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Up Front With the SOA Staff Fellow

By Joe Wurzburger

We all know how to identify an extroverted actuary by now, right? The most commonly told actuarial joke according to my very unscientific study always bugs me at least a little bit. Sure, I understand it's all in good fun (an extroverted actuary is one who looks at the *other* person's shoes). But I know so many dynamic and personable actuaries that it often feels inaccurate. Just look at the author names on the cover of this issue or members of the Health Section Council on page 2, and you'll see plenty of examples of actuaries who are nowhere close to matching the so-called stereotype.

That said, the Society of Actuaries (SOA) frequently hears feedback that actuaries need to improve their "soft skills," including communication. The fact that this feedback often comes from actuaries and not outsiders prompts me to get thick skin about the jokes and instead consider what can be done to help.

Actuaries generally spend at least the early part of their careers doing highly technical work. Promotions and additional responsibility often result from demonstrations of technical proficiency. At some point, one of those promotions may give managerial responsibility to someone who earned that opportunity by

proving their quantitative, not managerial, skills. In other cases, an actuary may be held back from such an opportunity because of a perceived lack of relevant soft skills.

Some people seem to be born with good communication and leadership skills. But for everyone else, can it be developed over time? Can it be taught? And if so, how? A 90-minute session at an SOA meeting seems well-intentioned but ultimately insufficient.

A bolder effort was first made at the 2017 SOA Annual Meeting & Exhibit and is being repeated at the 2018 annual meeting. Andrew Sykes, actuary-turned-professional-speaker, leads the engaging "Influence Training for Actuaries" seminar. Utilizing the full Sunday before the kickoff of the annual meeting, Andrew mixes art and influence science in a way that targets actuaries specifically. This highly interactive and hands-on workshop cultivates relevant soft skills in ways that I believe are unprecedented in actuarial education, and the Health Section is proud to partner with the Leadership & Development Section to bring it to you.

But don't just take my word for it. Here are testimonials from attendees of the 2017 event.

"I put into practice what I learned for an important presentation at an offsite managers' meeting. I burst right out with a great short and relevant story, gave three clear objectives, had folks briefly interact with each other a few times to keep everyone moving, delivered on the objectives, and practiced beforehand—it went so well. Without question, the reason it went well was solely due to what I learned at Andrew's Influencing for Actuaries seminar."

—Bill Leslie, FSA

"The presenter delivered new information in concise chunks, progressively building out new skillsets throughout the day. This session gave some great examples of ways to drive change and influence people through focusing on what motivates them, what holds them back, and why it does, by using a data-driven approach."

—Jason Christiansen, ASA, MAAA

"I recommend this seminar for any actuary or technical professional who wants to understand the behavior of his or her colleagues more, work on skills like better connecting with others in a group or meeting setting, and challenge the convention norm of doing business as usual."

—Mitch Stephenson, FSA, MAAA



You can also hear from Andrew himself by checking out his video on the SOA's YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/societyofactuaries.

By the time this article is published, you may have missed your chance to attend the 2018 version of this event. I hope it will be offered again in 2019, so please keep it in mind. But even if you did miss this year's event, that doesn't mean you should pass on opportunities to improve your own soft skills, especially if you think it may be the only thing standing between you and that next great opportunity.

Put yourself out there. I happen to believe that one of the very best ways to develop your soft skills is to take on challenges that are just a little bit beyond your comfort zone. Don't get too far out over your skis; if you consider yourself a shy introvert, maybe you should not immediately go out and give a presentation in front of 2,000 people. But perhaps you could ask your manager if you could listen in the next time he or she presents

information to the CFO; maybe the time after that you can ask if you could present one of the slides yourself. You may have some butterflies in your stomach, but that only confirms that you're alive. Chalk up some small incremental victories like this, and before you know it you'll be presenting sessions at the SOA Health Meeting! Perhaps more important, you may break down the barriers that are currently keeping you from attaining your professional goals.

If you have other ideas for how actuaries can expand their soft skills, please find me at the next SOA event and share them with me. I'll be the tall guy looking at your shoes rather than my own. ■



Joe Wurzburger, FSA, MAAA, is Health staff fellow at the Society of Actuaries. He can be reached at jwurzburger@soa.org.

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