

John D. Anderson

These three characteristics are essential for leading the pack in trying times. Are you...



Chateau Chantal, Old Mission Peninsula, MI II (Phil Fisher)

I CONSIDER MYSELF VERY FORTUNATE to work with a number of talented CEOs and executive teams. Sharing in their experiences and strategic thinking continually challenges me with new insights on what works. The last couple years have been tough, but watching my clients weather the economic storm has brought me to the realization that going forward, business success will depend on one's strength in three distinct areas:

- A problem solving *approach*
- Interpersonal communication skills
- Emotional maturity

Simple? Yes, they are. You've heard them before? I'm sure you have. You and your employees already exhibit them? Perhaps, but let's look at each on a deeper level. They seem pretty obvious to me, as well, but I have found that there is always room to improve on each.

A PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH

As an advisor, I frequently find teams who *address* and *analyze* problems yet are reluctant to hold one another accountable for *solving* problems. These teams consist of bright people, and in most cases, they enjoy addressing organizational issues. After all, that's why they work in leadership positions. However, when it comes to investing the necessary time to tear apart an issue, consider multiple points of view, and garner the collective wisdom of the entire leadership team to implement a solution, they frequently fall short. I suspect several reasons for this:

- Pressure – real or perceived – to solve the problem quickly

- Discomfort with conflict
- A desire to “look good;” not wanting to admit that their idea is flawed or a project has failed.
- Reluctance to “go deep” and address the root issue
- Distraction due to the daily tactical demands of the business

Solving problems takes time. Executive teams must prioritize and protect time weekly and monthly to conduct “deep dives” on important but not time-sensitive issues. Invariably, these discussions generate conflict that is uncomfortable for some or all team members. Especially if there are lingering personal issues from prior disagreements, the natural tendency is to quickly address the current problem and move on before it becomes awkward. The tragedy is that the point at which the team feels this awkwardness is typically the closest they come to identifying and taking real steps to actually solve the root problem.

Here are some practical suggestions to help you and your team solve the actual problem rather than just address it:

1. Deliberately create a “container” (physically and mentally) in which you focus solely on the problem at hand. Daily huddles and weekly meetings are great times to identify problems, but you must reserve adequate time to drill down on *one issue* if you ever hope to solve it.
2. Before entering the session, mentally prepare yourself for constructive conflict. Titles, personal feelings, and biases must be checked at the door. Your purpose is to use the collective intelligence of the executive team to solve *that one* issue, and any conflict should be related

to *that* issue, not personal qualities or abilities. If one team member had all the answers, you would not need to meet. This is not a “me” problem; it’s a “we” problem.

3. Stick to the subject. Straying off on various tangents will only raise additional issues that distract from the matter at hand. Once a problem is identified and defined, set aside a minimum of 20 minutes to focus on it before moving on. If you cannot commit 20 minutes to it, then you should probably table it for a later meeting.
4. At the conclusion of the problem solving meeting, the CEO must ask, “Have we done our best work?” and, “Can you all support this solution?” If anyone gives a “no” to either question, you need to further discuss it now or schedule another “container” when you can. You are *not* seeking consensus; you are seeking honest debate followed by agreement to support the final decision, regardless of who initially agreed or disagreed with the idea.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

It’s been said that communication is 7% words, 38% voice quality, and 55% non-verbal cues.* Perhaps that explains the problem with e-mail, which consists only of words (the lowest-impact component of communication), but smuggles in loads of unintended non-verbal cues. E-mail and texting are very useful tools, but they have significantly damaged our ability to communicate effectively. I know several business leaders who believe they can manage behavior and drive results via e-mail, but the results are almost always disastrous for the team.

I am not saying that there is no room for e-mail correspondence; it works well for sharing facts and data. If, however, you ever feel any emotion while writing, you should consider stopping and arranging a face-to-face meeting or at least a phone call. If you must send the e-mail, have someone else read it first. If neither of those options is available, then consider not sending the e-mail. Even this article, for example, will be read, revised, and reread multiple times before you ever read it.

The foundation of effective interpersonal communication – written or spoken – is trust. (Read more in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni.) Trust enables two people to vigorously discuss and debate issues without fear of offense or retribution. When trust is absent, the truth is buried. People mentally bury their ideas and concerns rather than risk offense to a colleague. The obvious result is poor decisions with disrespect as a byproduct.

Business leaders must diligently work to improve their own interpersonal communication skills and designate time and money for employees to do the same. One simple discipline that will go a long way toward accomplishing this is prioritizing regular one-on-one dialogs with direct reports and, if possible, all employees. They are hired to do the work of the company; the leader’s job is to ensure that they have the tools and a culture to do it well, and that begins with good communication.

EMOTIONAL MATURITY

Imagine your executive team biking along a flat road or slightly downhill grade. The less capable riders are able to draft the stronger riders in front of them and keep up fairly well. Now imagine the same team riding uphill. The weaker riders can no longer coast or pedal easily just by drafting the leaders. They must dig deep to conquer the hill, largely of their own strength. For the leader to drop back to assist a lesser rider will cost the team the momentum necessary to reach the summit.

Think about the “uphill” we hit in 2008. We likely still have a long way to go. Are you prepared for the hill? Do you *love* the hill? Great riders love the hill because it is here that the more prepared, conditioned, and emotionally mature riders pull away from the pack. The hills are where Lance Armstrong has proven his greatness time and time again.

Emotional maturity is tough to define, but I think of it as the ability and the will to weather a storm without straying from the goal or getting discouraged. It’s the intense personal commitment to grow in all aspects of one’s life. Like core values, it is deeply rooted in one’s life experiences. It includes an awareness of one’s place in his surroundings, his identity, and his purpose. I believe emotional maturity directly correlates to effective problem solving and interpersonal communication. Emotional maturity begins with holding oneself accountable to personal goals, even if nobody else cares.

Emotional maturity is often reflected in specific daily and weekly disciplines to build physical, mental, and spiritual strength. These disciplines might include regular exercise, daily journaling, inspirational reading, and surrounding oneself with equally committed and disciplined individuals.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR TRYING TIMES

I have worked with organizations that struggle with one or all three of these characteristics, yet still succeed. However, as we continue to struggle through trying times, I’m concerned that those who do not possess these behaviors will find themselves gasping for breath as the stronger riders speed ahead. It is imperative for today’s leaders to begin exercising all three disciplines and pushing their organizations to do the same.



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*Mehrabian, A. (1968). “Communications Without Words,” *Psychology Today*, 2 (9), 53-55