

16 PF Newsletter

I Didn't Come Here To Argue . . .

We are told that interpersonal skills are a prerequisite for top managerial positions - but who's kidding whom?

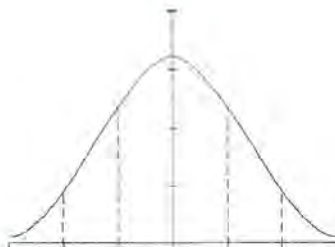
My client was quite definite. What he wanted to see in the battery of tests I was due to administer, was strong evidence of good interpersonal skills. "Absolutely essential for a top position," he said. We all repeat such shibboleths. (Looked this word up in the OED: interesting). Not only do we repeat them, but we also actually believe them, so dulled have our reasoning abilities become, and so susceptible are we to management-speak, the business scourge of the nineties.

We are told that good interpersonal skills (hereafter called IP skills, and may be called IP skills in the hereafter), are vital for success if you want to get to the top in today's business world. Just a moment's quiet reflection will expose that for the poppycock it is. Let me explain.

Take the role of the chief executive. An important part of his remit is to mirror (and shape) the values of his organisation. Assuming that these values are in tune with those of investors, the share price will rise. Investors put their money where they think there is plenty of steel at the top. If there is a chance of blood on the carpet (and as long as the blood is that of the more sober and reflective board members - probably seen as rhesus negative), then all will be well. Massive redundancies are always a good sign of the CEO who knows his job. A *Financial Times* headline such as "Jobs loss: five thousand to go over three years", works wonders for the share price. Thus encouraged, the CEO (very high in IP skills remember; that's how he got there) will add further grief when it comes to stage two, by shortening the timescale. Three years will become eighteen months. More jubilation among investors. Shares rise again. "I say," drawls The City, "this chappie has really got what it takes." So the CEO lacking in any IP skills worthy of the name is further entrenched in his job. Like most of us, he will carry on doing those things that seem to lead to success.

No doubt you will want me to define IP skills. Well, for a start, the ability to listen; to persuade without using threatening behaviour; the ability to interpret the behaviour of others; the ability to work as part of a team.

If you say that all managers exercise these skills, then maybe the difference between us lies in the quality of the IP skills.



"Women Have Better Interpersonal Skills . . ."

We are also told that women have better interpersonal skills than do men. I know I'm treading on dangerous ground here, and some of you may have evidence to the contrary, but let's assume that it is correct. Why, then are there not more women in top managerial positions? There may be many reasons for this, but

surely if IP skills are so critical to managerial success, and if women have such an abundance of these skills, that famous glass ceiling should by now have more than a few cracks in it.

If you don't believe this, and still think IP skills are in great demand at top level, try to imagine a different headline in the *Financial Times*. "CEO demands his managers have well-developed interpersonal skills. Key to survival". Difficult to imagine isn't it?

Even the most cursory glance at the financial pages almost every week will supply evidence that top managers lack IP skills, otherwise why would they be sacked so often? (OK there may be many other reasons but lack of IP skills must be in there somewhere.) Taylor Woodrow dumped their CEO after six months due to a "fundamental incompatibility" (he got £400,000 compensation). Peter Sherlock of the National Freight Corporation "clashed with long standing directors." Bill Coburn at W H Smith lasted 18 months. At A T & T John Walker, the CEO Designate, was told after nine months that he would not get the top job. (No, don't feel sorry for him; he got £15.6m in pay and compensation, so he will never need to cock-up another job in his lifetime.) At Scott Paper in the USA Albert Dunlap laid off one third of the work force within a year of his appointment. This enabled the company to be sold to Kimberley Clark for £4m. On the strength of this, Dunlap was appointed CEO at Sunbeam and the share price rose by 49% as a direct result of his ability to sack people. (But to restore your faith in justice note that he was later sacked by Sunbeam. Perhaps they deserved each other.)

You want more evidence, I can tell. So: let's think of a few names. Lord Hanson. Did he put together the Hanson Group in the sixties and seventies using IP skills? Hardly. What about Arnold Weinstock at GEC? What about Robert Maxwell? Do me a favour . . .

FUTURE MEETINGS (Note Venues)

- ① 14th April - Career Guidance - London
- ② 15th June - AM - Testing People Fairly and Professional Ethics - Birmingham
- ③ 15th June - PM - The Future of Testing - BIRMINGHAM!

"An Organisation Needs Conflict in Order to Survive"

Tom Peters, Robert Waterman, Peter Drucker, Frederick Herzberg, Abraham Maslow, Douglas MacGregor . . . nearly all management gurus of the last fifty years have in their various ways endorsed the need for high interpersonal skills and recognition of the individual. Just at this moment I think there is only one that I might trust: Richard Pascale. Why? Well he is honest enough to admit that an organisation needs conflict in order to survive. The secret is in being able to control that conflict. Pascale regards Honda, where conflict is allegedly rife, as the best managed company in the world. That's some compliment. It led me to be curious about Honda. In *The Art of Japanese Management* Pascale describes the character of Soichiro Honda. (Yes, there was a Mr Honda.) He says: "Honda was an inventive genius with a large ego and a mercurial temperament. [He is] variously reported to have tossed a geisha out of a second-storey window; climbed inside a septic tank to retrieve a visiting supplier's false teeth and placed them in his mouth; appeared inebriated and in costume before a formal presentation to Honda's bankers requesting financing vital to the firm's survival; hit a worker on the head with a wrench, and stripped naked before his workers to assemble a motor cycle engine." (Quoted in *Thriving on Chaos* by Tom Peters. p.247.)

Now that shows IP skills of a very high order. I think Mr Honda should be elevated to management guru status. Even better, assessment and development centres should frame IP questions around his obvious skills. "One of your suppliers has lost his false teeth in a septic tank. Would you (a) dive in and fish them out; (b) pretend that nothing unusual had occurred; (c) give him yours."

The Honda example could even be used for problem-solving skills. "Let x be a septic tank and y a set of false teeth . . ." Or perhaps marketing skills: "Compare the unique selling points of the fluid in a septic tank with Steradent."

Shapers More Likely to Reach the Top

But to get back to my main point: if IP skills are so essential, why does Belbin say that Shapers are more likely to reach the top than any other team role type? I have worked with a few Shapers in my time, and what they have definitely not got is IP skills. Just as a reminder, Shapers drive hard for results, steamroller objections - even reasonable ones - and usually leave a trail of human relations problems behind them.

Think of the top people you know or have read about - are they really strong in IP skills, or are they more simply, *strong characters*, for the most part intent on getting their own way at almost any price? Perhaps that's how you need to be in today's competitive world. I am not advocating that we ignore IP skills - just saying that the whole thing seems to smack of the "emperor's new clothes".

"Contention fuels the engine of enquiry - and is a cheap and abundant fuel," says Richard Pascale. Perhaps I should quote that and the Honda example to my next client who says that he wants candidates with IP skills. See you in the dole queue.

David Roberts
Editor

SUBMISSION OF MATERIAL

The Editor welcomes contributions from members either as letters or as articles on the use of the 16PF.

Case histories, unusual assignments, as well as unusual profiles are welcome.

When submitting material, please enclose a 3 1/2" disk (Microsoft Word 7) together with the printed copy. This saves re-typing and minimises the risk of mistakes.

WHY MEN DON'T LISTEN AND WOMEN CAN'T READ MAPS

'Beyond leaving the toilet seat up'

Geoff Hunt distils the essence of last year's IPD Conference

One highlight of an otherwise uninspiring IPD Conference last October was a seminar led by the Australian husband-and-wife team of Allan and Barbara Pease. Although the title of the seminar was slightly different (*Why Men Won't Ask Directions and Women Can't Reverse Park*) the hidden agenda was to promote sales of their new book (published in the UK by Pease Training International Ltd on February 10th 1999 at £10.99).

To listen to the politically correct lobby, in these days men and women (or 'lunch chasers' and 'nest defenders' as the book would have it) are supposed to be equal, yet the authors explain that there are irrefutable differences between the sexes which we ignore at our peril. These differences have little to do with culture or upbringing, but are the result of fundamental differences in the construction of the male and female brain.

If you think the title of the book is provocative, wait until you see some of the chapter subdivisions: "Is it all a male conspiracy?" "Why men should drive at night". "Why men can't lie to women". "How to avoid an argument". "Why boys hang out in video parlours". "Why men have pot bellies and women have large rears". "Men like things, women like people". "Why gays and lesbians seem obsessed with sex". "Why men grope and women don't". "Balls have brains too." Not only are the questions asked, but conclusions are drawn and, it seems, it all boils down to the fact that despite millions of years of evolution our chemical makeup still conditions men to chase lunch and women to defend nests.

Most of us have experienced the following domestic scene:

He: "Where is the butter?"

She: "In the fridge."

He: "Well I can't see it."

She: "I put it in there ten minutes ago."

He: "No you didn't - it's not here."

At this, she thrusts her arm into the fridge and, as if by magic, produces the butter.

Women as Nest Defenders

Men often think that this is some kind of sleight of hand and accuse their partners of deliberately hiding things. Women, on the other hand, think that men are putting on the little-boy-lost act just to drive them mad. But the biological fact is that men really cannot see butter in the