



Clever but clueless?

When technical competence impedes influence

A white paper
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Technical competence is not enough

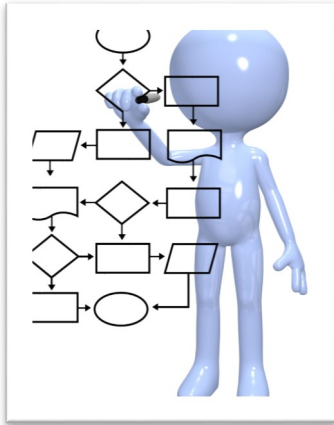


In today's competitive business environment, being great at the technical aspects of a job is no longer enough. It gets players on the field, but on its own, it won't win the game of work. More than ever before, people are required to work together across teams, departments and sometimes even across organisations. They are expected to work alongside others with different personalities and opinions, with different values and perspectives and still generate great business outcomes.

The ability to understand, engage and influence different players in the game of business, is crucial to achieving the organisations' goals and objectives. Being technically brilliant is one thing. Being able to engage and inspire others to buy into that brilliance is something altogether different. As Lee Iacocca once said,

“You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your ideas won't get you anywhere.”

Leaders who rely on their technical competency alone and fail to build strong relationships with those around them are quite frankly making it hard for themselves. Being competent but not socially connected is like moving forward on one leg. You can still get from A to B, but it's a whole lot easier if you use both legs.



By building strong working relationships with important stakeholders (reports, peers, management, etc.), highly technically skilled leaders can increase the speed of getting things done, reduce resistance and road blocks, and leverage the full potential of those around them. It also means that those working with or leading them spend less time smoothing ruffled feathers and repairing damaged relationships in the aftermath of a poor interpersonal exchange.

Developing communication and influencing skills is not a one-size-fits-all exercise. Tailored programs that target specific areas are essential for effecting long-term change,

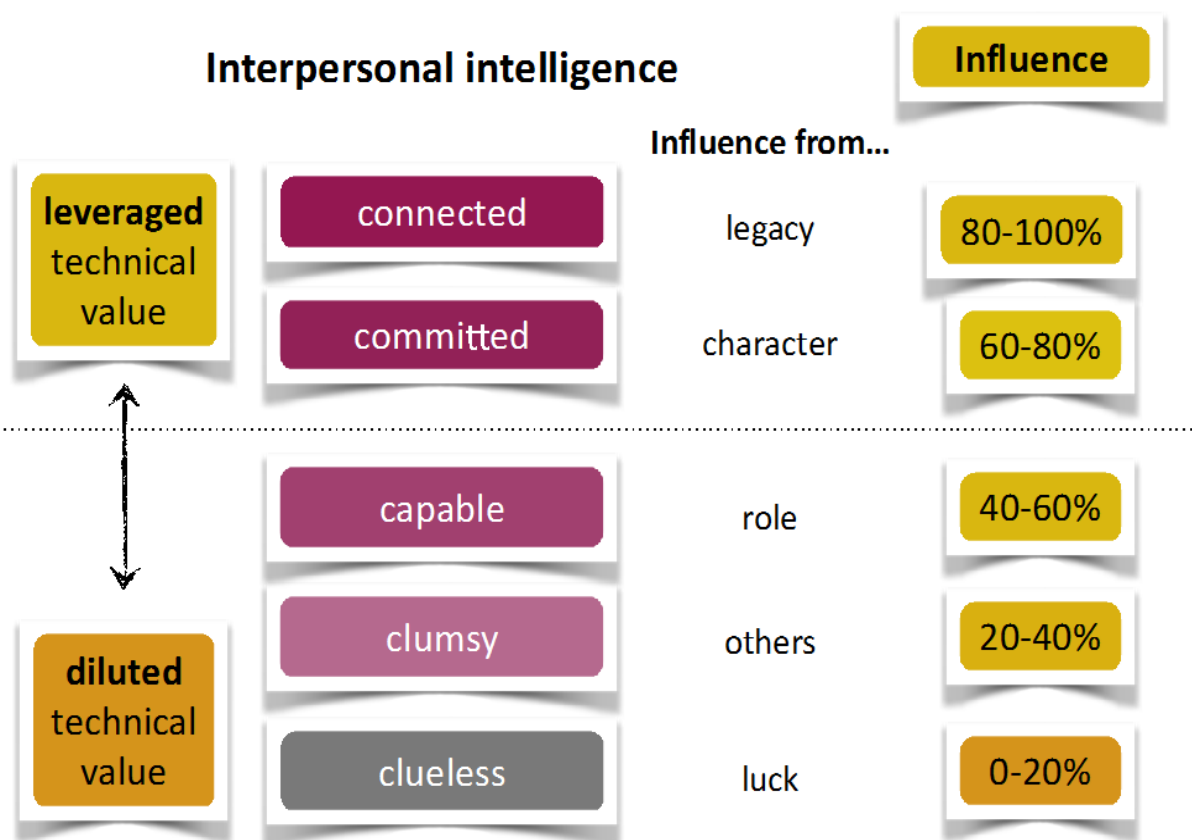
but there are some common communication traps that technically-focused leaders fall into.

This paper will cover some of these key traps and provide simple yet powerful suggestions to address them.

My hope is for this paper to assist you to develop the interpersonal and influence skills in your highly valued and technically accomplished leaders. Whilst it's not the whole enchilada, my intention is that the bite-size snacks provided will whet the appetite of your clever people. I hope it encourages them to continue developing and refining their interpersonal intelligence so that others may more readily benefit from their value. Let's begin.

Where are your clever people?

Interpersonal intelligence (the ability to understand and connect with different people) underpins the capacity to influence outcomes and engage others in work. A leader's ability to influence others can vary widely. We can use the model below to appreciate the interplay between a leader's interpersonal ability, the means through which they exert their influence, and the likely success of this influencing approach on others.



Clueless

Starting at the bottom of the Interpersonal intelligence ladder, we see that when technical experts have poor interpersonal intelligence their ability to exert influence over others is low. In fact any influence they may have is the likely result of pure chance, and interactions they have with others can often do more harm than good. They are clever but socially clueless.

Clumsy

When leaders have rudimentary interpersonal intelligence, they may appreciate the importance of connecting with others, but just not be very good at it. Their ability to engage with others is hit and miss and most likely the result of the other person's choices rather than their own ability to exert influence. They are clever but socially clumsy.

Capable

When leaders both value interpersonal intelligence and practice developing those skills, their ability to influence others becomes much better. These skills are often at their best within the confines of their own roles and with people who report to them. Their positional authority may assist their ability to influence at this level. They are clever and socially capable.

We can see from the model that in these three layers so far the capacity to fully leverage the leaders' technical value (as measured through their ability to influence and engage others in their expertise) is diluted. There is more value they can share. At the next level however we reach a tipping point and begin to access much more of the technical expertise on offer through a greater ability to communicate and influence.

Committed

When leaders are committed to developing excellence in both the technical and personal realms, they begin to influence through their character and less through their position. Communicating with both a technical and interpersonal focus, becomes a way of being for them. They are clever and socially committed.

Connected

Eventually, with enough focus on building interpersonal intelligence, the technical expert becomes connected. They can connect with different people in different ways. They can connect to the subtlety and nuance of different personalities, political plays, and competing agendas. They connect people to ideas and to outcomes. They not only influence through who they are and how they show up, but also through the reputation that often precedes them. The connected leader is able not only to leverage their own technical value but the value of those around them as well. They are clever and socially connected.

Knowing where your leader is on the interpersonal intelligence ladder is a useful way to understand how you can support them to build greater influence. And a great way to begin is by helping them to avoid some of the communication traps covered next.

Three communication traps for clever people

Each of the below aspects of communicating technical information are important, however they can also be traps. Without knowing when to 'turn the volume up or down', this way of communicating from a technical focus over an interpersonal focus can inadvertently ruffle feathers. It can create misunderstanding, misinterpretations, and ultimately missed opportunities to influence others and create engagement.

Let's look at each item in turn.

The three communication traps include:

- 1 Content over connection** - Focusing more on the content of the message rather than on the person receiving the message
- 2 Inward not outward** - Coming from an internal perspective without considering the other person's perspective, and
- 3 Reality over perception** - Assuming that reality (or the truth) is more important than people's perceptions of it

1 Content over connection (task over people)

Leaders who have developed a deep expertise in their fields (for example IT, finance, and engineering) have spent years honing their technical skills. This means they think about the work, about solving puzzles and rising to technical challenges. When they communicate, they focus on tasks and outcomes because that's their job.

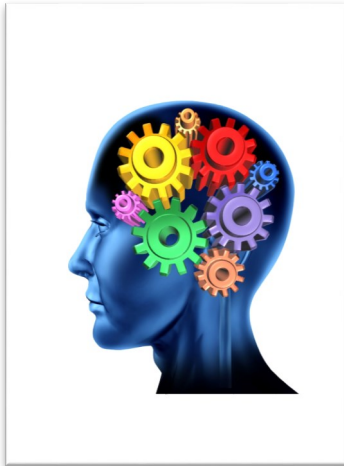
People and their feelings, emotions, and opinions are not necessarily part of the leader's default focus. Meeting with people, making small talk, building relationships, and winning people over are often seen as frustrating exercises that get in the way of real work.

This leaves our technical experts focusing more on the task (**content** of their work) and less on the people (the way they **connect** with others).

The latest research in neuroscience tells us that the brain is malleable and will grow and change according to what we pay attention to. The opposite is also true, just like a muscle that weakens without use, so too do parts of our brain atrophy if we don't use them.

Over time, a leader's increased focus on content over connection changes the structure of the brain and reinforces their propensity and ability to keep focusing on content over connection.

As a result, their technical skills become stronger and their social skills become weaker.



The kicker to this is that the two parts of the brain responsible for a technical focus and social connection (the analytical and social brain if you like) cannot be activated at the same time.¹ So focusing heavily on the technical content (using the analytical brain) creates a see-saw effect and switches off the social brain, making it hard for leaders to think about, let alone exhibit, connection behaviours with others. So it's not just a case of 'use it or lose it', but also a case of 'use one and lose the other'.



However, because the brain does work like a muscle, these areas can be improved by focused attention and repetitive action over time. It's simply a case of actively focusing on connection to switch on and strengthen the social brain.

If leaders have not spent enough (or any) time establishing a connection with others, they face a much tougher time when it comes to influencing and engaging them. In fact, relying on technical competence alone and ignoring the relationship component can even colour the way people view your technical competence to begin with. As Tiziana Casciaro, professor at Harvard Business School says, "People would rather work with someone who is likeable and incompetent than with someone who is skilled and obnoxious. How we value competence changes depending on whether we like someone or not."

"And people who lack social competence end up looking like they lack other competencies, too."

¹Trunk, P. (2006, July 18) [Online blog post quoting private conversation with the author of the HBR article mentioned here]. Retrieved from <http://blog.penelopetrunk.com/2006/07/18/social-skills-matter-more-than-ever-so-heres-how-to-get-them/>. Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks," Harvard Business Review, Vol. 83, No. 6, June 2005.

What's the solution?

Connect before contributing

Leaders need to make an effort to establish a personal connection with people before they jump into sharing their content or getting their point across. This can feel like a waste of time for leaders who just want to focus on the work, but research shows that before someone decides what they think of a message, they will first decide what they think of the person delivering the message. This adds some empirical rigor to the adage.

People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

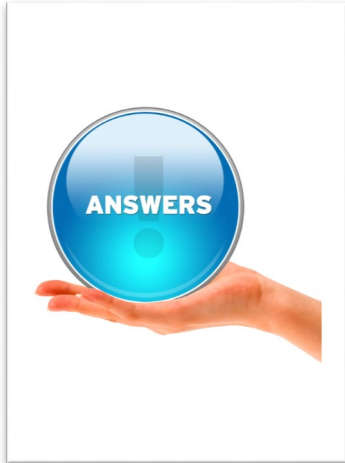
In the Harvard Business Review article entitled 'Connect, then Lead', the authors conclude that leaders must connect with personal warmth before leading with their competence as "Warmth is the conduit of influence: It facilitates trust and the communication and absorption of ideas."²

Quick tips for easy application

- ◆ Talk about the weekend
- ◆ Smile more
- ◆ Use facial expressions and direct eye contact
- ◆ Tilt your head and nod on occasion to show you are listening

² Cuddy, A.J.C., Kohut, M. and Neffinger, J. (2013). "Connect, Then Lead." *Harvard Business Review* 91, nos. 7/8 (July–August 2013): 54–61.

2 Inward not outward (me not you)



When trying to influence others toward our way of thinking, experts (and most people in general actually) have a tendency to persuade from their own perspective. They are focused inward on what they want and why it's important to them. There's also an extra trap here for those with high levels of technical expertise in certain areas, which is that due to their knowledge, people often go to them for their opinion and advice. They get used to sharing information from their perspective based on their knowledge and experience. In fact, it's expected.

A study in 2006³ showed that power was associated with a reduced tendency to understand how other people see, think, and feel. If a leader is seen as the expert in something, their level of power goes up, which in turn puts them at a higher risk of failing to understand the perspective of others (unless they consciously make an effort to do so).

Without the ability to empathise, a leader can struggle to overcome resistance that they don't understand or don't deem important.

³ Galinsky, A. D., Magee, J. C., Inesi, M. E., & Gruenfeld, D. H. 2006. Power and perspectives not taken. *Psychological Science*, 17: 1068-1074.

What's the solution?

Change shoes

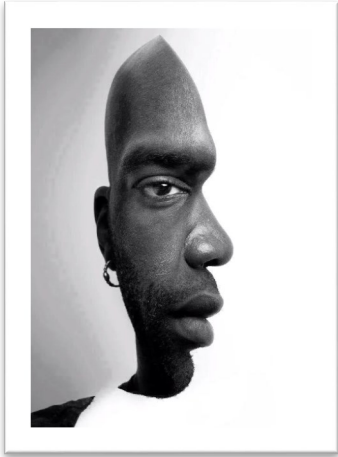
The ability to step into another person's shoes and understand things from their perspective is the quickest way to reduce resistance and increase influence. A new perspective provides access to new insights, new information, and a new appreciation for where the other person is coming from. This creates empathy for the other person, which in turn paves the way for greater understanding, influence, and respect.

And that's the key to escaping this communication trap; to actively choose to take the other person's perspective, thereby increasing your empathy for them, and in turn increasing your potential for influence.

Quick tips for easy application

- ◆ Spend 5 minutes thinking about people before you meet with them
 - ⇒ What do they want out of this meeting?
 - ⇒ What's going on in their world right now - challenges and celebrations?
 - ⇒ What kind of person are they?
 - ⇒ What do they value most when working with others?
- ◆ Ask more questions to understand the other person's perspective
- ◆ Spend some time working along side your stakeholders to gain a better appreciation for what they do

3 Reality over perception (Black versus grey)



Technically skilled leaders are comfortable in the world of facts, figures, and formulas. They rely on logic and reasoning to solve problems and know that if you do X then you'll get Y. Things just make sense and they relish this rational approach to work challenges and goals.

People, on the other hand, are not so simple. They cannot be understood and influenced through the same black and white lens.

Relationships, behaviour, influence, and communication live in the land of grey.

If you communicate X, you could get Y, C, 7, or purple figs!
People can be confusing.

Interacting with others and expecting the same black and white logic to drive their behaviour is like winning the lottery, a nice idea but highly unlikely. Granted, there are always other like-minded people who will be on the same page as the technically focused leader, but they are not generally the relationships that need work or the stakeholders that need more influencing.

When dealing with other people, black and white thinking about facts, logic, and truth has to adjust to a shared perception. Reality is no longer as important as someone's *perception* of reality. If people think 'running that report is hard', it doesn't matter how much you prove otherwise, until you can acknowledge their perception and meet them in this shared space of grey, you will never be able to convince them it's not. There is so much more at play than just the facts.

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

– George Bernard Shaw

What's the solution?

Explore the grey

The grey is made up of feelings, perceptions, emotions, interpretations, past experiences, negative and positive associations, instincts, intuition, and much, much more. All these nebulous and intangible aspects impact the way people think, feel and act. For the black-and-white thinker who enjoys the certainty of known, concrete elements, navigating this grey can be discomfoting. And yet it is in this space that real influence occurs.

The ability to explore the grey space in the conversation is what allows a common black-and-white to be visible to both parties. In order to move forward together, both parties must be on the same page. To get on the same page, leaders must first acknowledge that different perceptions and interpretations are at play. They must then seek to understand how these may be impacting the topic at hand.

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

– Albert Einstein

Quick tips for easy application

- ◆ Ask questions to explore the grey
 - ⇒ Can you tell me more about that?
 - ⇒ Hmm. I think we’re on a different page. What are we missing here?
 - ⇒ I’m not sure I understand this correctly. Can you tell me more about your take on this?

Conclusion

My time working one-on-one improving the influencing skills of highly skilled leaders has taught me that developing these skills is not only possible, but also highly effective *once the decision to do so is made*. Research from the Centre for Creative Leadership has shown that people develop faster when they take responsibility for their own development.⁴

Developing these interpersonal skills doesn't require the leader to change who they are, what they value, and what they contribute.

Rather it's an invitation to contribute their value in a way that is *easier for others to connect with*. It's about smoothing out the conversational edges, managing perceptions, and strengthening the social brain.

⁴ Petrie, N. (2011) *Future Trends in Leadership Development*. Whitepaper - Center for Creative Leadership, North Carolina, USA

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“Anneli’s communication coaching was possibly the single most important personal development I’ve received in my career, and was delivered with incredible skill, patience and thoroughness.”

Jon Eaves
Chief Architect, REA Group

“Anneli’s coaching approach unlocked and expanded paradigms that enabled phenomenal personal and professional growth.”

Miled Abdounour
General Manager, NBN Transit Delivery,
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“Anneli is a masterful coach. She understands people and works in a caring & respectful, yet challenging manner.”

Steven McInnes
Director, Human Capital International

- Professional People Whisperer
- Skilled parallel parker
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L&D Professional of the Year from the Australian Institute of Training and Development and Gold Stevie Award Winner for Entrepreneur of the Year, 2021, Anneli’s passion for decoding people and performance dynamics make her a sought after speaker, mentor and leadership expert.

As a Professional People Whisperer, Anneli has been working with leaders and teams to improve their communication and interpersonal intelligence. She brings to her clients a recognized expertise in the field of **below conscious communication and motivation**.

She is the author or **‘When men lead women: Navigating the facts, fears and frustrations of gender equality as a male leader,’** and the co-author of the acclaimed leadership book: **‘Developing Direct Reports: Taking the guesswork out of leading leaders,’** a leader’s guide to coaching the best from people.



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