

Reasons For and Against Using Effective Interpersonal Skills In the Workplace

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Why settle for success when you can grow to significance?

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INTRODUCTION

Warning! This article contains information that could be hazardous to your interpersonal performance. Proceed with caution and only if you're willing to accept the brutal truth about your stand the position we're putting you in, particularly if you're a leader. To be an effective leader it is imperative to administer the truth, regardless of the amount of pain the truth inflicts.



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For twenty plus years we've worked with thousands of employees to assist using interpersonal skills to maximize their working relationships. Throughout these years, there has not been one person who has disagreed to the importance of having a workplace characterized by trust, teamwork, open communication, respect, and integrity (to name a few leadership/teamwork values). A more complete listing of values and behaviors are listed in *Smart People Work People Smart* (log onto www.truegrowthassociates.com or you may contact the authors for a copy of the *TeamWork Dictionary*).

In spite of the universal agreement of the importance of these workplace values, people continue to struggle to consistently use specific interpersonal skills in their day-to-day interactions. This mystery is complicated by the fact that employees readily admit these behaviors are already available within their behavioral repertoire.

For example, a cornerstone to building trust is being dependable and doing what you agreed to do. A communication behavior that also builds trust is keeping people informed with facts. Ask yourself "Can you be dependable and do what you agree to do?" "Can you keep people informed with the facts of the situation?" One would think these behaviors would consistently be used since they are readily available to everyone.

REASONS TO USE EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

The gap between an employee knowing they can use effective interpersonal skills and not consistently doing so leads us to wonder "Why would you or any employee make a conscious effort to improve your interpersonal performance and subject yourself to the difficulties associated with the change process to do so?" Listed below are several reasons that explain why it should be natural to use effective interpersonal behaviors in the workplace. We're not claiming this list is exhaustive, so please add to the list as you use this article.

1. Organizational commitment. Employees want their employer to be successful for a variety of reasons, e.g., job security, to enjoy the challenge of meaningful work, or pride being associated with a successful company. That commitment to assist their employer's success is translated by using effective interpersonal skills to promote the efficiency of working relationships. You may be surprised to learn that just one member of a work unit who displays toxic behavior interrupts the team's production by as much as 20 - 25%. Our guess is that you don't like these dollars being stolen from your financial bot-

For and Against

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tom line. If that's the case, you will make the decision to use the effective interpersonal skills/behaviors to facilitate your company's success.

2. Integrity—it's the right thing to do. Using effective interpersonal skills is just the right way to treat another human being.

First, it's the kind thing to do. We want to be treated with kindness and to know that people care about us. Using crucial leadership and teamwork values to show people they are valued is the right thing to do. Plus these values are essential ingredients needed in a company in order to retain talent.

Second, interpersonal behaviors are an extension of personal values. When you treat people with disrespect you are telling people you "disregard" them as a fellow human being. When you fail to do what you agree to do, you're telling people that you can't be trusted. Surely you want a better reputation.

Third, we are inter-dependent upon each other. Not one of us can survive without the assistance from our fellow humans. Your company's very survival is dependent upon all employees working to help each other to be successful.

Fourth, teaching the corporate values and modeling those values for your direct reports is your responsibility if you are a supervisor. Supervisors frequently forget the powerful impact they have upon others. Testimony to this impact is the fact that the toxic manner in which supervisors interact with their direct reports is the number one reason employees leave their employer. The right thing to do as a supervisor is to meet the challenge to be the number one reason why valuable talent decides to remain committed to the organization.

Fifth, being the person you want others to be when working with you is the right thing to do.

3. People Power. We can't speak for all people, but most people are more apt to cooperate with people whom they like. A phenomenon that occurs when you assist others is you receive that which you share with others. Some authors refer to this as the Law of Abundance. As you help others, the end result is greater than the sum of the parts. The cliché "1 + 1 = 3" is true. Another characteristic of the Law of Abundance is that the more frequently you use the leadership and teamwork values and behaviors, the more you have to share with others. In other words, the more frequently you use these behaviors, the faster you increase their habit strength to become a permanent part of your interpersonal performance.

Remember, it's a natural tendency to avoid that which you don't like. There is no future in being the person people wish to avoid.

4. Continue personal development. We just become better people as we continue to use behaviors that maximize working relationships.

Looking at this from nature’s perspective, every living entity’s purpose is to grow in accordance with their genetic make-up. The environment in which we live (and work) may facilitate or interfere with that growth. Henry Ford recognized the importance of our internal environment when he stated, *“Some people think they can while others think they can’t. The problem is both are right.”*

Our individual challenge is to meet life’s challenge to be everything we possibly can be. That means striving to be the employee that’s too valuable to lose.

5. Life is easier and work is more fun. Employees want to have fun at work. Laughing is nature’s way of calming our bodies. It’s impossible to laugh and be stressed out at the same time. Laughter wins over stress every time.

We’re not advocating that the work environment should be the comedy hour. But the fact is employees spend a significant portion of their lives “in the workplace.” Enjoying the work experience is conducive to good physical and emotional health. In addition, people who enjoy their work environment exhibit higher safety records as well as higher quality production. Such a work environment is a “win” for everyone. Dolly Parton once said, *“When you love your work, you never go to work again.”*

In closing this section, we ask you to honestly complete the self-assessment by using the following scale:

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 = Always Disagree | 4 = Usually Agree |
| 2 = Frequently Disagree | 5 = Frequently Agree |
| 3 = Usually Disagree | 6 = Always Agree |

The company’s success is more important than my individual success.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I strive to use effective interpersonal skills because it is the right thing to do.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I use effective interpersonal skills to help my fellow employees to be successful.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I treat people with kindness to show that I care.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I want the reputation of using the interpersonal skills to maximize working relationships.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I use effective interpersonal skills to set an example for other employees.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I use effective interpersonal skills to encourage others to use the same with me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I use effective interpersonal skills to encourage collaboration.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I am constantly searching to identify what I can do to improve my interpersonal effectiveness.	1	2	3	4	5	6

I use the interpersonal skills to have an enjoyable work-place.	1	2	3	4	5	6
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Upon completing the self-assessment, total your scores and divide by ten to calculate the mean. The preferred mean is 5.0 or greater.

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\text{Total}}{10} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

REASONS TO NOT USE EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONA SKILLS

Warning! The remainder of this article contains information that could be hazardous to your career if this content describes you and you decide to do nothing about it.

Every coin has two sides. So let's address the reasons one could decide not to use interpersonal skills to maximize working relationships. As you read the following five categories keep in mind that you learned your behaviors based on the personal benefits you derived from them. Consequently, to maximize your potential, you must be willing to accept the brutal truth about your ineffective interpersonal performance and the personal benefits derived from them.

1. Ego. The ego can be a blessing or a curse. All of us use behaviors that feed our egos; unfortunately some of these behaviors are toxic. Look around the workplace and you will observe employees behaving like juveniles trying to get attention. They do this by throwing temper tantrums or other aggressive behaviors to champion their causes, such as bragging about their successes or their greatness, etc. These behaviors are driven by the personal benefits they gain from the results. The benefits associated with using toxic behaviors are unfortunate because they can certainly derail a promising career. Characteristics of ineffective egos can include any or all of the following:

A) *Lazy.* In spite of the fact that we are built for action, remaining in the comfort zone has a strong pull. Consequently, some people simply want to remain as is. They've become a victim of their life's routines.

The fact that employees have seen many training programs come and go creates organizational lethargy. Every organization has a cemetery labeled "the idea of the month" and employees are certain the current change effort to improve interpersonal performance will be buried along side the others. Consequently, the conclusion that participating is not worth the effort has been a valid one.

B) *Don't Care.* Sad to say, some people simply don't care how they interact with others. Not caring is often disguised in the rationalization that "*people are just going to have to accept me as I am.*"

C) *Incompetent.* A certain degree of competence is required to know that we're not good enough. Unfortunately, some of us are not willing to admit to our incompetence. This

unwillingness may be driven by fear of potential consequences should our supervisors or others also become aware of our incompetence.

D) *Painful*. Change requires the endurance of a certain degree of discomfort. First, there is the discomfort associated with frustration which drives the need to change. Second, there is the discomfort associated with changing, i.e., fear of the unknown, the hard work required to change, and the fact that other people do not support the change effort. Consequently, some individuals make the decision that the pain of remaining the same is more comfortable than the pain associated with changing. The end result is “no change.” Third, admitting to one’s incompetence may be just too emotionally painful so the individual wears the mask of being competent.

2. Ignorance. An employee may be unaware that they are a “toxic” employee and not knowing can take its toll. Two reasons a person may not recognize that there is a need to change are as follows:

A) *Does Not Recognize the Need*. There are five windows through which we can look to learn about the need to change. The first three are examining our thoughts, our feelings, and our behaviors. The degree of self-awareness or being able to correctly identify our strengths and weaknesses is a crucial variable in recognizing the need. The remaining two windows are completing self-assessments to learn more about our personal dynamics and obtaining feedback from others, i.e., participating in multi-rater assessments (e.g., the TeamMax® methodologies to measure behavior change and the Authentic Leadership 360° assessment). A certain degree of courage is required to use the five windows, and there can be a variety of psychological reasons people elect not to muster the necessary courage.

B) *Do Not Know How to Change*. This statement is sad, but true. In spite of the fact that change is one constant in life, many of us don’t know how to manage the energy sources associated with change. We recommend reading our book, *Smart People Work People Smart*, to learn how to harness the inherent energy systems that facilitate or interfere with your personal change process.

3. Emotional Stability. To be fair, some of us don’t make a conscious decision to be emotionally unstable. The genetic influence on many mental health issues is well documented and these psychological syndromes can have a devastating impact upon the use of effective interpersonal skills. Having said that, most of us do make conscious decisions as to what to do about our dysfunctional behavior. This speaks to the very leadership principle “*there is an I in teamwork*” that is discussed in our book *Be the Leader Followers Want to Follow*. Factors that impact one’s emotional stability may include the following:

A) *Egotistical*. If we put self-confidence on a continuum, the range could extend from a lack of self-confidence to being narcissistic or thinking that we’re *God’s gift to mankind*. Narcissism is officially classified as a personality disorder. Google that subject if you are interested in learning the symptoms associated with this syndrome.

Ideally, we want everyone to have the necessary self-confidence to competently complete their job responsibilities. Unfortunately, that's often not the case and the lack of self-confidence can certainly take its toll on workplace performance. On the other hand, there is a fine line that separates being confident versus exhibiting narcissistic behaviors. In reality, we probably frequently walk back and forth over this fine line. It's unfortunate, but some of us cross that line too often to be interpersonally effective. Hopefully, being narcissistic is not how you want to be described by your fellow workers.

B) *Dysfunctional*. This factor is being included within this category because it is characterized by an inability to function emotionally or as a social unit. The emotional bottom line is that, some people enjoy being dysfunctional and creating dysfunctional relationships.

4. If It's Not Broke, Don't Break It. Unfortunately, some people try to hide behind this excuse. Others, on the other hand, firmly believe that leaving well enough alone is best for them and/or their company. The truth of the matter is explained by one of Byrd Baggett's quotes "*you're either green and growing or ripe and rotting.*" The fact is there is no status quo. We're either striving to continuously improve or we're losing ground.

5. Stupid. This category is offered because we've all made stupid decisions when interacting with others. It just seems that some of us make this decision more frequently than others.

As done in the previous section, we ask you to honestly complete the self-assessment by using the following scale:

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 = Always Disagree | 4 = Usually Agree |
| 2 = Frequently Disagree | 5 = Frequently Agree |
| 3 = Usually Disagree | 6 = Always Agree |

I prefer to remain as I am rather than make the effort to improve my interpersonal skills.	1	2	3	4	5	6
People need to accept me as I am.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I prefer to not examine or admit my interpersonal ineffectiveness.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I prefer the comfort of remaining as I am rather than experience the discomfort associated with changing my interpersonal performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6
My interpersonal skills are as good as they need to be.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I do not know how to change my interpersonal performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6
People would describe me as being egotistical.	1	2	3	4	5	6

It is extremely difficult for me to function as an effective team member.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I like being the person who creates frustration in working relationships.	1	2	3	4	5	6
People would describe me as frequently acting in stupid ways when interacting with others.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Upon completing the self-assessment, total your scores and divide by ten to calculate the mean.

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\text{Total}}{10} = \text{_____}$$

The preferred mean is 2 or less. It would certainly be to your advantage for the mean associated with this set of statements to be much less than the mean associated with the first self-assessment.

In Conclusion

Let's conclude this article by addressing this subject from a leaders' perspective. As discussed in the book, *Be the Leader Followers Want to Follow*, top down change produces bottom up commitment. Consequently, in reality, leaders do not have a choice. In order to *raise the bar* to improve leadership and teamwork effectiveness, leaders must decide to maximize their interpersonal performance and support any corporate change effort.

Should a leader decide to resist improving their interpersonal performance and/or the corporate effort, their behavior introduces poisonous venom into the organization's lifeline. This can be hazardous to them as an individual as well as to the organization. If the organization is experiencing considerable dysfunction, the damage created by adding additional poison to an already toxic system makes it more difficult for those leading the change effort. A leader's decision to resist such efforts sends the message that they don't want to be part of the team. If that's the case, then we need to grant them their wish to find another team.

With that said, some leaders actually hold their employers hostage. That is, they believe their technical achievements guarantee them longevity. Their technical competence frequently complicates the decision-making process, particularly in a labor market that is screaming for talent. Such narcissistic thinking by the leader not only creates challenges for the employees who must work with this individual, but tolerating their behavior sends the toxic message that narcissism is acceptable. Consequently, the credibility of the immediate up-line supervisor is eroded. The end result is a losing proposition for the employee, the supervisor, and the company.

In the end, if all of us would live Gandhi's statement "*Be the change you wish to see in this world.*" the workplace would be a better place.

Contact Information¹

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