



Are People Skills the Answer to Productivity?

A Case Study in Staff Improvement

BY SHELLEY ROW, P.E., MBA



SHUTTERSTOCK.COM/ MONKEY BUSINESS IMAGES

“We had individual personalities, management style differences, and misconceptions about one another.”

“It’s organizational siloing, for lack of a better term—not sharing information, interdepartmental information.”

These statements could have been made by staff in many organizations, perhaps even yours. They represent common situations and familiar problems that waste time and money. Company X, which will remain anonymous for this case study, decided to do something about it. As a result, the company converted style differences, misconceptions, and siloing into higher productivity (between 15 and 50 percent), enhanced teamwork, shortened processes (by two-thirds) and improved decision-making. What worked for them can work for you.

To achieve this level of improvement, maybe you’re thinking they instituted a process improvement program or invested in a new automated system. Nope. The company’s leadership invested in their staff—in a specific, targeted way—and they reaped benefits both at the individual and corporate level. There was nothing especially hard about their efforts, except the will to start. In this article, I share the problems, processes, results, and the keys to their successes.

Who

Company X is a mid-sized technology and manufacturing company in the transportation industry. It employs more than one hundred staff who are physically located in multiple cities. To be successful, the leadership team must work together effectively to bridge communication gaps between engineering, manufacturing, sales, and service.

The Problem

The Company X leadership team is talented and filled with diverse personalities and wide ranging styles. However, the CEO realized that this diversity inhibited the staff’s ability to work effectively

together and was holding them back from their potential. When pressure was high, interactions too often triggered emotional reactions that soured relationships. Meetings dragged due to ineffective communication and often had to be repeated to reach closure. Some people simply opted out of discussions to avoid anxiety. As a result, communication became awkward and decision-making suffered.

“Once we have an issue with conflict, you might as well count on losing about two or three days of any communication.”

This is where Company X became unique. Most engineering and technical organizations invest in process and system improvements, but too rarely invest in people. In this case, the CEO invested in staff improvement, and it paid off for the business and organization.

“If we don’t communicate, we’re not going to have a successful business, or we’re not going to achieve the levels of success that we should be able to achieve.”

All organizations have people dynamics that create challenges. Take a moment to consider the organization you work in. Do people have varying management styles or strong personality traits? Are some people loaded with talent but difficult to work with? (Are you that person?) Are there people with differing styles who can't see eye-to-eye? Do personality conflicts result in small upheavals in the office? These challenges can result in plummeting productivity.

You may be thinking, "Yeah, but you can't change people." What Company X and I discovered in working together is with focused attention and intention, people can tweak their behavior enough to substantially improve working relationships. Company X's CEO said, "Maybe the leopard *can* change spots."

Process

The process we implemented was structured and straightforward. Working together for a year, we held four one-day, in-person workshops with the senior leaders. Between the workshops, a one-hour videoconference was conducted. The senior leaders were given access to one-hour of personal coaching per month, and email reminders were sent to team members every few weeks to emphasize implementation. Let's put the time commitment into perspective. Each participant allotted between 27 and 35 hours to personal improvement over the year. It took less than one week out of the year to dramatically improve efficiency and decision-making. But what did we *do* to create change?

Figure 1 provides an overview of the curriculum, but the story goes deeper. We began with a self-assessment tool—Business DNA Behavior—that is designed to illuminate natural behavior traits. The self-assessment tool was particularly useful for analytical staff. Behaviors were listed in black and white, enabling staff to more easily recognize their tendencies. For example, Karla's assessment highlighted her gift for analytic reasoning and structured thought. She quickly dissects a problem through sharp questioning, and she questions everyone and everything. On the other hand, George's assessment highlighted his gift for relating to people. He can talk with anyone, anywhere at anytime. And, he does. His time is drained by distractions as people come to him for a helpful ear. Without the aid of the self-assessment, neither Karla nor George clearly saw that their gift, when over-used, became a liability. The same was true for each of the staff.

The self-assessment also revealed that Company X's leadership is well-balanced across personality types. That balance is an asset to the company if they can work well together. It's a big "if." In the session on triggers, the staff learned that situations and people that are not in sync with their natural skill set triggered personal reactivity. Karla reacted loudly, George reacted quietly, and both reacted internally. The internal (and external) churn caused lost time and productivity as they and everyone around them struggled to recover from the upheaval.

The work on triggers proved to be highly productive as the team members identified his and her individual triggers and how to recognize and manage them. This module, like all others, included neuroscience so the staff understood their brain's biological process during triggered reactions.¹

Personality traits are important, *and* they must relate to the organization. Consequently, staff identified 14 behavior outcomes that, if enhanced, would lead to higher productivity for Company X. Plus, each person identified up to three personal behaviors for improvement over the year. Figure 2 provides examples of company and individual behaviors. These outcome statements provided focus and relevance throughout the year.

Results

At the end of the year, I interviewed each participant—filled with education, reminders, and practice—to hear their assessment of the results. We discussed their levels of success at individual behavior change and the impact of collective behavior modification on the organization. For example, another employee, Claire, intended to

Session 1

- Identify behaviors for organization success
- Identify personal behaviors for improvement
- Review of personal self-assessment
- Decision-making approaches: over-thinking and knee-jerk (triggered) reactions
- Fundamentals of listening skills
- Video conference 1: How to change a habit

Session 2

- Refreshers
- Understanding the team using the self-assessment tool
- Listening skills
- Understanding personal energy use during the workday
- Video conference 2: Using the brain more effectively

Session 3

- Innovation
- Cost of meetings and meeting management
- Decision-making approaches
- Distraction management
- Video conference 3: Motivate and manage using neuroscience

Session 4

- Review of individual behavior changes
- Creating reminders to lock in new behaviors
- Organizational change and the brain
- Managing change with the 5 Cs
- Mentoring
- Working with reactive staff

Figure 1. Company X Curriculum

More Collaboration: Increased competency to collaborate across organizations on activities that support corporate growth through shared ownership, mutual respect, and the effective use of capacities of all staff.

Active Listening: Increased competency in listening skills by using reflective phrases, understanding the viewpoints of others, and personal communication (face-to-face and phone calls).

Courageous Self-Awareness: Increased competency to be an astute observer of myself, my habits and motivations, and the ability to modulate my behavior appropriately.

Individual Behavioral Outcome Statements

Over-reaction: Increased competency to recognize triggers and manage responses.

Patience: Increased competency to have more patience in understanding others' points of view.

Listening: Increased capacity to listen more effectively to others; exercise reflective listening and better comprehend information and the feelings of others.

Figure 2. Company Behavioral Outcome Statements

work on recognizing and moderating over-reactions. At the end of the year, Claire felt she made progress, and her colleagues (through anonymous input) agreed. In fact, the majority of team members saw similar results. They successfully moderated their behavior and it was noticeable by others. Good for them, but how did that help Company X?

Small behavior change had a big impact on the productivity and effectiveness of Company X. Staff identified five areas of organizational benefit: time savings, improved communication, enhanced decision-making, teamwork, and reduced reactivity. Here are a few team member comments:

Time Savings

"I would say that my productivity is up because I'm setting my priorities better."

"(Use of agendas) reduced the time by half. What was languishing and going for an hour and a half is now just a 30-minute brief status."

"(The first draft of the budget) has come together in a matter of a couple of weeks where normally it takes a couple of months..."

"Actually, I'm getting more done during the work day and in doing less work at home at night and on the weekend, which is cool."

Improved Communications

"I think there is better understanding because there is an attempt to listen."

"Personal relationships are so much better that we're able to just get complex work done a lot faster..."

Enhanced Decision-making

"I am getting more things done and the team is getting more things done because, again, I am not the bottleneck by empowering them and saying, '...you are able to make a decision.'"

"I would say that we have reduced the amount of time that it takes to make good decisions, so I think our agility and flexibility has improved this year."

"We're mitigating this scenario that could cause...people to start clamming up and if people can clam up, then you can't get the correct identification to a problem."

Teamwork

"...really it has the greatest impact on a team because now the sum is greater: in terms of value, in terms of communication, in terms of stress reduction, in terms of efficiency, better understanding and getting things done right the first time and in less time. I think there's the value."

"Interaction between the various functional groups and engineering has vastly improved."

"We've had the result of pulling the team together."

"I feel that I really have grown in the past year, but also I feel that I've been able to become a better contributor to the organization...by working through the self-awareness."

Most engineering and technical organizations invest in process and system improvements, but too rarely invest in people. In this case, the CEO invested in staff improvement, and it paid off for the business and organization.

Reduced Reactivity

“Now I’m able to step back and try to move forward in a more positive way so that I don’t just fly off the handle... I can also listen to why somebody else is upset. What did I do or what did somebody else do in the team that might have caused this reaction?”

“I’m less reactive, and I’m far less predisposed of a specific action. I’m seeking out more counsel, but actually I think it has sped up the decision-making process for me.”

“I’m sort of pausing before I react and that’s had a significant difference.”

Keys to Improvement

Discussion with Company X participants revealed key factors that made their work toward positive changes particularly successful.

- **Forward-thinking leader.** The CEO of Company X is an excellent example of a forward-thinking leader of an engineering organization. Previously, he invested in process improvements and now he invested in staff self-improvement. He recognized that significant efficiency gains are possible when people work better individually and together. Plus, he actively participated in every meeting and ensured that his staff did too.
- **Team approach.** By participating together, the team learned about each other and how to work together. They now share a common language which enables them to converse more effectively. If someone says, “That’s a trigger for me,” other team members know how to work with it.
- **Neuroscience.** Behaviors seem squishy and touchy-feely and can be off-putting for analytical staff. Neuroscience grounded the program in fact. Participants developed a basic understanding of how the brain activates behaviors. That knowledge made behavior change more accessible individually and collectively. “The part which you have done I think that’s been the most effective is the science behind it. ...these have been effective because there is some actual science behind it.”
- **Duration and Reminders.** The year-long program provided a significantly higher impact than a single session. The brain rarely creates new behaviors with one exposure to a new idea. Change takes repetition and practice. That’s why reminders are essential.

Reminders were simple and effective in maintaining staff focus on the behaviors that best served them and the organization.

Company X achieved positive results, and while they are a talented group, so are other organizations. Their processes and results can be replicated. Nothing they did was particularly difficult. The staff brought awareness, attention, intention, and practice to their daily work. Recognizing the problem and deciding to invest in staff development was the hard part. Company X earned back their investment many times over plus the skills the staff learned will pay dividends in their work and personal lives for years to come.

Company X reaped solid bottom line benefits and noticeable productivity gains by addressing the human side of business. Have you invested in your people?

“I feel that I really have grown in the past year, but also I feel that I’ve been able to become a better contributor to the organization ...by working through the self-awareness.” **itej**

Reference

1. Row, Shelley. “Effective Leadership in Times of Change: Understanding and Leveraging the Brain’s Response.” *ITE Journal*. Washington, DC: Institute of Transportation Engineers, July 2015.



Shelley Row, P.E., MBA is a transportation engineer, former ITE staff, and ITS Director at the U.S. Department of Transportation. She is a leadership decision-making expert...and a recovering over-thinker. In addition to consulting in transportation, she speaks and writes on *infotuition*[®]—the intersection of business pragmatics and gut feel. Shelley’s work combines her executive experience, results from personal interviews with more than 75 leaders, and neuroscience to bring this powerful skill to you. She is the author of four books including her latest, *Think Less, Live More. Lessons from a Recovering Over-Thinker*. Shelley holds a certificate from the *NeuroLeadership Institute*, is certified with *DNA Behavior*, and is *President-Elect* at the *National Speakers Association Washington, DC Chapter*. Her work has been published in *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Smartblog* on *Leadership*, and more. Learn about Shelley’s work at www.shelleyrow.com and follow her on Twitter @ShelleyRow. She is an ITE Fellow.