain cultures, and are less effective in other cultures. In a recent two day training on the subject of people skills conducted in London in 2003 by this author and Larry Butler, M.A., the former senior human resources officer at PeopleSoft, some of the attendees, representing a number of countries, said that certain interpersonal communication techniques would work well in their culture, while others would be perceived as prying or rude. In sum, consider the culture in which you are operating. These days, when so much business is conducted in "international English," one can make the mistake of assuming that cultural issues are not in play. They are, and they need to be respected.

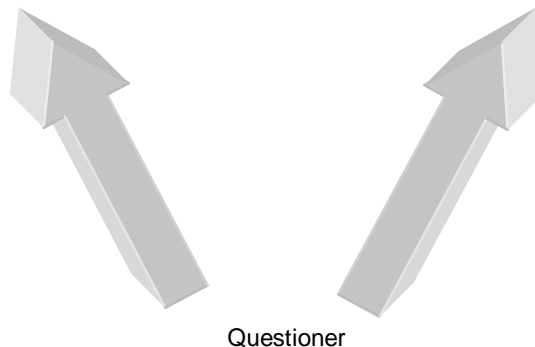
The second cautionary comment addresses the idea that these four techniques, when viewed intellectually, often seem basic, simplistic, and not very sophisticated. On one level that is true. However, do not underestimate the profound positive results that you can achieve in your business (and personal) relationships by employing these techniques. They can assist you in developing a richness and effectiveness in your relationships with all stakeholders that belies the apparent simplicity of these four communication techniques.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

These questions are good at drawing out people, giving them a sense that you are interested in what they have to say. These questions encourage conversation, the exploration of ideas, and the give-and-take between people.

Example: *"Bill, please tell me more of your thoughts about X."*

A visual representation of this type of question can be two vectors, expanding over time as these questions are asked. The expanding vectors represent the wide range of content that these types of questions can elicit.

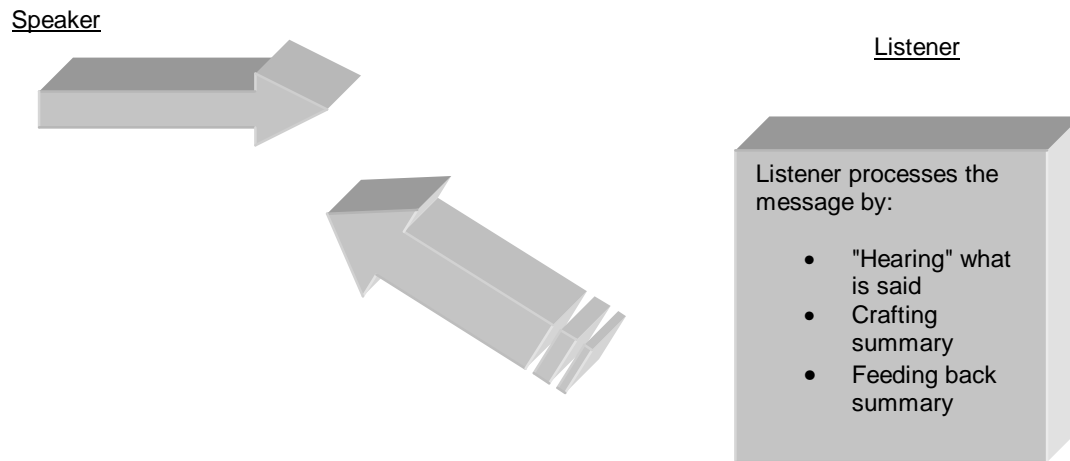


ACTIVE LISTENING

Here, the skill is to give feedback to the other person that indicates that you are hearing his or her message, that you are following what he or she is saying. A great skill to have in developing followership and communicating the image of you as the interested party.

Example: *"Gene, it sounds as though you believe X, Y, and Z about the proposal."*

A visual representation of this type of question would be arrows directed towards each other, suggesting the listener is sending his or her version of the speaker's message back to the speaker for confirmation or clarity.

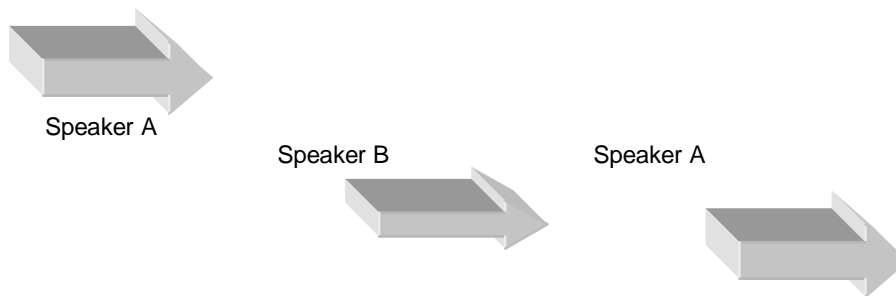


TRACKING THE DISCUSSION

This skill involves the ability to follow the discussion, and offer supportive comments when the flow of the conversation is getting off point. This technique helps you and your communication partner conduct meaningful, goal-directed conversations.

Example: *"Barbara, I think my comments have gotten us off point. Let's get back to what you were saying about X."*

The visual representation for this skill would be something akin to keeping the speakers' "directions" (that is, content or subjects) going in the same direction.



REFRAMING THE DISCUSSION

With this skill, one is taking a negative perception, outlook, or attitude of the other person and is trying to put a more positive "frame" around the issue, attempting to create more optimism and action-taking on the part of the negative individual.

Example: Person A says *"Every time I call for software support, I get no help or some type of very poor service!"*

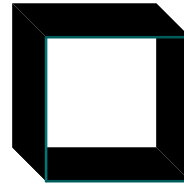
Person B reframes the issue with a more positive "frame" by saying *"Well, yes, that has often been true in the past, but I understand they have hired some new staff. Possibly this time you'll receive a better reception when you call."*

Visually, this skill is exemplified by the literal changing of frames:

Issue X with Simplistic, Negative Frame



Issue X with New, More Expansive Frame



The goal of reframing is to help the individual see more possibilities for solving the problem, creating a sense of "possibility," as compared to the experience of:

- Being stuck in a closed system of negative perceptions and expectations, or
- One-dimensional thinking.

Now, it never happens during a conversation that we use just one of these communication techniques. Doing that would make us look foolish, simplistic, and would not serve our purpose of being effective communicators. In reality, one needs to be able to employ all of these techniques in the same conversation or discussion, creating "bridging" comments that allow one to move from one technique to another (Bridging will not be discussed in detail in this paper).

Practice using this assortment of communication techniques within the same discussion and notice the results. You may find that certain techniques are easier for you to use than others. In a recent two-day training (Flannes and Butler, 2003) on the subject of people skills, a majority of project managers reported that the most difficult technique to use was "the open-ended question." Many felt that it was not action-oriented enough for their styles, and because they were project managers, they wanted to be action-oriented to assist their team members. Conversely, others stated that it was a great technique and one that *"should be used more often in order to understand people better."* Such comments suggest that each of these communication techniques has benefits and liabilities; the "art" of implementation is knowing what technique to use at what time.

COMMUNICATION SUBTLETIES

In addition to these communication techniques, there are communication subtleties that can add great value to our ability to communicate effectively. Described below are two of these subtle levels of considering communication efforts. The internationally known psychologist James F.T. Bugental, Ph.D, developed the "alliance and context" concepts (1990). The "process and content" ideas have existed in different forms for a number of years within the body of research on counseling and communication skills.

ALLIANCE AND CONTEXT

When considering how to say something to someone, always consider the alliance and the context. The *alliance* refers to the nature of your relationship with the other person (Is the person a coworker, a friend, an intimate partner, a stranger, etc.) and the *context* refers to current setting (Are you talking to them in the hallway? The boardroom? A café? The car?). By tailoring your message after considering the alliance and the context, you have the best opportunity of successfully being "heard."

Alliance "windows" include:

Friend, coworker, boss, stranger, nasty customer, tennis partner, ex-wife, etc.

Context "windows" include:

Sitting in the conference room, on the phone, eating at a café, standing in the hall, etc.

Said differently, the concepts of alliance and context answer those general but very important questions such as: *"How should I say X to a person during a conflict?"* or *"What's the best way to tell someone that their work on the project needs to be more timely?"*

PROCESS AND CONTENT

The *process* addresses "how" you are talking about a subject (such as whether you are direct/indirect, clear/unclear, accusatory/supporting, happy/sad), while the *content* deals with the "subject" of the discussion (such as the software problems on the project, the time for the next meeting, or where you are going for lunch). Often, communication is ineffective because information is being sent via the process channel without the material being described openly and in a straightforward manner.

ABILITY TO CONCEPTUALIZE AND APPLY FOUR DISTINCT LEADERSHIP ROLES

Leadership roles in technical organizations are demanding positions, in part because one is leading very bright, opinionated, and independent professionals. Similarly, difficulty exists because the leader must execute a number of different leadership roles, based upon the stage of the project, the nature of the current problem, and the sophistication of the people involved. And the leader must be comfortable moving from one role to another very quickly, or must find a way to discharge a number of roles at the same time, in the same discussion.

Many, many books and articles have been written on the subject of leadership. The field of leadership abounds with specialists, systems, and training opportunities. Frequently, I feel overwhelmed when trying to wade through the information with an eye to identifying the common themes. In *People Skills for Project Managers* (Flannes and Levin, 2001) Dr. Ginger Levin and I took a "minimalist" view to articulating a model for describing leadership, believing that often, particularly when dealing with the ambiguous and often messy subject of people skills, keeping things simple makes sense.

This minimalist system resulted in leadership being described as consisting of four distinct but complementary leadership roles that were described as leadership "hats." These hats are like first cousins: different but related when the big picture is considered. These hats were described as *leader*, *manager*, *facilitator*, and *mentor*.

LEADER ROLE

The *leader* role involves the project manager articulating the "why" to the team. This means stating the vision, is pragmatic terms, describing why the project is being done. Not just "what" is to be done, but "why." Here, the project manager is describing the added value that this piece of work will bring to the customer. When offered this view of "why," team members often start a project with increased motivation, curiosity, and the willingness to take on arduous tasks. Presenting this vision is not a one-time task, and the project manager may need to remind team members going forward, especially during difficult times, why they are doing what they are doing.

MANAGER ROLE

The *manager* role involves tasks related to the establishment of the project administrative infrastructure and the monitoring of quality, costs, and schedules. Accountability and attention to details are hallmarks of this role. Obviously, without this role in place, the project drifts in dangerous directions. When pairing this role with the leader role, one can start to see that not all leaders are good managers, and vice versa. (The sophisticated or veteran project manager realizes which of these four roles are personal strengths or weaknesses; one doesn't have to do them all, just make sure that someone on the team covers them).

FACILITATOR ROLE

The *facilitator* role involves the project manager getting the resources needed by the team to complete the tasks of the project. This is a "making things happen for the team" function, and can involve obtaining financial and/or human resources for the team, garnering key executive political support, or confronting problematic subcontractors who are not meeting schedules. The facilitator role requires the ability to have vision, anticipating needs and problems.

MENTORING ROLE

And finally, the *mentoring* role involves both the obvious and subtle provision of developmental assistance to members of the team. Because project managers are project-task focused in their relationships with existing team members, this role does not involve a formal mentoring relationship where two people meet on a regular basis in support of the developmental needs of the more junior professional. Rather, this role involves the subtle guiding, teaching, encouraging, and developing of the team member, done in a manner

where the team member often does not know that he or she is being “mentored!” This is achieved by the project manager asking how he or she can be of assistance, quietly offering examples of how they or someone they saw in the past handle the team member’s current problem, and modeling behavior that is consistent with higher levels of professional performance.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF THE FOUR LEADERSHIP ROLES

A project manager or technical leader needs certain personal qualities to successfully discharge each of these leadership roles. Now, since my original training was as a clinical psychologist, let’s look the psychological attributes that are required for each of these four roles.

For the *leader* role, the individual must be comfortable in expressing himself or herself verbally, in a manner that interpersonally engages each of the team members (written expressions of the vision are not sufficient). One also needs to be able and comfortable in displaying a personal passion or excitement for the vision of the project. And related to this, the individual wearing the leader hat must have the psychological capability to process anger and disappointment, so that such feelings do not lead to a cynicism that will hinder the team’s ability to embrace a vision with motivation.

The *manager* role requires a psychological comfort with structure, monitoring and tracking, and the drive for closure. The drive for closure can be thought of as a perceptual style attribute, where the individual feels uncomfortable with “loose ends.” This internal, psychologically driven desire for the “tying up of loose ends” translates to the professional competency of being good at performing in the project closure stage. Also present psychologically with this role is being “thick-skinned,” comfortable confronting others and the ability to be comfortable when “not being liked” by team members. Said differently, this quality suggests a self concept not based in seeing one’s self as a “people pleaser.”

Facilitator has many of the qualities just described for the *manager* role, especially the psychological comfort with not being liked at times. Specific to this idea is the importance of skills and competencies in the art of assertiveness, which is defined as the willingness and ability to stand up for what you need, in a way that respects yourself and the other person, and a persistence over time to pursue the need even in the face of conflict.

And with *mentor*, the psychological requirement is the ability and comfort to “give” to others on interpersonal levels, where one is able to step out of his or her own experience enough to conceptualize the needs of the other, and is able to access an internal motivation to meet the needs of the other within a developmental framework. Often in the mentoring role, the “giving” must be offered with no strings attached, where the giver is comfortable with the idea that recognition and a thank-you may not be coming from the person who is receiving the mentoring or coaching.

No one leader or project manager is equally comfortable or psychologically talented in all four of these roles. When most people read this description of the psychological challenges of the four roles, there is often the reaction of “*this one I can easily handle*” or “*this one is a tough one for me.*” The question then arises about how one can develop the psychological comfort and competencies in these four roles. A VERY short answer, for the sake of this paper, would be to say that executive coaching and focused training settings often help.

VIGNETTE ILLUSTRATING THE FOUR LEADERSHIP “HATS”

Often, a vignette can be helpful in presenting a context for an idea or concept, and a vignette will be used to illustrate how these four leadership hats can be worn by the same project manager over the course of a day. The presentation of this project manager’s day is simplistic, and no leader ever has a day when just one leadership role is solely being exercised at any one point of time. Still, the vignette may communicate how different roles are employed, and how one needs to be comfortable and competent in shifting roles.

The following vignette describes a project manager’s day. I have just described the various leadership hats (*leader, manager, facilitator, and mentor*) that the project manager needs to be able to wear in leading teams. The leadership hats will appear in bold caps after the sentence or section that reflects the presence of that role.

*Barbara arrived to work early so that she could review the latest information on the expenditures for her project (**MANAGER**). As she was reading through the reports, she received a call from Paul, a junior project professional on her team, who seemed confused and lost about how to handle a tough negotiation that*

would take place that afternoon (**MENTOR**). Barbara agreed to go to Paul' s office and think out loud with him about how he could proceed (**MENTOR**).

After 15 minutes, she left his office and headed down the hall to speak with Eric, the project' s sponsoring executive. Eric had promised her additional people for the project, but had not followed through with his commitment. Barbara assertively made her case for the need for the two additional people, and Eric promised that they would be assigned to her within the next two weeks (**FACILITATOR**). Before leaving his office, Barbara took the opportunity to review project progress and deliverables to date (**MANAGER**).

Following lunch, Barbara met with James and Margaret who said they were not clear about how their assignment fit into the overall goals of the project, as they had been working as virtual team members at a remote location (**LEADER**). Barbara welcomed the chance to review the project goals, as well as subtly offering some suggestions about next steps that James and Margaret could take (**MANAGER, MENTOR**).

ABILITY TO ASSESS INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

As much as is logistically possible, it is crucial to attempt to see and embrace the individual differences present within each stakeholder.

Individual differences suggest that while your team may consist of “software engineers,” you in reality have a group of people with different personalities, values, and professional interests. Clearly, there is nothing new about a statement like that about individual differences, but its self evidence does not minimize the importance of remembering it in applied settings. And to the extent that you can “see” these individual differences, and then use this knowledge of differences to craft tailored approaches to relating to your stakeholder, the more success you will have.

MYERS-BRIGGS TYPE INDICATOR AND PEOPLE SKILLS IMPLICATIONS

It is important to not arbitrarily label individuals based upon your perceptions of their personality. However, it is nevertheless valuable to have a framework to apply when considering individual styles and how to best interact with each individual. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one such framework that works well in a number of different settings for me, but you should search for the system of describing personality that is most comfortable for you.

The MBTI can offer a wealth of information that you can use in developing your people skills of seeing your stakeholders as distinct individuals. This results from your being able to use the MBTI ideas to know yourself better (and therefore have a greater handle on your preferred method of communicating), as well as developing ideas about the style of your communication partner (and therefore being able to craft a tailored communication approach for that specific individual).

The MBTI is a personal style assessment tool based upon the psychological writings of Carl Jung (1971) who believed that individuals varied in terms of how they focused their energy, their manner of attending to the world, the method used to make decisions, and their preferred mode of organizing the self in the world.

Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers, enthralled by the richness of Jung' s ideas, created the MBTI as a way of bringing Jung' s idea to the general public. The questionnaire is used today in many countries and in many applications, one such application being the creation of balanced work teams (Hammer, 1997). The MBTI measures one's preferences on four different scales, which are extraversion-introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving.

Definitions of the MBTI terms are presented below:

Extraversion or Introversion: The manner in which a person is energized.

Extraversion: One is energized from a strong interaction with the outside world of activities and people contact, or

Introversion: Person is energized from a focus on one' s internareflection on ideas and impressions.

Sensing or Intuition: The manner in which a person attends to a task.

Sensing: Person attends to a task and the world through a pragmatic, factual orientation, often with an immediate time perspective, or

Intuition: One perceives a task more from the big picture perspective, with an eye towards possibilities and innovation.

Thinking or Feeling: The method a person uses to make a choice or decision.

Thinking: One makes a choice based upon a logical-rational review of the options, or

Feeling: Person uses the subjective and personal values to make decisions.

Judging or Perceiving: How does a person like to live or approach a situation?

Judging: Person prefers to go into an event with a plan and an agenda, or

Perceiving: One prefers a flexible and spontaneous approach, want to keep options open

There is no "right" or "wrong" style, and in fact, we all exhibit behavior and approaches that are representative of both sides of any of the four scales. What is important is the direction and the extent of the preference. By obtaining a working knowledge and understanding of the ideas behind the scales, the project manager can make deliberate choices regarding the selection and management of team members.

The individual who completes the MBTI, in addition to receiving information on each of the four individual scales, also receives a global "type," which is a combination of the preference for each of the four scales. There are sixteen possible types, representing the total number of possible combinations of the four scales. For a detailed description of the sixteen MBTI types, with important information regarding the work contributions of each of the types, see Hirsch and Kummerow (1990).

You can apply the MBTI ideas to working specifically with different issues with your project team. For example, let's assume that you have a team member who needs to learn some new information about a certain technology that you will be using on the new project. Let us assume that this team member takes the MBTI questionnaire, and is described in the results as E (Extravert), N (iNtuition), T (Thinking), and J (Judging). This team member's overall style is then known as ENTJ.

By referring to the chart below, you can then develop a "learning" plan for this person by capturing the bullet points under the appropriate letter. Such a learning plan, referring to the bullet points, would involve:

Putting this team member in learning situations where:

He can learn in a *collaborative, participatory manner* (E)
starting with an *overview of the concepts* and big picture (N)
which allows him to *develop theories* (T)
that can lead to *goal directed learning* (T)

Preferred Learning Approaches for the 8 MBTI Preferences

Extraversion

- Active, experiential
- Collaborative, participatory
- Think out loud
- Learn best in groups

Introversion

Reflective, observational
Lecture format, readings
Internally review and process
Learn best in solo settings

Sensing

- Desire concrete, practical applications
- Want step-by-step approach

Intuition

Desire overview and concepts
Want to follow ideas vs. steps

- Fact based
- Present time orientation for learning
- Tactile learners

- Idea based
- Future time frame application
- Visual learners

Thinking

- Desire theory presented sequentially, logically
- Does it “make sense?”
- Sequential learners
- Systemic decision makers

Feeling

- Emphasis on experiential learning
- Does it “feel right?”
- Random learners
- Value based decision makers

Judging

- Desire structure and order
- Like drills and repetition
- Goal orientation for learning

Perceiving

- “Cramped” by structure
- Prefer free flow experiences
- Learning for the “experience”

This same approach to crafting tailored approaches to dealing with stakeholders on a number of issues is presented again in the following chart. This chart provides information on implications for best approaches in communication, decision-making, learning (again), and resolving conflict for each of the eight MBTI preferences. These approaches of considering the individual qualities of each of your stakeholders can help you with the refinement of your people skills, particularly your ability to communicate with others, tailoring your message to the style of each individual.

| MBTI Type | <u>Implications for:</u> | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| | <u>Communication</u> | <u>Decision-Making</u> | <u>Learn</u> | <u>Conflict</u> |
| <i>Extravert</i> | expressive | participatory | interactive | talk it out |
| <i>Introvert</i> | reflective | think about it | review on their own | think it through |
| <i>Sensing</i> | concrete | practical | immediate time frame | wants examples |
| <i>Intuition</i> | big picture | concept | rationale | establish rules |
| <i>Thinking</i> | logical | the facts | a system | what' s fair |
| <i>Feeling</i> | personal | values | interactive | win-win |
| <i>Judging</i> | orderly | closure | follow a plan | resolve |
| <i>Perceiving</i> | free-form | options | informal | let it evolve |

The MBTI has been quite popular within technology organizations over the last decade. If you have taken the MBTI before, keep in mind that there are many new wrinkles to this very effective assessment tool. Research continues, and a series of new interpretive reports is now available. One of these reports, the STEP II, now describes subscales for each of the preferences. These subscales offer a great richness to the original concepts. The MBTI is available in a number of different language versions. For more information on the these new MBTI advances and products, you may contact an MBTI publisher (CPP at www.cpp-db.com in the United States or OPP Limited in Oxford in the UK at www.opp.co.uk) or me at steve@flannesassociates.com.

ABILITY TO MOTIVATE INDIVIDUAL STAKEHOLDERS AND TEAMS

Motivation is one of the people skills that is really more art than science. As our previous discussion of individual differences suggests, what is motivating to one individual will not obviously be motivating to another team member. Work with technical trained professionals over the years has suggested to me that three core beliefs should be considered when you are crafting a motivation strategy for an individual team member or for the team as a unit. These core beliefs include:

- Avoid using clichés, slogans, and stereotypes in thinking about motivation. What motivates an individual is a function of his or her values, personality, current career stage, and professional goals.
- Always initiate a frank, direct conversation with each team member about what that individual finds is motivating for he or she. Ask open-ended questions that facilitate the team member in thinking out loud about his or her individual sources of motivation. Make this an ongoing conversation with the team member, as compared to a one-time meeting at the start of the project.
- During these discussions, be active in your questioning, using probing questions. Be honest and realistic with the team member, staying away from over promising what is not possible for the project. Help guide the team member to project activities that reflect team member passions and capabilities while still achieving mission-critical results.

Regarding your behavior as a leader, my experience in working with technical professionals suggests that you should consider the following checklist for your own behavior:

1. Are you applying the basic interpersonal communication techniques (open-ended questions, active listening, tracking, and reframing) presented at the beginning of this paper? If you are, you are creating the interpersonal connections, and relationships, that later allow you to use when communicating around issues of motivation. If you are not using these interpersonal techniques, you have no “channels” created to use in interacting later on the subject of motivation.
2. Are your statements and actions congruent? The best-crafted mission statements and verbal pronouncement are meaningless if your actions do not match your statements. When this type of incongruity exist, motivation is difficult at best.

THE “FLOW” VIEW OF MOTIVATION

When thinking about approaches to motivation that can be applied to motivating team members as well as motivating yourself, let's consider a very interesting body of work by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D.(1996) that has innovative applications to the subject of motivation. He has written on the subject of the "flow experience" as a crucial foundation for the presence of individual creativity, and, by implication, motivation.

Briefly stated, the flow experience involves activities that, because of their specific importance and meaning for the individual, offer the individual a deeply satisfying experience. Some of the attributes of the flow experience involve the individual's perception that there are clear, action goals along each step of the work process, the chance to receive real-time feedback exists, there is a match (or balance) between the team member's skills and duties, the team member's concern for failure is minimal, self-consciousness is reduced due to the involvement in something that is very personally important, and the team member is so immersed in the task that the internal tracking of time is not paramount.

Specifically, the practical application of these flow ideas for a project manager looking for ways to motivate team members (or to motivate himself or herself) would contain these points:

- Ask the questions such as *“What part of your work really excites you?”* and *“What are the things you do at work where you really lose track of time, and get deeply involved in what you're doing?”* and *“What's your description of the ideal work day, the type of day where you feel you that you are really firing on all cylinders?”*

A PERSONAL OBSERVATION

As I write these words, I am in San Francisco, sitting in an office on the building's twenty-third floor, with a view down to the North Beach section of San Francisco and a view of the Golden Gate Bridge. I realize that: I have been writing for two hours without noticing the time, I'm feeling really tuned in to what I'm doing, and I

haven't noticed that the bright sun of the morning has given way to clouds and fog. This immersion in what I'm doing, losing a sense of time and external cues, is a flow experience for me.

These experiences motivate me (and help me handle stress). Look for opportunities for these flow motivation moments for team member activities and for yourself. They certainly aren't present in all work tasks, but they can make the more painful or boring work tasks more manageable.

INDIVIDUALS ARE NOT FIXED OBJECTS

Motivation approaches should also consider certain more philosophical considerations, such as what is one's view of the nature of people. While that sounds like a lofty consideration, it can have some very concrete applications to how we interact (motivate) our stakeholders.

Leaders need to remember that team members are not fixed or static objects. They are not inanimate objects to which we "do" something, such as "motivate." People are evolving, changing, fluid, and, unpredictable, and we all respond best when we are treated as such. The antithesis of seeing people in this respectful manner is treating them as objects that we must leverage towards common goals.

We are treating stakeholders as objects when we view them through static or arbitrary filters. Said differently, this is the process of viewing people through a stereotype. Consider your own objectifying thoughts (we all have them!) when you observe your internal reactions when you read the words "sponsoring executive," "outside project auditor," and "corporate attorney." Like most people, you will notice a set of characteristics that you attribute to these titles. The attributions may be positive or negative, accurate or inaccurate, but they are still filters through which your vision may bias you towards seeing them as static objects.

Clearly, a certain degree of objectification is necessary in the world (without being able to make some assumptions about people's roles, we would be unable to function each day), but the challenge is to be aware of the nature and extent of our objectifying tendencies so that we may treat people as individuals, and therefore create the foundation for a motivating team environment.

In concluding this section on motivation, let's consider two key points:

- As a leader, you will make great strides in creating a motivating environment when you strive for congruence between your words and your actions.

People have incredibly accurate antennae that pick up a lack of congruence between statements and behavior. And even if the team member does not consciously register the lack of congruence, he or she will still pick up on unconscious levels that something doesn't smell right. Once that takes place, motivation will suffer to some degree, regardless of your other initiatives.

- Ask the team member what is motivating for him or her.

They are the experts in this area, and you need to position yourself as a facilitator to assist them in articulating their sources of motivation. Know your team members as individuals. Remember, just because something motivates you is no guarantee that it will motivate others.

ABILITY TO MANAGE CONFLICT AND AGREEMENT

In most cultures, conflict is a subject of anxiety for most people. Rarely is there a person who feels that the resolution of conflict is an easy skill to master. And this view of conflict has been born out in my experience in conducting training sessions for project managers in the United States and the United Kingdom; during these sessions project managers routinely say that conflict resolution skills are the toughest of the people skills to master.

For most individuals, and in most cultures, for that matter, conflict is often viewed in dichotomous terms. On one end of the dichotomy resides the belief that conflict is often resolved through aggressive means. On the other end of the dichotomy is the belief that conflict is often resolved through a passive giving in to the other, who is often seen as the aggressor. And it is this dichotomous thinking on conflict resolution that makes the

subject of conflict such a tough one for most of us; we only see two ways to resolve the conflict, and neither one looks very good!

THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODEL

Fortunately, Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann (2004) have created an approach to conflict resolution that gives us more options, and tools, that we can use. Thomas and Kilmann have described a multifaceted approach to resolving conflict that is based in the description of five distinct techniques or approaches that can be used. Thomas and Kilmann believe that each of the five approaches is a valid approach for certain situations, and that no one approach is the “right” one. Additionally, they believe that our goal as a professional is to develop competencies in each of the five approaches, plus the knowledge of when to use what approach.

This model consists of the following approaches:

AVOIDING

Avoiding, which can be used when the issue is not that important and when you can afford to let it slip by without taking action, possibly to curry the favor of a stakeholder who might have a certain need. For example, you might avoid confronting the team member who missed the last project meeting because you remember she cancelled her vacation over the holidays to assist in launching the project.

COMPETING

Competing, where the issue is very important, you know (believe?) that your position is the right one, and you have to make sure your position prevails. An example could be the team member who is about to employ a software package that you know is significantly flawed, and you must stop its deployment in order to stave off big problems later. In essence, you are following an “I must win, the other person must lose” strategy.

ACCOMMODATING

Accommodating is used when you give in to the position of the other person, often to create good will, on a subject that is of little importance. You are saying, so to speak, that “*whatever you want on this issue, you can have.*” This approach could be exemplified by letting the other person choose the hotel for the team meeting because apparently he has strong feelings about the subject, you believe that it really doesn't matter where it's held, and you do not want to create a needless point of contention.

COMPROMISING

Compromising is appropriate for a situation of moderate consequence, where both individuals have decent points, and it's important to find a win-win solution where the parties can meet in the middle without quality suffering.

COLLABORATING

Collaborating is a manifestation of “two heads are better than one.” Use this approach where both parties in the conflict are equally competent, a creative solution is desired, and both parties must conclude the process with the feeling of having been deeply involved in creating the negotiated solution.

A special aspect of the Thomas-Kilmann model is the fact that Thomas and Kilmann have created a self-assessment instrument that provides results showing an individual's preferred approach to resolving conflict. This is an excellent, short, self-scoring instrument that offers many positive directions for developing competencies in all five of the approaches. Project managers and other leaders in technical fields find this assessment tool, coupled with a discussion of the results, to be valuable in both team building efforts (letting others on the team see the conflict resolution approaches of their peers) or when project progress is “stuck” due to unresolved or unexpressed conflict among team members.

In an effort to make these conflict resolution approaches and techniques more tangible and practical, listed below are examples of questions that reflect the five different approaches.

Examples of Statements Reflective of the Five Conflict Resolution Approaches

Avoiding

- *Yes, that' s a possibility...let' s think ~~me~~ about that and talk again.*
- *I realize that' s an issue....what' s most important to talk about today?*
- *I hear you, I really hear you... (while nodding, making eye contact)*

Compromising

- *I need to have Bill work on this project. If Bill works on this project, what would you need from me in order to cover your other responsibilities?*
- *OK, I can move up the completion date, but I' ll need you to alter the specifications or change the level of resources I' m getting.*
- *We' re not getting anywhere in trying to change eachother' s mind. Can we meet somewhere in the middle?*

Accommodating

- *That' s fine... we can do it your way on this.*
- *What can I do for you on this issue to make it not a problem any more?*
- *You' ve worked on this system a lot longer than I have. Let' s do it your way*

Competing

- *Bill, I realize that you want to do it your way, but I can' t OK that change. We' ll have to keep proceeding along our current path.*
- *(Increasing the intensity to make the point) Bill, you don' t seem to be hearing me. We can' t change directions, and we' re sticking to the original plan!*
- *(Using humor to defuse a possibly tense situation) Bill, when you' re the boss, sitting in this chair, you can do it your way! Until then, we' re going to follow my plan*

Collaborating

- *Sounds like we both have some good ideas. How can we integrate them together?*
- *I hadn' t thought of that point before, and I like it. How can we make it work with some of the other ideas that I mentioned earlier?*

As with the acquisition of almost all new behaviors (i.e. "people skills"), these five conflict resolution techniques become part of our repertoire only when we practice them. Try practicing them in settings where the conflict and its resolution are not that significant.

ABILITY TO MEDIATE AND MANAGE PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL DISTRESS

Project management in the world of technology is a stressful role. Matrix management paradigms create ambiguous situations where the old description of "having the responsibility without the authority" is valid. Also, the problems encountered are often unique and singular, hence the experience of often starting from scratch to invent a new solution or initiative. And finally, the pressure to meet the triple constraint can easily create the psychological experience of "I can' t win!"

These attributes of project work create demands on one' s emotional, physical, and intellectual resources (Interestingly, research on intellectual and cognitive functioning under stress documents a significant decrease-temporary, thankfully- in the level of intellectual functioning when one operates under prolonged periods of stress.) Project managers are often left to manage their stress through their own devices. Many project managers, during training that I have conducted, talk about the loneliness of their position, where they interact with numerous stakeholders, often without their own individual support system.

We all know the obvious approaches to managing stress. Get plenty of exercise and sleep, stay away from "bad" substances and food, spend time with friends and family, etc. Unfortunately, knowledge of the obvious

approaches does not necessarily prompt us to use these tools. And sometimes even when we use the approaches, we find that they are not sufficient to do the job.

Consequently, the following more subtle approaches to managing distress are offered for your consideration. These approaches represent general schools thought (and research) on effective tools that one can apply. As you read through the descriptions, you are encouraged to experiment at some time with all of them. Then, determine the ones that work best for you and insert them into your life.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology is a system of approaching stress, and wellness, from the perspective of looking to *find some positive aspect within the overall stressful situation*. This approach believes that if you can find a positive component within the stressful situation, you can embrace that component, work with it, and gain something from your efforts. This is a more formalized version of "every cloud has a silver lining."

Examples of positive psychology include:

- The elderly woman, who, during her husband's serious illness, finds that the "positive" component is her working on developing her autonomy and independence (which she never had to any degree in over 45 years of marriage).
- The project manager, struggling with a very angry stakeholder, finds this challenging relationship as an opportunity to work on her developing more effective conflict resolution skills.

RESILIENCE

This approach to stress management is grounded in the idea that in order to handle stress in our lives, *we need to have previously created systems/people/approaches that are a positive, nurturing influence on us and our lives*. This school of thought suggests that if we create such supports ahead of time, we will be able to bounce back (be "resilient") when we encounter a stressful period.

Examples of resilience as a stress management approach include:

- The project manager who, having accepted a position in a new, distant city, joins the local PMI chapter, hoping that this new network of peers will provide some form of support should he encounter stressful situations in the new position.
- Elizabeth, was a project manager who was assigned to manage a project team consisting of complainers, blamers, and beginners. Having two months lead time before the project started, Elizabeth chose to begin an exercise program, believing that her being in good shape would give her the stamina (or "resilience") to bounce back from the stress challenges she might face with this new team.

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL APPROACHES

The cognitive-behavioral school of psychology believes that *our thoughts, or "cognitions," play a big role in determining our emotions and our behavior*. Cognitions are those thoughts and internal dialogues that play over and over in our heads, often appearing as a background accompaniment as we go about our day.

An example of this internal, often negative thought process would be the following statement:

"I'll never get along with this team member; he's always been disruptive on every team he's been on!"

The cognitive-behavioral approach suggests that we actively try crafting a new cognition, something that is more positive but is still realistic. The belief is that a more positive cognition sets off a more positive chain reaction of physiological processes and emotions that enable us to more productively manage stress.

Using the cognition above as an example, a more positive, self-crafted cognition would be something like the following: *"Yes, he's been a problem on previous teams, but maybe there's something I can do with him to impact his attitude. Maybe there's a project task that he has not done before that I could offer him; he might enjoy the new challenge."*

INVOLVEMENT IN "FLOW" ACTIVITIES

The concept of "flow" was discussed earlier in the section on motivation. To review briefly, flow activities are those *special activities that we can find in life where we tend to "lose ourselves"* when we are involved in them. We lose a sense of time, we drop any awareness of self-consciousness, and we have adequate skill for the demands of the task. Each person's list of flow activities is different, and examples can include:

- Playing a musical instrument
- Exercising
- Reading
- Touring a museum
- Working on a craft or an art form
- Hiking in the woods
- ?

When engaged in a flow activity, our obsessive thinking about our stressful event reduces, our physiological processes shift (blood pressure may lower, etc.), and our subjective optimism about "life being worth it, after all!" usually increases.

WRITING ABOUT THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS IN A JOURNAL

Journal writing has been found to be very helpful in reducing stress. Honestly putting our thoughts on paper, in a direct, unvarnished manner, helps us externalize the thoughts and feelings associated with the stressful situation. This process often leaves us feeling less emotionally burdened by the stressful event. Also, as these emotions leave us, we are able to think more clearly about options and steps that we can take to address the problem.

When using a journal, write about what is going on with you right now, and let the thoughts and feelings emerge. You are not writing a composition; you are merely putting on paper whatever thought or feeling surfaces. Here is an example:

"As I sit here on the couch starting to write, I can feel the knot in my stomach. I bet it's related to that Fred that I've got on my team. When he says those critical things in a meeting, I feel like screaming! I like to say: Fred, you are such a..... and a.....! And now that reminds me of when I ran into him last year, before we were working together. I always felt so anxious around him..."

The goal is to just capture whatever thought, emotion, memory or dialogue that comes to you. Write it for yourself. It does not need to make sense, nor have a theme to it. If you are concerned with confidentiality, tear it up after you write it. There's no particular need for you to keep it, unless you find value in that for yourself. Another suggestion: In today's world of email and files, it's probably more effective (and safer!) if you do not do it on the keyboard.

COMPETENCY IN SIX ACTIVE CAREER MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Since 1986, I have been a consulting psychologist with DBM (www.dbm.com), a global leader in the provision of career transition services. In this capacity, I have conducted thousands of career assessments with individuals ranging from mid level managers to chief executive officers. Through these individual consulting meetings, I have come away with a number of key learnings about successful career management during this period of change noted for distributed work teams, independent agents gathering as needed to form project teams to complete distinct pieces of work, and continual corporate downsizing and outsourcing.

The six key learnings can be expressed on both philosophical levels and on pragmatic levels.

IT'S YOUR CAREER

On a philosophical level, the following statement is gaining increasing utility:

The company owns the job; you own the career.

This statement, in reality a professional code to live by, calls upon us all to become and remain proactive in the promotion of our own career, regardless of how happy or content we are in our present situation. We have all witnessed how unseen forces shatter career directions, with the recipient of the shattering often caught off guard and unprepared for a career search. Expecting career positions to remain secure and steady is foolish in today's world, regardless of whether one works in the private sector or in the public sector.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Charles Grantham's book, *The Future of Work: The Promise of the New Digital Work Society* (2000), is an excellent guide to the issues of the shifting landscape of how work will be conducted. It is a must read for any technology professional desiring to take active control over his or her own professional destiny.

On more tactical levels, I have found the following five career management activities to be present when a professional has had success in actively managing his or her career. There is much that can be written about each area, but that is not the purpose of this paper. The purpose here will be to present the ideas and to ask you, the reader, to take stock of how many of these activities are currently present in your professional life:

KEEP AN ACTION ORIENTED RESUME ON HAND

One should always have a current resume on hand. Schedule fifteen minutes each month to add points to your resume.

The resume itself needs to be action and achievement oriented. Tell the reader what you "achieved" as compared to what you "did." Too many resumes have phrases like "lead a team of software engineers..." A more impactful statement would be "reduced delivery time of projects by 10% while hiring and deploying a virtual team of software engineers..." The goal is to add punch to your message. Achievements and accomplishments tell the story.

ESTABLISH AND NOURISH A PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

I have found that most professionals hate the word "networking." Few people claim to be good at it or to enjoy it, although most acknowledge its importance. If you feel a stigma associated with the word "networking," then come up with another word that feels more comfortable and get started. One project manager in the software industry told me that she refers to her network as "that bunch of people I know in my industry that I try to find some reason to stay in touch with." For this professional, her reframing of the term let her get involved with the process without feeling the negative self statements that surfaced when she said the word "networking" (*"I'm no good at working a room and I can't make small talk that well," etc.*).

HAVE SOME FUN WITH INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Informational interviews are those less formal interviews with people that give you a chance to find out what is happening at other companies or in other industries. These types of meetings, often just thirty minutes long, keep you stimulated about what is going on, suggest possible future directions for you, and assist you in building your roster of professional contacts. Schedule these meetings periodically even when you are content in your current position.

QUALIFY YOUR REFERENCES

One of the biggest mistakes I have seen when professionals are interviewing for a job is that they do not qualify their references. Qualifying one's references involves the following: Before you give an interviewer a list of your references, YOU should first call the references and tell them what you are applying for, how you think you can make a contribution in the new job, and remind them of some of your key strengths that they might want to mention. All too often, professionals allow their references to go into hibernation, the result being less than a focused recommendation when you really need one.

BE "CHEMISTRY" FOCUSED

The higher one goes in an organization, the more that the chemistry between you and the potential hiring manager and the chemistry between you and your peers will determine your success. Chemistry cannot be created between people, but it can be enhanced if you are competent and artful in using the people skills presented in this paper (especially when using the interpersonal communication techniques presented at the start of this paper). Remember, there are lots of people in the world of work who are as smart as you and

have as many skills. What can differentiate you from the masses is your competency in the people skills aspects of working.

CONCLUSIONS

People skills involve the abilities to communicate effectively on interpersonal levels, wear different leadership hats, apply a system that identifies individual differences, motivate individuals and teams, productively manage conflict, manage and mediate personal and professional stress, and become active in ongoing career management.

While these skills and perspectives can be presented and learned to certain degrees in intellectual, didactic settings such as a reading of this paper, they are best learned in experiential settings where one can practice the skills in real time. These experiential settings can include a range of informal or formal venues, such as casual social settings, workshops, or executive coaching.

The way work in the technology world is completed is changing rapidly, with the expansion of virtual teams, the influence of cross cultural factors, and the realignment of models depicting how work is completed within organizational settings.

No longer can technical professionals assume that they can succeed with just their technical skills (if they ever could). The successful technology professional of today and tomorrow owns a meld of people skills and technical skills. Author and thought leader Tom Peters (2004) captures this point well when he states:

“These days, it’s the people skills that matter and will increasingly determine an organization’s success.”

Don’t wait for others to help you develop your people skills. Take the responsibility for this, and begin today by taking small steps in that direction.

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