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Nixing Engineerese

ENGINEERING MANAGEMENT: Communicating with Non-Engineers

Communicating across departments calls for soft skills.

By Jean Thilmany

At no company is the engineering department an island unto itself. After all, a company's engineering products need to be marketed and advertised, and they must be produced within budget and on schedule.

Because they don't work in a vacuum, engineering managers are called upon to work with employees in all company departments: marketing, advertising, manufacturing, even human resources. So, as an engineering manager, one of your biggest jobs is to establish good working relationships with employees across the company.

But you know the stereotype: engineers are linear thinkers with less-than-stellar communication skills. Working with non-engineers who may hold these stereotypes—and who have their own goals in mind when negotiating with the engineering department—can be a bit of a challenge.

Fortunately, laying the foundation for good working relationships with other departments is a learned skill, say management experts. It starts with evaluating the role of the engineering department in your enterprise and continues with learning how to best communicate with employees of all personalities and skill levels.

One thing is certain: you'll have to marry your management approach to the personality, department, or status level of the employee you're dealing with, experts said.

Begin by taking a look at how the engineering department functions at your company. Is it the hub from which marketing and advertising people receive their ideas? Or are new products brainstormed at sessions in which many departmental employees participate? Take your cues from the answer.

If marketing people aren't in on new product development from the get-go, you may want to contact them more often during the development process to keep them apprised of the product's direction, said Roberta Matuson, president of HR Solutions, a human resources consultancy in Northampton, Mass.

Also, brushing up on your soft skills can help when speaking with people from other departments, said Jim Anderson, who helps engineering managers develop soft—or communication—skills. Anderson is president of Blue Elephant Consulting of Tampa, Fla., and maintains The Accidental IT Leader, a management blog.

LEARNED SKILLS

One soft skill that is easily learned and honed over time, Matuson said, is the ability to communicate clearly.

"By that I mean trying to get real clarity around what it is specifically other employees need," she said. "If you're unable to give them what they need right now you have to let them know when you can do it."

She offered this advice when it comes to communicating effectively with all employees across the enterprise: Remember, they likely don't have the same technical background you do. Be very specific in your message.

"If you can you say, 'I can get to that but it can't be until after 2 p.m.' and then ask them if that time will work for them, it will help them feel heard and it will help them plan their own day."

Of course, "after 2 p.m." might not be soon enough for the departmental employee. In that case, you can negotiate. Maybe he or she can rearrange the day's schedule or you can move a few projects to the back burner.

Another tip from Matuson: treat the person making a request of you the way you would an outside customer.

"Is it the customer the person making the request? If so, treat them as you would any other customer," she said.

If another customer request supersedes, explain that to the employee requesting your time.

And don't forget to follow up when you can't immediately meet someone's request, she added. Again, stating a timeframe he or she can expect to hear from you helps.

AUTOMATIC E-MAIL?

For engineering managers communicating across departments, Anderson also had some tips to make the exchange go more smoothly.

For every interaction, first consider whether it'd be better to e-mail the recipient, to pick up the phone, or to walk across the room, Anderson said.

"E-mail isn't right answer for every message," he cautioned. "Engineers need to remember that not everyone lives and dies by e-mail. They also have phones, written messages, and—gasp—actual human contact that they can use to interact with other departments."

Also keep in mind that not everyone wants you to point out problems within their department. They likely already know about those problems.

"Engineers, by the very nature of their background and training, are good at finding and pointing out problems," Anderson said. "But this can be really annoying to others."

"If we take the time to not only point out problems, but also offer suggestions as to how they can be fixed, then that will go a long way to improving how we are viewed by other departments," he added.

Always take the time to proofread an e-mail or instant message, or any other form of written communication, Anderson added.

"Spelling and grammar count," he said. "Your words form an impression of you for others."

Also, reread the note with an ear toward tone. Does it convey what you're trying to say? Will the reader understand where you're coming from?

One takeaway emphasized by both Matuson and Anderson: treat employees from other departments just as you would those on your own engineering team. But go easy on the technical speak. And speak to them in person. At least sometimes.

↗ good advice!