

Matching technical prowess and soft skills

Editor's note: To inquire about submitting a column, contact Managing Editor Mark Reilly at (612) 288-2110 or mreilly@bizjournals.com.

Imagine the effectiveness of a company in which employees with world-class technical skills had equally strong interpersonal skills. Ralph Salo, former chief financial officer of Target Stores, has said that the differentiator separating the technical specialist from the financial leader is their mastery of their "soft skills."

Those same competencies, often disregarded or dismissed by technically talented individuals, can have a significant impact on the success they could have. It's true in finance and technology. Technology consultant Larry Clarkin notes that, when projects fail, it's no longer about the technology itself — that expense is just about 8 percent of the cost of projects that fail.

Communication is a huge part of why projects fail or succeed. That's why there's nothing technically capable people can do to better increase project success than improve their communication abilities.

Investment professionals have the intensity and deep analytical skills to make them the

top in their field, but in many cases they could benefit by placing even more emphasis on relationship skills. This potential blind spot, if addressed, can help the technical leader realize his or her full potential and rise to the top of the field from a leadership perspective.

The Gallup Corp. has found that roughly 70 percent of getting people to support ideas is based on the hundreds of mundane moments we have each day. Often not enough emphasis is placed on developing the nuanced day-to-day communication skills with outstanding individual contributors. High performers need to be able to connect with those who have a different style in a group, or with co-workers, bosses and subordinates as well as the clients they serve to get things done.

It is challenging to lead high-talent analysts in a way that keeps their best traits while helping them to move to the next level of executive presence and interpersonal skills. Some don't think they need to develop those skills, or think they just need to use them in a highly selective set of circumstances. However, there comes a time when they need to take it to the next level. For example, there is a continual challenge in the investment business to strike the right balance between "telling" and listening.

Many high-potential investment and technical professionals fit a profile that could be described as "intelligent/impatient." The way it often shows up for people who are technically brilliant but whose interpersonal talents are limited is by the way they:

- Muscle their way through discussions.
- Sound or look condescending.
- Get frustrated when people can't keep up

with them.

- Expect if they got it, so should everyone else.
- Love a good debate — and are good at it!
- Observe the world ironically or cynically.
- Decide they know what the other person is

saying before they're finished because of being so competitive, intense and driven.

These high-talent mavericks can change, however. They can warm up their non-verbal delivery, both in how they speak and how they look. They can slow down their pace of speaking and consider the other person's point of view. They can take a few more moments to show they are connecting, listening and understanding.

If they can take some of these steps, they're more likely to connect with those

who don't process as quickly as they do, and they'll be more likely to get others on board.

Dean Junkans is chief investment officer for Wells Fargo Private Bank and author of *The Anatomy of Investing*.

Carol Keers is senior vice president of Change Masters and co-author of *Seeing Yourself As Others Do – Authentic Executive Presence At Any Stage Of Your Career*.



Strategies

Dean Junkans

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