

# MINNEAPOLIS • ST. PAUL THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

## **Growth through new products depends on effective collaboration between business and technical people**

A salesperson quips to another, “How do you recognize an extroverted engineer? When they talk to you they look at your shoes instead of their own”. Dilbert looks to his engineering colleague and says, “Let’s practice making small talk. It’ll come in handy when we meet with marketing”. Stereotypes persist. Communication suffers. New product development projects miss the mark.

The good news is we can course correct these projects if we recognize and address the real-life personality, motivation and communication differences among business people and their technical counterparts.

Successful innovation that drives business growth springs from groups of diverse individuals collaborating across multiple disciplines within the company. Poor communication among these many points of contact is one of the biggest reasons for the low success rate of new product development, currently estimated to be less than ten percent.

The first step to improve communication is to recognize that senders and their message in one function and receivers and their filters in another can be the corporate-equivalent of the Mars vs. Venus predicament.

A case in point.

The sender and the message. Over the past several years I’ve asked many business people what one factor matters the most to the successful introduction of new products and their impact on the bottom line. Their answer? Time-to-market. Hitting the window of opportunity for product launch, being the first-mover and getting to positive cash flow sooner are crucial.

The receiver and the filter. Developers respond to me that they are skeptical of this urgency and argue that introducing the right product and doing it right the first time are also important to long term success. Furthermore, if you accelerate development time you likely will experience greater quality or performance risks and incur higher costs.

The two sides think and act differently. This is not surprising and not necessarily bad.

Communication styles – Tight-lipped vs. Loose-lipped. The developer prefers to clarify product goals through a series of analytical questions upfront and then to set about the task of development. They will let you know when there is a problem. The commercial person prefers to think aloud, share personal opinions, discuss anecdotes and want frequent updates on progress of the project.

Work habits – Loner vs. Groupie. The typical engineer focuses on the task, is linear, and somewhat inflexible. They often work alone and want autonomy. They chose to work with things for a reason. Things aren't as messy as people. The salesperson tends to focus more on people and relationships, is more adaptable and believes socializing is not mind-numbing small talk but rather foreplay to consummating a sale.

Motivation/Reward – Scientific Pursuit vs. Expensive Italian Suit. The salesperson is motivated at an external level. They pursue compensation, company recognition, and promotion. The scientist is driven at an internal level by intellectual curiosity and the personal satisfaction from having solved a challenging problem.

Given these rather large fundamental differences, how can we improve cross-functional collaboration?

Determine team member's types -- Personality profile assessments can provide a context for why people behave the way they do. They create awareness but are not a panacea and should not be used as an excuse for people to not change.

Provide training -- Inadequate communication skills are cited as the largest limiting factor of an engineer's career success. Technical people need to practice "conceptual scaling". They must ascend from thrashing about in the bowels of the technology to framing their comments with true customer benefits as the focus. I have modified a model for improving technical to business communication proposed by John Hoschette.

- One good picture is worth 1000 words
- One good model is worth 1000 pictures
- One successful product demonstration is worth 1000 models
- One sentence about profitability is worth 1000 demo's ( My addition)

Use different strokes for different folks – Use incentive systems that meet the needs of individuals. Follow the platinum rule - treat others as they want to be treated. Be creative but fair in rewarding team members.

Implement a system or process -- "Eighty-five percent of all failure is in the system," said W.E. Deming, noted quality and management expert. Or lack of a system. Implementing a formal product development process can create a platform to accommodate successful collaboration.

There are also specific behaviors that business and technical people can model that will result in more productive product development teams.

How Businesspeople need to behave differently with Scientists & Engineers.

- Recognize uniqueness of behavioral tendencies of technical people.
- Understand technology and be able to talk it.
- Be factual when talking about needs.
- Help the technical person understand the marketplace.
- Trust them. They are on your team.

How Scientists need to behave differently with Businesspeople.

- Recognize uniqueness of personalities of sales and marketing people.
- Be honest about timelines.
- Think strategically/Think like a businessperson.
- Be accountable/Be flexible.
- Discuss benefits not just features.
- Trust them. They are on your team.

George Bernard Shaw said “England and America are two countries separated by the same language.” Business people and technical people in many companies suffer from the same paradox. Don’t fight or ignore stereotypes and other real-life differences among functions but deal with them proactively and with gusto.

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