

OPINION

Opinion: The unspoken truth about managing geeks

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I can sum up every article, book and column written by notable management experts about managing IT in two sentences: "Geeks are smart and creative, but they are also egocentric, antisocial, managerially and business-challenged, victim-prone, bullheaded and credit-whoring. To overcome these intractable behavioral deficits you must do X, Y and Z."

X, Y and Z are variable and usually contradictory between one expert and the next, but the patronizing stereotypes remain constant. I'm not entirely sure that is helpful. So, using the familiar brush, allow me to paint a different picture of those IT pros buried somewhere in your organization.

My career has been stippled with a good bit of disaster recovery consulting, which has led me to deal with dozens of organizations on their worst day, when opinions were pretty raw. I've heard all of the above-mentioned stereotypes and far worse, as well as good bit of rage. The worse shape an organization is in, the more you hear the stereotypes thrown around. But my personal experiences working within IT groups have always been quite good, working with IT pros for whom the negative stereotypes just don't seem to apply. I tended to chalk up IT group failures to some bad luck in hiring and the delicate balance of those geek stereotypes.

Recently, though, I have come to realize that perfectly healthy groups with solid, well-adjusted IT pros can and will devolve, slowly and quietly, into the behaviors that give rise to the stereotypes, given the right set of conditions. It turns out that it is the conditions that are stereotypical, and the IT pros tend to react to those conditions in logical ways.

To say it a different way, organizations actively elicit these stereotypical negative

Understanding why IT pros appear to act the way they do makes working with, among and as one of them the easiest job in the world.

It's all about respect

Few people notice this, but for IT groups respect is the currency of the realm. IT pros do not squander this currency. Those whom they do not believe are worthy of their respect might instead be treated to professional courtesy, a friendly demeanor or the acceptance of authority. Gaining respect is not a matter of being the boss and has nothing to do with being likeable or sociable; whether you talk, eat or smell right; or any measure that isn't directly related to the work. The amount of respect an IT pro pays someone is a measure of how tolerable that person is when it comes to getting things done, including the elegance and practicality of his solutions and suggestions. IT pros always and without fail, quietly self-organize around those who make the work easier, while shunning those who make the work harder, independent of the organizational chart.

This self-ordering behavior occurs naturally in the IT world because it is populated by people skilled in creative analysis and ordered reasoning. Doctors are a close parallel. The stakes may be higher in medicine, but the work in both fields requires a technical expertise that can't be faked and a proficiency that can only be measured by qualified peers. I think every good IT pro on the planet idolizes Dr. House (minus the addictions).

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While everyone would like to work for a nice person who is always right, IT pros will prefer a jerk who is always right over a nice person who is always wrong. Wrong creates unnecessary work, impossible situations and major failures. Wrong is evil, and it must be defeated. Capacity for technical reasoning trumps all other professional factors, period.

Foundational (bottom-up) respect is not only the largest single determining factor in the success of an IT team, but the most ignored. I believe you can predict success or failure

of an IT group simply by assessing the amount of mutual respect within it.

The elements of the stereotypes

Ego -- Similar to what good doctors do, IT pros figure out that the proper projection of ego engenders trust and reduces apprehension. Because IT pros' education does not emphasize how to deal with people, there are always rough edges. Ego, as it plays out in IT, is an essential confidence combined with a not-so-subtle cynicism. It's not about being right for the sake of being right but being right for the sake of saving a lot of time, effort, money and credibility. IT is a team sport, so being right or wrong impacts other members of the group in non-trivial ways. Unlike in many industries, in IT, colleagues can significantly influence the careers of the entire team. Correctness yields respect, respect builds good teams, and good teams build trust and maintain credibility through a healthy projection of ego. Strong IT groups view correctness as a virtue, and certitude as a delivery method. Meek IT groups, beaten down by inconsistent policies and a lack of structural support, are simply ineffective at driving change and creating efficiencies, getting mowed over by the clients, the management or both at every turn.

The victim mentality -- IT pros are sensitive to logic -- that's what you pay them for. When things don't add up, they are prone to express their opinions on the matter, and the level of response will be proportional to the absurdity of the event. The more things that occur that make no sense, the more cynical IT pros will become. Standard organizational politics often run afoul of this, so IT pros can come to be seen as whiny or as having a victim mentality. Presuming this is a trait that must be disciplined out of them is a huge management mistake. IT pros complain primarily about logic, and primarily to people they respect. If you are dismissive of complaints, fail to recognize an illogical event or behave in deceptive ways, IT pros will likely stop complaining to you. You might mistake this as a behavioral improvement, when it's actually a show of disrespect. It means you are no longer worth talking to, which leads to insubordination.

Insubordination -- This is a tricky one. Good IT pros are not anti-bureaucracy, as many observers think. They are anti-stupidity. The difference is both subjective and subtle. Good IT pros, whether they are expected to or not, have to operate and make decisions with little supervision. So when the rules are loose and logical and supervision is results-oriented, supportive and helpful to the process, IT pros are loyal, open, engaged and

downright sociable. Arbitrary or micro-management, illogical decisions, inconsistent policies, the creation of unnecessary work and exclusionary practices will elicit a quiet, subversive, almost vicious attitude from otherwise excellent IT staff. Interestingly, IT groups don't fall apart in this mode. From the outside, nothing looks to be wrong and the work still gets done. But internally, the IT group, or portions of it, may cut themselves off almost entirely from the intended management structure. They may work on big projects or steer the group entirely from the shadows while diverting the attention of supervisors to lesser topics. They believe they are protecting the organization, as well as their own credibility -- and they are often correct.

Credit whoring -- IT pros would prefer to make a good decision than to get credit for it. What will make them seek credit is the danger that a member of the group or management who is dangerous to the process might receive the credit for the work instead. That is insulting. If you've got a lot of credit whores in your IT group, there are bigger problems causing it.

Antisocial behavior -- It's fair to say that there is a large contingent of IT pros who are socially unskilled. However, this doesn't mean those IT pros are antisocial. On the whole, they have plenty to say. If you want to get your IT pros more involved, you should deal with the problems laid out above and then train your other staff how to deal with IT. Users need to be reminded a few things, including:

- IT wants to help me.
- I should keep an open mind.
- IT is not my personal tech adviser, nor is my work computer my personal computer.
- IT people have lives and other interests.

Like anyone else, IT people tend to socialize with people who respect them. They'll stop going to the company picnic if it becomes an occasion for everyone to list all the computer problems they never bothered to mention before.

How we elicit the stereotypes

What executives often fail to recognize is that every decision made that impacts IT is a

technical decision. Not just some of the decisions, and not just the details of the decision, but every decision, bar none.

With IT, you cannot separate the technical aspects from the business aspects. They are one and the same, each constrained by the other and both constrained by creativity. Creativity is the most valuable asset of an IT group, and failing to promote it can cost an organization literally millions of dollars.

Most IT pros support an organization that is not involved with IT. The primary task of any IT group is to teach people how to work. That's may sound authoritarian, but it's not. IT's job at the most fundamental level is to build, maintain and improve frameworks within which to accomplish tasks. You may not view a Web server as a framework to accomplish tasks, but it does automate the processes of advertising, sales, informing and entertaining, all of which would otherwise be done in other ways. IT groups literally teach and retrain the world how to work. That's the job.

When you understand the mission of IT, it isn't hard to see why co-workers and supervisors are judged severely according to their abilities to contribute to that process. If someone has to constantly be taught Computers 101 every time a new problem presents itself, he can't contribute in the most fundamental way. It is one thing to deal with that from a co-worker, but quite another if the people who represent IT to the organization at large aren't cognizant of how the technology works, can't communicate it in the manner the IT group needs it communicated, can't maintain consistency, take credit for the work of the group members, etc. This creates a huge morale problem for the group. Executives expect expert advice from the top IT person, but they have no way of knowing when they aren't getting it. Therein lies the problem.

IT pros know when this is happening, and they find that it is impossible to draw attention to it. Once their work is impeded by the problem, they will adopt strategies and behaviors that help circumvent the issue. That is not a sustainable state, but how long it takes to deteriorate can be days, months or even years.

How to fix it

So, if you want to have a really happy, healthy and valuable IT group, I recommend one

thing: Take an interest. IT pros work their butts off for people they respect, so you need to give them every reason to afford you some.

You can start with the hiring process. When hiring an IT pro, imagine you're recruiting a doctor. And if you're hiring a CIO, think of employing a chief of medicine. The chief of medicine should have many qualifications, but first and foremost, he should be a practicing doctor. Who decides if a doctor is a doctor? Other doctors! So, if your IT group isn't at the table for the hiring process of their bosses and peers, this already does a disservice to the process.

Favor technical competence and leadership skills. Standard managerial processes are nearly useless in an IT group. As I mentioned, if you've managed to hire well in the lower ranks of your IT group, the staff already know how to manage things. Unlike in many industries, the fight in most IT groups is in how to get things done, not how to avoid work. IT pros will self-organize, disrupt and subvert in the name of accomplishing work. An over-structured, micro-managing, technically deficient runt, no matter how polished, who's thrown into the mix for the sake of management will get a response from the professional IT group that's similar to anyone's response to a five-year-old tugging his pants leg.

What IT pros want in a manager is a technical sounding board and a source of general direction. Leadership and technical competence are qualities to look for in every member of the team. If you need someone to keep track of where projects are, file paperwork, produce reports and do customer relations, hire some assistants for a lot less money.

When it comes to performance checks, yearly reviews are worthless without a 360-degree assessment. Those things take more time than a simple top-down review, but it is time well spent. If you've been paying attention to what I've been telling you about how IT groups behave and organize, then you will see your IT group in a whole different light when you read the group's 360s.

And make sure all your managers are practicing and learning. It is very easy to slip behind the curve in those positions, but just as with doctors, the only way to be relevant is to practice and maintain an expertise. In IT, six months to a year is all that stands

Finally, executives should have multiple in-points to the IT team. If the IT team is singing out of tune, it is worth investigating the reasons. But you'll never even know if that's the case if the only information you receive is from the CIO. Periodically, bring a few key IT brains to the boardroom to observe the problems of the organization at large, even about things outside of the IT world, if only to make use of their exquisitely refined BS detectors. A good IT pro is trained in how to accomplish work; their skills are not necessarily limited to computing. In fact, the best business decision-makers I know are IT people who aren't even managers.

As I said at the very beginning, it's all about respect. If you can identify and cultivate those individuals and processes that earn genuine respect from IT pros, you'll have a great IT team. Taking an honest interest in helping your IT group help you is probably the smartest business move an organization can make. It also makes for happy, completely non-geek-like geeks.

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