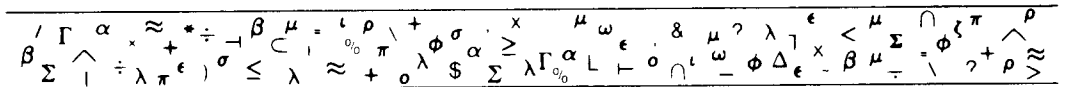


# People Skills: Students—Don't Make the Grade but Miss the Point

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I had just finished making a presentation to a very interested group of second-year master's students in MS/OR about how our ability to deal with people had helped my colleagues and me succeed in business, when the professor who invited me whispered in my ear, "Bob, thanks for coming. That was exactly what these people needed to hear. I wish we could teach them these skills ourselves, but if we did, no one would pay the tuition. You know, if it doesn't look technical or analytical, it doesn't fit our image as a top business school."

The professor, a giant in MS/OR, a mentor, and a friend, spoke the truth then (some 15 years ago), and his message is even more timely today. Like it or not, people skills are crucial to success in the business world. If you don't have them, get them. If your school doesn't teach in-

terpersonal communication, group dynamics, team building, change management, and practical leadership skills, find a way to learn them. The business world is changing; make no mistake about it. You may be passing your exams but flunking your future if you don't learn how to change with it.

## **The Old Paradigm**

When I was a student, the party line (espoused by practitioners and academics alike) was "hard stuff is in; soft stuff is out." Quantitative analysis was king. Finance was a close second. Marketing was a distant third. Behavioral science, although a required subject, was seldom mentioned by professors from the other disciplines.

As a result, I became an expert analyst. But I knew in my heart that the real stuff of life and business revolved around people, not numbers. (Later, my experience as

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a consultant and manager bore me out.)

Even then, some of the professors, most notably the behavioral scientists, knew the secrets of success and shared them willingly with us. Unfortunately, their colleagues seemed, much to our detriment, to ignore them. I wasn't so much surprised as disappointed by this state of affairs. My freshman English professor had clued me in earlier when he uttered what could have passed in those days as the academic's creed: "Your job as students is to decompartmentalize your knowledge." (Of course, he and most of his colleagues acted as if they didn't have any responsibility to help us do that.)

So most of us entered the business world believing that our strong technical and analytical backgrounds would win the day. And for many of us, they did; at least for a while. But when the world began to change at an ever accelerating rate, our steady-state models and heavily constrained solutions didn't seem to help as much as they had before. The message was clear to those who had the courage to interpret the signs: Change or be left behind.

### **The New Paradigm**

Today the party line is not only different but also more sophisticated. The old competitive (win/lose) model, which spawned the notion of hard versus soft, is rapidly being replaced in business by a collaborative (win/win) model. The new watchword is balance. The new goal is to create visionary, dynamic, team-based solutions that balance the business, technological, and human aspects of a problem.

The professors who understand this new reality are busy trying to decompartment-

talize their own knowledge so that they can create courses that integrate these three elements of every business problem. Those who don't understand continue to produce students whose knowledge of business is nicely compartmentalized like their own. For example, a recent survey indicated that many American students actually share the academic's belief that majority rule is a better way to resolve organizational disputes than consensus decision making.

### **Decision Making in the Business World**

Why don't managers use majority rule to make group decisions? After all, isn't the American way to take a vote when a choice has to be made among alternatives?

Despite all the hoopla surrounding the so-called flat organization, most American companies are still hierarchical or top-

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down in structure and management style. As a result, autocratic rule is prevalent in most organizations, especially near the top of the pyramid.

At the middle and lower levels of organizations, where the pressure to do productive work is greatest, consensus decision making, not autocratic or majority rule, is the predominant decision-making method. At these levels, managers have a dilemma. They have to get results by motivating people to do the work; yet they are personally and totally accountable to senior management for those results. They don't have the luxury of giving orders. They have to meet people half way or fail.

But if they let their employees decide what to do by a simple majority vote, they create several problems for themselves.

First, they may not agree with the decision and be forced to argue the merits of the majority's position to their management. Second, if something goes wrong, they will be held responsible, not their people. Third, they will be viewed as having abdicated their management responsibility if they tell their managers that they let their subordinates make the final decision. Finally, the work may not get done effectively or efficiently anyway because the minority may not cooperate fully with the majority.

The real danger of basing group decisions on the results of a voting process is that the win/lose dynamic inherent in majority rule simply isn't good enough in situations where success is dependent on cooperation and teamwork.

If you haven't already done so, take a minute to think about a situation in which you voted with the majority on an issue. How did that make you feel? Now, think of a case in which you were in the minority and how that made you feel. Would you have been favorably disposed to work with the majority to implement the group's decision? This is why the technical win of majority rule, while it may be acceptable to most academics, is not good enough in the business world, where collaborative effort is essential to survival.

### **Conclusion**

Students, if you aren't being taught how to make consensus decisions in groups, you should be asking why. In your program, if you aren't getting the benefit of a collaborative, cross-departmental focus on

the business, technological, and human aspects of business problems, you have a right to know why. Twenty years ago, well-developed people skills were a distinct advantage. Today, if you don't have them, you've missed the point.