TRAINING FOR TECHIES

Jimmy Neutron Take a Bow: How Techies Make Work, Work
by Jim Tietz

Watching television with my children the other day, remembering sleepy Saturday mornings in front of Space Ghost, I was struck by how different things are now. Cartoons today are available 24/7 on several cable channels. The sarcasm is meaner, and anime influences are everywhere. But one thing hasn't changed in all these years. I still have exactly two role models to choose from: the evil scientist and the dweeby social misfit.

You see… I'm a techie. While other kids dreamed of being firemen or pilots, I wanted to be an astronomer. I've always been drawn to the mysteries and glories that science reveals in everything around us. I see the beauty in mathematics. I've therefore always resented the stereotypes presented to me by the media – from children's cartoons (Dr. Doofenshmirtz? Please!) to the news, to movies – that techies are completely incapable of interacting with people in any meaningful, normal sense.

Then came the epiphany. I wasn't the only one watching those cartoons.

As adults, the stereotypes that people have about techies can cause embarrassing moments in social settings. The more serious impacts for most of us, however, take place at work. While Dilbert can make us laugh at pointy-haired bosses and evil HR directors, real life behaviors driven from negative techie stereotypes can cause significant difficulties in job satisfaction and career advancement.

One example of this impact is the difficulty non-technical people have in evaluating the performance of a technical group or individual. Whether it is the over-emphasis of fitting into the preconceived notions of "normal" interpersonal behavior, or the devaluation of necessary background work that doesn't produce "results" from a business-oriented viewpoint, the business/technical interface is fraught with misunderstanding. While the misunderstanding can certainly be bidirectional, the sad truth is that the "pointy-haired boss" is usually the one that gets to write the personnel report and thus determine the technical professional's career trajectory.

What can be done about this? Certainly, the non-technical professionals who interact with techies need to understand the nature and requirements of technical projects. You can't manage or judge technical programs without a basic understanding of the resources, time, and risk-taking required to complete the tasks.

That said, stereotypes often form precisely because there is, at their core, an element of truth. All of us who self-identify as "techies" recognize in ourselves some of the behaviors so well parodied in Dilbert. Some of us are clothing-challenged, others have difficulty speaking in "plain English." I know I have to throw away most of my best jokes because people just don't appreciate puns based on obscure references to thermodynamics.

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Recognizing that our workplace injustices are not always the other guy's fault, what can we do to improve the situation? Do we have to sell our technical souls and move to the dark side? Will we always have to operate as fish out of water – uncomfortable in the alien environment of gelled hair and pinstripe suits?

Happily, the answer to the perpetual misunderstandings between business types and techies is to tap into the very skills that make us effective as technical professionals. Most of us spent many long years learning the methods and skills involved in finding technical solutions. Granted, you won't find the answer to dealing with a difficult coworker by consulting steam tables. Likewise, the magic of Planck's constant doesn't work in the business universe. However, the crucial skills that make for technical success – analytical thinking, objective criticism, systematic methods, attention to detail, the ability to integrate pieces into a big picture – these are the strengths of technical professionals, and they are the secret to survival and success in fields and endeavors outside the technical arena.

The first important step to many technical projects is the identification and definition of the problem to be solved. Who says this can't be applied to the business world? Whether you are struggling with an externally-imposed, unrealistic set of deliverables from your boss or a non-linear fluid that needs to be pumped at high volume, an important first step is to clearly define what issue needs to be solved.

Other technical steps of experimentation, test, data analysis, etc., are also applicable to so-called "soft" problems, though these require more extensive modification of the familiar forms we're used to. The bottom line is that the qualities and skills that make technical professionals so strong and effective in solving extremely knotty technical issues can and should be used to improve our interaction with non-technical coworkers and management.

Remember that despite the screwy mix-ups along the way, Jimmy Neutron's "brain blasts" have a way of saving the day in every episode…