
Know Your Role: How to Succeed in Your Position in the Process Automation Organization

White Paper

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Introduction

Organizational hierarchy creates conflict in any workplace, but working in plants and factories with a high degree of automation presents unique challenges. Automation work is highly technical and complex, and several years of work experience are required to become a proficient automation professional. At the same time, automation technology is continuously evolving, creating challenges for both entry-level workers and their supervisors. Further complications arise because much automation work must be executed at customer sites, which lessens the opportunity for professional development through day-to-day interaction between managers and their team members.

Because of these potential complications, managers and subordinates must strive to understand the inherent challenges of their positions and to develop the skills required to deal with them. Here are a few suggestions.

Management Takes the Lead

A “good” process automation or technical manager understands the work he asks his subordinates to execute and possesses the skills to do the subordinates’ jobs. This knowledge and capability allow the manager to monitor performance and progress and to avoid problems associated with the technical content of a project.

How to Be a Good Manager:

- Know how to do your subordinates’ jobs
- Develop good problem-solving skills by learning and always employing the scientific method
- Visualize project execution
- Assess workers’ strengths and weaknesses
- Keep your team informed
- Focus on people as well as the work
- Develop your management skills

A good manager is usually an exceptional problem-solver, meaning that he rigorously applies the scientific method and can visualize the execution of the work as the project progresses. By knowing the specific requirements of the project as well as the strengths and weaknesses of his subordinates, the manager can assign optimal resource mixes to projects.

A good technical manager must also understand the strengths and weaknesses of his own personality. While a technical background is necessary and allows a manager to relate well to other engineers and technicians, the typical engineer is not particularly skilled at interpersonal interactions. Engineering managers are job-focused, not people-focused, meaning they tend to pay less attention to the non-job needs of their subordinates. They may ignore personality conflicts, friction between subordinates and clients, and problems associated with family situations. As a result, project performance may suffer even though the subordinates have all the skills and capabilities needed to successfully complete the work.

In order to overcome this weakness, a good manager must be proactive in maintaining his relationship with his workers. For example, he can schedule team meetings, contact individual subordinates in remote locations to keep the communication lines open, inform his team of pertinent company information, ask for feedback and demonstrate genuine interest in his subordinates’ work and career paths.

A good manager should also take steps to further develop his own management skills. For example, he might choose to become a project management professional (PMP) — both to prove his dedication to his employer and to foster his own career. Many other types of management seminars and workshops are available through career development organizations or colleges, allowing managers to enhance their leadership skills and to select specific areas for personal improvement.

Finally, a good manager should always reflect on his past experiences with his own supervisors. He should identify the good traits of previous supervisors and try to emulate them. At the same time, he should recognize bad managerial traits and determine how best to avoid them in himself.

Subordinates Lead Their Own Careers

Two of the most important traits of a “good” subordinate are adaptability and attention to detail. Adaptability is extremely important today because of the short time horizon of typical automation projects and the rapidly changing technology. An automation professional who trains himself to be adaptable and who can easily switch between different kinds of projects and assignments becomes recognized as a key employee within any organization. This status leads to promotions, raises and career advancement.

How to Be a Good Subordinate:

- Be adaptable
- Pay attention to detail
- Maintain skills
- Work well alone and with a team
- Admit when you don't know something
- Learn from your mistakes

Attention to detail is THE essential ingredient of error-free project execution — especially on projects in operating process plants, where a minor mistake can mean the difference between a high-quality deliverable and a failed project that may jeopardize people's safety, the client relationship and, ultimately, the bottom line. Attention to detail is not an inherent characteristic of many individuals, but it can be learned through rigorous application of standard quality control procedures that are part of an organization's project execution methodology. Automation professionals who fail to develop this skill are relegated to less challenging work and fail to advance in the organization and in their careers.

A good subordinate must also maintain his skills and be motivated to further his education on his own without prompting from his supervisor. He should strive to work effectively with others and must also be able to work well independently.

Another extremely important trait of a good technical professional, especially one just beginning his career, is the ability to recognize when he doesn't know how to do something, and then asking for help. Individuals often think this is a sign of weakness, but it is a mark of maturity and is a key part of a career-long learning process. What's more, a good employee should learn from every mistake. No one expects a subordinate — or manager — to demonstrate perfection, but a good employee admits mistakes and learns from them.

And just as good managers must understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own personalities, so must subordinates. Many subordinates tend to be myopic, meaning that their short-term outlook causes needless frustration when working on a boring, unchallenging job. They may also tend to have tunnel vision, in that they generally focus only on the work at hand, losing sight of the bigger picture and often not noticing other problems or opportunities outside the scope of their specific work assignment. Subordinates should be aware of these negative personality traits and should strive to overcome them. Generally, myopia and tunnel vision fade with experience and maturity.

Meeting in the Middle

One of a manager's most important contributions to an organization is to successfully mentor an entry-level employee through the first few months of employment. During this period, the new employee needs to develop an effective approach to problem solving and automation job execution that he will then use throughout his career. In the absence of such mentoring, an employee can often flounder and become disenchanted with the work, leading to high organizational turnover.

Regardless of age or experience level, a healthy professional relationship depends on both parties. The keys to good workplace relationships include strong communication and mutual respect. Without these traits, none of the other attributes will matter.

Conclusion

Conflicts will almost certainly arise from time to time between managers and their subordinates. Recognition of the potential for conflicts, their root causes, how to avoid them and how to deal with them are all keys to successful project management and execution in the automation world.

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