



The Downside for Knowledge Workers

By Patricia Wheeler

Time is money. Speed of execution drives competitive advantage. We hear these words constantly, across levels, across industries. Given the need for speed, what can we do to increase efficiency and execution in today's knowledge economy? When the economy was based on "hard" products, the solution was evident. Build machines that worked faster. Teach workers how to follow more efficient processes. It's different today. Today we live in a world of even more rapid change.

Peter Drucker, the foremost management guru of our time, was clear that in a knowledge economy, the quality of one's work output is at least as important as the quantity. Knowledge work, he said, requires continuous learning on the part of the knowledge worker. But that's not all; he clarified that it requires that knowledge workers be continuous teachers of knowledge as well. More than anyone over the last century, Drucker was such a teacher.

With most of the executives I coach, changes come fast and furious. New technologies, new reporting structures, new business challenges abound. And those in leadership roles not only have to integrate these changes seamlessly into their own work product, but they have to teach this knowledge to others simultaneously.

Highly matrixed organizations add to the complexity. We no longer have one line of accountability and reporting within a silo. Working collaboratively up, down and across the organization is critical to success. And good communication is even more crucial. In fact, our primary work "engine" is likely to be how we use our own words.

Here's the downside for knowledge workers: we're never done. As we increase in effectiveness and grow as leaders, we have even more relationships and stakeholders with whom we need to be credible, clear and transparent. As Drucker infers, we are the filter through which our company's knowledge must pass.

This is both the good news and the bad news. On the positive side, we can increase our effectiveness and organizational power exponentially by learning how to communicate seamlessly with our stakeholders without adding interpersonal "static." The bad news is, this may seem simple but it's certainly not easy. And we tend to underrate its importance and the commitment involved. How many leaders ignore improving their clumsy, perhaps arrogant, interpersonal style and spend their development time and money focusing upon technical skills or strategy instead?

We know from both research and observation that executives lose their effectiveness or even derail, not because they aren't smart enough, but because they fail to connect with or understand their impact on the people around them.

In a recent webcast, Marshall Goldsmith said that the success of projects depends as much upon relationships as it does on strategy. In fact, our communication is our biggest point of leverage, bar none. Sixty per cent of mergers and acquisitions fail to produce return on investment due primarily to the difficulty in combining organizational cultures – a process that depends heavily on consistent communication and understanding the various frames of reference of all parties. It is yet another example of “the soft stuff driving the hard stuff.”

What does this lost time and effectiveness look like? Imagine this scenario: a talented director is verbally assailed by her manager in a staff meeting. She returns to her office where a full calendar of work and meetings await her. How will her productivity be impacted that day? How, and in what ways will she be distracted? How free will she feel to honestly engage her boss? How alive and aligned will she be with her peers? And how clear will she be in communicating to her directs the critical messages of the organization?

Coach’s tip: Ask yourself: how do you know how well you communicate? How clear are you about your impact on others? Ask your stakeholders for feedback and then for feedforward (suggestions for improvement) about what you do well and how to improve. Remember, your communication is a knowledge engine for your company! Finally, ask yourself – how would communicating even better benefit both me and my organization? What are the “hard” profits that will result from developing this “soft” competency?

Remember, as Peter Drucker points out, organizations are no longer built on force. They are increasingly built on trust. And trust has much to do with the quality and clarity of our communication as leaders.

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