

# DEVELOPMENT

## Are You People-Smart?

It's good business.

By Mel Silberman and Freda Hansburg

In our fast-paced, results-driven work worlds, every day poses tensions with challenging customers and colleagues. Individuals who possess strong people skills are especially valuable in these times of greater complexity and diversity, but fewer resources. Each time someone responds to mounting interpersonal tensions with retaliation, despair, or cynicism, business suffers. Each time people bring out the best in each other, business thrives.

Following are six strategies that enable employees and, ultimately, the entire organization to work people-smart. Which ones are you and your colleagues using?

**Strategy 1: Be curious, not furious.**

When people at work engage in unpleasant behavior, it's only human to get annoyed, even furious. Your typical "fight, flight, gripe, or snipe" reactions might bring momentary relief, but they

don't improve the difficult relationship. When a challenging person at work frustrates you, don't get upset. The people-smart thing to do is to get curious. Find out why he or she is acting that way.

You may not like or approve of your co-worker's conduct, and you don't have to tolerate irresponsible behavior, but you'll find it pays to explore why a co-worker acts as he or she does. Proceeding with an inquiry may

- unlock new ways to relate to that person that will be productive for both of you
- give you a new perspective on your co-worker—you'll get some distance from the situation and avoid taking his or her behavior too personally
- win your colleague's appreciation and become the basis for a better relationship.

To "get curious" about challenging co-workers, try any of these approaches.

**Take time to listen.** You may miss useful information if you tune the person out.

**Ask questions.** Interview, don't interrogate, your co-worker to learn about his or her needs and concerns.

**Consult others.** Find someone who can give you an objective opinion of your colleague.

**Walk in his or her shoes.** Look at events from your co-worker's point of view.

**Adapt your style.** Try out some new ways to relate to your colleague and see how he or she responds.

### Strategy 2: Include rather than talk at the listener.

If you fail to consider the needs of the listener, you end up transmitting noise instead of communicating information. People-smart individuals know that the listener is their "communication partner." By making a practice of considering the listener's frame of reference, you foster two-way communication exchanges that promote understanding.

Communication often turns into a one-way street when you are in a rush,

assume too much about what the listener knows, or sell the listener short. When you stop and include the listener, you save time in the long run. You'll be able to tailor your message for greater impact and correct misunderstandings more easily if you first find out what the listener thinks and understands. If you do all of the talking, you're left to guess how the listener is interpreting and responding to what you say. Make it a practice to do the following:

**Orient the receiver.** Convey the "big picture" before describing the details.

**Feed information in portions.** Introduce blocks of information in bite-sized segments.

**Use familiar references.** Choose friendly language, rather than jargon.

**Share the microphone.** Invite the listener's questions and responses.

### Strategy 3: Speak up with tact.

Everyone has had moments at work when he or she should have expressed his or her views, needs, and expectations. Some employees remain silent and let resentment build; other employees don't hesitate to speak up, but do so in ways that make their co-workers defensive. If you work people-smart, you understand that your concerns are important to the success of the organization, so you make it a priority to express your ideas clearly in a way that is respectful of others.

How, then, do you go about the sensitive task of speaking up? The first challenge is to communicate honestly, without being hurtful or putting others on the defensive. When you want to share your feelings or views, make "I" statements, such as "I'm angry," "I disagree," or "I'm not convinced." You don't have to air *all* of your views *all* of the time. Be selective about when you choose to share what's on your mind, and present it as your opinion, not the gospel.

Keep in mind, it's natural for people to get uptight when their control is threatened or their self-esteem is under attack.

Try describing your colleague's behavior, rather than interpreting it. It's better to say, "You're not letting me finish" than "You don't care what I have to say." Don't control the solution by stating, "We must stay within our budget" when you could share the problem by saying, "I'm worried that we're over budget. What can we do about that?"

It's hard to speak freely about your ideas and feelings; it's even tougher when you're asserting your needs. Others may want something from you that you would rather not do (your boss asks you to take on an assignment that doesn't suit your talents) or you want something from others that may be an imposition (you ask for assistance in completing a project). Here are some tips to help you speak up clearly and with tact.

- Take a deep breath and slow your speech. Calmness creates confidence.
- Use clear, direct statements.
- Explain your reasons, briefly.
- Be informative, but don't be defensive.
- Restate your position. If you get resistance, restate it again.
- Don't argue or blow your cool.

### Strategy 4: Invite others to be your mirror.

Your co-workers have opinions about your performance that are useful to your growth and development. Most of us, however, are reluctant to seek feedback. People-smart individuals feed off of feedback. They invite feedback from colleagues, rather than wait for it, and use strategies that encourage constructive feedback.

To reduce people's discomfort and improve the odds of getting honest and constructive input, incorporate the following when seeking quality feedback.

**Sincerity.** Present an authentic rationale for asking your co-worker for his or her feedback: "You have a lot of experience with this equipment, and I'm new at it. Would you be willing to watch me while I try to operate it and tell me how I'm doing?"

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**Specificity.** Be clear about the particular feedback you're seeking: "Would you please tell me when you notice me interrupting others?"

**Safety.** Give colleagues time to prepare their feedback, or offer anonymity when appropriate: "I'd really like your feedback about how I handled the presentation. Would you be willing to get back to me with your thoughts later this week?"

**Self-critique.** Reveal some of your own flaws as a way to model honest feedback: "I feel like I'm getting more comfortable with these cold calls, but I wonder if I could do better at closing the sale. What did you think?"

## Strategy 5: Be open to resistance.

People at work don't always agree with each other or follow each other's recommendations. All too often when faced with a disagreement or conflict, colleagues become either argumentative or avoiding. People-smart workers are influential because they consistently bring resistance to the surface by making an effort to understand their colleagues' concerns and objections. They then use that information to build agreement and resolution.

When a co-worker doesn't willingly think or do what you want, you need to drop your agenda for a while to learn about his or her needs, concerns, and objections. That's what it means to be open to resistance. By uncovering what matters to the other person, you gain the ability to present your ideas in terms that may hold particular appeal to him or her. In that sense, resistance provides a real opportunity. If a co-worker is willing to take a chance and tell you his or her concerns, you've been given material to work with. Silent acquiescence provides only a false sense of security.

Here are some tips:

- Ask questions to better understand your colleague's perspective.
- Point out the benefits he or she will receive by embracing your advice.

- Give your co-worker time and space to mull over your proposal.

Seeking a balance between patience and pursuit is difficult. Instead of pushing for a big "yes," request a small one by trying one or more of these strategies:

- Ask your co-worker merely to listen to your suggestion, and don't expect a response.
- Encourage your colleague to try out the suggestion as a one-time experiment.
- Invite him or her to read something relevant to your recommendation.
- Urge him or her to consider just one part of your recommendation, rather than the whole enchilada.

## Strategy 6: Think "we," not "me."

Teamwork is essential in any organization. Often, without even realizing it, we act in ways that don't contribute to teamwork. Although our intentions may not be selfish, our actions can end up serving only ourselves. People-smart workers gain from behaviors that foster collaborative, rather than individual, effort.

Think "we" rather than "me" in everyday interactions with your co-workers. The following activity list will help you be seen as a team player even if you rarely meet together as a group.

**Pitch in and assist others.** Maybe you have a special talent or skill others need. Even if you don't, a helping hand is always appreciated.

**Reach out to quiet or new teammates or co-workers.** Find out what they need to be a part of the group and contribute to its success. Help co-workers get to know you and group members.

**Encourage teammates who are in conflict to talk out their differences.** Look for opportunities to facilitate direct communication between them.

**Share the credit you receive for a job well done.** Seek out opportunities to acknowledge, both publicly and privately, the help and support you obtain from others.

**Suggest teambuilding and problem-solving techniques.** Share tools you know,

such as brainstorming, problem analysis, and consensus building, and offer to mentor a colleague.

**Check to see how your decisions affect others.** Review some recent decisions you've made and consider how they might have created an inconvenience for or a burden on others.

**Include everyone in the information loop, when appropriate.** You'll run into plenty of situations in which information you have can be helpful to others.

**Seek information and expertise from others.** Review tasks and assignments that you typically do by yourself, and consider whether the help of others could enhance your work.

**Communicate your own activity so that it's public knowledge.** Let others know about initiatives you've recently undertaken or events you've experienced.

**Inform colleagues of what they can do to support your efforts, and ask them to tell you when they need help.** Give colleagues this feedback, and request it from them in return.

If you are serious about working people-smart, get specific. Choose a strategy that best fits your current needs, and try out a particular tip on the job. If you like the results, keep at it. Make these six strategies "business as usual" for you at work and your organization will enjoy happier customers and enhanced collaboration and productivity. It's business-smart to work people-smart.

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