10
things i've learned

I recently retired from a medium sized engineering consulting firm. I had been with this firm for over 35 years. I started there when I graduated from the finest engineering school in the world, The University of Maryland, College Park.

My career at this firm was a terrific experience. I made a great many lasting friendships and I worked on many projects that I take tremendous pride in. When I announced my retirement, some people asked me, "What have those 35 years taught you?"

That question caught me a little off guard, but it got me thinking. Could I summarize what I learned in ten bullet points? Let's see . . .

>> By Thomas M. Chicca, PE

■ Family and health first, work and career second.

I tended to be a workaholic. However, I tried hard to keep a balance between my work life and my personal life. Maybe I could have done a better job of this. I always went to my kids' sporting events and school programs, encouraged their participation in group activities, and tried to be there for them. My wife worked hard to keep me on balance and I will forever appreciate those efforts. As the saying goes, "No one has ever said on their deathbed, 'I wish I had worked more.'"
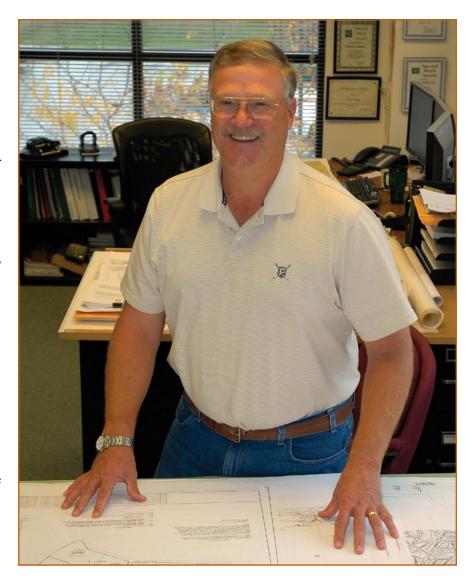
■ Other people are not like me.

This was a huge eye-opener for me as I started getting into management. It was hard to believe, almost incomprehensible, that every other person did not see things the way I saw them, did not share my beliefs, did not want the same things that I wanted, and did not perform the various work tasks the same way I would. This significantly complicated my job. If others were not like me, how would I be able to manage them?

The corollary to this eye-opener was understanding that it's okay if people are not like me. In fact, it was great that they were different. What a boring place this would be if everyone was just like me. I learned to understand the differences and to value those differences. One of my early mentors used the example of a good stew (I love a good stew on a cold winter night). The great taste of a good stew comes from the variety of the ingredients: meat, spices, carrots, potatoes, beans, celery, etc. You can't make a good stew with only one ingredient. You don't want all carrots or all potatoes. You need the variety. A good workplace thrives on a blend of different cultures, ages, genders, and professional backgrounds.

■ Managing people is different from managing projects and managing projects is different from managing tasks.

There is a common misbelief that all good technical professionals make good project managers and that all good project managers make good general managers. Furthermore, in the consulting industry, there is a culture that encour-

ages all professionals to go through this transition–from Technical Expert, to Project Manager, to General Manager. If you don't follow this career path, there is obviously something wrong with you.

This whole system is fatally flawed. The fact is, we need most of our professionals (engineers, surveyors, planners, etc.) doing technical work. This is what we went to school for and these are the skills for which our clients hire us. We need a few professionals who are capable of being strong project managers. These are people who are totally focused on the overall project and the client's needs. This is where the money is made– technical work and strong project management. If the company is large enough, you then need a few

"general managers" to handle the other business and human resource issues.

We should not be pushing our best technical staff away from what they do best. We should not be pushing our best project managers away from what they are most successful doing. The emphasis should be on creating a culture that focuses on technical expertise and project management expertise. Salary, title, and benefits should be heaped upon these positions. Recognition and benefits should not be centered on general management in a professional firm. At my firm, we created what we called "multiple career paths" which was designed to address this need. It provided equal status, recognition, and rewards for growth along all three of these career paths.

There is more than one way to get something done.

We all know how to complete a task or achieve a goal. That's how we reached our current level of success. We all know how *we* would do it. After all, there are only two ways to do something–my way and the wrong way.

However, much to my surprise, I learned that there is always more than one way to achieve a goal. More often than not, it will be different than the way I would have done it. Initially, I found this to be inconceivable. Wasn't my way the smartest and most efficient way?

What I learned is that everybody processes data differently, prioritizes differently, and as a result will plan and execute differently. Extroverts plan and execute differently than introverts. Teams will operate differently than individuals. Various professionals will approach things from different perspectives.

The important lesson is not just that there *is* more than one way to get something done. The important lesson is that these different ways are perfectly acceptable and often desirable. Focus on the result and not the process used to achieve it. Set a goal and allow the individual or team the latitude to achieve it in their own way. Understanding this is critical to being a respected leader and a successful manager.

Most people want to be successful and to do the right thing.

This was not a hard lesson for me. I tended to always believe this and my experience bore out this assumption. Most people are honest, hard working, and want to be a good team player. Now their perception of what "success" is and what the "right thing" is can vary from person to person. As a manager, I simply needed to be sure that their perception was in alignment with our company core values. My experience has been that people will tend to rise (or sink) to meet your expectations.

Often you don't realize how much you express your "hidden" perceptions. You may think that you conceal your true beliefs. However, more often than not, your staff will pick up exactly what you think of them. If you believe that they are marginal performers, they will become marginal performers. If you believe that they are exceptional performers they will become exceptional performers. Always expect the best and think the best of everyone and allow them to rise to your expectations.

Sooner or later you will come across someone who is simply a "horse's ass".

Notwithstanding the above comment, from time to time you will encounter someone who cannot be trusted, cannot be relied on, and/or cannot fit into the team that you are trying to build. Life is too short and too valuable to waste time dwelling on or tolerating these people. Take an action and be done with it. Nothing more needs to be said about this.

Fundamentally, I am a GEEK.

I like to think of a GEEK as "Great Engineers Expressing Knowledge". Unfortunately, most people's view of GEEKs is less flattering–broken eyeglasses mended with tape, pocket protectors, and a slide rule hanging on their belt. In these modern times, GEEKs are better camouflaged with electronic gadgets and cool computers. Nevertheless, we are still GEEKs.

I believe that through the natural selection process, as we go through the education system, those who are strong with math, chemistry, physics, etc., move into the "GEEK professions". These people are often introverted, weak communicators, and have poor social skills. The stronger, extroverted socializers move into fields like sales, advertising, radio & TV, and bartending.
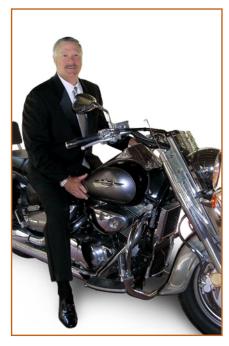
I have met a number of professionals in this industry that are exceptions to the GEEK rule, but they are vastly outnumbered. These poor communication skills will manifest themselves at meetings, social events, business development opportunities, etc. Nevertheless, we GEEKs can overcome these natural shortcomings and improve our communication and social skills. Well, most can.

Early in my career I took the Dale Carnegie Course, which I found to be very beneficial. I believe that this program helped me be a more "persuasive communicator, problem solver, and focused leader" (that's an excerpt from their marketing literature). Seriously, I would encourage everyone (particularly my fellow GEEKs) to seek out similar courses to help you develop your own communication and social skills.

Learn as much about yourself as you can.

We all think that we know ourselves pretty well. The fact is that we are often blind to our tendencies, our strengths, and our weaknesses. There are many assessment tools available to help us learn more about ourselves. Things like the Meyers Briggs Assessment, 360 Assessments, Peer Reviews, etc., are all designed to help us learn our tendencies and to learn how we are perceived by others. Sometimes the feedback we receive from such assessments can be hard to take. Nevertheless, it is important that we keep an open mind and learn from them.

Sometimes we like to tell ourselves that it doesn't matter what others think about us. However, as the expression goes, "perception is reality". Since we tend to be poor communicators (because we are fundamentally GEEKS), we don't always (or ever) express ourselves well to our bosses, peers, clients, or staff. This can lead to misunderstandings and resistance. We may be GEEKS at heart, but we can

Tom Chicca on his 1500cc Suzuki Boulevard C90.

learn to overcome those tendencies when we recognize and understand them.

Based on my Meyers Briggs Assessment, I am an ENTJ (an Extroverted, Intuitive, Thinking, Judger). These terms will make more sense once you take the training. Knowing that I am an ENTJ and how this is different from other personalities makes it easier to communicate effectively. So the more we learn about ourselves and the more we learn about the people around us, the better prepared we are to communicate well. The better we communicate, the more effective we will be both at work and in social situations.

■ The biggest obstacle to your future success may be your past success.

We've all heard the expression, "The only constant is change." It is easy for all of us to recognize resistance to change in others. It's much harder to recognize resistance to change in ourselves. *We* are Change Agents. Each and every one of us thinks we are Change Agents. So, who exactly is resisting change?

The fact is that we all tend to recognize what made us successful today and try to replicate those beliefs and behaviors going forward.

Don't become complacent. Be diligent about recognizing your own resistance to change and all of the reasons we come up with to justify that resistance. Be open to new ideas, constantly look for ways to improve ourselves, our businesses, our profession, and our processes. Be a real "change agent". The belief that "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is a huge obstacle. Always strive to make improvements and never stop learning. I was a compulsive "tinkerer". There is always the opportunity for improvement.

■ When you have a clear and strongly held belief, it may be wrong.

As I evolved in my management career, there were always a few firmly held beliefs that I knew to be absolutely true. I'm not talking about core values like integrity, honesty, hard work, etc. Those are, in fact, inviolate.

I'm talking about "truisms" that we all tend to have and hold. "The best staff go to the best schools." "Extroverts are better performers than introverts." "Professional registration is a requirement for being a good manager." Over time, I learned that none of these truisms were actually true.

With regard to the last one, while professional registration may be important to many management positions, it is less important for leadership. Furthermore, many management positions require a great deal of leadership. In some cases, the desired leadership component may outweigh the management component.

I lost sight of this once. I held back a technically competent individual who possessed a great deal of natural leadership skill simply because of a lack of professional registration. I was absolutely sure, at

the time, that all managers must have their professional license. I *knew* this to be true.

In this instance (in hindsight) the professional registration was not really necessary. We had other senior staff who could seal the documents. What we didn't have was other senior staff with that same level of leadership skill. What I ended up losing was the compelling leadership that this individual brought to our team. It was a mistake based in a firmly held belief.

I like to think that I learned from that mistake and never repeated it. Always keep an open mind and be ready to think outside of the box.

Don't misunderstand. I encourage all professionals to obtain their respective registrations. From the professional/technical perspective, this should be a clear goal.

■ You can never communicate too much.

Everyone is thirsty for information. We observe, we read, we listen, we email, we blog, and we twitter. During these tough economic times, information is more critical than ever. Bankruptcies, Chapter 11s, layoffs, and shrinking personal wealth have everyone on edge. In the absence of clear information, your team will take what they have and draw their own conclusions. Frequently, these conclusions are wrong. Meet with your team and give them the information that they are thirsty for. Tell them the bad news as well as the good. Be compassionate and sincere.

Don't rely on memos and email. Written messages are far too easy to misunderstand. There is nothing better than a face to face meeting. "I see my team members every day, so I don't need to meet with them." I heard this excuse far too frequently. I suppose this is a defense mechanism covering the fear of speaking to a group. Since we are fundamentally GEEKs, this is understandable, but not excusable.

In this age of computers, PowerPoint, and Digital Laser Projectors; it is easy to put together a clear and informative presentation. These aids make it easier to talk to groups of any size. Always take the time to prepare and practice your presentation. We've all seen enough episodes of "The Office" to know what a bad meeting looks like.

So, there are ten bulleted pearls of wisdom that I learned over my career

(so far). Those among you who are truly GEEKs will have noticed that there are, in fact, eleven bulleted points. This was a test for those of you who were not sure if you were actually a GEEK, like me. If you weren't sure before, now you are. Learn to deal with it. Re-read bullet points seven and eight, if necessary.

Tom Chicca is a Registered Professional Engineer in fourteen states and the District of Columbia. He recently retired as Senior Vice President and Market Leader from a 650-person engineering consulting firm with offices along the East Coast. He is currently an independent consultant for a number of firms.