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Understanding People People

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Timothy Butler, James Waldroop

The Idea in Brief

Looking for fresh ways to motivate your employees? Give them work that allows them to use their varied interpersonal talents. But first recognize that people skills are more nuanced than many of us realize. Some employees, for instance, can "talk a dog off a meat truck." Others are great at resolving interpersonal conflicts and making sure colleagues feel heard. Some have a flair for translating messages to the masses, while others perform best when managing a team. If you don't recognize your employees' specific interpersonal talents, you could be missing a big opportunity to enhance their job satisfaction *and* boost your organization's overall performance.

Say you've got a crucial negotiation coming up and you need to put someone in charge. Giving the assignment to those with a knack for influencing others' opinions, as opposed to the office sounding boards, will yield better results all around. Your company will strike a more favorable deal and your people will excel because they enjoy what they do.

You'll keep projects on track when you deploy the right kind of interpersonal talent for your current business challenges. Assessing your organization's specific interpersonal requirements before you make new hires or assign projects will help you find and keep talented employees who will add the most to your bottom line.

The Idea in Practice

Consider these guidelines for maximizing the interpersonal capabilities of your organization:

Assess Job Candidates' and Employees' Interpersonal Skills

If you need this skill...

Influence:

Expert at changing others' behavior or points of view

...look for:

- History of elected leadership positions and a broad, deep professional network
 - Confident and persuasive responses to questions with no "right" answer
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Interpersonal Facilitation:

Highly attuned to the feelings of others

- Extensive personal as well as professional network
 - Accurate assessment of the underlying causes of conflict and insights on how to resolve it
 - History of participation in a "good cause"
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Relational Creativity:

Uses images and words to arouse emotions and create relationships with groups of people

- High level of engagement when describing a fact, slogan or image
 - Offbeat answers to questions about other careers considered
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Team Leadership:

Excels at working through a group

- Affiliation with varied groups—sports, fraternities, sororities, or social clubs
- How inspired and energized others feel when interacting with this individual

Craft Assignments to Ensure that Project Groups Include People with Varied Interpersonal Skills

Teams containing all four interpersonal dimensions produce the best solutions to challenging problems. Reconfigure, combine, or break apart teams to fill interpersonal skill gaps.

Reward Interpersonal Work

To underscore the importance of interpersonal skills, evaluate them as a formal part of employee performance reviews, and tie merit raises and bonuses to proficiency in interpersonal work.

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Further Reading

Articles

Job Sculpting: The Art of Retaining Your Best People

Harvard Business Review

September-October 1999

by Timothy Butler and James Waldroop

"Understanding 'People' People" argues that individual and organizational performance improves when employees are encouraged to use their specific interpersonal skills. In "Job Sculpting," the authors discuss the broader topic of crafting jobs that boost employee satisfaction and productivity. Butler and Waldroop's research suggests that employees feel satisfied when their jobs fit their deeply embedded life interests--those things about which they feel most passionate. That's why it's important for managers to listen closely when employees describe what they like and dislike about their jobs. Then manager and employee can work together to customize work assignments that will ensure the employee remains committed and productive.

What Makes a Leader?

Harvard Business Review

November-December 1998

by Daniel Goleman

Goleman is another advocate for the importance of interpersonal skills, especially for managers. Here he asserts that emotional intelligence--being attuned to the emotional makeup and needs of others--is the crucial component of effective leadership. Different situations call for different types of emotional skills: Most mergers need a sensitive negotiator at the helm, for instance, while many turnarounds need a more forceful kind of authority. Managers who commit to improving their overall emotional intelligence will be able to move people more quickly toward their organizations' goals.

Leading by Feel

January 2004

While Butler and Waldroop's article gives practical advice to managers on how to capitalize on employees' varied interpersonal skills, "Leading by Feel" takes a more philosophical approach. HBR asked 18 leaders and scholars (including business executives, leadership researchers, psychologists, and a cult expert) where emotional intelligence comes from and how leaders learn to use it. Their responses differed dramatically, but there were some common themes: the importance of consciously--and conscientiously--honing one's emotional skills and the danger of letting any one emotional intelligence skill dominate.

About the Authors

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