

Welcome to the April 2003 issue of **Management Shorts**
Written by Andrea Corney (ACorney@acorn-od.com)
Published by Acorn Consulting (www.acorn-od.com)
Back Issues available at <http://www.topica.com/lists/shorts/read>

IN THIS ISSUE

- I. INTRO: The Most Memorable Class at Stanford Business School
- II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: The 5 Core Interpersonal Skills
- III. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: Interpersonal Mastery
- IV. NEW OFFERING: High Impact Leadership
- V. FUTURE SHORTS: Nitty-Gritty of Core Skills

I. INTRO: The Most Memorable Class at Stanford Business School

“Touchy-Feely”

In previous newsletters I’ve talked about a hugely popular course at Stanford Business School on Interpersonal Dynamics. The students jokingly call it “Touchy-Feely”, but alumni aren’t joking when they say it was the most important class they took during their 2 years at Stanford. The class is an intensive experience that gives students a visceral lesson in core interpersonal skills – a lesson that many say lasts a lifetime.

The Lasting Impact of “Here & Now” Experience

Part of what makes the class so effective is the structure. There is some reading and some theory, but the bulk of class time is spent in groups consisting of 12 students and 2 trained facilitators. In these groups the focus is on the “here and now” interaction between individuals, giving participants a very personal experience of what kinds of behavior build effective relationships. This kind of learning sticks much longer than role playing exercises where the “role” can be shrugged off at the end of the class.

Bringing The Class to a Wider Audience

I was so bowled over by the experience as a student that I enrolled in the facilitator training program and have been returning to the class as a facilitator on a regular basis ever since. What keeps me coming back is the experience of seeing what a huge positive impact the class has on so many people. Over the past few months I’ve been working with several colleagues to adapt this powerful course into a condensed program for business people.

Stanford Alumni Say the Class Was Key

As part of our market research I spoke with a number of my classmates from the classes of 1989 and 1990. I asked them how the class was or was not applicable to their work lives. From CEOs to partners at major consulting firms, every alumnus I spoke with said the core interpersonal skills they learned in the class have been a key factor in their success. This month's Management Short is a closer look at those core interpersonal skills.

II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: The 5 Core Interpersonal Skills

Why Interpersonal Skills Matter

In my conversations with alumni, the importance of interpersonal skills in business came through loud and clear:

“Running a business is fundamentally a people enterprise. I’ve seen people flame out because they are terrible at interpersonal relationships.”

-- CEO of Large Nonprofit

“Most people who move from an individual contributor role to a management role tend to be unaware of their impact on others – to be effective in leadership you need to be hugely aware of how everything you say and do will impact those around you.”

-- CEO, successful Internet Company

“You need analytical skills and pure smarts to get into the management ranks, but by themselves those skills won’t carry you up the ladder. As you move into more senior roles the people stuff becomes more and more important.”

-- High Tech Executive

The 5 Core Skills

I asked my classmates to talk specifically about what the skills are and how they are useful in a business setting. 5 core skills came up again and again:

1. Self-Awareness
2. Surfacing Unspoken Assumptions & Diverse Points of View
3. Understanding & Empathy
4. Feedback & Coaching
5. Straight Talk & Handling Conflict

1. Self-Awareness

The Internal Dialogue

Self-awareness is often thought of as an introspective exercise:

“What am I thinking and feeling?”

“What do I want and why do I behave the way I do?”

Although these seem like simple questions, many students in the class find that they have no practice looking inward and “listening” for their internal dialogue. They learn that unacknowledged thoughts and feelings often “leak out” in the form of:

- A sharp tone of voice
- A “joke” that cuts too deeply
- An overly defensive reaction

These “leaks” can easily undermine working relationships. The tools for introspection and increased awareness that alumni learned in the class have allowed them to have more control over their behavior and to communicate in more direct ways that increase their credibility.

Impact on Others

A second aspect of self-awareness is knowing how your behavior impacts others. Many of the people I spoke with talked about how the class “held up a mirror” that let them see what others saw. One classmate was startled to learn that he was inadvertently alienating people – and relieved to have a forum where he could make changes before it tanked his career.

One executive put it quite eloquently: “When you are a leader, your style and values, what you stand for and what you say, echoes even when you’re not in the room”. The first step in managing that “echo” is self-awareness.

2. Surfacing Unspoken Assumptions & Diverse Points of View

Intuition Uncovered

One benefit of increased self-awareness is the ability to articulate our underlying assumptions. I often call this “thinking out loud”. An example of this might look like the following:

“I just know customers will want internet access in the kitchen. Why do I think that? I don’t know, it just seems obvious . . . Well, now that I think about it, I’m remembering a conversation with my husband while he cooked dinner . . . and a recent article on consumer trends . . . and a connection I made with the TiVo business model . . .”

When we think out loud like this, there is a lot more substance and more opportunity for a useful and productive discussion with our colleagues.

Snap Judgements

The business example above may seem obvious to many of us, but less obvious are the assumptions we make about others. How often do we make snap judgements about others without exploring how we came to that

conclusion? If we thought it through, we might come up with something like this:

“I don’t trust Joe. It’s just an instinct I have and I always trust my instincts. . . . Well, I guess I first had this feeling on our initial meeting when I asked some questions and didn’t get direct answers. . . . Then there was the time he said one thing to me in the hall and something very different in the staff meeting. . . . And I don’t like the way he always asks how my weekend was – it seems so intrusive to me . . .”

One Set of Facts, Multiple Plausible Conclusions

In the Stanford class students learn to be aware of and articulate their assumptions and the “data” that led them to those assumptions. The big discovery for many of them is that others can take those same data points and come to different conclusions! They grow to appreciate the diverse points of view that are always present in a room but so rarely articulated.

Practical Implications

One high tech product manager spoke about how critical this perspective has been to her success. As a product manager she was often in the position of managing cross-functional teams over whom she had no authority. Typically, getting Sales, Marketing, and Engineering to all agree on product specs can drag on for weeks. By skillfully eliciting and understanding conflicting points of view she was able to help people from different functions hear each other and productively work out their differences. For this manager, interpersonal skills were about the bottom line of speeding up the product definition process and time to market.

3. Understanding and Empathy for Others

Listening Leads to Empathy

The more experience people have with hearing and understanding diverse viewpoints, the more empathy they develop for others. It turns out that empathy plays a big part in business success.

Consulting Success Tied to Empathy

One management consultant talked about the challenge of managing client relationships. He found that training on empathy and listening skills for his team had an immediate impact on the consulting work. Once they started listening with empathy, the consultants discovered that their clients magically became less “difficult”. In addition, the quality of the consulting improved because the consultants were creating more open conversations with clients that allowed for better dialogue and information exchange.

Empathy Opens the Door to Effective Coaching

Empathy also plays a role in effective coaching. When you make an effort to understand where the other person is coming from and how they experience the situation, two powerful things happen:

- The individual experiences you as being on their side and immediately becomes more open to your feedback and coaching; and
- Because you have a better understanding of their point of view, your coaching is likely to be of higher quality (as with the consulting example above).

4. Coaching & Feedback

Empathy opens the door to effective coaching. Once that door is open, the ability to give effective feedback becomes critical. Too often managers put off giving negative feedback because of their own discomfort and their fear of how the other person will respond. One of the great learnings in the Stanford class is that when feedback is given with care and with skill, it is experienced as supportive, even when the immediate message is negative. The real “aha” here is that supportive feedback is the most effective way to change another person’s behavior.

The bottom line is that you get better performance from subordinates and have greater ability to influence your peers and boss when you know how to give feedback effectively.

5. Straight Talk & Handling Conflict

Many of the alums I spoke with talked about how the class helped them learn to be more direct. One manager said the most memorable lesson she took from the class was that the risks of speaking up were much less than she feared and the benefits much higher. One venture capitalist summed it up very nicely when he said, “Life is a whole lot simpler when you are direct.”

Costs of Being Indirect

My own observation is that most of us are orders of magnitude less direct than we could be (this is especially true on management teams). And that lack of directness is very costly:

- The real issues don’t get raised
- Core problems aren’t addressed
- Creative thinking and problem solving is squashed
- Excuses replace accountability
- Decisions take too long and even when they are made they don’t stick

Handling Conflict

There are many reasons most of us shy away from being direct, one of them being that straight talk often increases the level of conflict. Conflict isn't always a bad thing and students in the Stanford class often learn 3 important lessons:

- They can tolerate more conflict than they thought
- They can be direct in ways that are constructive
- The core interpersonal skills they learn in the class give them the ability to successfully resolve most conflicts

III. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: Interpersonal Mastery

In this newsletter I've broken out a series of discrete skills – self-awareness, empathy, directness, etc. – but the reality is that these skills are part of a bundle – an interrelated whole. Increased self-awareness leads to increased directness; increased directness leads to more effective feedback; more effective feedback invites dialogue that increases self-awareness, and so on.

This core set of skills creates what I think of as “interpersonal mastery” – the ability to create trust, have influence, and develop the kind of work relationships that make managers and leaders effective. It is one critical component of effective leadership.

IV. NEW OFFERING: High Impact Leadership

Interpersonal mastery isn't just for Stanford MBAs. The power of “here and now” experience in small groups is now available in a 2-day program called High Impact Leadership.

High Impact Leadership was developed by a group of senior facilitators from the Stanford class and has been modified so that it can work inside an organization. The program is designed to be customized for specific groups such as: sales; product managers; consultants; management teams; and cross-functional groups. We start with an assessment to identify specific business objectives (such as increasing customer focus), customize the program, deliver it to groups of 15 to 20 participants, and follow up with e-tools and phone coaching.

More information on High Impact Leadership is available on the web at: www.highimpactleadership.net

V. FUTURE SHORTS: Nitty-Gritty of Core Skills

Future issues of Management Shorts will go into more depth on these core interpersonal skills with some practical theory, guidelines, examples of what it looks like to exercise these skills, and more illustrations of how they impact the bottom line.

If you and your team need these skills **now** and can't wait for future issues, give me a call!

Warm regards,
Andrea

About Management Shorts

Management Shorts is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.

Copyright 2003, Acorn Consulting

Feel free to forward this newsletter to friends and colleagues. You may reprint this newsletter in whole or quote with attribution to Andrea Corney and Acorn Consulting and a link to www.acorn-od.com.

Back issues are available at <http://www.topica.com/lists/shorts/read>