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The Soft Skills Challenge, Part 2

The previous column explored a set of soft skills that could not possibly harm anyone. Quite the opposite, this issue examines a further set of soft skills that may require a longer period of time to acquire, that are likely to develop over time and that always leave room for improvement.

TIME AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

It is good to remember American cartoonist Bill Keane’s quotation, “The past is history, the future is a mystery and today is a gift...which is why we call it the present.” It is certainly a fact that any time that is not used for a purpose cannot be saved for later; it is lost forever.

The life of a professional in any field of activity makes many demands on how to use time effectively to get things done and do them well. Fortunately, there are many good guides¹ to time management, all of which mention planning, organizing and prioritizing activities.

Two helpful factors are not always explicit in these guides:

1. Mastering the art of saying “no”²
2. Knowing the difference between what is:
 - Important and urgent—Action is required to avoid serious consequences.
 - Important and not urgent—Action is required to prepare for the future.
 - Not important and urgent—A symptom of an artificial crisis: What would happen by not doing it?
 - Not important and not urgent—Unless one is taking a break to relax, why even think of doing something about it?

Unfortunately, the hectic pace of life expects us to react immediately, and being permanently connected (a matter of choice, not an obligation, at least not yet) may lead us into the domain of “not important and urgent” and, thus, steal our time. Warning: Failure to manage time effectively is a sure way to result in overload, poor quality of work and, in the end, stress. Failure to cope with stress can lead to burnout or, worse, illness.

The best ways to manage stress are left to the reader to explore because there is no answer that works for everybody. What matters is being able to recognize that one is suffering from stress by understanding its symptoms.³ If simple measures

do not work, it is prudent to seek professional advice.

COLLABORATION

There will be many situations where we need to work with others over whom we have no formal authority. Instead, the relationship needs to be based on goodwill and trust—starting with having to overcome two obstacles: that auditors are rarely welcome and that, frequently, they are not trusted. Nevertheless, the situation exists and it is up to the auditor to take steps to make it work.

Collaboration⁴ with an auditor provided by another organization is no different from the teamwork of a group of auditors from the same organization working together on a project. This is facilitated when the members of the group:

- Are willing to work together toward an agreed-upon objective
- Respect each other’s skills and experience
- Trust each other and accept shared responsibilities
- Have a clear understanding of the structure of the group

On the other hand, successful collaboration with auditees whose expectations and objectives may not be the same as that of the auditors requires the auditor to:

- Ask questions that lead the auditees to express themselves adequately and freely
- Listen carefully and understand the auditees’ perspective and reasons
- Advocate the audit point of view in a way that the auditee can understand and accept
- Recognize that differences of view may lead to conflict before reaching consensus
- Diagnose when the relationship gets emotional and defuse it
- Build credibility and trust as the work progresses
- Diagnose when the relationship gets emotional and defuse it

It looks simple and it is simple—at least in principle.

NEGOTIATION AND PERSUASION

Negotiation⁵ is a process required to reach agreement or, at a minimum, some form of

consensus when there are different views on an issue. While the ideal is to reach an agreement in which all the parties involved are satisfied (win-win), this does not always happen; it is enough to follow the news to see how many situations remain unresolved for decades.

An auditor can expect to negotiate on many subjects, some simple, such as agreeing on a date and time for an interview, and some complex, such as the disputing of a finding or audit observation.

Good negotiators understand that a win-win outcome may not be achieved and have a considered set of alternative outcomes, ideally based on compromise, i.e., all the parties make concessions to reach an agreement, even if recognized not to be ideal. In audit, compromise is acceptable as long as it does not compromise the auditor's integrity or independence. The challenge for the auditor is to recognize when it is time to be firm and when compromise is an acceptable path to follow.

A situation where there is a clear winner and an identified loser is undesirable whenever the parties need to work together again as this will result in a lack of cooperation and trust.

Persuasion⁶ is a process whereby one of the parties is encouraged to buy into an idea and then act on it, ideally without noticing they have been persuaded to do it your way.

Please remember that audit is a service function strongly dependent on relationships. Nagging (i.e., insisting time and again) and coercion (i.e., getting someone in authority to order something to happen) are unsatisfactory as techniques as they create resistance and resentment.

ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE

Winston Churchill said, "When you mix people and power, you get politics."

Being dedicated and hardworking is usually not enough to succeed. A person may be influential because of being liked and respected by peers and managers and their ability to "play the game" because of their understanding of the politics. Influence, power and politics are ongoing processes in day-to-day organizational life.

Politics involves the social relations between the parties that make an organization, the authorities delegated to the parties, how these are used, and how power and influence are exercised. The extent to which individuals pursue self-interest without taking into account the effect this could have on the organization's ability to achieve its objectives must be considered.

For the purpose of this column, "power" is a flexible term that can range from the ability to change the *status quo* (real power) to the authority to exercise the "no" option (blocking initiatives) and everything in between.

The auditor should remain sufficiently outside such politics in order to maintain independence while still being aware of how decisions are reached. That is to say, who has the ability

to make, ignore and overturn decisions, whether these are taken unilaterally or by consensus, and to what degree do they represent a compromise?

Without such knowledge, the recommendations in the audit report may not be followed and the audit function consequentially discredited.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Unlike algebra and other branches of mathematics, most situations likely to be encountered by an auditor may not have a single correct answer and, instead, offer several options, some of which may be suggested by the auditees and be worthy of careful evaluation.

In addition, the auditor may find facts that emerge slowly and in fragments that may require a review of previously reached findings and observations. It is absolutely acceptable to change your mind based on the identification of previously unknown facts.

The most difficult situations are those involving Wicked Problems,⁷ which require choices to be made based on incomplete or unverified information, have identified consequences, and, usually, unpredictable or undesirable side effects. The challenge is to make a decision with the knowledge that it is an imperfect compromise.

CONCLUSION

The intention behind this column has been to make the reader curious enough to pursue these human factors and accept that they can make the difference between audit success and failure. The next column in this series, to be published in volume 4, 2015, in July, will examine the disagreements and conflicts that are assumed to be inevitable in this line of work.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mathews, Joe; Don Debolt; Deb Percival; "How to Manage Time With 10 Tips That Work," *Entrepreneur*, www.entrepreneur.com/article/219553

² Bradberry, Travis; "The Art of Saying No," *Forbes*, 11 March 2013, www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2013/03/11/the-art-of-saying-no/

³ The American Institute of Stress, "50 Common Signs and Symptoms of Stress," www.stress.org/stress-effects/

⁴ University of Strathclyde, "Teamwork & Collaboration Skills," Glasgow, Scotland, www.strath.ac.uk/careers/skills/peopleskills/teamworkcollaborationskills/

⁵ Skillsyouneed.com, "What Is Negotiation?," www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/negotiation.html

⁶ Skillsyouneed.com, "Persuasion and Influencing Skills," www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/persuasion-skills.html

⁷ Kolko, Jon; *Wicked Problems: Problems Worth Solving*, Austin Center for Design, 2012, <https://www.wickedproblems.com/>