

Leading Today's Technical Professional

Effective technical leadership demands specific behaviors and strategies. A survey defines what managers of technical professionals can do to meet organizational goals and sustain strong commitment.

Do the managers of technical professionals require special training? In many cases, the answer is yes. Technical professionals are highly specialized; managing them according to traditional principles may meet with only minimal success.

Technical professionals have invested considerable time and energy in preparing for their careers. They are knowledge workers who bring unique values and expectations to the workplace.

To respond to technical professionals' special needs, their managers should understand and be able to address several issues effectively:

Technical professionals want autonomy. They are frequently achievement-oriented people who seek motivation from their work. A high level of autonomy concerning the conditions, pace, and content of work is important to them. They are often sensitive to the quality of the work environment, climate, and culture.

Technical professionals' desire for autonomy usually means that they want a large role in setting goals and making decisions. Many would prefer to manage themselves. In fact, the lack of management—the lack of perceived direction and control from another person—is the kind of management that appeals to them most. This obviously creates a challenge for the technical leader.

Technical professionals need a sense of achievement. They often



Sharon Cohen

find the greatest challenge in tasks that require high levels of skill and effort; they want to do difficult jobs well and make significant accomplishments. Work they perceive as exciting and meaningful generates commitment, as does the opportunity to apply themselves fully and use their skills and knowledge.

By Bernard L. Rosenbaum

Support and recognition from management and colleagues also generate commitment, along with their organizations' and their professions' acceptance and recognition of the results they achieve.

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When the goals of technical people are not in alignment with those of their firms, their sense of achievement suffers and they become demotivated.

Technical professionals fear burnout. Burnout happens when the professional loses a sense of accomplishment from work, is emotionally exhausted, and feels powerless to influence change. A fear of obsolescence often accompanies this syndrome. So do personal problems, demotivation, and declining performance. When skills are underutilized, apathy, burnout, or alienation may result.

Technical professionals are loyal to their profession first. Loyalty to the company often is second. College

graduates in entry-level marketing positions, for example, are more apt to align career objectives with the company promotion path than are entering engineers or accountants. Indeed, to be a professional first and an employee second is a common characteristic of many scientists, engineers, and other specialized technical people throughout their careers.

This can create conflict. The pursuit of professional goals can differ from the work necessary to attain department and company goals.

Technical professionals resist participating in company missions. With their tendency to pursue professional goals first and their need for control over their work, technical

professionals are more resistant than are most occupational groups to committing to mandated organizational goals. Control over their work is vital to them, so their participation in the goal setting process is integral to motivation and job satisfaction.

Alignment of goals (ensuring that the professional's goals overlap and are similar to the goals of the organization) is critical to establishing and sustaining motivation. Once committed, though, technical professionals often set high performance standards and can experience anxiety over attaining them. They also can develop so strong an attachment to goals and standards that change becomes upsetting and demotivating.

From Loner to Leader

By Steven Lurie, *president of Lurie Executive Development Inc., 300 Central Park West, Suite 1K, New York, NY 10024.*

Making the transition from an individual, technical contributor in an organization to a leader and team player can be difficult. A new manager must redefine personal and professional effectiveness to include not only technical excellence, but also the ability to motivate, assess, develop, and influence people individually and collectively.

Careers of some of the most technically gifted and individually effective managers are sidelined indefinitely by the challenge of developing "people skills."

People with such qualities as competitiveness, independence, aggression, dominance, and the need for control—some of the very traits traditionally associated with individual corporate success—seem especially vulnerable.

From the point of view of the company, the fallout can be heavy if a manager's people-handling skills are underdeveloped. It can mean high turnover, disaffection, and low productivity for staff members—and burnout for the manager.

In spite of these costs, the number of managers with poor people skills remains high. Why is this so common a trap for U.S. managers? What are some of the critical barriers that impede their development into more effective supervisors?

An "impossible" manager

To address those questions, let's look at the experience of Roger Strong, a hypothetical product manager at a *Fortune* 500 company. Roger was in many ways a fairly typical middle manager. He made his way up to just shy of general manager through hard work, unmatched business knowledge, unflinching competitiveness, and a quick, intuitive, "steel trap" mind.

Roger usually worked independently or supervised a small hand-picked staff of "clones." His accomplishments had earned him a reputation as someone who could get things done. With his highly competitive and aggressive style, he soon became a favorite of the president, clearing the way for a fast trek up the ladder of success.

But behind the scenes, Roger was developing a reputation for being impossible to work with. He was generous and available to those who needed his help, but hid his vulnerabilities behind a mask of total self-reliance, confidence, and control. A "black-and-white thinker," he showed little patience for opinions, approaches, or work styles that differed from his own. There was his way and the wrong way.

The competitive, aggressive style for which Roger had been so well-rewarded was seen by subordinates as insensitivity, defensiveness, and over-control. His intimidating style compelled others to agree with him, avoid

him, or keep their differences to themselves. That pattern, along with his tendency to recruit like-style executives as his closest subordinates, enabled Roger to maintain an unrealistically positive view of himself as a manager. In the meantime, he had created a highly repressive atmosphere in which most team members felt devalued and underutilized.

In time, disaffection and turnover increased among his staff, as did complaints to the human resource manager. Morale was low, and with it loyalty, creativity, and innovation.

Encouraged by his human resource manager, Roger tried to practice a more participatory style of management. He attended a variety of management training activities. They were helpful in identifying many of his weaknesses and some alternative management approaches, but Roger's trouble was in applying that new knowledge in the high-pressure work world for more than a few weeks.

For example, he tried delegating more responsibility to subordinates, but he was too anxious about giving up control to allow his people to take different approaches than the ones he preferred. Rather than truly allowing autonomy, he continued to rescue, control, and second-guess his employees—in effect, undermining their confidence and authority. This pressure brought out the worst in his people and reinforced his excuse for not being more participative: "They are not ready for it."

Technical professionals need collegial support, stimulation, and sharing.

The potential for competition is high among bright, ambitious people with strong egos. It can cause insecurity for some. That insecurity can reduce risk taking and, in time, take a toll on innovation.

Unproductive competition also has a negative impact on the sharing of information, as well as on team effectiveness. At the same time, collegial support is important to these professionals, many of whom seek an environment that uses the energy derived from different knowledge and experience bases. Technical leaders must manage a productive balance between interpersonal competition and collegial support, as well as between teamwork and individual creativity.

A successful transformation

Over the next four years, Roger was passed up several times for promotions and transferred laterally to other areas. Then the roof caved in. A peer steadfastly refused to work with him, and his mentor, the president, retired.

Now Roger was read the riot act: "We value you, need you, and want you, but your career now depends on your ability to work effectively with people. People-handling skills are now the bottom line."

Roger was given the support of an intensive, assessment-based, one-on-one management development program with 10 follow-up coaching and counseling interventions over a six-month period.

Much to the surprise of everyone, including Roger, he made a lot of progress in the developmental objectives judged critical to his success (improved skills in listening, conflict resolution, assertion, and consensus building). He became more sharply aware of his blind spots and the effect of his behavior on others. His personality did not change dramatically, but he was able to modify enough of the dysfunctional behaviors to make a difference in his effectiveness.

Success was measured on the basis of his self-perceptions and those of his superiors and subordinates. It was also assessed by observing others' reactions to him.

Subordinates actually began asking

The leadership challenge

Those are strong needs, so managing the technical professional requires special knowledge, strategies, and tactics.

That would be a substantial challenge to leadership candidates with high levels of interpersonal skill and aptitude. The challenge is even greater for most technical leaders, who often come to management positions because of their technical competence, not their interpersonal abilities. Many such leaders assume their responsibilities without adequate role models. And while superior technical ability can influence short-term managerial success, interpersonal effectiveness is necessary for a technical leader's long-term achievement.

In general, technical leaders who

to work for him to learn from his valuable business knowledge. His staff's turnover decreased. Co-workers became comfortable enough to seek his input actively, and sometimes even to disagree with him. Perhaps most important was the fact that Roger felt more relaxed and comfortable with himself.

So why did it take so much time for Roger to get to that point? What prevented him from developing years earlier, before so many opportunities were lost, so many bridges were burned, and so much talent was squandered?

Personal barriers

Part of the answer lies within Roger. During the management development program, several personal barriers emerged that were preventing his development as a people manager.

One barrier had to do with his fear of giving up control. Although he hated feeling unpopular and rejected, it was safer than risking a more participatory management style that would mean giving up control, trusting and depending on others, and feeling vulnerable.

Another important resistance was his reluctance to give up the baton of technical star. As a highly pragmatic and concrete individual, he was afraid that relinquishing the tangible role of hands-on contributor—in exchange for the softer, more intangible role of "catalyst," "galvanizer," or "developer"—would lessen his value to the

company. On another level, it meant giving up a proven skill for an unproven one. For Roger, who was actually rather unsure of his self-worth outside of his narrow expertise, the thought of taking such a risk created enormous anxiety.

The necessary combination of technological expertise, interpersonal skills, and leadership abilities rarely occurs on its own.

Most technical professionals have aptitudes that do not focus on interpersonal skills; their education leaves little room, if any, for courses in the behavioral sciences. In addition,

company. On another level, it meant giving up a proven skill for an unproven one. For Roger, who was actually rather unsure of his self-worth outside of his narrow expertise, the thought of taking such a risk created enormous anxiety.

Organizational barriers

Roger would never have addressed these personal barriers had the organization not forced him to do so. The company created a personal crisis for Roger. Top managers confronted him with the realities of his effect on other people and the business, and with their intolerance of his dysfunctional style.

Personal development of this magnitude is, in most cases, only possible against the backdrop of an organization that demands such development, communicates that demand unequivocally, and provides incentives for achieving it.

It was only after the organization itself changed that it was able to take that step. Before that, organizational barriers kept Roger from addressing and overcoming his management deficiencies.

One such barrier was denial. Almost the entire organization knew that Roger had a dysfunctional management style that had to be addressed. But senior managers unconsciously conspired with Roger to avoid seeing the impact of his dysfunctional management style on the organization and its people. Their denial was evident in

the organization hires them on the basis of technical competence, and most of them work for someone whose orientation is similar—heavily technical, and light on people skills. The training functions in technology-oriented organizations must know how to compensate for that lack.

MOHR Development conducted extensive research over a three-year period on the leadership of technical professionals in 19 technology-oriented companies. We observed, interviewed, and surveyed more than 300 technical leaders and professionals, with the objective of analyzing and identifying successful strategies and behavior patterns that helped foster innovation, strengthen teamwork, and sustain commitment.

The population included engineers, scientists, and data-processing professionals in the computer hardware, software, pharmaceutical, chemical, manufacturing, electronics, aerospace, and consumer products industries.

Two statistics are particularly relevant for trainers: 80 percent of the technical leaders reported that the extent to which past training prepared them to manage technical professionals was limited or nonexistent. When asked about how they would benefit from future training targeted at managing technical professionals, 91 percent said they would find it valuable.

We found many patterns related to effective technical leadership; there

were some variations, but successful leadership strategies and tactics displayed more commonalities than differences. This was true in all the participating organizations, whether their focus was on the development of state-of-the-art computer software or specialized chemical compounds.

The survey found that technical leaders are able to facilitate the achievement of individual and group goals in multiple projects according to their ability to address certain common, strategic dimensions of technical leadership. Successful leaders

- coach for peak performance
- run organizational interference
- orchestrate the professional development of their subordinates
- expand individual productivity

their continuing to reward him largely on the basis of bottom-line performance, in their avoidance of direct confrontation about his style, and in their failure to follow up with him when he participated in earlier management development efforts.

Several common—but mistaken—beliefs supported this denial.

Equating bottom-line success with management success. Roger and senior management made the mistake of attributing his success to his approach to management.

"After all, with these profits, how bad could he be?" asked the president to himself. Of course, several factors contributed to Roger's productivity. An objective analysis would have shown that his bottom line was strong in spite of his style.

It was only after market conditions became increasingly competitive that the negative effects of Roger's management behavior upon the company's profits became evident.

Believing that Roger was incapable of changing his management style. The company's and Roger's own denial was fueled by a belief that he could not change. People avoided talking about Roger's dysfunctional style rather than bringing something out into the open that they thought no one could do anything about anyway.

Believing that they were protecting Roger's self-esteem and repaying him

for his loyalty by not confronting him with the real implications of his style. In fact, by avoiding the issue, they were ultimately paving Roger's way to failure.

Believing that strong interpersonal skills are important, but not essential to management effectiveness and productivity.

This belief was communicated through the private conversations and overcontrolling, autocratic management behavior of several senior executives, despite the organizational "party line" that emphasized strong people-management skills.

In fact, it is likely that some senior managers feared having to confront dysfunctional aspects of their own management style if they confronted Roger's problems. Those fears may have contributed to their denial of his deficiencies.

Developing people skills

Roger may have had more than his share of dysfunctional management traits, but all managers have weaknesses. In the right (or more accurately, wrong) situations, those weaknesses may compromise their effectiveness. Over time, they can create silent fallout.

As an organization changes (business gets worse, mentors leave, or the wrong toes get stepped on), previously overlooked weaknesses can become a focus. Such attention can

result in a second chance for the manager in question (if he or she is lucky) or, in many cases, termination.

Don't wait for problems to develop.

Some suggestions for managers and those who are helping them to manage people more effectively:

■ Remember that for managers people-handling skills are "bottom-line" in the long run. Business success and technical competence may diminish; strong relationships and people skills can sustain success.

■ Don't assume that senior managers will accurately gauge the impact of a manager's style on long-term management effectiveness. They are often unaware of the negatives, because the effects are not immediate, because they are protected from them, or because they deny them.

■ Listen carefully to subordinates and peers. Good listening skills are essential in enabling a manager to receive and pay attention to feedback—direct or indirect—from those who count.

■ Find and meet regularly with a person whose interpersonal skills you respect and whom you can trust to be honest with you about your style and your impact on others.

■ Make full use of the company's training and development opportunities on your own initiative, rather than in reaction to a bad situation or in an effort to fulfill requirements.

■ Make accurate self-assessment, with special emphasis on people skills, an ongoing objective for yourself and your subordinates. ■

through teamwork

■ facilitate self-management.

We did not find that any single dimension was more important than any other. Effective leaders blended strategic thinking and behavioral competence across all dimensions.

Coach for peak performance

Technical professionals are more self-directed than most occupational groups, so classic management prescriptions—with the manager as a controller of work—are likely to be demotivating.

The most effective technical leaders are coaches: they listen, ask questions, facilitate, integrate, and provide administrative support. They develop ideas and goals rather than dictate them. They reinforce discussion and networks rather than apply hierarchical procedures. They share information rather than demonstrate power by withholding it. They encourage self-management rather than promote dependency.

A coach's function is quite different from that of a supervisor. A coach is not always the technical professional's source of the right answer to a problem; in fact, the right answer may be unknown.

The coach serves more as a sounding board for the professional's ideas—he or she acts as a supportive critic (when necessary) of those ideas, as a source of facts and ideas from a broader base of experience, and sometimes even as a devil's advocate, testing the strength of the professional's plans. Coaches commit themselves to helping the technical professional to be as successful as possible.

Coaching strategies and their accompanying skills are most notable in three critical leadership situations:

Aligning Individual and Organizational Goals

Many one-sided leaders focus on departmental or organizational goals and give little consideration to individual needs. They usually accomplish short-term project goals, but at the price of losing the commitment of technical professionals. That frustration and lack of fulfillment often result in either turnover or apathy.

The laissez-faire leader, on the other hand, expresses enormous concern

for and pays exclusive attention to the technical professional, and does not focus much on organizational needs and goals. This leader often is well-liked by his or her subordinates, but innovation suffers as the organization's competitive position deteriorates.

Some leaders are so preoccupied with personal needs that they pay little attention to either subordinates or projects. The absence of leadership results in highly visible problems, usually followed by a change in leaders.

The most effective technical leaders are sensitive to blending individual and organizational goals through a balanced leadership approach that relies heavily on coaching. They are able to use technology to serve market needs while remaining sensitive to the needs of the technical professional.

Making Performance Analyses

Successful technical leaders bring their critical and logical thinking to the analysis of performance problems—missed deadlines and cost overruns, for example. They are good at determining whether a performance discrepancy is due to a skill deficiency (rarely the case, the survey found) or to inappropriate performance consequences (usually the case).

As a result, the technical professionals they manage quickly address and correct performance deficiencies.

Managing Change

Anticipating and communicating change is another hallmark of a coach. Change is a way of life in the technical organization; the leader is often the one who determines whether people resist or welcome it.

Many technical professionals welcome change, challenge, and variety. But further investigation usually turns up a leader who coaches them through change by making certain that they know the reasons for it. An effective coach also involves technical professionals extensively in the implementation of change.

Run organizational interference

Successful leaders teach subordinates how to take advantage of organizational opportunities, such as engaging in a high-visibility project that might resolve a major quality

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issue. They are also quick to remove organizational obstructions from the path to innovation. They do so by the following means:

- providing resources to support creative endeavors
- preventing the organizational bureaucracy from interfering with the technical professional's work
- taking steps to gain management support for a professional's idea or proposal.

Their subordinates admire them for

for their ability and desire to support them in the following ways:

- broadcast good news and explain shortfalls
- cut away red tape, so that technical professionals can focus on project goals, rather than become distracted by administrative details
- help technical professionals get things done in the existing structure by knowing whom to inform, how to time a request, and how to build a network of reciprocal assistance

■ protect the professional's time by acting as a gatekeeper, allowing him or her to maintain concentration on priority goals rather than nonessential requests.

Orchestrate professional development

Technical professionals have a strong need to achieve. Through achievement, they experience psychological and professional growth. Achievement, recognition for achievement, the work itself, and responsibility are all critical determinants of job satisfaction and motivation.

Enriching the job is an important strategy for motivating the technical professional. Variety, an emphasis on performance over process, and challenge must be integral parts of the work. The nemesis of challenge is underutilization of skills, which arises from narrowly defined, tightly controlled jobs. Unenriched jobs yield apathy, burnout, and alienation.

The most effective technical leaders address three critical components of professional development:

They provide the business perspective. Technical professionals often generate ideas, become absorbed in following them, and wander off the organization's strategic path. The leader must focus that energy by providing a vision of where the organization is today and where it is heading.

A broad business perspective entails marketplace knowledge, competitive information, and sensitivity to the business climate.

They build and encourage champions. Taking ownership of an innovative idea and running with it is a powerful professional development experience. The leader's responsibility is to nurture and protect the fragile growth of ideas that might otherwise be trampled by the bureaucracy or uprooted by someone uneasy with the unfamiliar.

Innovative companies encourage intelligent failure and continually reinforce innovative efforts. And leaders in such responsive organizations act as catalysts to convert ideas into action. The ability to recognize and nurture winning innovations is the essence of technical leadership. Without it, innovation withers.

They facilitate career development. Although career development is primarily the technical professional's

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responsibility, effective leaders take a proactive role in encouraging it. The leader helps the professional formulate a plan and becomes involved in the implementation strategy.

Challenging "stretch" assignments—projects that are a bit beyond what the professional feels ready to take on—provide networking opportunities and also help to fulfill growth needs and sustain commitment. If leaders make stretch assignments gradually, they can minimize occasional disappointments and accelerate the growth of competence and professional development.

Expand individual productivity through teamwork

Encouraging innovation requires shifts in fundamental management techniques, the most important of which may be the use of teamwork. Science and technology are becoming too complex for most technical professionals to be able to make meaningful contributions on their own. More and more, basic inventions, minor and major breakthroughs, and creative inspirations come from group collaborations.

When technical professionals work in a truly collaborative way, the product development cycle shortens, innovation flourishes, and the organization responds to the marketplace in a timely way.

Effective leadership in groups, whether they are functional or project teams, calls for the following skills:

- establishing goals that are clear, achievable, mutual, realistically timed, and reasonably stable
- clarifying roles
- identifying and securing resources
- implementing information exchange systems.

Two particularly critical incidents exert an extraordinary influence on teamwork achievements: the initial orientation of the team to a project, and group meetings to resolve project problems. In these situations, the leader must be group-centered rather than manager-centered.

Simple, straightforward informational meetings are productive when conducted in a manager-centered mode. Meetings that entail complex planning or problem-solving are most productive when the leader assumes a group-centered facilitator role.

Leaders who assume inappropriate roles either engage their groups in unnecessary, time-wasting discussions, or demotivate group members and stifle creativity.

Facilitate self-management

The technical professional's need for autonomy, achievement, professional growth, and challenge finds its fullest satisfaction when the structure of the job and the relationship with the manager promote and support

self-management for the employee.

In today's organizations, middle layers of management are disappearing; flattened hierarchies are emerging. Technical leaders must guide, coach, and monitor outcomes, but their willingness and ability to empower technical professionals is crucial to success in dynamic, downsized technical organizations.

Three leadership activities are crucial to this empowerment:

- Sharing information. Information

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enhances a sense of empowerment. Professionals who have to perform with little information tend to feel manipulated and pawn-like. Professionals who receive as much information as possible about a project have much higher motivational levels.

■ Delegating responsibility. The delegation of meaningful tasks and

Empowering technical professionals to share information builds trust and an increased sense of ownership in projects and organizational objectives.

Needed: high-touch leaders

The high-tech age requires new levels of technical knowledge and skill. But our observations make it

High-tech leaders also need to be "high touch"

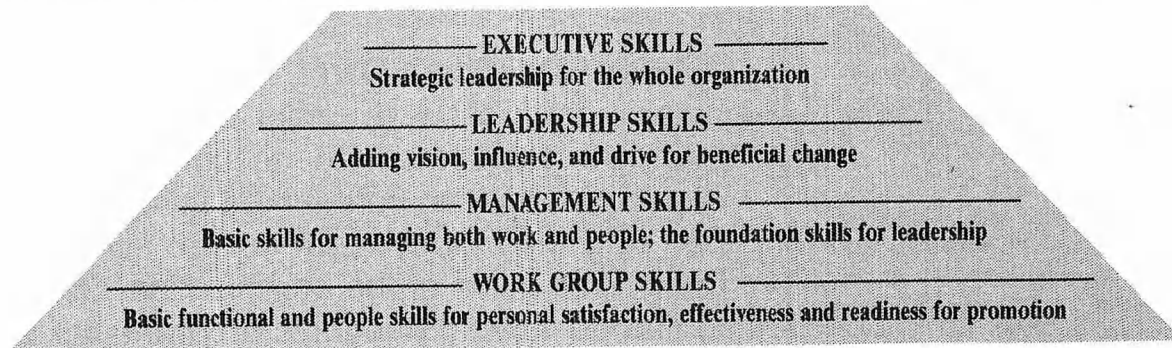
responsibilities is enriching and empowering. It can provide insight into the organization's big picture, decrease dependency, and satisfy achievement needs. Technical leaders who seek opportunities to delegate and who skillfully communicate and transfer responsibilities maintain motivated project teams.

■ Encouraging upward communication. Endorsing and reinforcing two-way communication plays a major role in facilitating self-management.

clear that technical leaders in a high-tech world also need to be "high touch"—that is, adept at communicating, influencing, and motivating.

Clearly, we must look to training within technology organizations to develop technical leaders who can address the special needs of professionals. Such training will enable organizations to realize the highest degrees of innovation, teamwork, and sustained commitment among technical professionals. ■

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