

Observations on leading 'techies'

We manage objects and processes but we lead people, says **Chris Garratt**

I must first declare a vested interest before sharing my observations on leading 'techies' – I am and always will be a 'techie'.

I have a deep interest and curiosity in how and why things work and have expressed this interest in various ways. As a child I bought a large non-functioning case clock at my scout jumble sale, took it to pieces, cleaned and re-assembled it and, to my surprise, it worked ... but chimed continuously for hours until the spring ran down. My parents were not impressed, but this was my first foray into the world of 'things' and I am sure that, with more patience on the part of my parents, I could have fixed the chimes.

Objects are predictable: they can be weighed, measured, tested, analysed, used and will always remain the same as when you started. Even years later, they remain the object you know and appreciate. This is very comforting and is, in my opinion, the main issue when considering the inherent behaviour of 'techies'. In general, 'techies' feel more comfortable with objects and find it easier to deal with people as objects and to assume that they are definable and predictable. Therein lies the issue: people are infinitely unpredictable but gloriously creative, stimulating and lovable.

A little background may help to put some of my personal observations into context. At the age of 13, I had to choose between sciences or humanities at grammar school. I managed a few GCEs, which led me to believe that a technical career might be appropriate. Not having made the grade for university entrance, I was attracted to a military apprenticeship, on which I learned my telecommunications trade over a three-year period, and then went on to take advantage of whatever training I could and to progress within

the military. After an excellent free and salaried education, I had to give five years of service in return and this was extremely interesting and character-forming. It introduced me to the value of teams, to the individuals who make up these teams and to the self-discipline that augured a successful career in the 'techie' sector: telecommunications, computers, nuclear power and then back to *data* communications before retiring from the role of general manager in 2002.

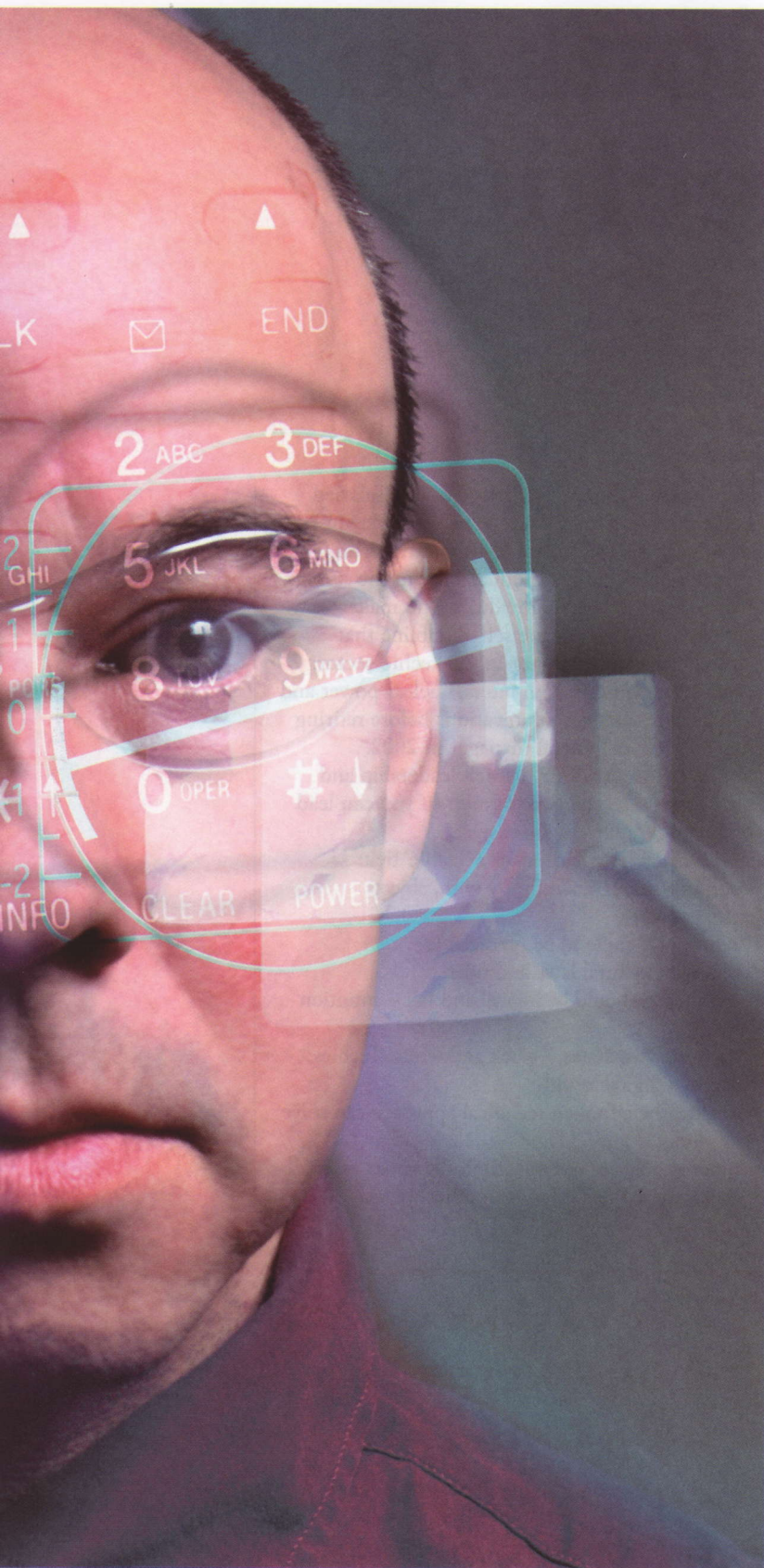
Now, at the age of 69, I teach leadership and run a very successful Scout group (if you can lead volunteers, employees are easy).

Let's consider what makes a 'techie' tick:

- curiosity about, and affinity with, objects and gadgets
- expecting people to be predictable
- following natural laws and rules
- everything should be logical and fair – intuition is soft
- there are two states – black and white. Techies live in a digital world
- a strong belief that a technical approach can solve all things
- other people are not as technically smart as me (but maybe I feel inferior in other ways).



'Techies' often cannot see the big picture but are happy among the trees, focusing on their little part of the action



'Techies' are found not just amongst engineers and scientists but thrive in many other professions where logical, linear thinking is paramount, ie lawyers, doctors, accountants etc. The liberal arts and social sciences, on the other hand, encourage non-linear approaches and the emphasis on feeling, opinion, attitude, intuition, philosophy, contrast, aesthetics and depth of intellect.

There are always examples that will deny the generalisations inherent in articles such as this but I believe that, if we are aware of 'techie' tendencies, it becomes easier to understand and adjust our approach to getting the best out of these people, producing motivated and fulfilled team members.

'Techies' can become highly energised when given the freedom to follow their chosen subject but totally demotivated if asked to do things outside their interests. The manager of a group of researchers (all PhD plus) asked for help with a problem: he had called a group meeting but not one of his nine people showed up. I asked to see his meeting agenda: it contained "company news, expense report problems and budgets for the next year".

His problem was solved by adding as item number one a round table for everyone to take five minutes to tell the others what they were working on and what they hoped to achieve. He had 100 per cent attendance at the next meeting and had problems limiting his 'techies' to five minutes.

This indicates the level of latent energy sometimes focused on technical issues to the exclusion of almost everything else. These same researchers had a backlog of expense reports unclaimed for up to one year: when asked, they considered this unimportant and said that they would get around to claiming the money eventually. I won't report what the finance manager said when he heard this!

Many of the attributes that we label as 'techie' have a degree of brain dysfunction and I believe that most of us are a little bit dyslexic, autistic, Aspergic (why not?) etc but we manage to become mature, productive employees in spite of these challenges. We learn from doing and seeing results, we copy the successful behaviour of others; we follow training and are coached by more experienced mentors, and learn from the trials of life.

I have followed this path until the realisation, at about the age of 45, that people and relationships were the key to success and that objects and processes were subsidiary. This Damascene conversion changed my life and my conscious behaviour has since been directed at relationships, win-win negotiations, helping others to achieve, motivation, team-building, empowerment and

having fun while doing all these things – work should be fun. Having said all of this, I am still intrinsically a ‘techie’ and, under stress, tend to revert.

The ‘techie’ syndrome is well illustrated by a golf joke doing the rounds...

A priest, a doctor and a ‘techie’ were waiting one morning for a particularly slow group of golfers. The ‘techie’ fumed: “What’s with those people? We must have been waiting for 15 minutes.”

The doctor chimed in: “I don’t know, but I have never seen such inept golf!”

The priest said: “Here comes the greenkeeper, let’s ask him.”

The priest said: “Hello George, what’s wrong with that group ahead of us? They are rather slow.”

The greenkeeper replied: “Oh yes, that’s a group of blind firemen. They lost their sight saving our clubhouse from a fire last year, so we always let them play for free at any time.”

The group fell silent for a moment.

The priest said: “That’s very sad. I think I will say a special prayer for them tonight.”

The doctor said: “Good idea. I’m going to contact my eye specialist colleague and see if there is anything he can do for them.”

The ‘techie’ said: “Why can’t they play at night?”

There is no negative consideration on the part of the ‘techie’ in the joke above – he is simply playing what he sees as his role and looking for a constructive technical solution to the issue.

As this illustrates, ‘techies’ often cannot see the big picture but are happy among the trees, focusing on their little part of the action, sometimes without knowing the impact of their work either on the bigger picture or on the wider world. When trying to diagnose disastrous situations, I have often heard the excuse: “But my bit is perfect.”

I was once berated by my CEO because the computer network was down (one of my responsibilities), so I spoke with the ‘techie’ in charge and asked him to fix it urgently. He came back some time later to say that all was well. I immediately phoned the CEO to tell him the good news, only to have him back on the phone 30 seconds later shouting that it was still not working. When I tasked the ‘techie’ with this feedback, he told me that it was not a problem as “I know what is wrong and how to fix it”. That’s an example of technical focus, without regard for the service that the technology provides.

So how do we go about leading ‘techies’?

Well, it is not much different from leading other people – it simply needs more focus and awareness of ‘techie’ traits.



Praise followed by a more challenging technical assignment will look like heaven: work satisfaction is a key motivator for 'techies'

Communication

'Techies' will usually opt for an impersonal means of communication – email, messaging etc. They need to be trained to understand that this is 100 per cent okay for communicating *data* but *totally* inappropriate for discussing, decision-making, idea convergence, agreements etc, in fact anything involving intellectual interaction. This must be done face to face or, at second best, by phone. It may even be necessary to set targets for the reduction in the use of email to make this stick. I have read all the arguments about the misuse of Mehrabian, but his basic message is clear: when communicating anything other than *data*, body language and tone of voice are important (forget the percentages).

Like many people, 'techies' prefer actions and pictures to words and find the abstract difficult. 'Techie' leaders often behave in parent mode when filtering out information that their people will find 'difficult to understand' or 'do not need'.

Delegation

When delegating tasks, it is a good idea to ask the 'techie' to repeat back to you what they have understood you want. Some leaders simply say 'any questions?' but no self-respecting 'techie' will ever admit that he doesn't know how to do it or has not understood your request. A time limit should always be negotiated, as 'techies' often have a tendency towards perfectionism and tasks will take as long as you allow. 'Techies' tend to assume that once something is clear in their mind, then everyone else must also understand and will then stop trying to communicate.

Team leading

When asking a 'techie' to lead a team, it is important to set expectations about the time they should spend with each team member to get to know them, to build a relationship on which

future interaction will depend. 'Techies' tend to believe that work is transactional, ie 'I explain to you (by email) what you are supposed to do and you just do it'. Communicating a complex task requires human interaction to ensure that the task is fully understood and the constraints agreed.

'Techie' team leaders will tend to gravitate towards work that they understand and enjoy and sometimes miss the big picture for which they are responsible. They may be the best technical resource available but must be constrained to 'lead' not 'do'.

'Techies' may resist moving into a leadership role, as they often regard managers as being an unnecessary overhead and simply want to be left alone to do their work. When they accept management roles, they have an inclination towards a command and control style.

A suggestion that an electrical engineer should be appointed to manage a mechanical group was greeted with derision: "What could an electrical engineer possibly know about mechanics?" Only when it was pointed out that the manager's 'technical' role was primarily to lead people did they begin to see the light and that 'leading' was a complex technical task.

Reports

Many 'techies' have difficulty in writing reports, sometimes because of inadequate education but often because they do not understand the need and make too many assumptions. They use acronyms and refer to underlying technical *data* that most people will not be able to follow. They may also focus on keeping reports succinct, ie less than one page. In my experience such reports tend to omit all adjectives and articles and read like a policeman giving evidence (yes – policemen are often 'techies').

Such people need to be coached in the techniques of communication. 'Techies' take well to a request for graphs and diagrams and they tend to be good at it – let them go this way. My written style is still somewhat terse, many years after I worked for a 'one-page boss', who focused my style so much that my mother preferred to get letters from my wife rather than from me.

Remote working

Trying to convince someone over the ocean, who you have never met, to do something for you is not easy but becomes impossible if attempted by email. As a minimum, it is necessary to call the other person, preferably by a video conference link, and to spend time explaining who you are, who you work for, what your needs are and to offer reciprocal help if appropriate. This person will

then be able to relate to the requestor and is more likely to respond positively.

Relationships are very important and it is money well spent to encourage people to meet if they will need to have significant interaction. 'Techies' and 'techie' managers can't see the need for this. Global structures are making this way of working more and more common but we ignore human relationships at our peril. I can point to multiple global initiatives that have failed due to inadequate human considerations. When you have been out for a beer together, everything is much simpler as each side tries to sustain the relationship.

Motivation

Most of us accept that the best way to get good work from people is to create an environment in which the person is most likely to be motivated and want to do what you need from him. 'Techies' often fail to see this and assume that the target has to do the work, because it is their job. Overheard from a 'techie': "I am not going to say thank you for something that they are paid to do." Saying thank you for routine work is well worthwhile if it make the receiver feel good and more motivated. Saying thank you costs nothing!

Recognition is also a key factor in motivation and public acknowledgement of technical excellence goes a long way for a 'techie'. Praise followed by a more challenging technical assignment will look like heaven: work satisfaction is a key motivator for 'techies'.

A brilliant 'techie' colleague was awarded the company president's prize for being the best engineer worldwide and this was to be presented in person at the next all-employee meeting. He was so proud; he might have floated in the air. He was then called by HR who congratulated him and offered him a voucher for £200 to spend as he wished. He was outraged, stamped his foot and tore up the voucher. His one-off recognition had been devalued by being offered a 'trivial' amount of money. His behaviour also illustrated another trait of very clever 'techies': they often lack some social graces.

Estimating

'Techies' are one of life's optimists and will usually underestimate the work to be done: "Oh you meant you wanted it tested and documented as well?" Doubling of 'techie' estimates is common and a close analysis of work scope is called for to ensure that all bigger-picture aspects are covered. They really think that they can do it in minimum time but can ignore the realities of life like holidays, sickness, politics, changes, imposed constraints etc.

I never ask 'techies': "How much have you done?" I always ask them: "How much do you still have to do?" In both cases I will get an optimistic answer but, in the second case, this gives me a margin.

Male versus female

Why is it that so many 'techies' are male? It may be due to the biological role of males in which logical decisions are important to preserving life, catching food, defending etc. Women have an inherent advantage in being biologically programmed to be good at building relationships, communication, empathy, caring etc. Men have to consciously learn and practise such leadership skills.

'Techies' have a tendency to be introverted in that they prefer to find answers themselves rather than through interactions with other people. This is another male bastion – when we get lost, do we easily ask for directions?

Training

'Techies' need strong training in interpersonal skills and leadership, to enable them to understand their innate shortcomings and how to overcome them.

Role plays are extremely valuable in coaching 'techies' to handle human situations. Being averse to the emotions present in confrontations, they will try to avoid them unless they are confident in their ability to cope.

They also need coaching to enable them to handle uncertainty and ambiguity without panic. They hate the imprecise.

Planning

Planning is not a strong point for people with 'techie' tendencies. This is illustrated by the tendency of 'techies' to leap into action without analysis and planning – they often start designing or programming before fully understanding the task needs.

Decision-making

Not having 100 per cent *data* before making decisions can inhibit 'techies' and prevent them from making the decisions critical to success. The Pareto 'good enough' model is appropriate to push.

So where do we go from here?

'Techie' degree varies from 'slight' to 'geek' but these people are critical to all human endeavour, so we must find a way of harnessing their skills while compensating for shortcomings and coaching them in the knowledge and skill of dealing with people.

We need their technical knowledge, skill, energy, creativity and initiative, so we must do all we can to encourage them. **TJ**

Chris Garratt
MBE

is founder of Leadership Solutions Europe. He can be contacted at chris@garratt.org or via www.lse.lu