

CHAPTER 18

DETERMINING THE INFORMAL CRITERIA BY WHICH YOU ARE ASSESSED

Most engineers do not realize that informal criteria often play a bigger role than imagined in evaluating one's performance. Informal criteria are very hard to define, and therefore, you must be aware of and recognize the subtle hints that are available to you. The informal criteria are those intangible things that your manager and superiors use to judge your performance. Informal criteria are usually based on personal biases or beliefs and styles as to how to best perform the job. These beliefs are often a result of your manager's work experience as well as their background and training. The informal criteria are usually never documented and sometimes very hard to determine.

UNDERSTANDING THE DANGERS AND BENEFITS OF THE INFORMAL CRITERIA

Since most of the informal criteria are style-related, you have to be acutely aware that people have different styles or methods when working and solving problems. We all select a style or method of performing work on the basis of our experiences, training, and personal beliefs. Since we all have different training and experiences there will always be differences in opinion on the best way to complete the task. These differences in opinions or styles can cause serious career problems when your performance is rated solely on whether or not a person likes or dislikes your style. My objective in this chapter is to identify some common styles and the dangers associated with these styles.

The real problem for your career occurs when you and your supervisor have directly opposite styles for accomplishing work. Either style will achieve

the high-quality result, but are totally different in their approach. This is a very dangerous situation because even when you are meeting or exceeding work expectations. Simply having opposite styles from your supervisor's may result in getting rated as a "Poor Performer."

Let's identify some common examples of how supervisors are using informal criteria to judge you and without being conscious they are doing so. We will work on helping you to identify and recognize when you and your supervisor have different work styles and how to successfully overcome this.

INFORMAL CRITERIA—HOW TO IDENTIFY THEM

For the remainder of this chapter, I will identify common informal criteria many supervisors use to judge people. Along with this I will discuss how you can use this knowledge to improve your performance ratings, and hopefully, significantly improve your supervisor's opinion of you and your style.

PICKING THE ONE AND ONLY SOLUTION

Over the years, I have NEVER had a lack of methods to solve a particular problem. When seeking other's advice I found that the lead engineer had one method, my supervisor had a different method, my fellow engineers had another method, the Program Manager had still another solution, and I sometimes even had a different method to solve the problem.

My quandary was one of having too many choices to solve the problem rather than having none. I quickly learned who I should listen to when put in this situation; it was my supervisor. They were the most brilliant men and women I had ever met. I usually tried to highlight how I implemented their brilliant approach in my work.

► **Career Tip.** When faced with many different equal options on how to solve the problem, always pick your supervisor's approach.

I learned early on in my career that when all things are fairly equal in science, the obvious solution was the one most politically correct. This was tough for me to accept in my early career since engineering classes always taught there is only one correct answer to a problem. If you do something wrong in deriving the answer to the problem, you are marked off points. Subconsciously, this trains one to believe there is only one correct method of solving any problems (your way). When on the job, I tried applying this opinion that there is one possible method of solving a problem; it ended in disaster for me.

What finally did work for me was selecting the supervisor's method and letting my coworkers know how brilliant a solution it was. If the solution worked, I was complimented for following my supervisor's advice and

labeled a great employee. If the solution, per chance, did not work, I was not blamed since I was only following the boss' direction.

Obviously if the supervisor did not have a good technical solution, I made sure to ask if they had considered the benefits of other solutions. Then we jointly discovered my solution was the proper way to go. Once again my supervisor was brilliant for recognizing the problems with their approach and discovering a better approach.

NEATNESS OR APPEARANCE

Take a good look at your managers and their superiors. How do they dress and what is their style of hair? How do you dress and wear your hair for instance? Some managers like to come to work everyday wearing a suit with neat, short hair. Or in the case of women, some wear full makeup and jewelry. If you are a man and prefer to dress very casually, wear your hair long, or in the case of women wear neither makeup nor jewelry, how do you think your superiors relate to you? Might he or she be thinking you are a sloppy person or that you need more discipline and character in your life?

Or conversely, if you like to dress up and wear a good business shirt with a tie and maybe even a sport coat, and your supervisor likes the very casual dress of jeans and tee shirt, what do you think they are thinking of you—you're uptight and too stuffy? In the case of a women supervisor who wears neither makeup nor jewelry, she may be wondering why you, as a woman, are wearing makeup and jewelry. You obviously have your priorities in the wrong spot.

In either case, just because you dress differently, it has nothing to do with your performance. You are being judged simply by your difference in appearance. The personal beliefs of the supervisor (style) influence their opinion about you.

► **Career Tip.** You can dress the way you want outside of work, but the style of your dress will impact your relationships with others at work and ultimately your career advancement! Dress for success at work.

The important thing to remember is to observe your style of dressing compared to your supervisors. Neither style (neat versus casual) is right or wrong. They are simply different. If your style of dress is similar to your supervisor then you might be able to relate to one another better. When they are opposite, problems may arise. Who should change, you or your supervisor? I have found that trying to change your supervisor to fit your style is NOT a good career move. If anyone is going to have to change their style, it more than likely is you. You are going to have to change your style. Take a few minutes and observe your supervisor, your lead engineers, and other

key individuals in the organization, and how they dress. A good place to do this is at your next staff meeting. It is a good idea to mimic your manager in dress and office appearance unless your manager is clearly a maverick in the company.

NEATNESS OF OFFICE

This is a classic example of style difference. Let me share a personal example with you. I have a neat office style, I like a clean and clear desk with everything filed away. I dust my office weekly and make sure it is cleaned up every time my boss comes to visit. I like to give the appearance I am in control of things and I am, so I want my office to reflect it. My personal feeling is that people with messy offices reflect an image of not as much in control and generally not good managers.

However, I worked for a great manager who was just the opposite. He filed by piles on his desk and table. He could not even get his filing cabinets shut because he stuffed drawers until they were overflowing. In his office he had boxes stacked from floor to the ceiling because he had never unpacked from the last two moves. He could find anything he needed as long as you did not disturb his piles. He had hieroglyphic sketching on his white board from the last century because he never erased anything.

We were working on a particularly tough project and things were not going well. I had been putting in overtime to help, but things were not improving at the rate my supervisor wished. He called a meeting in my office to discuss what was going on. He came to my office and we proceeded to discuss the problems and potential solutions. After about 10 minutes, he suddenly announced he discovered the problem. My office was too clean and I obviously had not been putting in the time needed on the project.

I was furious at his remark, I had spent overtime working on the problem and even staying extra late at night and on weekends to clean up my office. I kept my cool and realized what had happened. He had judged me on my office style which was directly opposite his. I realized then what I needed to do. We finished the conversation and he left with me agreeing to put more time in and we planned for a follow-up meeting in a week.

A week went by and this time I was ready for him. I took out several dozen folders and threw them across the top of my table and desk. I made sure every square inch of my desk and table was covered. I even managed to create a pile of folders on the floor. It was completely ugly, the place was a mess, and I could barely stand it. I had paper and hardware all over the office.

He arrived promptly on-time for the meeting and I quickly started giving status on all I had done during the week. I apologized for the mess, told him I was too busy to clean up. We had only talked for about 10 minutes when he suddenly announced there was no need to continue. He informed me I had obviously totally engaged in the project and had enough to do since I did not

have enough time to clean up my office. He indicated further discussion would only slow my progress and he was confident I would solve the problem shortly. He stood up and left before I even had a chance to complete giving him a progress report. We had overcome a very difficult problem and expected to complete the project on plan as a result. His leaving before I could finish made me realize how my work was being judged by the condition of my office. Making a mess out of my office before he arrived was somewhat the right thing to do.

The moral of the story is your supervisor may be judging you on your style compared to theirs. If they are similar, you have less to worry about. If they are different, you better have a plan on how to deal with their totally opposite style.

Take a few minutes and observe your manager's office. Some managers keep a very messy office and feel it is a sign of being busy. Other managers keep a neat, well-organized office and claim they are in control. How do you keep your office compared to your manager? If you are neat when they are messy or vice versa, then they may not be able to relate to you. Both styles produce results. The danger is when you and your boss' style are opposite of each other.

VERBAL VERSUS GRAPHICALLY REPORTING

There are generally two styles of presenting information. One style is verbally. For this method, people tend not to write instructions or reports but communicate the results verbally. These people often say, "Tell me what happened, I'd like to hear everything." Also, verbal people use very little paperwork to support their discussions, the best way to communicate is to simply sit down and talk things through.

The second style is graphically. For this style, people present results in written form or transmit ideas by presenting charts or drawing pictures and diagrams. They usually have large amounts of graphs and pictures for support. A good way to find out which style a person prefers is by noting how they give directions. If someone gives you directions to a place by writing words (turn right, go north, etc.), he or she is usually a verbal person. If a person draws you a map, then he or she is a graphics person. What is your manager's style? What is yours?

Now let's look at an example of a verbal supervisor getting a status report from a graphic engineer. The verbal supervisor will ask the engineer to simply inform them of the progress. The graphic engineer will start out talking but quickly start pulling out graph after graph to show all the support material. At the fifth or sixth graph the supervisor is totally lost in all the data and simply informs the engineer to put it all down and tell him what is going on. The engineer has been trying to do this all along and is totally taken back by the remark. The supervisor does not relate to all the graphs and wants a

simple verbal explanation. Both are frustrated with each other at this point and both blame the other person for the disconnect. Neither party realized the disconnect and the supervisor informally judges the engineer as a bad communicator and not a good engineer.

Now let's reverse the styles. Let's assume the supervisor is a graphics person and the reporting engineering is a verbal person. The verbal engineer is convinced the best way to brief the boss is by sitting down and verbally reporting status. The verbal engineer shows up at the graphic supervisor's office with nothing in hand and starts reporting progress verbally. After about 10 minutes the supervisor is lost and wants to see the data and graphs from which the engineer drew the conclusions. The engineer does not have time to generate all the data but has a good grasp of the meaning and is giving the boss a great verbal report. The boss is frustrated at this point and starts asking for the charts and graphs. What happened? Difference of styles! The supervisor informally believes the engineer is a poor communicator because of the apparent lack of necessary graphic support material. The engineer is frustrated because they feel the verbal report is the best way to communicate the information. Neither supervisor nor engineer relates very well to one another's communication style, yet neither style is better than the other.

► **Career Tip.** Learn to present information in both verbal and graphic style. Use the appropriate style for each person you are presenting to.

If you are a verbal person trying to report results to your manager and they are a picture person, they may have a tough time relating to you. They may be constantly asking you for something graphic to look at in your report. On the other hand, if you are a picture person and your supervisor is a verbal person, you will have a different problem. They will not be interested in reading reports or looking at graphs—they want you to tell the results.

ARE YOU A DETAIL PERSON OR BIG PICTURE PERSON?

Some people like to talk details and not worry about the big picture. They believe the devil is in the details. Detail people will ask for all the supporting data and go through each piece to ensure its integrity and applicability.

The opposite style of a detail-oriented person is the big picture person. The big picture person does not want to get into all the details, but to understand the progress, issues, and status at a more global level.

Let's take a look at an example of these two types of people trying to discuss the progress on a project. Let's assume the supervisor is a big picture person and the engineer is a detail person. The supervisor asks the engineer to report progress on the program. The supervisor is expecting to hear an

overall assessment of the status with the bottom line of: "Are we on track to complete the project on time?" The detail engineer assumes the supervisor wants to hear all the details and immediately launches into a detailed status of the project/program with little or no indication of how they relate to the big picture. The supervisor stops the engineer after 10 minutes and indicates this is way too much detail. What is the big picture? At the same time, the supervisor is thinking informally, this engineer has no idea of what's going on. The detail engineer feels he or she knows exactly what's going on and cannot believe the supervisor is not interested in the details. Once again a difference in style has led to a total disconnect. Neither style is right or wrong; it is when the styles are directly opposite that conflict occurs.

What type of a person is your manager and what type are you? If you are both the same you will have more in common. If you have different styles you may have to consider altering your style when working together.

ARE YOU PEOPLE-ORIENTED OR RESULTS-ORIENTED?

Some managers are very people-oriented, which means they are really interested in you, your family, and how you are doing. When you interface with these people, they want to hear about you just as much as they want to hear about work. You can recognize these people by the type of office they keep. Generally, they will have pictures of their family, trophies they have won, and many personal items. These people believe socializing at work is part of conducting business. So you want to remember to talk about yourself, as well as your work, when interfacing with other engineers and supervisors who are people-oriented.

The directly opposite style is results-oriented. These managers are only interested in hearing about and obtaining the final results. They are not interested in discussing personal matters; they are in it for business only. They are not interested in socializing and consider you to be wasting company time when you socialize at work.

Now let's take a look at when a people-oriented manager interfaces with a results-oriented engineer. The manager tries to start the meeting out socializing and asking the engineer about his or her weekend. The results-oriented engineer, feeling very uncomfortable about small talk and socializing, ignores the question and immediately starts reporting progress. The manager thinks how rude the engineer is and informally identifies the engineer as having very poor people skills. This engineer is perceived as not a good leader.

Now let's reverse the roles. This time the manager is results-oriented and the engineer is people-oriented. The engineer enters the manager's office and immediately starts to socialize and ask about the manager's weekend. The people-oriented engineer continues to socialize until the manager can no longer stand it and abruptly announces that this is work time and we should

not waste so much time discussing nonwork items. What happened again? Total style differences! The manager is informally convinced that the engineer will never make a good leader since he or she wastes too much time socializing. In both examples, neither style is better than the other; they are simply different. It is when you and your supervisor have different styles that trouble arises.

► **Career Tip.** The upper levels of management are generally results-oriented people. When interfacing with these upper-level managers, get to the point quickly—no more than two charts and start with the bottom line!

How does your style relate to your managers'? If they are the same then you and your manager should be able to communicate openly and easily. If they are opposite, then you may want to communicate more in the style of your manager.

PROCRASTINATOR OR PLANNER?

How people handle business and deadlines generally fall into different styles. One style is what is referred to as a procrastinator style where the individual waits until the last minute for everything, and is usually in a panic mode and seems to always be fighting fires. Sometimes this style is referred to a fire putter-outer. In this style, the person usually waits to the last possible minute and often works late into the night to meet impossible deadlines. A good example of this mode of operation is how people handle term papers and finals in college. The procrastinator person was the engineer who waited until the last night possible to start writing the term paper or lab report, and ended up working all through the night to complete the assignment just in time. He or she turned the paper in after putting in a humongous amount of work in a very short period of time and received an "A" on the paper.

If your manager is a procrastinator person he or she will most likely expect the same from you, instant response and last minute panics to be taken care of. If you do not work well under these circumstances, you will have a hard time impressing your manager.

The opposite style is the planner style. For this style, the person has to have everything planned out well in advance and always strives to avoid last minute panics. In college, this type of engineer always had their term paper completed days in advance of when it was due and handed in extra credit work to make sure it shined above the rest. This engineer also got an "A" on the term paper. It is interesting to note that the engineers used a totally different style of work to complete the assignment and both got an equivalent grade "A."

Now let's observe these two styles at work and how complex working together can be. For the first example let's assume the manager has the style of planner and the engineer has the style of procrastinator. Now the real world problem. The manager gets a call from the president of the company and the engineering team is expected to demonstrate the new product in 3 weeks. The manager immediately calls a meeting of the team and announces the plan to demonstrate the new product to the president in 3 weeks. To be prepared in advance for the demonstration, the manager asks a procrastinator style engineer to lead the effort. The manager describes how the first week the engineer will call a team meeting to generate a complete plan of everything that has to be done. The second week the team will start working the details for everything, as well as start assembling the hardware and software and decide what will be shown. Three days before the demonstration the team will do a practice run to ensure everything goes perfectly. And finally, the entire team will review everything the day before to be absolutely ready. The day of the demonstration, they will assemble early in the morning and quickly run through everything. The team should be all set by the time the president arrives.

The procrastinator style engineer immediately wonders what all the fuss is about and realizes they could pull the whole thing off in just 3 days. So the lead engineer never calls the team meeting because they believe there will be plenty of time. One week goes by and the manager does not hear about the team meeting nor any progress. After checking in to why the team meeting never took place, the manager becomes angry when the procrastinator engineer explains there is no reason to panic because there is plenty of time and the team had other more important things to work on. Another week goes by and nothing else happens. The procrastinating engineer has delayed everything until the last week, and by this time the manager is in complete panic, a state that a planner style considers a failure and never wants to get into. Finally, with just 2 days to go, the procrastinating engineer calls a team meeting, gets everyone organized, but they are going to have to work late the night before. A deadline situation the manager has wanted to avoid at all costs.

The manager goes home the night before totally upset since they do not even know if the demonstration is going to happen. The engineer and team work late into the night and get the entire thing working perfectly.

The next day the engineer and team put on a successful demonstration for the president and the president congratulates the team. Excellent work! The engineer feels wonderful; they made it happen and the president was totally impressed because of the engineer's work.

And what is the manager thinking? Informally, fire the engineer! They jeopardized the entire demonstration by waiting until the last minute and that is no way to run a business. This procrastinating engineer is viewed by the manager as a poor performer even though the demonstration was a huge success. The engineer is not a good member for the team or the department. Totally different styles led to the problem.

► **Career Tip.** Working for a procrastinator is extremely stressful. If your supervisor is one, be prepared to be constantly in panic mode. Get yourself a stress relief plan.

Now let's look at the same example only reverse the roles. This time the manager is the procrastinator style and the engineer is the planner style. In this case, even though the manager received a call 3 weeks in advance, the manager procrastinated and did nothing to prepare the week of the demonstration. Then in a panic, the manager calls the team together and announces the demonstration must come off this week and the planning style engineer is in charge. Immediately the planner engineer instinct kicks in and determines there is not enough time to pull this off successfully. So the engineer panics and argues with the manager to get the demonstration delayed—there is not enough time to prepare! The manager counters with yes, there is plenty of time. Three whole days and the engineer will just have to deal with it.

The engineer panics and starts working late into the night to make things happen, something a planner usually despises and is uncomfortable with—remember it is not their style. The engineer complains to the manager daily about the prospects of not making the deadline and things have to be postponed. After 4 days of working late and most of the night before the day of the demonstration, everything is ready to go. The engineer is totally freaked out and a nervous wreck.

The demonstration to the president is a huge success and the president congratulates the team. Excellent work! The engineer believes they deserve an award for meeting an impossible deadline. The engineer is stressed out and never wants to work under these conditions again. Poor planning on the manager's part caused all the unnecessary extra work and panic. It was all totally avoidable.

And what is the manager thinking? Informally, the engineer cannot work under tight deadlines. The engineer will never make it because impossible deadlines are the norm in business. This engineer is a "poor" performer even though the demonstration was a huge success. The engineer is not a good leader for the team or the department. Totally different styles led to the problem.

These styles are totally different and will often cause conflict among team members. Each style appears to be out of control to the other style. Neither style is right or wrong; they are simply different.

Now the big question: how does your style compare to your managers'? If they are different, who is going to change?

How do you find out what style your manager is? Simply observe them in their office, meetings, and hallway conversations. Once you realize their style and how this relates to your style, you can start to deal with the conflict since you will know what you are up against. Realizing this informal criteria, and its impact on career, make work and career advancement quite a bit simpler.

These are some of the more common informal criteria that managers use to judge people. You need to be aware of these informal criteria and constantly checking for others that your manager may have. The informal criteria are often not obvious and they may not be easy to recognize, but they are there. With a little bit of research and acute observation, you will begin to recognize other informal criteria. Your task is to start looking for and recognizing these informal criteria, and then use them to your advantage. In other words, take off the remaining part of the blindfold and see what you have to do to get the promotion.

SUMMARY

Most engineers do not realize that informal criteria often play a bigger role than imagined in evaluating one's performance. Informal criteria are very hard to define and therefore you must be aware of the subtle hints that are available to you in identifying them. Informal criteria are usually based on personal biases or beliefs and styles as to how to best perform the job.

We all select a style or method of performing work on the basis of our experiences, training, and personal beliefs. Since we all have different training and experiences there will always be differences in opinion on the best way to complete the task. These differences in opinions or styles can cause serious career problems when our performance is rated on whether or not a person likes or dislikes our style.

The real problem for your career occurs when you and your supervisor have directly opposite styles for accomplishing work. This is a very dangerous situation because even when you are meeting or exceeding work expectations, simply having opposite styles from your supervisor's, may result in getting rated as a "Poor Performer."

Once you realize you have a difference in style from your supervisor, you can start to deal with the conflict since you will know what you are up against. Realizing this informal criteria, and its impact on career, make work and career advancement quite a bit simpler.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 Which is more important: the formal company criteria or the informal criteria supervisors use to assess your performance?
- 2 Is selecting your supervisor's approach always the best way to go?
- 3 Observe your supervisor's office. What style does it indicate he or she is?

- 4 When your supervisor's style is directly opposite yours, who should change? Should the supervisor be adaptive and change for your benefit?
- 5 When you are in charge of a team and the members of the team have different styles, what should you do?
- 6 Identify your styles and make note of it.
- 7 Do these styles exist in other nonengineering departments of the company?
- 8 Are these the only styles with directly opposing approaches to work? Can you identify others?
- 9 If you are a manager, do you feel you should have to change to match others' styles?