

Creating More Effective Managers Through Interpersonal Skills Training

Managers face a host of responsibilities every day, and none so important as interacting in effective and meaningful ways with both direct reports and executives.

Managers attain their position due to exceptional “hard” skills, but some have stronger interpersonal (“soft”) skills than others.

What happens over the long term when managers communicate poorly or fail to resolve conflict?

What are the implications for the organization as a whole?

The TRACOM Group surveyed employees at companies throughout the U.S. to ascertain how a variety of interpersonal skills impact productivity in the workplace. The survey was conducted in late 2007 with 166 executives, 337 managers and 377 staff, all of whom had participated in The TRACOM Group's SOCIAL STYLE™ training. The survey participants were asked a series of questions about organizational performance in the areas of managerial responsibilities, communication and leadership.

Key Findings

Interpersonal Skills

- More than half of all managers chose “interpersonal skills” as one of their greatest strengths.
- 55 percent of staff said their bosses could improve interpersonal skills to impact individual performance.
- 23.5 percent of managers have terminated an employee due to poor interpersonal skills.
- 84.8 percent of executives have witnessed an executive-level leader fail or derail due to poor interpersonal skills.
- 56.4 percent of managers have decided NOT to promote someone due to the person's poor interpersonal skills.
- Nearly all executive respondents agree that interpersonal skills become increasingly important as a person progresses through the managerial ranks.

Communication

- More than half of all managers selected “effective communication” as one of their greatest strengths.
- 77.7 percent of staff thought their bosses could communicate more effectively to impact individual performance.
- 84.8 percent of executives feel that ineffective communication is a deficiency among first-level managers.
- 81.9 percent of managers and 87 percent of staff believe that poor communication within or across work teams was a cause of poor productivity in the workplace.
- 90.2 percent of executives chose effective communication with all levels of employees as an important skill in progressing from first-level management into executive-level roles.
- 72.6 percent of executives indicated that ineffective communication with all levels of employees is a common reason that executive-level leaders fail or become derailed in their careers.

Conflict Management

- 69.4 percent of managers believe that managing team conflict more effectively would have a beneficial impact on their team's performance.
- 53.7 percent of staff selected “manage team conflict” as a skill that his/her boss could improve upon in order to impact individual performance.
- 58.2 percent of executives named poor conflict management as one of the five greatest deficiencies among first-level managers.
- More than half of executive respondents chose “good conflict management skills” as one of the five skills most important for progressing from first-level management to executive-level leadership roles.

Research by the Cutter Consortium, consultants in business and IT, shows that a lack of interpersonal skills is the main cause of leadership failure. Interpersonal skills include the leader's ability to build strong relationships internally and externally, and to motivate others. The most effective leaders adjust their behavior to reflect the needs of the situation and the people they are working with.

The Connection—and Disconnect—Between Leadership and Interpersonal Skills

The survey data reveals a disconnect between how managers see themselves and how their staff see them. While over half of the managers who participated thought interpersonal skills were one of their greatest strengths, 55 percent of staff said their bosses could improve those skills. This lack of personal objectivity is part of human nature and speaks to the need for an assessment that includes feedback from co-workers as well as the standard self-rating.

Leadership expert Susan West wrote in a recent article, "The bottom line is that when it comes to being a good manager or leader, you must master the hard skills of your specific job as well as the soft skills of interpersonal relations. Interpersonal skills must be a focus of your leadership development."¹ Nearly all executives participating in this survey agree that interpersonal skills become increasingly important as a person progresses through the managerial ranks, and they have seen the consequences of ill-trained or ill-suited peers as well. 84.8 percent have witnessed a high-level leader fail or derail due to poor interpersonal skills. If poor leadership were a disease, this high percentage would categorize it as an epidemic. As West recommends, interpersonal skills training is clearly needed as an element of leadership development.

The Impact of Communication

Once again, the data show the difference between self-perception and others'. More than half the managers felt that effective communication was one of their greatest strengths, yet 77.7 percent of staff thought their bosses could communicate more effectively. Significantly, they felt this better communication would positively impact individual performance. This suggests that less than a quarter of staff are satisfied with their bosses' communication skills. Executives seem to share that opinion, with 84.8 percent of executives selecting ineffective communication as a deficiency among first-level managers.

Ineffective communication can cause more than misunderstandings. Nearly 82 percent of managers and 87 percent of staff believe that poor communication within or across work teams is a cause of poor productivity in the workplace. Nearly 73 percent of executives indicated that a common reason for executive-level leaders to fail or become derailed in their careers is ineffective communication with all levels of employees. If effective communication can improve individual performance, poor communication skills can lessen it — or even ruin an otherwise-promising career.

¹ West, Susan. "Interpersonal Skills — The Keys To Management And Leadership." <http://www.isnare.com/?aid=154822&ca=Leadership>

A study in March 2008 by Colorado State University and Regis Learning Solutions compared the three leading training programs in interpersonal skills: DiSC model from Inscape Publishing; the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, or MBTI, model from CPP Inc.; and Social Style. Study participants said that the Social Style model is easier to understand and use than the other two programs, and it outperforms them in terms of workplace training.

Managing Conflict

In an award-winning management study, the authors reported that managers spend up to 42 percent of their work time resolving interpersonal friction, conflict, refusal to collaborate and other forms of non-productive behavior in the workplace.² Nearly 60 percent of executives named poor conflict management as one of the five greatest deficiencies among first-level managers. Staff recognize this deficiency as well; 53.7 percent chose “Manage team conflict” as a skill that their bosses could improve upon to impact individual performance. And 69.4 percent of managers agree that managing team conflict more effectively would have a beneficial impact on their team’s performance.

If managers lack the needed interaction skills, all this time spent in poor communication may further reduce individual and team morale, decrease productivity and increase turnover as frustrated employees disengage or leave. With the appropriate interpersonal skills, managers can more effectively manage employees for greater productivity and engagement and reduced turnover. Time will be freed for managers to then perform more productive work themselves.

The Power of Social Style

Social Style is a powerful tool for understanding behavioral differences and creating strategies for effective relationships. Individuals are charted according to their assertive and responsive behaviors, and these behavioral preferences are then categorized into one of four quadrants: Amiable, Driving, Analytical, or Expressive. Pinpointing an individual’s Social Style helps them understand their verbal and non-verbal communication tendencies and how they are perceived by other Social Styles. Each participant does a self-rating and is also rated by coworkers in what is known as a multi-rater assessment. In this way, participants obtain a well-rounded and more objective—and accurate—picture of their Social Style. An individual not only better understands how his or her behavior is perceived, but also how this affects every interaction.

This accurate picture of oneself can then positively affect workplace interactions. The TRACOM Group’s study found that:

- 81.9 percent of managers that have participated in Social Style training agree that the training has helped them to become more effective managers.
- 80.1 percent of managers agreed that Social Style training has helped them have more effective relationships with direct reports.
- 82.8 percent of managers agreed that Social Style training has helped them to be better coaches or mentors.

² Watson, C., & Hoffman, R. (1996[0]). Managers as Negotiators. *Leadership Quarterly*, 7(1).

The TRACOM Group helps individuals and organizations improve workplace performance by building interpersonal skills, improving teamwork, developing leaders and enhancing communications. TRACOM offers measurement-based learning models, courses, surveys, assessment tools and consulting services, which have been used successfully for nearly 50 years. Much of TRACOM's work is based on the SOCIAL STYLE MODEL™, a proven model for effective work and personal relationships. TRACOM is a division of Reed Business Information.



Summary and Implications

The vast majority of managers and staff in this survey said that poor communication within or across work teams is one of the greatest causes of poor productivity in the workplace. Most executives agreed that one's interpersonal skills could make or break a career. This in-the-trenches look at work life identifies a real need: better interpersonal effectiveness skills. Other research shows that when managers (or employees) learn to use such interpersonal skills, they are able to apply them in a wide variety of job-specific activities, including leading teams, coaching, managing conflict and even selling. This data shows that interpersonal skills — unlike many functional job skills — are extremely beneficial to all groups of employees and throughout the career track of individual employees.

Of the three leading interpersonal skills programs available today, Social Style was found to be the easiest to understand and use, and the most relevant for workplace training needs. TRACOM's exclusive multi-rater assessment gives participants a well-rounded understanding of their Social Style. Over 80 percent of managers agreed that Social Style training has helped them to become more effective managers or mentors and to improve relationships with direct reports. When a manager applies Social Style techniques, awareness of his or her own behavior and awareness of the behaviors of others will lead to strengthened teams, managerial effectiveness, and overall productivity within an organization.

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