The Softer Side of Science

Managing Self and Relationships

By Sherry Harsch-Porter, Ph.D.

“History’s great achievers - a Napoleon, a da Vinci, a Mozart - have always managed themselves.”

- Peter Drucker

The soft stuff drives the hard stuff

Most of us start our career the same way – eager to apply our skills and knowledge to important issues and problems. Our academic success, however, does not prepare us for what is to come in the workplace: difficult co-workers, demanding clients, bosses who micro-manage our projects and unrealistic timelines. Leadership research has repeatedly shown that it is the ‘soft stuff’ that drives the hard stuff – goal achievement, financial outcomes, customer satisfaction and career success.

In fact, it is this “soft stuff” that can make or break our career. The Center for Creative Leadership has identified a number of issues that can stall, or derail, a career.

1. Problems with interpersonal relationships
2. Difficulty building and leading a team
3. Difficulty changing or adapting
4. Failure to meet business objectives
5. Too narrow functional orientation

Today’s organizations are leaner and flatter with much of the work being done in teams – both ad hoc and permanent. So it is noteworthy that the top two career derailers are linked to the ability to understand people and effectively manage relationships. Several specific behaviors were noted in the study: difficulty listening, poor communication skills, lack of trust-worthiness and not being a team player. We’ve seen how these behaviors play out in the workplace – meetings where people talk over each other; managers who publicly criticize employees; colleagues who don’t complete assignments on time; peers who compete for recognition or resources. If not well managed, these sources of conflict can lead to resentment, anger, anxiety or withdrawal. Ironically, it is often easier to see these negative behaviors in others than it is to accept that we, too, might be damaging relationships and team effectiveness by using them.

A different kind of smart

Daniel Goleman has written extensively on the importance of social/emotional intelligence and the behaviors associated with it. Based on more than forty years of empirical studies conducted in multiple countries, across many kinds of jobs and organizations the findings are clear – IQ is clearly secondary to EQ (emotional quotient) in determining outstanding performance in virtually all jobs. In fact, compared to IQ and expertise, emotional competence matters twice as much. This finding holds true across all job categories and in all kinds of organizations.

The more complex the job, the more social competencies matter

Goleman describes the paradoxical importance of social and emotional intelligence in cognitively demanding disciplines such as science, medicine and engineering. The threshold for entry into these fields is very high, requiring an IQ of 110 to 120. Given that everyone in these fields rates in the top 10% or so in intelligence, IQ itself is not a differentiator.
The same can be said for education since our peers likely have the same academic preparation as we do. Expertise, then, is a baseline competency. You need it to get your job and to do your job, however, it will not distinguish you in your career. Rather, it is how you get your job done that makes the difference. Selecting effective behaviors and being willing to adapt those behaviors based on the circumstance and the needs of other people are a hallmark of social competence.

**The Good News about Social and Interpersonal Competence**

The good news about social skills, whether we refer to them as ‘intelligence’ or competencies, is twofold. First, there are multiple pathways to inter-personal excellence. We each have a portfolio of strengths and weaknesses that can be leveraged and amplified. Second, social competencies can be learned throughout our lifetime. In fact, they are best learned *in situ* as we go about doing our work, interacting with people and managing our careers. The ability to use our daily experience as a living laboratory lies at the heart of expanding our repertoire of competencies.

There are two aspects to building social competence – *awareness* and *action*. In practical terms, it is unlikely that we can consistently choose the most effective action until we are aware of our behaviors, emotional states and reactions. And, until we understand the needs, concerns and feelings of others we cannot build and manage relationships. Awareness is the first step to choosing actions that keep disruptive emotions in check, create trust, and practice the kind of empathy that builds relationships and team capabilities.

How do we develop awareness? And, how can we be sure that our understanding is accurate and that we don’t have a blind spot? A key ingredient is feedback. There are many approaches to getting feedback:

- Multi-rater assessments (sometimes known as 360°s)
- Behavioral interviews (conducted by an independent third party)
- Self-assessments
- Asking for it from trusted others

While asking for feedback seems like the simplest and most direct approach it is not without challenges. Many people are uncomfortable or unskilled in giving specific, useful feedback. Others may be reluctant to provide it if they are unsure that the recipient (you) will receive it openly and won’t become defensive.

Multi-rater assessments and behavioral interviews are good ways to get feedback from a broad range of people who know you well. When delivered skillfully, this feedback can provide a clear picture of how others experience your behaviors. Because of their broad scope, multi-rater assessments and interviews can highlight strengths, weaknesses and patterns of behavior. These approaches are generally sponsored by the organization and are most commonly used within formal development programs and executive coaching engagements.

Most accessible to individuals are self-assessments. There is a broad array of self-assessments available on the market and include tools designed to measure core personality; talents and strengths; optimism and resilience; subjective happiness and countless other characteristics. While some of these assessments are highly validated; others are not.

For purposes of this white paper, we will use the DISC behavioral model to illustrate how a self-assessment tool might be used to develop both awareness and action. We often use the DISC in our work with teams and organizations and have chosen to use it here because:
Most people tend toward one or two styles.

The DISC model uses four specific reference points, called styles:

- **Dominance (D):** direct, results-oriented, strong-willed, forceful, firm
- **Influence (I):** outgoing, enthusiastic, optimistic, talkative, lively
- **Steadiness (S):** even-tempered, accommodating, patient, humble, tactful
- **Conscientiousness (C):** analytical, reserved, precise, private, systematic

Although some people tend equally to all four styles, research shows that most people tend toward one or two styles. While there is normal variation within a style, individuals within a style are likely to share priorities and exhibit similar tendencies.

We Live in a World of Differences

We can tell a lot about how an individual will react to certain types of people, situations and tasks by looking at their preferences based on two scales: **pace** and **priority**. These preferences form the axis of the DISC model and result in the four quadrants shown below.

Precise placement of an individual within the DISC model requires answering a series of questions. We can, however, approximate DISC style by asking two questions:

1. Do you consider yourself more fast-paced and outspoken OR cautious and reflective? This response indicates either DI or CS.

2. Do you consider yourself more questioning and skeptical OR more accepting and warm? This response indicates either DC or IS.
Developing Leaders. Building Teams. Accelerating Results.

Your behavioral style is an aspect of personality but is influenced by life experience, education and maturity.

Combining the two response moves you to one of the four corners and a particular DISC style. Fast-paced and questioning moves you to the **Dominance** or **D** style. Fast-paced and accepting moves you to the **Influence** or **I** style. Cautious and accepting moves you to the **Steadiness** or **S** style. Cautious and questioning moves you to the **Conscientiousness** or **C** style.

The DISC model offers us insight into how we, and others, approach problems; set priorities; manage time; influence and communicate; pace work; schedule projects; approach analysis; etc. It also highlights the kinds of work and types of situations we find motivating and what we might find more stressful. We often find it easier to relate to someone who shares the same work styles and approaches as we do. It is common to believe that ‘our way’ is the best way. After all, it works for us.

Once you have found yourself on the DISC model using the two questions, review the following table which highlights some of the differences between the four styles. You might also consider using the two questions when thinking of someone you know well and find challenging. How well do the table descriptions fit you?

### Style Overview Based on Everything-DiSC® Workplace Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>&quot;D&quot;</strong></th>
<th><strong>&quot;I&quot;</strong></th>
<th><strong>&quot;S&quot;</strong></th>
<th><strong>&quot;C&quot;</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Priorities</strong></td>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>You will notice</strong></td>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Patience &amp; calm</td>
<td>Restraint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decisiveness</td>
<td>Charm</td>
<td>Team orientation</td>
<td>Diplomacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Risk-taking</td>
<td>Sociability</td>
<td>Methodical approach</td>
<td>Precision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivated by</strong></td>
<td>Challenge, Power &amp; authority</td>
<td>Social recognition</td>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Clearly defined expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct answers</td>
<td>Group activities</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Sincere appreciation</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stressors</strong></td>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td>Rapid change</td>
<td>Being wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appearing weak</td>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>Upsetting others</td>
<td>Sloppy work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being taken advantage of</td>
<td>Being ignored</td>
<td>Loss of harmony</td>
<td>Emotional outbursts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Over-use Limitations</strong></td>
<td>Blunt</td>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>Indecisive</td>
<td>Overly critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impatient</td>
<td>Disorganized</td>
<td>Overly quiet</td>
<td>Analysis paralysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Overly expressive</td>
<td>Too accommodating</td>
<td>Too cautious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intimidating</td>
<td>No follow-through</td>
<td>Inflexible to change</td>
<td>Overly reserved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A quick look at the table shows the potential for misunderstandings and conflict between people of different styles. They have different priorities and are motivated and stressed by different things.

While D’s and I’s seek action, C’s and S’s prefer stability and predictability. S’s and I’s want to collaborate. D’s think collaboration will slow them down and C’s worry that collaboration might lead to an inferior outcome.

Under stress or when in conflict, D’s might become aggressive and blunt, an approach likely to shut-down input from S’s and cause hurt feelings for I’s. This same stress might send C’s into analysis-paralysis.

Individuals who take a DISC assessment receive a highly personalized report based on their responses. The report includes specific strategies and behaviors to make them more effective with people from each of the styles. For purposes of this white paper, one DISC style will be used to illustrate how self-assessment
feedback can be used to move from awareness to action. The behaviors, rather than the styles, will be highlighted.

**Using Feedback to Build Awareness**

Our work with scientists and engineers over the last 15 years finds professionals in all DISC styles. To illustrate the points made in this paper, however, we will choose behaviors from the Steadiness (S) style to represent a hypothetical mid-career scientist named Eric.

Based on the feedback found in his DISC report and his own experience, Eric understands the following things about himself. He:

- Takes pride in his contribution to the team.
- Is comfortable working behind the scenes.
- Would prefer praise be given in private. And, he’s quick to share credit with the team.
- Values harmony, which makes conflict difficult and distressing for him.
- Finds it hard to say ‘no’, even when he is too busy or will be inconvenienced.
- Is more likely to redo substandard work himself than give negative feedback. He does not want to hurt feelings or damage relationships.
- Is cautious and prefers to minimize or avoid risk.
- Is a good listener and finds that people often come to confide in him.

Eric did not agree with all of the feedback in his report. In particular, he felt he was comfortable operating with limited guidelines. To ensure that this was not a blind spot for him, he conferred with some of his trusted colleagues.

**Using Awareness to Take Action**

Eric works as part of an intact team. His coworkers did not complete an assessment but he understands their styles because he knows them well. Overall he thinks the team works well together but there are a few areas he’d like to work on.

- In weekly status meetings his ideas and concerns are often drowned out by one or two peers who tend to dominate the discussion. Rather than shutting down or giving in, Eric is going to experiment with some different strategies:
  - When possible he will meet with these individuals one-on-one before the group meeting to hear their questions and critiques.
  - Whether one-on-one or in the team meeting, he will be direct and to the point about his views and link them to bottom-line results.
  - He will expect a candid – even blunt response to some of his ideas. He will not let this deter him from standing ground on issues he feels are important.
  - He will practice using a firm, and louder than usual, voice to show confidence in his ideas.
  - He will challenge ideas that he thinks are wrong.

- Eric knows that he has the reputation of being too conservative and risk averse. The team feels that it is missing out on opportunities to develop bold new ideas. Eric would like to be more open to the projects his colleagues find exciting. He knows that he will need some support in this area and some new approaches.
  - When a new idea is proposed he will withhold judgment until he has had time to give the idea thorough consideration. Eric will closely watch others in the meeting to understand which elements
Eric knows that some of these behaviors will be quite a stretch and may cause him stress. He will monitor his attempts to see which strategies are effective. Because he values collaboration and support, he will use his network of friends and colleagues.

Summary
This paper examined the limitations of relying on intellect and expertise alone to successfully manage a career. It highlighted the paradoxical importance of social and interpersonal competence for those in cognitively demanding disciplines such as science, engineering and medicine. It noted that the inability to manage interpersonal relationships and difficulty building teams can stall or derail careers in all fields.

Both awareness and action are needed for social competence. It is possible to develop these competencies throughout our lives. Feedback is a critical component to awareness. But awareness without action is insufficient.

There are many approaches to getting feedback on our behaviors and how they impact other people. This paper used the DISC model to illustrate how personal insight could be used to develop strategies to improve effectiveness and improve working relationships. There are, however, other ways including participating in multi-rater assessments, having an independent party conduct behavioral interviews, and simply asking people you trust for honest and direct feedback.

References


Sherry Harsch-Porter, Ph.D., founded The Porter Bay Group, Inc., a leadership development consulting firm, in 2000. She is a board certified coach; teaches at Washington University in St. Louis; is a contributing author to the landmark coaching reference book “The Handbook of Knowledge-Based Coaching: From theory to practice” published in 2011 and author of “Education as Possibility: Coaching for Persistence” published in 2012. She is certified in a number of assessments including the Center for Creative Leadership’s suite of 360-degree assessments; The Hay Group’s Emotional and Social Competency Inventory; Wiley Publishing’s DiSC Behavioral Profile; CPP’s Myers Briggs Type Indicator; The Birkman Method; and Leader-to-Leader Institute's "Five Most Important Questions.” She may be reached at sherry@porterbay.com.