

CE^2: Communication and Empowerment for Cost Estimators

How to use soft skills to exponentially impact your team's analysis

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Author Note

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author alone and do not reflect the official policy or position of any other organization, employer, or company.

Abstract

Too often, cost estimator training focuses solely on technical abilities, largely ignoring the “soft skills”. Good communication and empowering the team were shown in a 2020 ICEAA community survey to be critical to cost leadership efficacy. Knowing that technical skills alone will only take estimators so far, this paper leverages existing communication and empowerment best practices to demonstrate how all cost estimators can use soft skills to exponentially impact their analyses.

Keywords: Communication, Program Management, soft skills

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Introduction

The International Cost Estimating and Analysis Association (ICEAA) is a cost estimating organization built by cost estimators for cost estimators. While having a technical-specific emphasis does facilitate state-of-the-art estimating training and incorporation of best practices in quantitative areas like data science, we sometimes lose focus on other opportunities for professional growth. As a community, we spend a lot of time building on our strengths, but this paper seeks to target a weakness for many technically competent professionals. Fortunately, there are many examples of anecdotal and empirical findings of the behaviors and attributes that lead to effective leadership in professional, educational, and popular media.

In a recent survey of cost analysts, (Snyder, 2021) the community unanimously agreed that leadership is important to the end cost product and that “soft skills” like being a good communicator are important to leadership efficacy. “Soft skills” are essentially people skills – and due to the nature of being less tangible, non-technical, and sometimes personality driven, they are harder to define and teach. These become increasingly important when you work on larger teams, begin leading cost projects, and/or as your direct visibility to the decision maker increases. This paper expands upon previous works regarding soft skills to improve cost team outcomes such as: higher team morale, efficiently delegating work, and quickly identifying challenges. It seeks to leverage proven training on how to communicate and empower members of estimating teams more effectively. Although there is specific guidance to cost team leadership, given the nature of cost estimating, the insights can be helpful in all aspects and roles within our field. Much of the success of our work relies on efficiently receiving inputs from others and then communicating our results to decision makers. Taking personal inventory of strengths and limitations in soft skills and working on communication skills throughout the leadership chain will improve all estimators, not just those in cost lead positions.

EQ and Self-Awareness

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other” – John F. Kennedy

Effective leaders boost team morale, create strong relationships in the workplace, and help others embrace stretch goals; all of these key skills require emotional intelligence (EQ)¹. There are several different interpretations of EQ. For the purposes of this paper, we will define EQ as the ability to recognize your own emotions, knowing how you are perceived by others, understanding your impact on those around you, and being able to use that knowledge to motivate or adapt the behaviors. To bring out the best in others, it is critical to first understand your own strengths and weaknesses through self-awareness. Personality and EQ assessments seek to measure one or more of the following: personality traits, dynamic motivation, symptoms of distress, personal strengths, and attitudinal characteristics². The path to self-awareness involves honest communication with yourself and those that know you best. This communication can be complimented by structured self-report personality and EQ assessments readily available on the internet.

The Four Self-Awareness Archetypes

This 2x2 maps internal self-awareness (how well you know yourself) against external self-awareness (how well you understand how others see you).

	Low external self-awareness	High external self-awareness
High internal self-awareness	<p>INTROSPECTORS</p> <p>They’re clear on who they are but don’t challenge their own views or search for blind spots by getting feedback from others. This can harm their relationships and limit their success.</p>	<p>AWARE</p> <p>They know who they are, what they want to accomplish, and seek out and value others’ opinions. This is where leaders begin to fully realize the true benefits of self-awareness.</p>
Low internal self-awareness	<p>SEEKERS</p> <p>They don’t yet know who they are, what they stand for, or how their teams see them. As a result, they might feel stuck or frustrated with their performance and relationships.</p>	<p>PLEASERS</p> <p>They can be so focused on appearing a certain way to others that they could be overlooking what matters to them. Over time, they tend to make choices that aren’t in service of their own success and fulfillment.</p>

Dr. Tasha Eurich published the chart above in the Harvard Business Review that outlines internal and external self-awareness³. Dr. Eurich distinguishes internal self-awareness as how clearly we see ourselves, our aspirations, our strengths/weaknesses, and our impact on others. External self-awareness is how other people view us for those same criteria. Research has shown there is no relationship between internal and external self-awareness³, so it is possible to rate high on one scale and low on the other. It is critical that both new and veteran leaders take time to focus on self-awareness as it is positively associated with important leadership outcomes. In a study of more than 1,200 leaders in a variety of industries, higher level leaders had larger discrepancies between their self-assessments and the assessment of them by those around them; meaning the larger a leader's team, the more important it is to close that gap by improving the communication with those that report to them⁴.

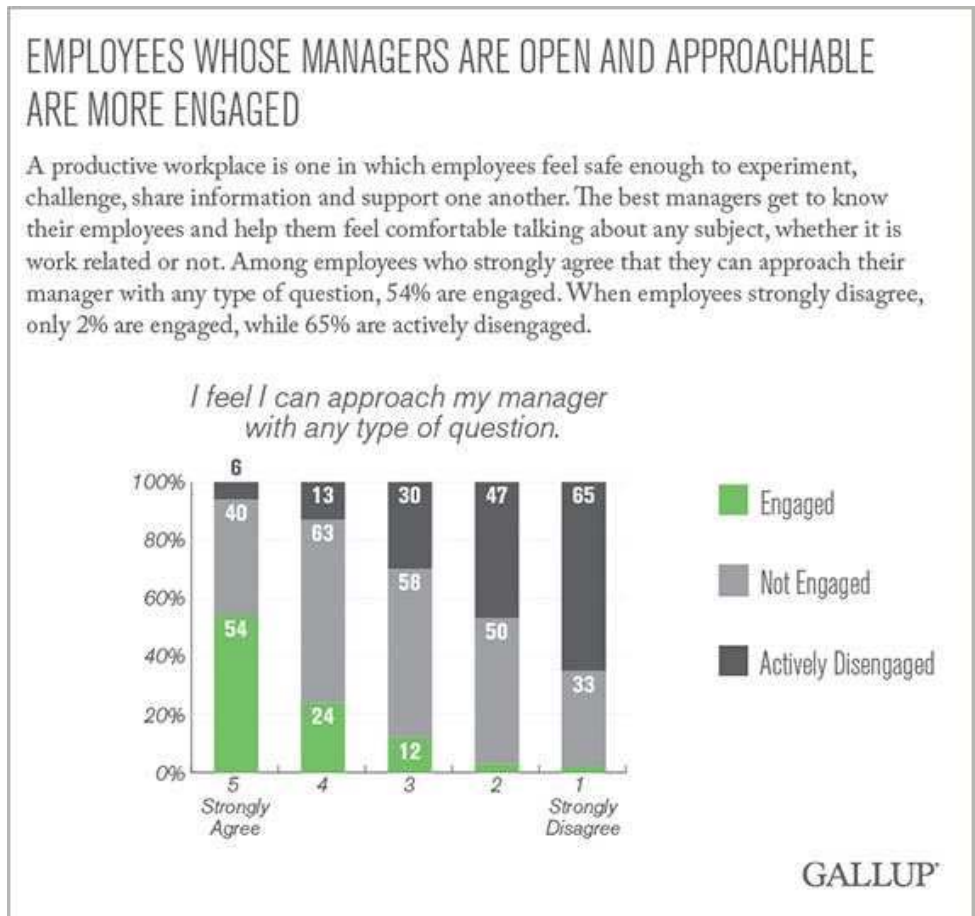
Communication

"Communication is the real work of leadership." Nitin Nohria, Dean of Harvard Business School from 2010-2020

Part of what differentiates humans from the rest of the animal world is our ability to work as a team through our communication. Unfortunately for our profession, most cost team leads are put into those positions solely due to their technical abilities. However, high technical achievement doesn't necessarily teach the skills or empathy needed to understand other people. When leading an estimating team, leaders should be looking for opportunities to increase productivity, maximize employee engagement, and effectively navigate the estimating process. All of these can happen by improving team communication. Using best practices across multiple industries, we can get inspiration for the best communication strategies leaders can implement to impact our cost estimating teams. It should be noted that the literature on leadership says the best leaders continually develop leaders within their own team, so all members of a cost team can benefit from beginning to practice these communication strategies at any stage in their career. The communication skills found most often to be employed by effective leaders were: adaptability, approachability, trust, and inspiration.

Adaptability – Adaptability in leadership involves understanding and accommodating the communication styles of each team member. The best leaders use their EQ to understand that each person is different and one of the keys to effectively communicating is tailoring your communication style, both verbal and nonverbal, to your audience. This allows you to be more persuasive and build stronger relationships with your team members. Some team members may appreciate short emails with no pleasantries while another may interpret that style as cold or harsh. Leaders should give their teams hope and support, so being careful with words and having a cool head in stressful situations might be especially important. Ultimately, using tact and showing respect when interacting with every team member sets the foundation for modeling a collaborative and efficient work environment. This is where having self-awareness into your default communication style and adapting to your team’s individual needs is critical.

Approachability - Most of us learned as children that we have “two ears and one mouth, because we should listen twice as much as we talk”. Active listening should be the foundation of communication for every leader. If team members know that you are really listening to their inputs, they are more apt to openly share their ideas and provide honest feedback. As the Gallup poll shows⁶, this drives employee engagement, but also increases productivity and creativity. Approachability



means setting time aside to speak directly to your team and removing distractions like not looking at your phone or computer screen when they speak. When a person brings issues to your attention, empathize with their feelings appropriately, and encourage them to continue talking.

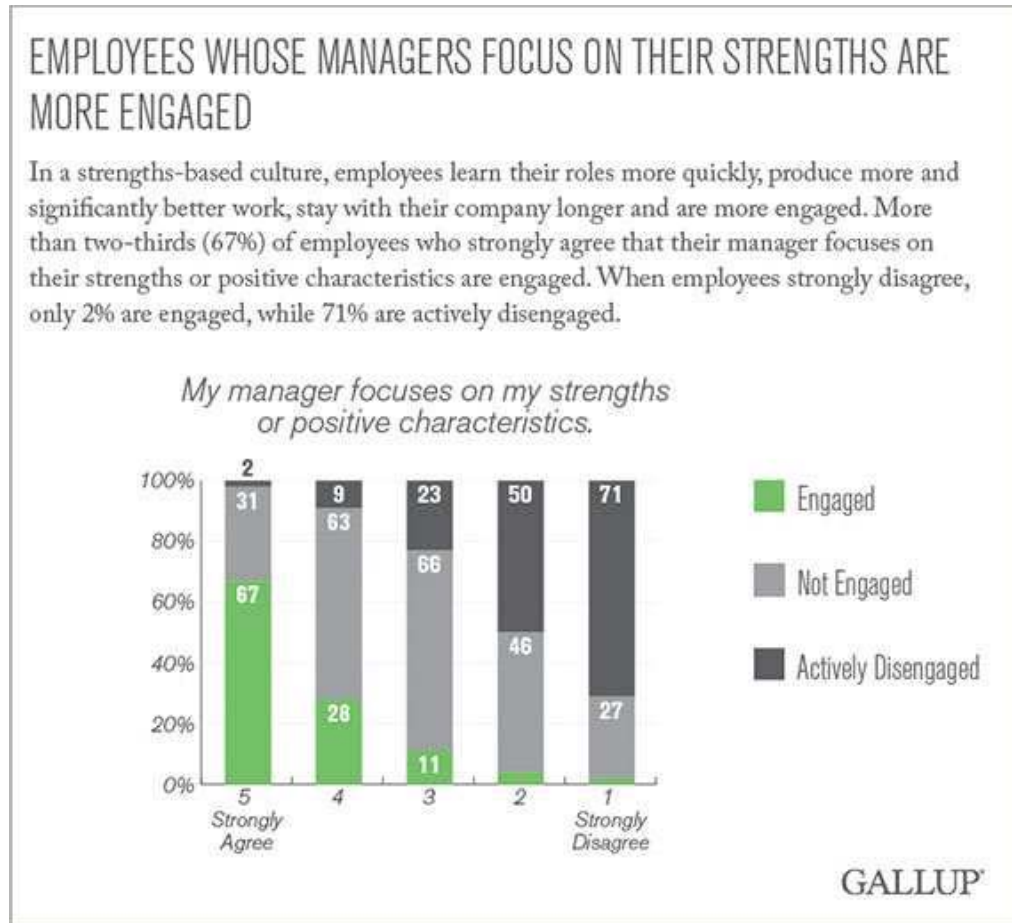
Trust - Consistent in the literature on team effectiveness, trust has been shown to be the most important component of any successful team. When teammates fear each other, fear their leader, or believe they are in competition, they lose the ability to be creative for fear of making mistakes and will hoard knowledge and resources to give themselves a tactical advantage over other team members. To have team members trust each other, the leader needs to model transparency, integrity, and vulnerability through consistent action. The book “Connect – Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends, and Colleagues” outlines the six hallmarks of exceptional relationships that stem from these areas of trust and authenticity⁷:

1. You can be more fully yourself, and so can the other person.
2. Both of you are willing to be vulnerable.
3. You trust that self-disclosures will not be used against you.
4. You can be honest with each other.
5. You deal with conflict productively.
6. Both of you are committed to each other’s growth and development.

If you can build trust in you as the lead and within the team dynamic, all members will be more willing to share ideas and learn.

Inspiration – A leader that believes in their people can have a positive effect on the overall culture of their team. This involves celebrating success, framing missteps as opportunities for growth, and providing more positive than negative feedback. A 2004 study⁸ showed that leaders should be in the habit of providing significantly more positive feedback than most would assume. This research showed that high performing business teams had a positive to negative comment ratio of 5.625, medium performing teams had a ratio of 1.875, and but the low performing teams had a positive to negative comment ratio of .365⁸. When placed in a bad team culture, even a star employee can become apathetic and perform to less than their abilities. Conversely, wanting to meet the expectations of an inspiring leader that believes in you can cause a mediocre performer to achieve more than they themselves felt possible. Leadership inspiration has resulted in greater productivity, greater workplace satisfaction, and employee engagement has been shown by Gallup to be superior to the more authoritarian approach. Procter & Gamble runs a development program which focuses explicitly on teaching leaders on how to

inspire colleagues; A.G. Lafley even goes as far as to say, “The command-and-control model of leadership just won’t work 99 percent of the time.”⁹



Empowerment

“As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others”- Bill Gates

-To paraphrase from the Google re:Work website, the most effective leaders usually realize that they work for their teams and not the other way around¹⁰. Part of leading others is believing your team can become that best version of themselves and make an important contribution to the group effort. When developing cost estimates with a team, it is a balancing act for a cost team lead to figure out how to best utilize the available resources to complete the workload in a timely manner with the most quality of work. Taking into consideration the skillset and past performance of the individual, a cost leader can set high but achievable goals. True leaders don't manage or mandate actions or tasks; instead, they motivate and empower staff to

identify and complete the work necessary for the established outcome¹¹. The best way for a leader to do this is the commit to planning up front; the more work that is completed before the project begins, the clearer expectations and trust. As Dave Stachowiak, EdD puts it, “by doing more work up front, we minimize the amount of rework, conflict, and unclear expectations”. By putting into practice the seven steps of delegation set up by Dr. Stachowiak, a cost team leader can ensure the whole team feels empowered and that communication is happening throughout the project.

1. *What does success look like?* - Begin with the end in mind, envisioning the expectations for the timeline and final delivered product. Plan with as much detail as possible the expected outcomes for to the final deliverable including what will be in the scope of the work, what will the documentation look like, who will receive the briefing. This planning process needs to be completed by the team lead alone before any tasks are delegated.

2. *Who is the right person for this particular job?*- The

size of the team and capabilities within available time/resources need to be taken into consideration.

You may have one person that is your go-to, but it can be demotivating if this person feels

disproportionately overburdened. Think of the

capability and motivation of the team members and that each person on your team is not just doing a job but could also use the existing work as an opportunity to stretch and build leadership and skills beyond their current capability.

3. *Communicate expectations* –Take time to clearly set expectations for which team members will be responsible for sections of the work and try to be as detailed as possible.

The 7 Steps of Delegation



Keep in mind the communication principles discussed earlier of adapting your style to individual members and inspire them by reiterating that you believe they can accomplish the work.

4. *Individual estimator (staff member) plans the project* – Once individual responsibilities within the estimate are clarified, allow the estimators to plan out the details of their own work. Not only does this convey trust but it allows them to have ownership over the work that they are doing. While taking into account previous performances, assign appropriate levels of autonomy to keep them engaged, allowing every estimator on the team from juniors to seniors to be creative and bring their unique ideas to the team.
5. *Review the plan with the individual estimators (staff member)* – If there are any gaps that you think will affect quality, objectives, or timeline on the final deliverable, then make sure to address them up front. However, resist the temptation to change inconsequential things that you may have done differently to maximize each member's feelings of empowerment and ownership.
6. *Set the check-in drumbeat* - At the outset, determine clear milestones and expectations regarding follow-ups. This will provide an effective way for leaders to provide direct feedback without being perceived as micromanaging. It is important as the team lead to realize that no feedback is worse than negative feedback
7. *Provide access to resources* - If they need to get information from external stakeholders make sure those connections have been made up front and that data requests or information will be coming. Help people anticipate obstacles so they can figure out how to work through them. Even if you don't have full answers for all challenges or questions, be honest and forthcoming to let them know if there are problems that need to be worked through.

Empowering your team has an exponential impact. Not only will your team feel more ownership over their work and inspired by your trust, but leadership research shows that

employees who feel more empowered are more likely to have higher levels of trust in their leaders.

Summary

“Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence”

ICEAA members and the cost community unanimously agreed that leadership is important to the end cost product and that “soft skills” like being a good communicator and an empowered team are important to leadership efficacy. By working on being highly internally and externally self-aware, focusing on effective communication, and efficiently delegating work, cost team outcomes including estimate development time and efficiencies in the process will also improve. Much of the success in cost estimating relies on efficiently receiving inputs from others and then communicating our results to decision makers. Taking an inventory of your own strengths and limitations of your own soft skills and working on your communication skills at every level of leadership will improve all estimators.

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