

# RECORD OF SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES 1994 VOL. 20 NO. 3A

## MANAGING TECHNICAL PROFESSIONALS

Instructor: ALAN W. FINKELSTEIN  
Co-Instructor: JAMES W. SCHREIER\*

During this session we will develop skills to motivate, evaluate, manage, and direct the work of technical professionals. Specific areas to be covered include: appraising the work of technical professionals, extrinsic versus intrinsic rewards and their impact on motivating technical professionals, how to gain credibility with people who have greater technical expertise than you, delegating highly technical projects that go beyond your level of expertise, and getting technical professionals to work smarter.

MR. ALAN W. FINKELSTEIN: I'm a member of the Society's Committee on Management and Personal Development. Our committee is charged with encouraging the development of management and business skills of actuaries through such vehicles as: a series of articles we publish in *The Actuary*, Society of Actuary sessions such as Effective Listening, Management Disney Style, Secrets to Better Writing, the Annual Senior Executive Forum and this one.

Our speaker is James Schreier. He is the founder and president of Far Cliffs Consulting in Brookfield, Wisconsin, which is dedicated to improving individual and organizational performance. About 75% of the work he does is dedicated to training and the balance is devoted to organizational development and human resources. He has a bachelor's in human resources and an MBA and Ph.D in education from Marquette University. He was on the faculty of Marquette for ten years which included five years as the assistant dean of the business school.

MR. JAMES W. SCHREIER: We have two companion sessions entitled Managing Technical Professionals. I'm going to start by talking about the performance environment of the 1990s. We're going to have a brief discussion with some input from the audience on the problems and opportunities of managing technical professionals in the actuarial field. We're going to devote most of our time in this first session to the subject of management style. I'm going to briefly introduce peak performance, although that subject will carry over a bit into the case study session in which you will attempt to apply some of these principles as well as your own experiences to create a very special environment for an actual situation involving the types of people and situations that some of you probably manage regularly.

Why would I start a presentation like this talking about something like the performance environment of the 1990s? Because everything has gone up for grabs. Managing people in the 1990s is unlike anything we've ever faced in this country before. I had the opportunity just a few weeks ago to be in the Ukraine. I was there to teach something in the banking field, and also to get some information, because I will be teaching some human resources topics later this year. They have a very

---

\*Mr. Schreier, not a member of the sponsoring organizations, is President of Far Cliffs Consulting in Brookfield, WI.

interesting situation, unlike anything we have here. After coming out of a socialist economy where everything was structured as it was under the Soviet Union, the Ukrainians are now in a totally chaotic free-market situation. All of the environmental or legislative types of things that managers in this country face every day to an ever-increasing level of complexity are not only unheard of in the Ukraine, but they're not even being thought of, discussed, or considered. They need to know basics like how do you pay people, how do you hire people, how do you evaluate performance. Those are all still very important issues for us today, but we have a different environment.

For those of you who are in the management side of this field, not only do you have the potential for tremendous legislative change that could change the basic tasks and function that you perform in the business that you're in, you've also got this constantly changing chaotic environment of legislation that affects how you interact with people. We don't have time to talk about all the acronyms or legislative issues that affect the job of managing people. A few examples are the Americans with Disabilities Act, sexual harassment, equal employment, and disabled Americans. We have so much complexity and change that influences how we deal with people every day, that the whole issue of trying to create an environment for performance is no longer secondary to getting the work out. It has become what many managers tell me is the main thing they have to deal with now. They're spending more time on some of these other things. A few examples would be the changes that the profession is going to be facing and how that's going to affect the actual work that's going to be done, the need to get more work done in less time at less cost, and the impact of technology on your work force and on the people that you're managing.

So the environment that any manager of a technical area as complex and changing as yours is today is facing what I can simply label the performance environment of the 1990s. Let's get specific in some of the areas that you folks feel strongly about. We're going to list a couple things. If you think about managing the technical professionals that you face every day and the issues you have to deal with in this environment, I'm sure it will be very easy for us to get through the first part of this list—the problems. What are the problems in dealing with managing a group of technical professionals. Before we launch in collecting some of those, I also want you to be thinking a little bit about the opportunities. What's the positive side of managing a group of technical professionals?

Let's start with the problems, however. This is going to be a quick free-for-all. What are some of the problems you face in managing technical professionals?

FROM THE FLOOR: They know more than you do.

FROM THE FLOOR: Communicating practical objectives. Getting them to stay focused.

MR. SCHREIER: Give me an example or tell me more so I understand that.

FROM THE FLOOR: Sometimes they're a little idealistic and they head more to the details.

## MANAGING TECHNICAL PROFESSIONALS

MR. SCHREIER: *Arguing philosophy and theory, and not getting the thing done.*

FROM THE FLOOR: Teaching them to communicate with other professionals.

MR. SCHREIER: With who? Who do they need to communicate with outside their technical area? Customers?

FROM THE FLOOR: Customers or other people in the organization.

MR. SCHREIER: Other people in the organization, such as other departments. In other words they become an island unto themselves. They are their own little tribe with their own little language and their own little dress code, they all drive the same cars, they all eat at the same place for lunch.

FROM THE FLOOR: Keeping them challenged.

MR. FINKELSTEIN: Getting them to be team players.

MR. SCHREIER: Does anybody have anything that they think is so pressing that it absolutely has to be up here, or does this give us a good representation of some issues. What about the other side of it? It can't be all that bad or you wouldn't be here. Or maybe that's why you are here. What's the good side of it? What do you enjoy about working with a group of technical professionals? I've been all over the country, I've been all over the world working with different groups of technical people. There's something fascinating about every group when I get to work with them. They're creative. If teamwork is an issue, and people are creative, what a possibility. Let's talk about wanting them to be self-managed. I'm working with a group of insurance claim processors dealing with issues that are somehow connected to the Veterans Administration right now, where a highly structured environment of government is creating a union setting. They are putting the employees in self-directed teams. It's unheard of, but it's probably working faster than it happens in some manufacturing settings. Why? I'm not sure yet because it's too early to tell, but it appears that the reason it's working so well is because the group is very eager and very creative and is making it happen on their own. Oftentimes, in manufacturing, where I do a great deal of work with team processors and things, teamwork doesn't get very far because the employees have been so squelched in their jobs all along that they had no power to make decisions. When you tell them to, they don't do it. So if you have creativity as an opportunity, you have a tremendous asset on the side of the team issue. It probably relates to some of the other things too, but the team issue is a good one.

FROM THE FLOOR: Very motivated.

MR. SCHREIER: By what?

FROM THE FLOOR: Challenge or cash.

FROM THE FLOOR: Intelligent.

FROM THE FLOOR: Hard working.

FROM THE FLOOR: Organized.

MR. SCHREIER: That's an idea. Some of the things that I'm going to say are things that some of you have already recognized. This is not an impossible situation. This is not a bleak environment where everything that you're trying to do is impossible. The group of people you're with are not incompetent, untrained, or unwilling. It doesn't fall into that category. So let's build off of the opportunities to look at some of the things that we can do to solve problems.

Just a few weeks ago, I was asked to give a speech to a group of trainers on international training experiences. The one thing that I said to that audience as a universal truth about the travels that I've been able to make around the world, is that style among people is a global fact. While cultures are different, while individual people in different parts of the country and the world are different, something that we refer to as style seems to be a very universal phenomena. In almost every program that I've ever done that has been somehow related to a group of very specific technical people, whether that's actuaries or claims agents or engineers or accountants or nurses or anyone else, the issue always comes up about managing or interacting with this particular group. I usually start by addressing the issue of style, because it is one basic concept that will rarely let you down as a way of understanding where technical people are coming from. We'll talk more about them, which in many cases is talking about you, in just a few minutes.

At your tables there was a stack of instruments called *LifeScripts*, an inventory of personal strengths. We're going to pass out score sheets right now. I'm looking for someone whose controlling score on the top is less than it is on the bottom. When we're talking about management style, what are we talking about? I use the term management style because I work so often with managers like yourselves. I work with different kinds of people too. The goals of any session like this are very simple. We manage better when we know ourselves, when we can control ourselves, and when we have the ability to know others and do something for them. One of the hot 1990s buzz words for management is stewardship; we recognize that clearly, in this performance environment of the 1990s, our role as managers is changing from an authoritarian in control of a production type of environment to a leadership role where we are becoming the coaches of the teams.

Style is probably one of the most powerful tools that we can use to make that transition more effective. We're also talking about values, but I'm not talking about changing anyone's personal values. One of the reasons I want to cover these things very quickly is to clarify that point. Style training, whether it's what I'm doing with you or an opportunity you've had in another setting, measures basically the same thing. It's not new-age training; it is based on some basic concepts that say if we get to know each other, we'll probably work better together, because people perform best in positive relationships. We also recognize when we talk about doing style training that people need to work on this.

Relationships get worse without effort, they don't get better. Problems don't solve themselves, they get more serious. Again, in the environment that we're in today, relationship problems have more potential to do more damage. We are literally seeing what could almost be called an epidemic of issues coming forth in the media about

## MANAGING TECHNICAL PROFESSIONALS

style. We've had chief executive officer (CEOs) resign from companies clearly because of their style. The head of a Chamber of Commerce was fired because people were leaving his office in tears. *The Wall Street Journal* recently featured a story about a CEO of another company involved in a take over, who suddenly left after a couple of months. Why? His style didn't fit. It's a major issue at all levels of an organization.

One of the two major causes of The Challenger disaster was an issue related to management style. Yes, there was a technical failure. The Challenger space shuttle exploded because of an O-ring failure that was technical in nature; however, the Rogers Commission also cited that an equally responsible cause was management style. A group-think mentality caused the NASA managers to make a decision that made no logical sense. The Rogers Commission (a commission to investigate NASA after the Challenger disaster) had access to information just like the kind of information we're generating here. If you looked at it, you would see why they would make the decision the way they did.

A change in approach is not manipulative. If I flex my style, if I use information about my style, my preferences and the preferences of a group of people I'm working with, I'm not manipulating. In fact, if I was it would be obvious. It would be as obvious as the old-fashioned, traditional (I hope changing) car salesman style that suddenly, out of nowhere, switches approaches completely based on something that the customer says. Anyone who does that is trying to misuse this kind of information; it is very obvious that that's what is going on. We are talking about some other important things including recognizing that other people are important. Recognizing and controlling one's actions does not conflict with your own personal, individual, or for many of us, religious values. We're not talking about changing anything like that. We're talking about recognizing how you deal with people and how to use that to be more effective. The one thing that you never want to consider is changing your style. As a matter of fact it's the worse thing that you can do. We want to talk about using your style to be more effective in dealing with people whose style is different from yours. Flexing your style is one issue, changing it is very different.

I also want to point out that when we're talking about management style, we are not talking about something like personality. When we're measuring style, we are always talking about a photograph taken at a particular point in time. If you were to complete this *Lifescrpts* instrument next week back in your office, you might answer it differently than you did now that you're attending a workshop at a convention in San Antonio. So your style information, while it's probably very accurate for you, changes slightly even from day to day. The emphasis is on external, verifiable information. We basically asked you how you'd react to a couple of different situations and how other people would describe you. That ought to give us some information that enables us to deal effectively with other people.

I was exposed to the very first style program in the late 1970s. It was at a Holiday Inn in North Central Wisconsin, and I was attending a program where I was going to learn how to introduce some drug education activities into the liberal arts college I was working for in the Milwaukee area. I was attending that program with about 149 other folks from various health care organizations, group homes; there were social workers, teachers, community leaders, and religious folks—a cross section of

people who were going to be going back to their communities to try to mobilize people to work on drug education activities. The facilitator got up and explained the purpose of the program to us. He said, "We're going to give you some skills that will make you much more powerful when dealing with the folks that you're going to go back and try to mobilize." Most of us were going to be going back to work with an audience that we didn't work with on a regular basis. We were going to be trying to influence them to do some kind of campaign or something. He then proceeded to teach us about a very simple three-style model. It was one of the most powerful learning experiences that I ever received and I continue to try and pass it along to folks like yourselves in situations like this.

He told us that if we took a look at our own style and how we interacted with other people, some of us would fall into a category called logical thinkers. Logical thinkers are very interested in getting the answer. They want to know what  $A + B$  is going to equal; they want to know the rules, and they want to get to that answer in a very structured, logical way, very quickly.

He said another group isn't uninterested in that, they are much more interested in relationships and we'll call those folks the friendly helpers. These are the people that are very interested in what other people think. These are the people that are very interested in making sure that everyone at the table gets an opportunity to talk. These are the individuals who can perform what we call in group dynamics the gatekeeper function; the person who is able to notice that someone hasn't said much; the person who is able to very effectively, without offending, silence someone and does it with tact. The friendly helper has the ability to do that.

The third style that he talked about was the tough battler. The tough battler, like the logical thinker, wants to get to the right answer. In fact the tough battler already knows what that answer is. The tough battler, like the friendly helper, is very interested in what other people think. If other people agree with the tough battler, they're in; if they don't agree, they're out. They're really concerned with winning, with being in charge, and with making the decision.

I just gave you the *Reader's Digest* version of those three styles, but I think I gave you enough information to explain what happened after that. At the end of that fascinating session, this facilitator asked us to divide ourselves into three groups based on what we thought was our dominant style, we were a group of 150 people. I was very surprised when I saw that the group divided itself up into three almost equally sized groups, because I was convinced that there was going to be more of one style than the other; you might feel the same way too. Many of you are likely to feel that the group that should be the biggest is yours.

After I got over the shock of that lesson, I found that the second lesson was even more powerful. The facilitator went up to each of the three groups and gave them a task to perform, and he gave each group 30 minutes to accomplish that task. I don't know what the logical thinkers were given to do, but I do know that after 30 minutes they had not accomplished their task. I don't know what the friendly helpers were given to do. I do know that after 30 minutes they had failed to accomplish their task. I do know what the tough battlers were given to do, and I'm going to ask you whether or not 50 people who classified themselves as tough battlers were able to

## MANAGING TECHNICAL PROFESSIONALS

accomplish the following task in 30 minutes. The facilitator came up to the group and said, "You have 30 minutes, pick a leader."

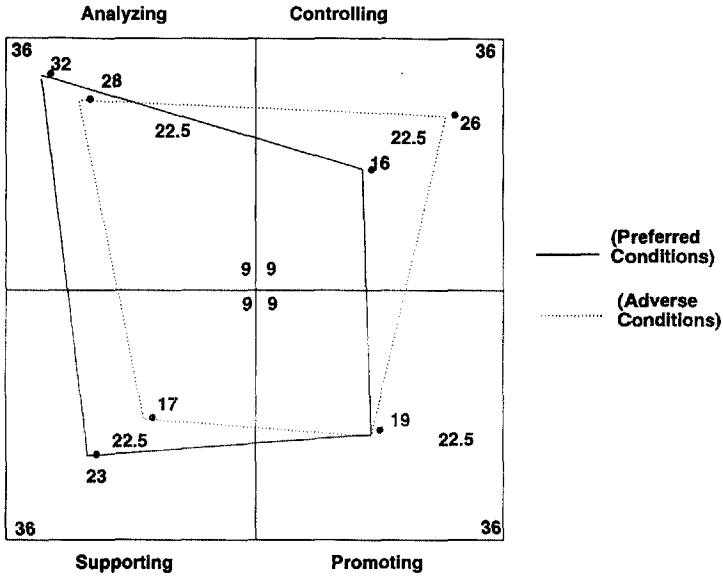
You probably have some idea as to what happened for the next 30 minutes. All fifty of us because of our basic preference and our outlook on life, wanted to be the leader of that group. We didn't know why, we didn't know what the leader was going to have to do, but we wanted to be the leader. That's all there was to it. The point is obvious and it's one of the most important points about your style that we need to address. As you look at the information that you're getting today, and as you look at the information that many of you will choose to get by giving me those score sheets, the information about your style is how you view the world and how you act. It's even more important to see how that fits in, how that limits us, not in a negative way, but in how we need to be aware of what we're good at versus what other people are good at and how to develop the ability to see things from other people's perspectives.

I've passed around a graph. Julie has nicely volunteered to allow me to plot her scores up here on the board. First, notice that on Chart 1 the lowest score you can have on any area, so it forms the midpoint of the matrix, is nine, the highest score is 36. The midpoint of each quadrant is 22.5. Now take a look at your scores on the top. Julie has a 23 on supporting under preferred conditions, and I'll explain that in a minute. She has a 16 on controlling. She has a 32 on analyzing. And she has a 19 on promoting. The next thing you need to do after you plot your scores is connect them because whatever you have now, is what we're going to refer to as your playing field. This may be slightly different from what some of you have experienced who have done other instruments like this. Most instruments that measure management style put you in a category, and if we were to put Julie into a category we would look at her scores and say, "Julie, you're an analyzer." And in fact if you take the opportunity to get your computer profile, it probably will say that your primary style is analyzing. However, she's not an analyzer because of a dot. She has defined a playing field that includes parts of all four of the styles. She clearly shows a preference for playing over here in the analyzing part of the ballpark, if you will, but it's not foreign for her to be supporting. In fact her score is slightly above average, and it's certainly not foreign for her to be promoting or controlling. She's familiar with all those. She's laid out a playing field here that defines how comfortable she is. We sometimes mistakenly tell people in terms of talking about style that the idea is that you're an analyzer, therefore, you know nothing about the opposite which is promoting. Untrue. You know something about it. You know what it's like over there. You can learn more, but the playing field idea is very powerful.

One of the other major reasons that I like the *LifeScripts* instrument is because it raises an issue. Also, borrowing from the sports world, professional sports teams play only half of their games on the home field, and as we're seeing in all of the playoffs this year, home field is not necessarily an advantage. It may be for you, but when you're dealing with employees, sometimes you have to play on their field. The *LifeScripts* instrument gives a calculation of your style under preferred conditions (in other words, the way you like to play) and how you play when things get tough (how you play when you're behind, when you get called into your boss' office, when you have to do something you don't want to do like discipline an employee or talk to them about their performance or their attendance). Do you play differently when

things aren't the way you'd like them to be when your back is against the wall or when you're on someone else's turf?

CHART 1  
LIFESCRIPTS: PLOTTED SCORES



Let's see if Julie's style changes under pressure. Her supporting style goes from a 23 to 17. Her controlling style goes from a 16 to 26. Her analyzing style goes from 32 to 28 and her promoting style stays at 19. Some of your styles don't change at all, but Julie's style changes. Julie, under normal conditions, is Miss Nice Manager, who has all the facts right. When things get tough and she gets backed in a corner, she gets tough too. Each of you can look at your style scores and see to what extent they change under pressure. Some of you have scores that don't change much at all, and that's OK. In other words, nobody needs to know what kind of a mood you're in. If I'm working for Julie, I want to know what kind of a mood she's in.

What if your diagram, under adverse conditions, is the same? Does this mean you've got no style? What does it mean?

FROM THE FLOOR: Balanced?

FROM THE FLOOR: Consistent?

FROM THE FLOOR: Squared?

FROM THE FLOOR: Neutral?

FROM THE FLOOR: Stable?



## MANAGING TECHNICAL PROFESSIONALS

MR. SCHREIER: How about flexible. A person who has scores in all four areas that are about equal, has tremendous flexibility, but is that good? It can be very good. Is it difficult? Yes. On a baseball team, we probably have somebody that's an outstanding hitter. If you're going to have a championship baseball team, you're going to need to have somebody on the team who is hitting above 300, maybe even above 310 or 320. That's the individual's main role and strength. You're going to have somebody on the team who is probably an outstanding pitcher. You have someone else that's a very good fielder. There are always exceptions. Is that excellent fielder a 300 hitter. Rarely. You could have someone else who is a very good . . .

FROM THE FLOOR: Team leader?

FROM THE FLOOR: Coach?

FROM THE FLOOR: Base runner?

MR. SCHREIER: You've probably got someone on the team who is very fast. Is that very fast lead-off hitter a 300 hitter. Rarely. You'd like him or her to be, but it rarely happens. You clearly have four strengths that are put together to make a good team, but baseball has one other unique characteristic about it. Baseball has someone on every team who qualifies for the 23-22 approach. This person is not outstanding at any of it. He or she is good at all of it. What do we call it? A utility player. Utility players can do it all. They're not 300 hitters, but they're not 100 hitters. They're not golden glove award winners, but they're good. They're not fast, but they're faster than some of the players that are starting. You know how you can prove they're utility players? At some time during the season that utility player will pitch. It happens about 6-8 times every year. It happens because that person is the utility player. It's a very powerful position.

There's one other example that I have to give because it makes a better point than the baseball example. Bridge is a card game in which no particular suit is trump. You bid for it, so in any one hand, hearts, diamonds, clubs or spades may be trump. However, there is also a situation in bridge where everybody has cards that are basically of equal strength. You play the hand in no trump which is four people playing an organized version of war. However, playing no trump in bridge has two very unique characteristics that are important. The no trump hand is considered to be what?

FROM THE FLOOR: Worth more points than the rest?

MR. SCHREIER: It is worth more points than any other hand. Why? It's considered the most difficult to play. If you can play a no trump hand, it's valuable. Our balance style hand is extremely valuable, extremely difficult to play, but potentially very powerful. If I had to make up a team of people for my department, and I had the chance to have a five person team, who would I want on the team? Someone high in controlling, one high in promoting, one high in analyzing, one high in supporting and one utility player to be my leader or manager.

