

## Technical Performance and Interpersonal Skills In The Project's Staff

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### *Is something missing in the education and training of project staff?*

Early in my career, I was told that enhancing my technical skills would bring me success and, of course, money would reinforce the fact that I was successful. I was convinced that anything under the heading of mechanics, physics, chemistry, or other physical sciences would advance my career. Although not stated, it was implied that interpersonal skills were secondary to those “hard disciplines.”

Education and training focused on those technical subjects that promoted understanding of physical properties, with little or no exposure to formal training in interpersonal skills. Nowhere was there any training or participation in teamwork or the interaction among groups of people. School grades were on an individual basis and often in competition with classmates – not cooperation. All rewards in the educational and training processes were based on individual performance.

All too often, career goals are set based on individual achievement; work is single-person efforts and the resultant rewards. Managers encourage this type of work in that single person effort is easier to measure and manage. Group activity is encouraged as “go along to get along, don’t rock the boat, don’t interfere with another’s work, and don’t try to change the way things have always been done.” A person could work in that type of environment without doing too much thinking. Group efforts are often called team efforts although collaborative work and a single goal for all individuals are often missing.

### *On the other hand, what is teamwork?*

One of the worst criticisms that I ever received from my boss was “you’re not a team player.” I asked the boss “who is in the team?” and “what are the team’s goals?” The response was “you know what I mean.” Perhaps a better criticism from the boss would have been “you disagree with me” -- because there was no team, just a group of people pursuing individual efforts. Teamwork to this boss was “we have consensus when everyone agrees with me.”

Military service gave me an exposure to team type activities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Military leaders were picked based on “natural selection” – i.e., they were senior in rank and therefore considered more knowledgeable. Technical skills counted for a lot and individual effort was rewarded through medals and certificates of achievement. Small units, such as the Infantry platoon, were more exposed to teamwork and unit effort. Team leadership was frequently exhibited by the lieutenants and sergeants in the Army at the platoon and company level, while many of the senior officers managed individuals.

NASA’s astronauts are trained as teams and work closely to build the trust and confidence needed to function as a unit in space. Each flight of the shuttle has a unique patch that is designed by the team. The design of the patch is one of the first tasks in teambuilding and demonstrating the ability to work within a team environment. Astronauts are trained to perform tasks in a confined space and work with others in a collaborative manner that does not give offense to other team mates.

Teamwork is promoted in sports, but still many trophies go to individuals. All team members are not paid equally nor do members get rewarded for a team effort. Some positions in sports teams get more recognition than other positions.

For projects in a matrix organization to optimize the use of human resources, it is especially difficult to develop teams. Different leadership style for project managers and assignment of staff across several projects easily creates situations whereby team members become passive about being contributors to the project. They often just do only as they are told. Teamwork becomes more of a “go along to get along” function.

***What contributes to development of interpersonal skills?***

The first and perhaps only interpersonal skill training that many people receive is from their mother, which typically is –

- No fighting or calling names
- Play fair
- Share your toys

Behavioral traits, most specifically self-control, have been recognized as essential to leadership. In the mid-1700s, Benjamin Franklin recognized self-control through denying himself the “right to criticize others.” In the mid-1800s, Confederate General Robert E. Lee believed “that one must control oneself to be able to control others.” Franklin may have used humor to highlight the shortcomings of others, but there does not appear to be a direct criticism of any one individual. Lee, as a military leader, followed his maxim by selecting those individuals exhibiting self-control as his subordinates in the American Civil War.

In the business world, interpersonal skills often are dictated by what is appropriate behavior to maintain relationships. “Appropriate behavior,” often called “ethical behavior,” in any environment reflects a consideration for the feelings and prerogatives of others while working toward your goals. It is essential to build trust in others through honest dealings and truthful communications. Confidence is gained by a promise made and a promise kept.

Project managers probably have the most difficulty in getting a team of newly assigned, full-time and part-time staff to follow him or her. The project manager may not be the most technically qualified individual on the project, but must be competent in interpersonal skills to bring the team together then motivate them to perform at their best. Interpersonal skills should be used to build on self-esteem and to motivate the team.

There are some “do’s” and don’ts” that one should be aware of in any environment. This list may be helpful in recognizing situations and improving ones interpersonal skills that relate to communication.

Don’t: That is a stupid thing to say.

Do: I didn’t understand your comment.

Don’t: Any idiot can do that.

Do: It should be easy to accomplish.

Don’t: You should have known how to do that.

Do: Next time, ask if you are unsure of how to do that.

Don’t: I thought you were competent enough to do that.

Do: Let’s build on these things so you are confident in the future.

Don't: Let me show you why you have just done something very stupid.

Do: Let's see where this thing went wrong.

Don't: Its about time that you completed that task.

Do: That task took longer than we expected.

Don't: You're either a liar or stupid. I hope that you are a liar because I don't have time to teach you.

Do: This task didn't go off well. Let's review what happened for improvement in the future.

Don't: You'd better have that job done by Monday afternoon or I'm going to have your hide.

Do: When can I get the result of your work? It is important that I have it no later than Monday afternoon.

Project management consultants are hired for the technical skills and fired for the lack of interpersonal skills. No matter how technically qualified a person is in project management, getting along with the customer is one key to success. Arrogance and ignorance are a bad combination for a consultant. Technical arrogance, a reliance on technical jargon to impress the customer, is probably the most damaging to a consultant's position. Attempting to conceal errors through arrogance only compounds a bad situation, and does not fix the problem.

Perhaps the best method for learning good interpersonal skills is to watch role models to see how they handle situations, especially stressful situations. Reading biographies of well-respected present day and historical figures often reveals brilliance in how interpersonal skills were used to defuse, neutralize, or motivate. Those episodes of superior use of interpersonal skills should be emulated for success.

### ***Summarizing thoughts.***

In summary, it is sufficient to say the interpersonal skills that one possesses can be a great asset in any social or business environment. This has been a brief touching on the need for good interpersonal skills drawn primarily from experiences with a wide range of individuals in age and profession. All ages and all professions should continue to improve in interpersonal skills.

*asapm's* certification program recognizes the importance of 15 interpersonal skills in its National Competence Baseline document (see the downloadable version at [www.asapm.org](http://www.asapm.org)). These key knowledge, skills and competences in the National Competence Baseline are assessed to validate that the certification candidate possesses the interpersonal skills needed to perform in a project environment. These 15 interpersonal skills are key to project management performance.

Interpersonal skills are most often learned from association with talented people, who demonstrate adeptness at dealing with others, and from reading biographical descriptions of how difficult situations were handled. Learning interpersonal skills never stops and is a continual learning process. We learn from our experiences or the experiences of others. Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), first chancellor of Germany, perhaps expressed the best approach to experience. "Fools say they prefer to learn from experience. I, however, prefer to learn from the experience of others."