

# Dear Wayne ...

## Advice from the PM Trenches

Wayne Turk

**When you give credit to others, most people assume that you were a part of the reason for success and are just being humble.**



wants—those that are difficult or the ones where others have failed.

Some people shy away from taking on a project where others have had problems. They don't want to taint their records with possible failure. But it's actually a win-win situation. If you *do* find a way to achieve success, you'll make a name for yourself. If you don't, nobody expected you to anyway—but if you've made a significant effort, the boss will notice your hard work (assuming that he or she is a good boss). A warning, though: Don't take on one of these jobs or projects and just kiss it off because you know you aren't expected to succeed. That won't help you at all and may hurt you.

I can think of one young man who was assigned to be the coordinator for charitable contributions for a government organization. It was considered a trivial job by some and a lot of work for no real reward. He got the job because he was the new guy, and nobody else wanted

**A**s a project manager and someone who has been around for a while, people frequently ask me for advice. Whether you are new to the workforce or a seasoned employee, the following pointers can help you do a better job, move up in the organization, and keep out of trouble. For you managers, they may also be worthwhile ideas to pass on to those who work for you. At the worst, the suggestions won't hurt and, I hope, will help someone during a working career. Most of my tips come from my own experiences (not always positive experiences, I have to admit). Why not learn from my mistakes or those that I have seen, rather than making them yourself?

### Take the jobs that nobody else wants

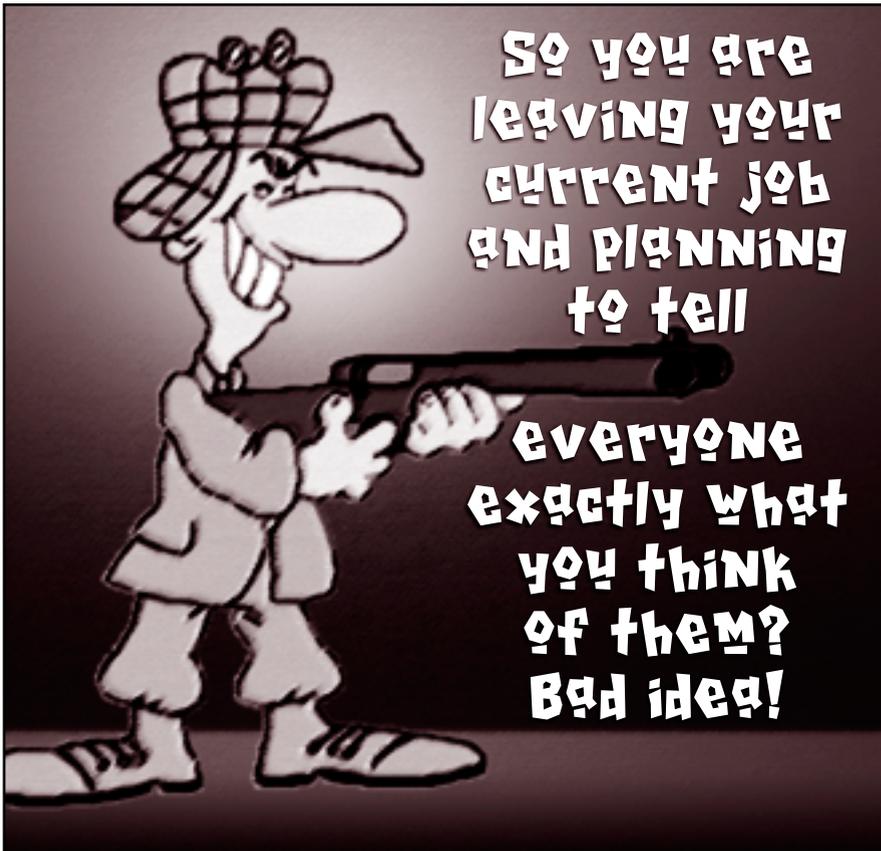
How to stand out and maybe even become the office shining star: Take on the jobs or projects that nobody else

it. He didn't either, but once he was assigned the job, he decided to give it his best effort. He ended up surpassing the organizational goal by a large percentage. Not only his boss noticed, but other senior managers did too. It wasn't long before the young man was tapped for another project, this time a desirable one that many others *did* want. He was given the project because he'd been noticed for his hard work on the charity drive. He went on to become a success with a number of promotions along the way. All because of the jump start that he got from doing a good job on that one project that no one else wanted. Of course, he also continued to work hard, and that helped.

### Don't burn any bridges

So you are leaving your current job and planning to tell everyone exactly what you think of them? Bad idea!

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more willing to help you when you need it. And you *will* need help at some point. A helping hand doesn't only support the person you helped, but it also helps your organization. All of that reflects well on you.

### **Give credit, don't take it**

Learn to give accolades to those around you when they do something good or are helpful to you. This goes for recognizing the contributions of those under you and your peers. It is especially true for managers but also pays dividends no matter where in the chain of command you fall.

Be quick to share the credit for a job well done. Trying to hog the credit for an idea or a successful project might get you recognition or help you move up in the short run, but it certainly won't help over the long term. Word will get around, and people won't want to work with you on the next project. Another thing: When you give credit to others, most people assume

It's a very small world out there. Unless you have won the lottery and are going off to live in splendor, there is too much chance that you may need some of these people in the future, that you'll see them professionally or socially, or that they'll know someone in your new job or the one after. At most, it is seven degrees of separation between any two people in the United States, and if you are staying in the same field or place, it can be a lot fewer than seven. People remember and—innocently or maliciously—may say something that could damage you or your reputation. Why take the chance? Even if you are changing professions and geographic locations, don't burn any bridges. The good feeling you get from telling off one or a few people is temporary, and it's not worth the potential repercussions. The same goes for other scenarios that involve doing something based on your emotions that others might perceive as unprofessional.

### **Reach out a helping hand**

Be willing to assist others, especially if you have knowledge that can help them do their jobs.

Helping others shouldn't be allowed to negatively impact your own work, but taking the time to assist coworkers usually has a very positive payback. Answering questions, providing ideas, editing a document, helping on someone else's project, mentoring, giving advice, welcoming a new person into the organization and helping him or her get settled—even something like helping to move furniture—all make others feel in your debt. Then they are

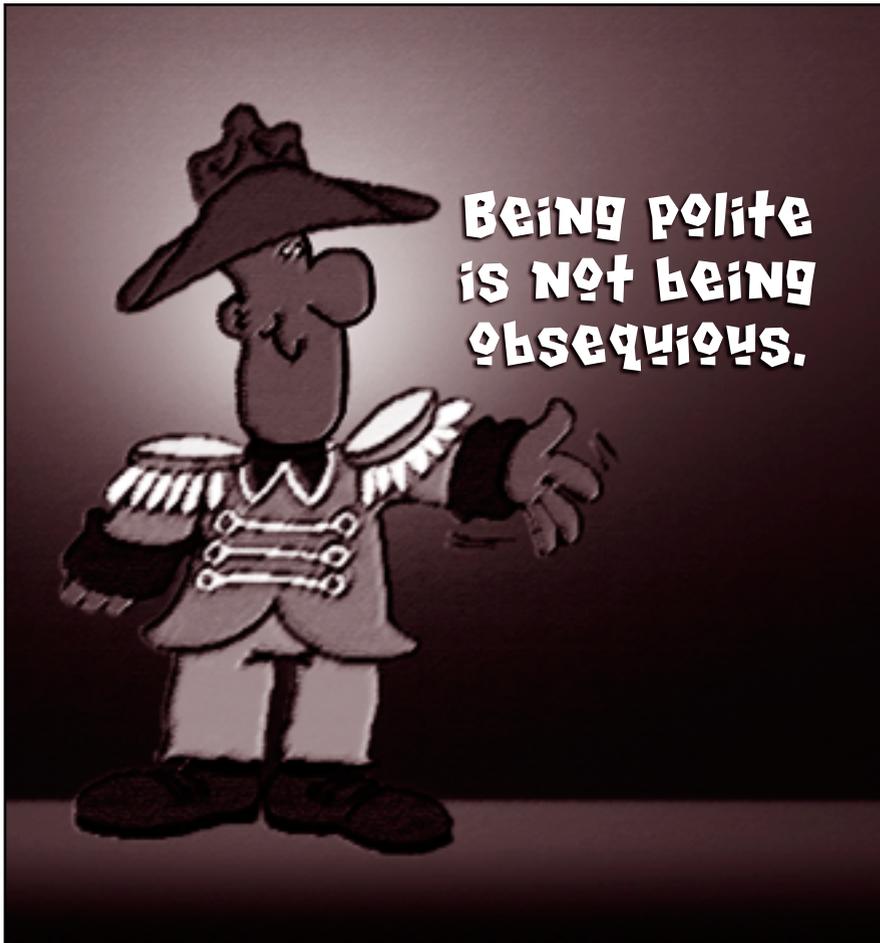
that you were a part of the reason for success and are just being humble. Perceived humility is a good thing. Perceived egotism for claiming the credit due others is not.

In the same vein, a letter or e-mail or private word of appreciation to the boss of someone who has done something significant or helpful can really win friends and influence people. If you choose letter or e-mail, don't forget to copy the person about whom you're expressing appreciation. It takes only a few minutes, shows your professionalism and lets the helpful person know you did something nice in return.

### **Be creative, and speak up**

I heard a story many years ago about a too-tall truck that got jammed in an underpass on a military base. All the senior people stood around giving their ideas on how to get the truck out. The ideas weren't practical, and all involved doing damage to the truck or the underpass. Finally, a very junior person spoke up. "Why not let air out of the tires," he said. "That will lower the truck and allow it to be backed out." It was a simple, creative, and practical solution to the problem that impressed his boss and got the man a promotion.

When you have ideas, speak up. It is always a good practice to look for ways to make improvements. Whether it's processes or products, almost anything can be improved. Don't be obnoxious about it, but don't hold back for fear of rejection. Make sure that you have your case built and



### **Treat everyone respectfully**

How you act toward those around you can have an impact on your career. It's not just the people above you, but anyone with whom you have contact—your peers, those under you, and those in what can be considered service positions, like waiters, secretaries, the mailroom clerk, and so on. People notice how you treat others. If you are rude, demanding, or demeaning, people within earshot or those who hear about it secondhand can—justifiably—make harsh judgments about you. It probably won't cost you your job, but it can make people wonder whether you should ever be in a position of authority. It's the same when you are nice to people: others notice and judge you accordingly. Being respectful or nice doesn't mean letting people roll over you. You can be strong but tactful and polite, even if others aren't.

There can be other, more direct consequences, good or bad, of the way you treat people. It may influence how your needs are handled or the priority applied to your work or requests.

can present it coherently. Even a suggestion for change that is rejected initially sometimes plants a seed that will bear fruit later.

Change is difficult, and people can be very hesitant. If you are the manager, listen to suggestions. A suggested improvement from one of your people can make you look good too if it is put into practice and is successful. One of the worst reasons in the world for not changing something is "we've always done it that way." Keep an open mind. Stability can lead to stagnation. Change may be painful or disruptive, but the results frequently justify the pain.

### **Learn to write**

You don't have to be the world's greatest writer, but learn to put words on paper in a way that is readable, grammatical, and gets the idea or point across. The ability to write well is a highly valued skill. Surprisingly few people can do it—or maybe the rest are just not willing to take the time or make the effort. A well-written proposal, report, technical document, request for resources, or some other document will get you noticed and put you in demand. Managers at every level are looking for people who can communicate well. While the written word is only one aspect of communication, it's the one that leaves a permanent record.

Everyone you work with has influence somewhere. Being rude to the mail clerk could well mean that your next priority package gets "forgotten" for two or three days. Someone else you mistreated could sabotage or undermine your work even more seriously.

Kindness and politeness pay great benefits. People want to help you. You might be surprised how something as simple as holding an elevator for someone, a cheerful "good morning," or a polite "thank you" can lead to assistance in a time of need. The words "please" and "thank you" should be a frequent part of your vocabulary with everyone. Being polite is not being obsequious.

### **Network and communicate**

Meet people and talk to them. Get to know the people in your organization. They can help you to do your job faster and better. They can tell you what's happened in the past, what's worked, and what hasn't. They can tell you about the other people in the organization. Share information with them. Learn from them. What you learn may not help you today, but it might in the future.

There are those who won't share knowledge because they feel that having knowledge provides them with a certain power. They hoard information, sharing it only when they think it will benefit them to do so. Don't be one of those

people. It hurts your ability to do your job and the organization's ability to get the mission accomplished.

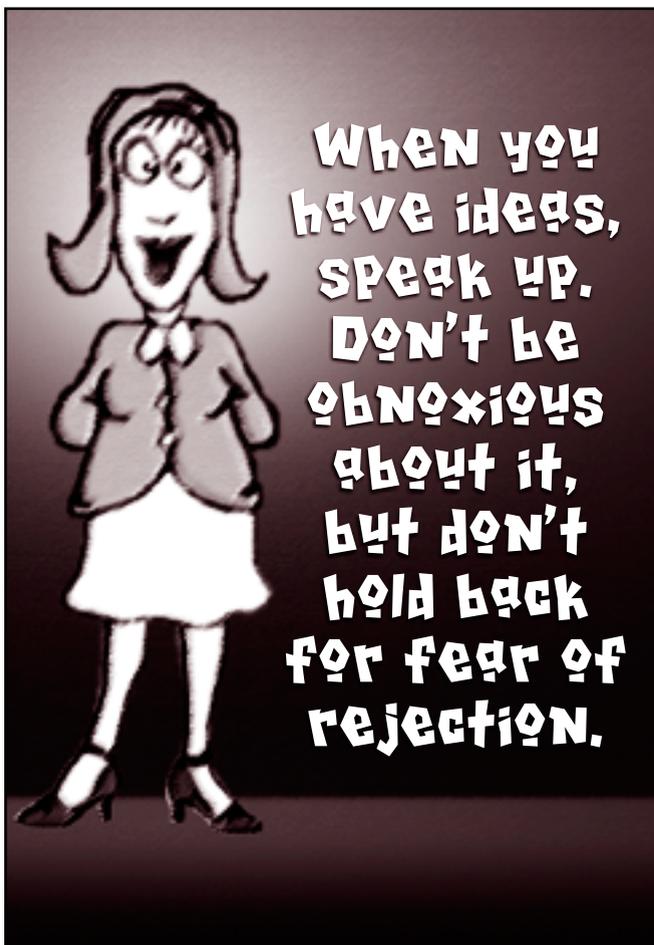
### **E-mail is forever**

E-mail has become such an integral part of our personal and professional lives that we use it almost without thinking. It is a great business tool, but it has some significant pitfalls associated with it. We have all heard stories of people who sent out e-mails in anger or shared negative comments or rumors and lived to regret it. People pass on e-mails, especially the funny, juicy, dumb, or unusual ones, but e-mails can easily and quickly get back to those who are mentioned or impacted in some way. Even innocent e-mail errors can come back to haunt you, making you appear unprofessional or just plain dumb. Old e-mails don't die. They are kept on file, sometimes by the recipients but always by the Internet service provider and/or your organization. Check the sidebar for some e-mail tips.

### **It's mostly common sense**

Knowledge, training, and experience are important to your career. But basic politeness and common sense cost nothing and can work wonders too.

**Editor's note:** The author welcomes questions and comments. He can be contacted at [wayne.turk@sra.com](mailto:wayne.turk@sra.com).

A cartoon illustration of a man sitting at a desk with a laptop, looking stressed. The laptop screen shows a calendar with dates circled. The text "E-Mail Etiquette" is written across the bottom of the illustration.

- Never put anything in an e-mail that you wouldn't want to read on the front page of your local newspaper or see somewhere on the Internet. Nowadays those are distinct possibilities.
- Don't fire off an e-mail while you are angry. Wait until you cool down. Some people say that they write e-mails while they're angry to get it out of their systems then erase them. That may be a good form of catharsis, but what happens if you accidentally click "send" instead of "delete"? It happens.
- Always be professional. Use spell checking, and read over what you wrote (remember that the spell checker doesn't catch misused words). Poor grammar and spelling or instant messaging slang can make a bad impression and ultimately hurt you.
- There's no tone of voice or body language in an e-mail. If there is more than one way to take something, it's a given that someone will take it the wrong way (another reason to write carefully and read it over).
- If you make a comment as a joke, it's not a bad idea to let people know you're joking. Someone will be sure to miss the point and be offended. Probably a better idea is to keep the work e-mails professional.
- The proliferation of e-mails, the number of messages you're copied on, and the steady stream of spam make it a constant challenge to filter e-mails for what is really important. Try to answer, or at least acknowledge, e-mails in a timely manner. (That goes for telephone messages, too.) If people don't hear back, they're left wondering if the message got lost in cyberspace or if you're ignoring them.
- Don't clog bandwidth and mailboxes by forwarding virus warnings, medical horror stories, or dire predictions without first visiting a couple of e-mail hoax identification Web sites to check if they are genuine. Most are not.