MANAGEMENT AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT SECTION

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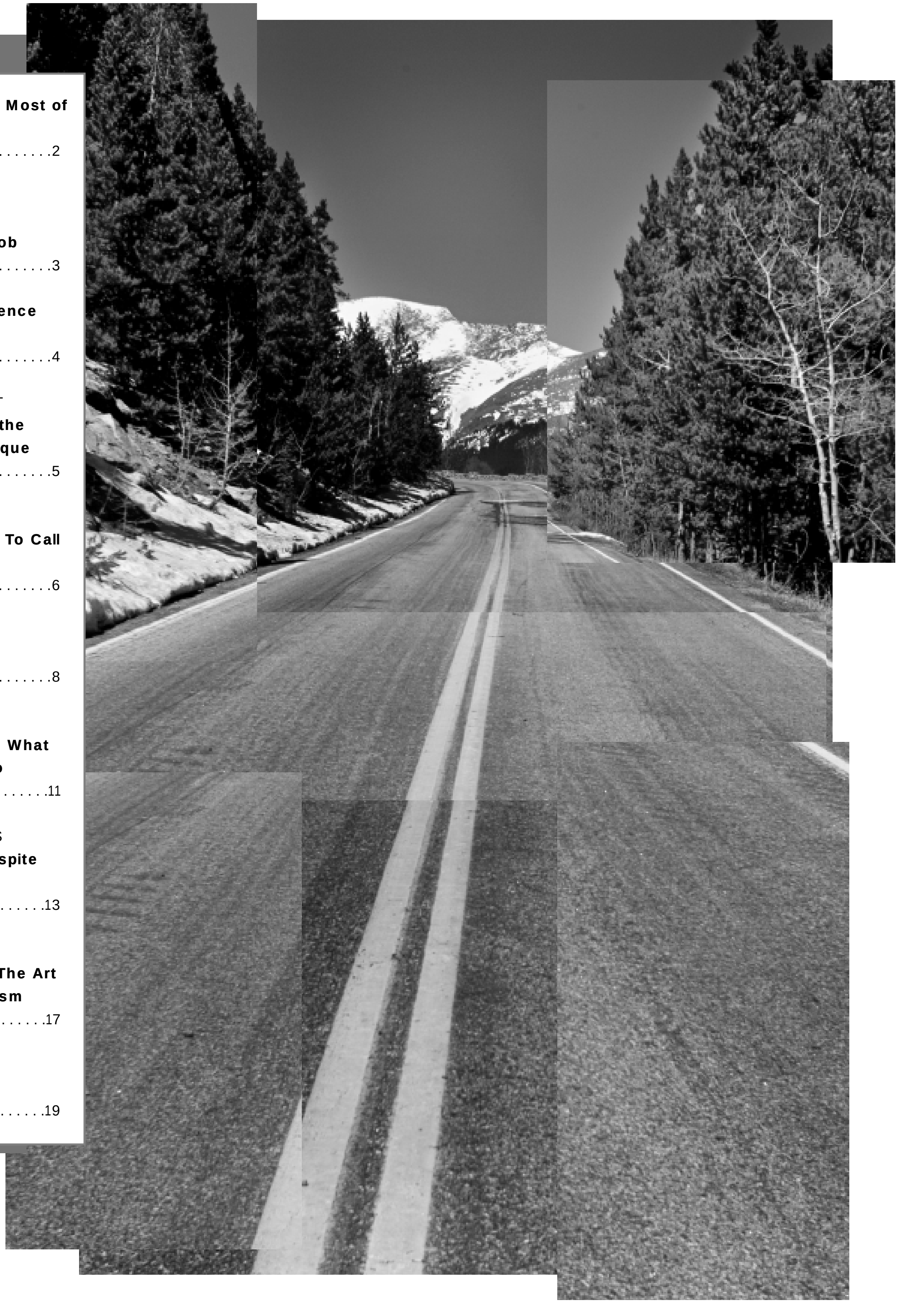
The Stepping Stone



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Actuaries

Risk is Opportunity.[sm]

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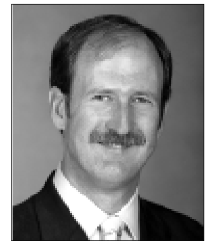
From the Editor

Making the Most of *The Stepping Stone*

by John West Hadley



John West Hadley, FSA, is a career counselor who works with job seekers frustrated with their search, and professionals struggling to increase their visibility and influence at work. He can be reached at *John@JHACareers.com* or 908.725.2437. His free *Career Tips* newsletter and other career resources are available at *www.JHACareers.com*.

Every quarterly issue of The Stepping Stone brings you at least half a dozen articles on a variety of business, career and personal development topics. We could probably compile the last several years' worth into a great primer on how to manage your career more effectively!

To help us make sure that we are addressing your most pressing issues, in January we introduced the "Dear Stepping Stone" feature, where we answer a specific question from a reader. We need your help to keep this going! Please take five minutes right now to drop me an e-mail at SteppingStone@JHACareers.com with one or two questions you would like to see addressed in a future issue. Pick from these general subject areas, or come up with your own:

- People management
- Business management
- Career development
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills

I look forward to your help in making The Stepping Stone a communications tool that is as responsive as possible to your professional needs. And please, drop me a note any time to let us know how we are doing. ❑

Dear Stepping Stone: Describing Why You Left a Job

by John West Hadley

Question: How should I handle a question as to why I would consider leaving an employer that I have been with for a relatively short time? I have been employed with my current employer for seven months, the previous employer was for eight years.

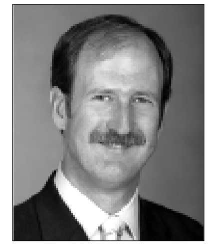
Advice:
You need to keep your answer short and simple ... the longer the answer, the more apologetic it will sound, and the more you will be emphasizing the past instead of the future. Think very carefully about why you left, and how you can express that in a way that doesn't criticize your employer. Then give a short (one or two sentence) explanation.

Finish with something that is forward looking, ideally what you are seeking now. However, if you are leaving for any reason related in any way to your performance, then be sure to include a statement about what you've learned from that. Don't leave the listener wondering why that won't be a problem in the future!

Here's an example:
"I was hired by XYZ to be the financial actuary for their individual insurance products. Shortly after I joined them, there was a restructuring, and the scope of my financial responsibilities no longer fit my long term goals. What I'm looking for now is ..."

Your message will be strongest if the "looking for now" expresses a result you expect to be able to bring to that role, or a challenge you can help your target employer overcome. For help in doing this, see "Catch Yourself Doing a Good Job" in the April 2006 issue of The Stepping Stone, or e-mail SteppingStone@JHACareers.com for other resources.

Submit your questions and challenges, and your own comments on any of the articles we publish to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com. We will give you expert advice in subsequent issues. ❑



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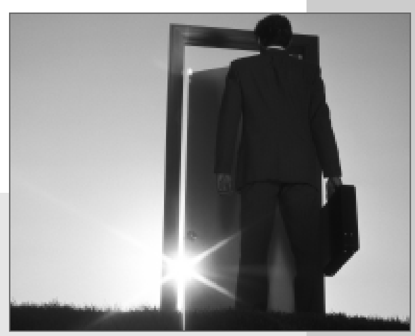

Eminence Building 101 Via Google

by Donna K. Weninger

Donna K. Weninger, FSA, MAAA, is a consulting actuary at Deloitte Consulting. She can be reached at *dweninger@deloitte.com*.

Recently, it seems the hot topic is eminence building. You can't go a day without hearing about the topic either via newspaper articles, talk shows or e-mails from business coaches. We've heard the concept and theory behind eminence building, but perhaps a few simple and practical pointers will be even more inspiring.

In today's Internet-based environment, building your personal and business brand depends upon being able to be "Googled." A strong presence in leading Internet search engines means that prospective and current clients looking for experts in their topic of interest can easily find references to leading thinkers and doers in that field.

Three different types of eminence building activities that will result in more Google hits include writing, speaking and press quotes.

Writing

In today's world, there seem to be more trade journals than one can keep track of or possibly read. This may be a negative if unread copies are cluttering your desk. However, the large number of trade journals can be a positive if you are trying to get published. Editors need to fill up the pages of their journals month after month and are always looking for volunteer writers. Certainly, an editor isn't going to turn down a high quality article. It's important to keep in mind that most trade journal articles aren't excessively long or extremely technical—often articles are between 250 and 1200 words.

A few pointers include:

- Understand the editorial content of the specific trade journal.
- Review the journal's editorial calendar.
- Make sure you understand the journal's audience.
- Develop a central theme for your article.
- Create a sound byte or tag line that fits your central theme.
- Get to know the writers at the journal by calling them and sharing information and providing article ideas.

Speaking

In general, public speaking is more difficult than writing an article for a couple of reasons. First, it has been noted repeatedly that public speaking ranks as many people's number one fear. Second, most speaking engagements require that you have some pre-established eminence that has been built through writing and other industry activities.

One easy way to get started on building your personal eminence via speaking is to present at internal meetings or trainings. An additional tactic would be to ask senior members of your team if they are aware of any upcoming conferences needing speakers. But, before you get involved with any speaking efforts, you must learn to be a good speaker and practice speaking in front of a crowd.

Press Quotes

At first, getting your name quoted in the press may sound nearly impossible, but here is a very simple approach:

- Make a list of selected reporters.
- Call the reporters and introduce yourself.
- Offer to talk to them about your area of expertise.
- Tell them a few things that you think are cutting edge.
- Tell them to feel free to reach out to you at any time.
- Occasionally, follow-up with them to say hello or e-mail them interesting thoughtware you've created.

You are doing them a favor and not asking anything in return. Perfect! It doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to realize that eventually they'll call you to be interviewed in

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Are You Feeling Stuck? Use the Worst-Case Scenario Technique

by David C. Miller

David C. Miller, FSA, MSCC, PCC, is a professional certified coach who works with actuaries, consultants and executives who desire to attract more clients and have a greater impact on their organizations. He can be reached at *Dave@BusinessGrowthNow.com* or 215.968.248.

We all get stuck or paralyzed when we're on the verge of doing something big that takes us beyond our comfort zone. You might have felt this way when you were about to do something like making a call to an important prospect, preparing for a key meeting or making the transition to starting your own business or changing careers. This dynamic often presents itself whenever we're about to do something where the stakes are high. It's a "no-brainer" that you need to take action in these areas, but you find yourself cleaning your desk or tending to some other low-risk activity instead.

An effective technique to battle this avoidance behavior is what I call the "Worst-Case Scenario" technique (WCS). This approach will seem counterintuitive, much like being taught to turn into a skid when driving in the snow. But all I can say is that it works ... and very effectively.

Here's the basic step-by-step recipe:

1. Notice when you're stuck

The first step is to be aware when you're stuck. This may seem obvious, but usually in these situations there's a short period of denial before we admit we're really avoiding this activity. One classic example is that we always seem too busy to get to this really important action. For a while we successfully justify putting it off. Eventually, if we're honest with ourselves, we realize that we're stuck.

2. Identify the associated feelings and thoughts

We can confirm we're stuck by examining the feelings and thoughts we experience whenever we think about doing the task. Feelings of anxiety, nervousness or fear are telltale signs that you're stuck. We all desire to avoid these feelings and will even unconsciously take steps to do so.

3. Ask, "What's the worst that can happen?"

Most people want to avoid thinking about the answer to this question. Therein lies the problem! You see, what we avoid has power over us. So the answer is NOT to avoid thinking about the doomsday scenario.

4. Go there and take it deeper

This is the challenging part. Not only do you want to think about the WCS, but you want to vividly imagine it and LIVE there! Play the whole scenario out; feel the sense of failure or dread to the fullest extent you can. If the intensity of the pain feels like a seven on a scale of one to 10, take it to a 12! The key is to not avoid your worst fear; instead, pursue it with vigor.

5. Stay with it until you notice "the shift"

At this point you may be thinking, "Dave, you're really sadistic!" But I promise you that if you play the WCS out in full, what will occur is a major shift in your thinking. Suddenly, failure isn't such a bad thing. You can handle it, you will survive.

It's critical that you stay with the WCS until you feel this shift. The shift is the emotional place where your WCS no longer has power over you. Now you can pursue your high-stake business or career-building action with courage and excitement.

Going through this exercise isn't always so dramatic. It can be as easy as asking yourself, "What's the worst that can happen? Can I live with that?" The answer is almost always an emphatic, "Yes." Then you can freely move forward.

I invite you to experiment with this technique and notice how it works for you. I would love to hear any feedback on what you discover. Just send me an e-mail at Dave@BusinessGrowthNow.com. ❑

Winning In Conflict: How Not To Call Your Coworker An Idiot

by Bela Patel-Fernandez

Bela Patel-Fernandez, FSA, MAAA, is an actuarial director at Health Net of Arizona. She can be reached at *bela.h.patel-fernandez@healthnet.com*.

Picture this: you are presenting your recommendations for a special project to a cross-departmental committee in your organization. In the middle of your presentation, a department head explodes with anger. His attack challenges your seemingly myopic thinking on the project. This outburst undermines your credibility with the rest of the committee. What do you do?

Conflict. No organization is free of it, and to the extent that it is ignored, corporations will pay a hefty fee in terms of turnover, poor employee engagement and eventually, failure.

In Mark Gerzon's book, "Leading Through Conflict," the art of leading groups of disparate stakeholders is explored in detail. The goal is not to "resolve" or "fix," but to "transform." By their inherent nature, human beings will always have variations in beliefs. To the extent that these beliefs clash, progress towards a common goal is thwarted. The mark of a successful leader is to not only have the humility to question the complexity of differences, but to also mediate in the creation of original collaborative solutions.

According to Gerzon, leadership can be described as having three faces:

The demagogue

- Leadership based on sustaining the "us" versus "them" mentality
- Heavy reliance on fear, intimidation and blame

The manager

- Leadership based on a defined "us," e.g., company, country, team
- Deals with conflicts only within boundaries

The mediator

- Strives to act on behalf of the whole
- Committed to ongoing learning and building bridges across dividing lines

With today's fast-paced, global economy, leaders who understand not only how to lead their organization, but also how the organization fits into the greater whole called Earth are a necessity. This leader understands that to be effective, relationships that expand beyond the leader's direct sphere of influence need to be forged.

So, how can we apply this mediator concept in crisis situations of high stress and strife? The answers are simple in theory, but can be challenging in practice.

Think first

When facing verbal assault, take some time to think before speaking. The first thing that you want to say is not the thing that you should say. Pause for a few moments to breathe deeply and contemplate. This may create an awkward moment of silence where the angry outburst is allowed to reverberate around the room and then settle down into quiet.

Focus on your goal

When you do speak, concentrate on meeting your objectives, not on retaliation. Chances are the folks involved in the conflict are there for a reason. You need them to be successful. Alienating them is counterproductive, like a self-inflicted wound.

Avoid the nanna-nanna-boo-boo

Refrain from pointing fingers and name calling. Yes, that person may truly appear to be an idiot as far as you're concerned, but confirming this publicly is not going to build collaboration. Try to also avoid the arrogance of self right-

The mark of a successful leader is to not only have the humility to question the complexity of differences, but to also mediate in the creation of original collaborative solutions.

eousness. Yes, it is a fine line, and you are not a Mother Teresa. Just try to be conscious of your words, and keep the phrase "you are an …" out of them.

Listen more

Before responding to an insult, clarify the situation. Make sure you are the intended target. To the extent possible, meet with those involved separately. In this meeting, try to uncover the true reason for the anger. You may want to consider having a neutral third party present in case things get out of hand.

Let "them" know you

A good deal of conflict is due to a misunderstanding of intent. Traditionally, withholding information is used as a ploy in negotiations. This will hinder your long-term success if this breeds mistrust and suspicion of unfair dealing. It requires real courage to share who you are with your so-called "enemy." This dialogue encompasses sharing the underlying intentions driving your actions—why you do what you do. If through this sharing, everyone gains a better perspective, then you are closer to reaching your goal.

Be proactive

Creative solutions are not found by waiting for someone else to act. Take the first step in the process by behaving in a manner that will get you to your shared goal. This will require courage, creativity, humility and compassion. An easy way to keep this in mind is to remember to treat everyone the way you would like to be treated.

By following Gerzon's advice, you may also be able to transform conflict into opportunities. ❑

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one of their articles. One more Google hit for your name!

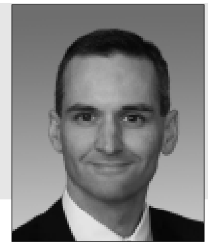
Another approach is to call a reporter and say, "I saw your article on XYZ. Did you think about ABC? It might be a good follow-up article and I can help." Of course they'll thank you for giving them the next story idea and naturally, they'll want your assistance.

When it comes to eminence building via any of these activities, remember this: you must have something unique and insightful to say. This requires that you spend time thinking of innovative ideas so that you can provide a unique perspective on standard industry topics. You must bring something new to the table since there will always be someone who can do the basics.

One final pointer is to think about what audience you are trying to reach and what your personal brand looks like. Each magazine, conference and reporter has a certain audience and you should try to match your career objectives to the eminence you build. Eminence building takes time and getting Google references can take years. You want to be sure that the memorialization of your efforts in cyberspace reflect the direction in which you want to take your personal brand. ❑

EI not IQ

by Steve Gaspar



Steve Gaspar, FSA, MAAA, is vice president and chief actuarial officer at The Regence Group in Portland, Ore. He may be reached at *steven.gaspar@regence.com*.

Establishing a successful track record on the job opens doors to other opportunities, including advancement. At some point advancement may involve moving into a supervisory role. However, many first time leaders have high failure rates. Why? Put simply, the skills, knowledge and behaviors that make a personal producer successful are not the same attributes that create a successful supervisor and leader.

The disconnect between the necessary competencies in two successive roles can present quite a problem. Actuaries fall prey to this challenge as much as any professional group, perhaps more so. For example, in many companies the attainment of an actuarial credential, such as ASA, can lead to immediate supervisory responsibilities. Often such a promotion is done without any formal management training or additional support. Since moving into a supervisory role requires a different set of skills, why should we expect success in that situation? The segue from personal producer to manager changes the application of one's strengths, which can be at best confusing and at worst a failure.

What skills make a good manager? While specific positions vary, 'soft skills' are basically a uniform requirement for any management role. Soft skills are primarily skills and attributes that focus more on interfacing with people and less on finance theory or claim triangles. Managers are not the only beneficiaries of strong soft skills. Anyone in a position that involves interpersonal interactions will benefit from having strength in these areas. That said, while soft skills such as empathy and listening are relevant for a personal producer, they are far more critical for someone who manages a team, especially a team comprised of diverse personalities and talent.

Soft skills and soft skills training have been discussed and debated for years, and there is a thriving industry aimed at providing training in this area. At the time of this writing, a Google search of "soft skills training" scores nearly two million hits. A more current way to describe these kinds of competencies is 'emotional intelligence,' or EI. At 1.3 million hits, "emotional intelligence training" is somewhat less prominent in Google-space, but significant nonetheless. EI is generally accepted as a measure of one's skill in the following areas: self-awareness, self-regulation, awareness of others, and relationship management. EI is internal and external awareness and control. (See sidebar for EI competencies and groupings according to Goleman, et. al. in books such as Primal Leadership.)

Sidebar of EI Competencies and Groupings

Personal Competence

Self-Awareness
- Emotional self-awareness (monitoring one's emotions)
- Accurate self-assessment (knowing one's strengths)
- Self-confidence

Self-Management
- Emotional self-control
- Transparency (honesty, integrity, trustworthiness)
- Adaptability (to changing situations or to obstacles)
- Achievement (drive)
- Initiative
- Optimism

Social Competence

Social Awareness
- Empathy
- Organizational awareness
- Service

Relationship Management
- Inspirational leadership (ability to convey a clear vision)

EI is generally accepted as a measure of one's skill in the following areas: self-awareness, self-regulation, awareness of others, and relationship management.

- Influence
  (persuasion with or without authority)
- Developing others
- Change catalyst (leader of change)
- Conflict management
- Building bonds
  (relationship network builder)
- Teamwork and collaboration

In reviewing EI competencies, a high level of skill in any or all of them couldn't hurt a career. In fact, many experts agree that these competencies are relevant to professions that involve either managing others or being part of an effective team. In his book Working with Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman goes one step further. He claims that for professions in which the intellectual entry hurdle is particularly high, EI is the dominant differentiator for performance. Goleman is not the first, nor will he be the last, to reach this conclusion. Assume for a moment that this is a fact. Can you think of a profession which has an entry hurdle that is high in the area of intellectual horsepower? That's us, folks. Assuming Goleman is correct, in spite of all of the technical training that actuaries pursue, it is emotional intelligence that differentiates the highest achievers from the rest of the pack. For some this might not feel like great news, especially considering the number of years actuaries spend on technical learning.

The good news is that emotional intelligence competencies can be acquired. And contrary to IQ, which is fixed at a relatively young age, EI can be enhanced at any age. Now here's the tricky part. There are two key differences in enhancing EI as compared to picking up a new way to price a contingent future event. First, the time required to develop EI is greater than the time it takes to learn a technical skill. The reasons behind this difference in training time are fascinating and have to do with how the brain functions. Goleman, et. al., cover this topic very well in Primal Leadership. A simple way of looking at this issue is that it takes time to achieve sustained behavioral change, and that is essentially what enhancing EI is all about.

The second difference, which might be viewed as bad news to actuaries who are accustomed to studying and passing exams, is that EI is not enhanced by the same methods as technical skills. Raw intelligence and traditional learning tactics have propelled actuaries through college and the actuarial exams. Unfortunately, studying and memorizing are of limited use when it comes to developing EI skills. In the EI arena, academic approaches simply raise awareness. But awareness alone is not sufficient—any more than understanding that kicking your feet and paddling your arms will keep you off the bottom of the swimming pool. To survive in the water you must practice those actions until they are second nature. EI skills are similar. Beyond mere intellectual exercises, EI competencies are practiced in the real world with other people. In this way emotional intelligence skills are more similar to physical skills than IQ or cerebral skills because EI is behavior-driven.

So how does one enhance EI skills? Not surprisingly, most successful methods look something like this: become aware of the necessary behavioral change, develop a desire to change the behavior, gain understanding about what success looks like, and practice in the presence of a trusted third party. This latter step is probably the most significant. Having a professional coach is ideal, and many compa-

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nies hire coaches to develop the highest level leaders of their organizations. A coach can directly observe your behavior and offer helpful advice for change. He/she can also solicit input from those closest to you to provide insight into how your behaviors are perceived. But even if your company is not providing you with a professional coach, you have your boss, your coworkers and your friends. Enlisting their help can provide real-time feedback and reinforcement. Obviously the basis of any such arrangement is complete trust in the relationship. Each "coach" needs to have your best interests in mind.

Beyond trust, coach selection should be influenced by knowledge; that is, pick a coach who has the skill you are looking to enhance. For example, if your boss is a particularly good empathetic listener, she would be a good coach candidate for that specific skill. If she just doesn't seem to have the ability to build a strong network of relationships, then you should find someone who does have that skill-set to coach you in that area. Many companies' Organizational Development departments also have processes set up to support such employee growth.

Reading this article or a book on EI will not get you where you need to be. And while you may be able to attend a seminar on predictive modeling to acquire the ability to use such a tool, there is not a three day EI boot camp that will result in sustained behavioral change. EI enhancement takes time, practice, patience and support.

This isn't to say that technical skills are trumped by EI. Technical skills are a gateway to more opportunity. As levels of responsibility increase, technical skills become table stakes. The higher you ascend in an organization the more technical skills are like compulsory tumbling for a gymnast. You must do them perfectly in order to be allowed to continue on to the medal round. To win the medals you need special skills, and in the area of management and leadership those skills are the competencies of emotional intelligence. ❑

To win the medals you need special skills, and in the area of management and leadership those skills are the competencies of emotional intelligence.

Managing Your Career … Do What You Love; Love What You Do

by Daniel Shinnick

In my almost 25 years as an actuary, I have participated in talent management processes both as an employee and as a corporate leader. The words and consultants have changed over the years, but the process and principles have remained pretty constant.

As we manage our personal careers, I think it is helpful to understand the process so that we can make informed decisions about our futures that will position us to have the careers that we desire.

In general the evaluation process is relatively straightforward. Through various input sources (360 feedback, job performance, assessment tools, intuition, etc.) management determines your rating. Most processes use a 2 X 2 matrix (yes, consultants are involved) with potential on one axis and performance on the other.

My experience with actuaries is that most fit in the four professional boxes. People in the professional boxes are characterized by their knowledge, expertise, dependability and competence. This is NOT a bad place to be if you enjoy the work you are doing and are adding value to your organization. So, if you are a good solid actuary and that is what you want to be, what should you do to continue to grow and be of value to your organization (i.e., stay employed)?

- Invest in technical development; be an expert in your field
- Deliver high quality results; performance matters!
- Build your emotional intelligence (read the book, "Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ," by Dan Goleman) and political savvy (read the book, "Survival of the Savvy: High-Integrity Political Tactics for Career and Company Success," by Rick Brandon and Marty Seldman.)
- Take on new roles and assignments that give you an opportunity to build your technical skills

You can have a very good career and job satisfaction as a professional actuary as long as you continue to grow and change as the work you do changes.

A few actuaries aspire to be leaders in their organizations. It is typical in most professions

Long Term Performance			
High	Expert Professional	High Performing Professional	High Potential Leader
	Professional	Solid Professional	High Potential
Low	Low Performer	Inconsistent Performer	High Potential Future (usually new role)
	Low	Performance	High

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that more people want to be good at what they do than want to be senior leaders. For those of you who want to be senior leaders, you need to recognize that senior leadership requires additional skills/characteristics beyond those required to be a professional including:

- Aspiration
- High degree of political savvy and emotional intelligence
- Interest and experience in areas outside of technical expertise
- Strategic thinking about the business
- Broad leadership capabilities

So what should you do if you aspire to senior leadership positions?

1. Seek out assignments and roles that are more than just actuarial.
2. Find a non-actuarial mentor that will help you become more effective in your political organization. Manage the buzz about you.
3. Be a voracious reader on business topics and leadership. Attend non-actuarial conferences on leadership and your business.
4. Be a leader, regardless of your role. It will be noticed.

Here are a couple of important points to remember as you manage your career:

1. It is your career, so it is your responsibility to manage it. Be proactive and don't wait for someone to manage it for you.
2. Do what you love; love what you do. There is nothing wrong with enjoying being a great technical actuary. If you became an actuary because that is what you wanted to do and you still love it, then be the best technical actuary you can be and grow in your career that way. If you really enjoy leadership, there is nothing wrong with leaving your actuarial roots and doing something different. Remember, you will find more satisfaction with your job (and life) if you're doing what you want to do.

Enjoy the journey! ❑

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If you became an actuary because that is what you wanted to do and you still love it, then be the best technical actuary you can be and grow in your career that way.

Effective Communication Despite PowerPoint

by Frank Grossman

The market for enterprise risk management represents an important growth opportunity for actuaries. Gauging an organization's exposure to diverse financial hazards, and identifying what can be done to transform that organization's risk silhouette—and at what cost—are serious tasks well suited to actuarial techniques and analysis. Yet, it is in the communication of results that a potential source of additional risk resides, particularly when using PowerPoint. If you consider your presentation skills not to be at risk, then it's probably time to skip to the next article—vade in pace.

1. PowerPoint's Message

"PowerPoint Pipeline" (The Stepping Stone No. 15, July 2004) discussed the extent to which one's ideas risk transformation and miscommunication when using PowerPoint. The tendency of PowerPoint presentations to be unidirectional as well as content poor—and that ultimately their content can be lost en route—prompted the pipeline metaphor. Many PowerPoint presentations betray an inflexible ballistic quality: once the slides are launched, you know in advance where they will land and the exact path taken—subject only to the influence of gravity, wind speed and direction. Given the contemporary state of pitch and spin in PowerPoint usage, the basic ability of effective communication to withstand a tool that encourages presenters to make power (bullet) points to their audiences is questionable. In a McLuhanist sense, PowerPoint as a communication Medium risks becoming the Message itself.

2. Return to the PowerPoint Nation

There have been a few developments regarding the topics mentioned in "PowerPoint Pipeline." The final report of the Return to Flight Task Group, released in July 2005, echoed the (space shuttle) Columbia Accident Investigation Board's August 2003 criticism of PowerPoint:

> We also observed that instead of concise engineering reports, decisions and their associated rationale are often contained solely within Microsoft PowerPoint charts or e-mails. The CAIB report … criticized the use of PowerPoint as an engineering tool, and other professional organizations have also noted the increased use of this presentation software as a substitute for technical reports and other meaningful documentation. PowerPoint (and similar products by other vendors), as a method to provide talking points and present limited data to assembled groups, has its place in the engineering community; however, these presentations should never be allowed to replace, or even supplement, formal documentation.

In September 2005, former Secretary of State Colin Powell conceded that his February 2003 speech to the United Nations Security Council—regarding Iraq and the search for weapons of mass destruction—was personally "painful," representing a "blot" on his record. While there were other factors, it's fair to say that PowerPoint did not help.

There has been some resurgence of interest in Marshall

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McLuhan and his work with the launching of an annual McLuhan International Festival of the Future in Toronto, although this may be to some extent a reflection of his professional association with the University of Toronto.

While there have been recent upgrades of PowerPoint software, singling out specific improvements in its ability to effectively communicate ideas is not easy. Edward Tufte has noted that, "New releases feature ever more elaborated PP Phluff and therapeutic measures for troubled presenters." Given Microsoft's dominant market presence, one wonders whether substantive future product innovations will ever materialize. What is clear is that each revision is indeed different from its predecessor, sparking a need for continual user upgrades.

Ian Parker observed, in his May 2001 article "Absolute PowerPoint" published in The New Yorker, that "… there are great tracts of corporate America where to appear at a meeting without PowerPoint would be unwelcome and vaguely pretentious, like wearing no shoes." And though PowerPoint's pervasive influence on corporate culture would seem to continue unabated, there are notable examples of successful major league speakers who eschew slideware entirely. Instead of spending time and energy packaging their content as bullet points, each of these speakers instead focuses on using spoken words to deliver their essential message—their particular story.

3. Once Upon A Time

The time-tested power of communicating by telling stories cannot be underestimated. While sales gimmicks frequently have a short shelf life, a good story can be retold with effect again and again. The ability of stories to fire the human imagination and thereby perpetuate their existence even pre-dates their documentation in written form—consider the Greek epic poems that existed for centuries as an oral tradition before finally being written down. The many brief fables ascribed to Aesop, as well as the folk-tales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, demonstrate that even simple stories can have great staying power—ask the younger members of your family!

Much of the information that we receive each day is still in the form of narrative stories (e.g., "He told me …" or "She did …"). This is in direct contrast to McLuhan's Mosaic Method theory of modern information presentation in which content is fragmented, juxtaposed and often stated without context. Other than one's weekly grocery list, perhaps the best contemporary example of the Mosaic Method is the daily newspaper USA Today. And the importance of contextual framing and a clear narrative thread when making a presentation are never more apparent than when they are absent—and confusion results.

4. Narrative, Interrupted

The contribution of a strong narrative thread and supporting context help make information transmission more effective and improve comprehension, but they also support information retention. Consider for a moment the half-life of the information transmitted by various means in everyday life. For example, how long would it take you to completely forget half of what you read in 20 minutes on the op-ed page of a serious newspaper or in The Economist, compared to 20 minutes spent with a copy of USA Today? And how do those half-lives compare to the half-life of the information that you received during the first 20 minutes of the last PowerPoint presentation that you attended?

An article on business planning published in the Harvard Business Review emphasized that requiring a plan to "have a narrative logic … encourages clear thinking and brings out the subtlety and complexity of ideas." One manager said:

. . . the importance of contextual framing and a clear narrative thread when making a presentation are never more apparent than when they are absent—and confusion results.

> "If you read just bullet points, you may not get it, but if you read a narrative plan, you will. If there's a flaw in the logic, it glares right out at you. With bullets, you don't know if the insight is really there or if the planner has merely given you a shopping list."

PowerPoint presentations are comprised of a sequential thread of slides that partition information into arbitrary compartments subject to bullet point hierarchies. Given their fractured continuity, these presentations tend to be inherently anti-narrative—placing both comprehension during the presentation and subsequent information retention at risk. Anyone attempting to read a stack of PowerPoint slides for the first time following a presentation may appreciate just how poorly they can convey information on their own.

5. PowerPoint's Cognitive Style

Edward Tufte is a Yale University professor who authored a series of masterful—and idiosyncratic—books on information design beginning with The Visual Display of Quantitative Information published in 1983. Tufte's case study of the Columbia accident PowerPoint presentations was the kernel of a booklet published in May 2003, subsequently reissued in a 31-page second edition entitled The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within in January 2006.

(The updated edition is more tightly argued and more cogent. Some of the hyperbole present in the earlier edition has disappeared. Thankfully Peter Norvig's biting PowerPoint riff on the Gettysburg Address in six slides remains.)

Tufte points out that conventional PowerPoint slide design style yields low data resolution inasmuch as only a minority of the slide's area is available to show unique material, while the balance is consumed by bullets, frames and branding. The immediate consequence of low resolution PowerPoint slides is that the written language of the slides is often clipped and therefore subject to misinterpretation. Interestingly, Tufte observes that the bullet point phraseology found in many PowerPoint slides has a strangely Orwellian ring. Slogans such as, "Freedom is Slavery" and "Four Legs Good, Two Legs …"—now, how exactly did that phrase go?—could have been lifted directly from a typical PowerPoint presentation.

Ultimately, Tufte recommends replacing PowerPoint with word-processing software—publication quality tools able to handle mathematical notation—to generate information rich high-resolution paper handouts. "This tool design should be driven by the necessities of evidence display, not pitching."

6. Beyond the Pipeline

You'll want to keep the end result in mind before attempting to break-out of the traditional PowerPoint "pipeline" and establish more effective communication with others. And modern workplace conventions must obviously be considered as well.

For example, there may be little need to innovate when undertaking rote delivery of a speech or an address. The "stand-and-deliver" approach worked well enough for 17th century highwaymen or on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera, but in these instances the respective roles (and delivery expectations) were usually precast and fairly rigid. And in the later case, the paying audience

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really did want to hear all of the notes in Di quella pira sung just so—and in the right order too.

Yet a typical actuarial presentation's message often consists of a proposal or situation report based on involved quantitative analysis, with loads of supporting data—particularly when operating in the stochastic end of the forest. Hence some degree of presentation flexibility may be wise, as not every question can be turned aside (nor should they) with the standard "Let me get back to you" reply. Responding to substantive comments (time permitting) as they are raised rather than deferring them to the end of your presentation may help build a constructive context-specific dialogue with your audience. At the very least it might help demonstrate that your presentation's timetable ("Gotta get through another 17 slides in the next 10 minutes!") is not more important to you than your audience's concerns.

Preparing a technical document (in sentence-paragraph form) to support your slides can help by providing context and a more thorough exposition of your ideas. This document can be distributed either before or after your presentation depending on your need for a concluding "reveal." And opting to use overhead projector transparencies that can be annotated with a marker—or even good old flip-charts—may give you the real-time flexibility to tailor your message.

While it may be possible to arrive at some sense of your audience's needs and expectations, it's nearly impossible to know them as well as they know themselves. So concentrate on knowing your story and its supporting materials—inside and out—so that you can respond and adapt as your presentation unfolds. After all it's the presentation between your ears that counts, not the thick stack of slides on your laptop's hard-drive.

7. Suggested Readings

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Preparing a technical document (in sentence-paragraph form) to support your slides can help by providing context and a more thorough exposition of your ideas.

“Wow, you flubbed it Fred!”
The Art of Giving Constructive Criticism

by Maureen Wild

Sooner or later in our professional lives, we discover ourselves in a corner office waiting to deliver a workplace review. Our workplace “report cards” often give others great advice, and the process does not have to be disagreeable. When the “coaching” is honestly meant to improve performance and success, the changes and growth an evaluee experiences can be a bit like getting the “most improved player” award from the NFL .

Ah, but here’s the problem. Not every supervisor is a candidate for the diplomatic corps. Often employees are recipients of vague, judgmental, caustic or non-specific “suggestions” for improvement. When this kind of dialogue occurs, it’s a net loss for both employee and management.

Productive feedback has several important characteristics. It must be descriptive and free of judgment. It must address modifiable behavior—not unchangeable traits. It must deal with specifics, not broad-spectrum objectives. Finally, as in nearly everything in life, the feedback should be well-timed.

The goal of feedback is to have people reach their full potential AT WORK. It is wildly inappropriate to offer advice about an employee’s personal life unless some aspect of that behavior is affecting job performance. Managers: your evaluation of another party should be descriptive but not judgmental. Choose examples of concrete situations that are impairing job performance. In the same vein, your coaching must focus on modifiable, not unchangeable behavior. You must never suggest or insinuate that a person would be more effective if she/he were taller, ethnic, not ethnic, younger, older, slimmer etc. Not only is this frustrating and insulting to your audience but, depending on what you say, your remarks could be illegal and cause you unthinkable consequences. A tall person cannot shrink and, therefore, may not be qualified to be a jockey in the Trifecta, but in most professions, height is irrelevant and thus, a moot point.

Increasingly, workplaces are moving toward cross functional teams, more departmental interaction and, generally, more group input and decision making. Thus, contributing suggestions and insights for improvement actually can enhance your value to the company that employs you—if—and this is a big if— you are tactful and wise with your constructive criticism.

Choose the right environment to make your suggestions. Don’t coach someone in front of an audience. Most people would construe this as being scolded in front of a group. Since most people respond to criticism with defensiveness or belligerence, seek a private place to have your conversation. If you are coaching a team of people, pull that small group aside and talk to them privately as well.

Here are some are some general guidelines for offering a workplace evaluation:

1. Ask—“Is this a good time to chat?” or make a formal appointment.
2. Keep your topic working and task oriented, even if the other party tries to personalize it.
3. Explain how a particular problem or situation affects work flow.

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4. Invite the other person's perceptions with, "… how do you see this situation?"
5. Watch body language. Appear relaxed and approachable.
6. Don't pile on—focus on one performance area at a time.
7. Stay on target: don't go off on a tangent. Stay in control of the session.
8. Speak slowly and deliberately to avoid verbal miscommunication.
9. Supply a written report of your remarks so that you have proof of what you have said.
10. Put a positive spin on your remarks—"How can we improve …?"

Unless you are supervising a dream team, delivering evaluations can be challenging and uncomfortable, but, with a little forethought and finesse, this part of your job does not have to make you reach for the Rolaids. Remember to balance the bad with the good, inject some positive acknowledgement and try to be as tactful and impassive as possible. ❑

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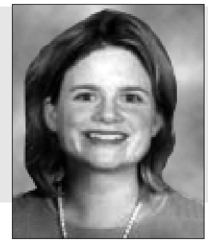
The House of Perhaps

by Kristi Bohn



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Most actuaries have a few preconceived notions about the other side. No, I am not talking about the afterlife. What I mean is that if you are a consulting actuary, you likely have an impression about the insurance actuaries. Thoughts that may come to mind include: introverted, programmers, tacticians, academics and researchers. If you are an insurance actuary, you likely have prejudices about the consulting actuaries as well: extroverted, highly paid, overworked, strategic and savvy. If you have worked in both environments, you likely recognize that neither impression is true; a variety of personalities exist in both environments and the work content is just as technical and just as strategic in both markets.

What is actually more important to an actuary's career development is the corporate culture in which they are raised, and later, the culture that one fosters when one leads. Corporate culture varies widely within both insurance and consulting firms, and even offices within a particular insurer or consulting firm can vary drastically. In terms of career development, a few uncorrected cultural missteps will ultimately hamper your personal development, and left unabated could damage opportunities for the rest of us too.

Let me share with you a couple of examples regarding one important cultural aspect: an actuary's attitude toward new work. A few days ago, I was talking with a fellow actuary about how a common acquaintance liked the move to a new job. My friend made a vague comment that our friend was getting used to it, and that there is some good and some bad, just like with any job. Then I asked, how does that company get by with so few actuaries? Easy, the answer was that when sales or marketing asks for something new, the answer is no. Sound familiar? Not to all of you. Thus, example two …

In consulting, the people who ask you to work on projects are the same people who ultimately pay your salary. With the hourly rates that consultants charge, added to strapped budgets, it was very unusual to get a frivolous request. Most projects require actuarial skills and very specific, deep knowledge of the topic at hand.

However, from time to time in consulting, a project that is relatively simple, administrative and time-consuming comes along. If the bid is accepted, the consultant works happily knowing that his or her billable hour goals would be that much easier to meet that year. However, if the magnitude of the project is high enough, someone else within the requesting firm might ultimately take offense to your price tag, and the whole relationship quickly disintegrates—and relationships are so important, particularly in consulting.

My point: whether you are a consultant or an insurance actuary, take a step back and think about the attitude you and your staff project when it comes to new learning and new projects. Obviously, you need to balance the necessity of the project with your team's ability to solve the problem. Also, one needs to think about the cost that accepting the project will have on your customer and your team. However, if you find yourself consistently ready to say "no" before you have even heard the request, take note that this attitude is ultimately career-limiting, both for you and for the entire actuarial career. When that big project comes around that you would love to work on, it is your past record that will put you on the candidate list. Take your corporate culture from the house of no—or the house of yes—to the house of perhaps ❑