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Three Keys to Transform You from “Technical Resource” to “Strategic Business Partner”

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As an independent actuarial recruiter for the past 15 years, I've had the opportunity to work with a host of senior-level executives who employ actuaries. From this vantage point, I've observed actuaries who have enjoyed steep trajectories in their careers, assuming ever-increasing levels of responsibility and strategic impact. I've also observed actuaries whose careers have plateaued, sometimes for a few years, sometimes for the rest of their careers. The reasons for these plateaus vary: stagnant technical skills; economic conditions affecting hiring headcounts; personal circumstances limiting ability to relocate and/or pursue career opportunities, to name a few.

The single biggest factor I've observed that determines an actuary's trajectory is one's **ability to communicate in a way that you are perceived not merely as a technical resource, but as a strategic business partner whose insight, knowledge and opinion carry influence with decision-makers.** It's not about having the right answer, but the ability to communicate it in the right way to the right person so they “get it.”

And lest you think this is something that applies only to more senior actuaries, think again. No matter what your level of experience or responsibility, exam status or accreditation, you can begin to apply these keys, too. Start wherever you are, and the results will come.

As I've presented at Society of Actuaries (SOA) conferences on this topic, I've asked audiences what the term “technical resource” means to them. Responses have included, “the numbers, small picture, narrow view, details, models.” In contrast, when I've asked, “what does ‘strategic business partner’ mean to you?” participants have responded in a totally different vein, with “influence, credibility, stakeholder, big picture, impact, seat at the table.”

Believe it or not, **communication skills**, the stereotypical thorn in the side for the actuarial profession historically, are the catalyst that can transform how you are perceived and, thus, your level of influence. Did you know that we derive 55 percent of a message's meaning from the speaker's facial expressions, 38 percent from how he or she says the message, and 7 percent from the actual words spoken?¹ So, if your words, your knowledge, your brilliant technical projects, models, reports and analysis, are only 7 percent effective, what's an actuary to do? Let's focus on the 93 percent by discussing the *Three Keys to Transform You from “Technical Resource” to “Strategic Business Partner.”*

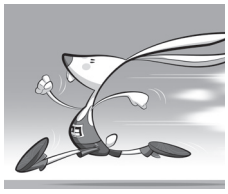

KEY #1—UNDERSTAND

When I make the effort to *understand* the behavioral and communication style of another, I am building a skill to unlock how to communicate, and ultimately influence, more effectively.

To understand human behavior and communication styles, we need to begin by looking at two basic elements: **pace and priority.**





Pace is the speed at which an individual moves and speaks. Generally speaking, some individuals tend to be more fast-paced while others tend to be more slow-paced.

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|  <p>Fast-paced individuals tend to move, speak, respond and decide quickly. They enjoy being on the move and in the middle of the action.</p> |  <p>Slower-paced individuals tend to move, speak, respond and decide slower with greater reflection and caution.</p> |
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Think of yourself. Would others describe you as predominantly fast- or slow-paced? Do you tend to speak rapidly or have a slower, more deliberate speaking style? Do you tend to respond more quickly or like to reflect on things for a while? Are you more comfortable in a fast-paced, upbeat environment, or do you tend to prefer one that is more relaxed and laid-back? There is no right or wrong or better or best here. Each one of us has some elements of both.

Priority refers to one’s perspective or the most important consideration as they view their world. As with pace, generally speaking, some individuals tend to be either task-/process-oriented, which means they are more focused on accomplishing tasks; or people-/relationship-oriented, which means they place higher importance on establishing relationships. Note that this isn’t a rigid equation, meaning that task-oriented individuals can like people, but they place a greater importance on tasks. People-oriented individuals do perform tasks well, but they place a greater importance on the people around them and how those people feel.

Remember, we are all some of both, and each day we’ll switch back and forth between the two.

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|  <p>TASK/PROCESS Task-oriented individuals think of life in terms of plans, process, projects, function, organization, procedures and programs. They like to create lists and check off tasks as they are completed. They may focus more on results or on quality and value and excellence.</p> |  <p>PEOPLE/RELATIONSHIP People-oriented individuals are energized by being around people. They tend to focus more on feelings, relationships, friendships, helping others, and making people happy. They genuinely like to serve others, either one on one or in groups.</p> |
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Think about yourself. Do you tend to be more task- or people-oriented? Do you prefer to attack the list or conquer the hill on your own? Do you spend more time thinking about the people who will join you in battle, your team and their needs, than the task itself? How would others describe you? Remember, we are all some of both, and each day we’ll switch back and forth between the two.

KEY #2—RECOGNIZE

When I make the effort to *recognize* the behavioral and communication style of another, I can observe valuable clues about their communication style in that moment.

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Just because your CFO displayed a fast-paced, people-oriented style in yesterday's meeting, doesn't mean that in today's earnings call prep she'll display exactly the same behavioral and communication style. We are a blend of all of these elements, and in any given moment, our style can look different.

Observing their body language and communication style will help you to recognize if their pace is fast or slow, and if their priority is task- or people-oriented.

Pace is easily recognizable:

| BODY LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION STYLE BY PACE | |
|--|--|
| FAST-PACED | SLOWER-PACED |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quick, large movements - Exaggerated facial expressions - Loud volume, rapid-fire speech - Inflection or dramatic flair - Talks more than listens - Steady eye contact - Energetic or intense demeanor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Subtle, smaller, controlled movements - Little or no facial expression - Lower volume, chooses words carefully - Little inflection or monotone - Prefers listening - Intermittent eye contact - Reserved, non-confrontational demeanor |

Priority can be observed through the following:

| TASK-/PROCESS-ORIENTED | PEOPLE-/RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May seem intimidating either through how they carry self or through asking lots of probing questions - Use of thinking, not feeling, words - Statements are factual or authoritative - Seems to be an expert on everything either through forceful tone or through command of material/intellect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accessible, open style, often described as warm and friendly - Use of feeling, not thinking, words - Enjoys telling stories and anecdotes - Shares feelings and is open to hearing others' feelings - May ask questions but stops quickly if interrupted |

The important thing to remember is that we are not robots! Just because your CFO displayed a fast-paced, people-oriented style in yesterday's meeting, doesn't mean that in today's earnings call prep she'll display exactly the same behavioral and communication style. *We are a blend of all of these elements, and in any given moment, our style can look different.*

That's why **it's absolutely critical for you to build your skill in recognizing which behavioral and communication style you're observing at that very moment.** This is a dynamic, not static, exercise. We're not "personality typing" people—putting a label on their forehead and then thinking forever after there's only one single, fixed way to approach that person. *In fact, if you're married, you probably already recognize the dangers of this thinking!*

Positioning yourself as someone who builds rapport sets you apart.

KEY #3—ADAPT

When I make the effort to *adapt* to the behavioral and communication style of another, I can begin to develop rapport, which, when practiced repeatedly, creates influence.

We seek out individuals with whom we have rapport—it's natural. This holds true for your executive management team, your senior managers, your chief actuary, your manager, and your colleagues, whether in your division or outside of it.

Positioning yourself as someone who builds rapport sets you apart.

Communicating, or better said, “connecting,” in a non-confrontational and/or non-irritating way requires adapting your pace and priority. All relationships begin at pace. You may be fast-paced, but if you are to successfully connect with slower-paced individuals, you must slow down and vice versa. Miss adapting here and you will miss the “connection.”

The same goes for priority. If you're talking in “task” style to a people-oriented person, you'll simply miss it—no matter how compelling you think your content is! *Approximately 90 percent of all conflict is created because of a disconnect in priority.* Miss adapting at priority, and you will fail to develop rapport.

Fail to develop rapport, and you'll fail to position yourself as someone whose insight, knowledge and opinion carry influence with decision-makers—a strategic business partner.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Take some time to reflect on these three keys. With which staff member(s) would you like to carry more influence? What are the behavioral styles you observe most often in that person(s)?

Now think about which behavioral style you struggle with the most in communications. Is it fast pace? Slow pace? And what about task-oriented or people-oriented styles?

What are two or three things that you personally can do to adapt to the other behavior style?

If you're looking for a new position, do you know how to build rapport with the interviewers and decision-makers at the company you're exploring? Effective recruiters will not only identify the right opportunity for you, they will prepare you for the interview so you can get the job.

Learning and applying these three keys is worth the effort. As your ability to communicate effectively increases, your rapport will increase. Practice this repeatedly, and this rapport becomes influence. You have now expanded your influence. Decision-makers will no longer perceive you as a technical resource, but will see you as a strategic business partner. ●

ENDNOTE

¹ Source “PR Daily” June 25, 2013.