

**GARD EXECUTIVE CONSULTING, LLC**

applying  
behavioral science  
to enhance  
executive and organizational  
performance

## **Why AEC Professionals Need Non-Technical Competencies**

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Leaders in technology-driven professions such as architecture, engineering and construction need to fulfill a variety of demanding roles that test their interpersonal skills. An upper-level individual typically oversees a range of activities involving project management, client management, and firm management. As many firms have learned the hard way, adept leadership requires more than just technical and intellectual prowess. It also requires a number of psychological competencies (see figure 1). For example, dealing with differences of opinion among principals in a firm involves psychologically-based abilities such as diplomacy, resolve, insight, and candor.

The need for psychological competencies is seen in the case of Donald S., the 52-year-old president of a growing construction management firm. Donald's eldest son Greg, a vice president at the firm, tried to convince him to expand and promote the firm's expertise as a pioneer in sustainable design and the use of green technology. Greg eagerly volunteered to head up this initiative, thus presenting Donald with two major questions. Was this the right direction to take the company, and was Greg the right person for the job? Donald's analysis of the matter led him to conclude that the initiative had merit, but he didn't believe his son had the temperament to lead it. Unfortunately, Donald was too uncomfortable to convey this to his son and instead he avoided the issue until Greg stopped raising it. The firm squandered an opportunity to establish its leadership position early on.

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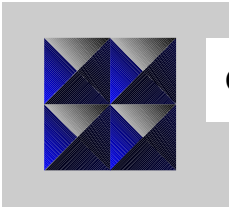
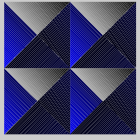


FIGURE 1

	<b>Typical Tasks</b>	<b>Some of the psychologically-based competencies needed to accomplish those tasks</b>
<b>Project management</b>	<p>Coordination &amp; communication between project team, subcontractors, and clients</p> <p>Problem anticipation &amp; resolution</p>	<p>Attention to detail</p> <p>Problem-solving skills</p> <p>Emotional Control</p> <p>Organizational awareness</p> <p>Conflict management skills</p>
<b>Client management</b>	<p>Presentation of proposals</p> <p>Negotiation of contracts</p> <p>Maintenance of client relationships</p>	<p>Persuasiveness</p> <p>Flexibility</p> <p>Social confidence</p> <p>Attentive listening</p>
<b>Firm management/operations</b>	<p>New business development</p> <p>Management of personnel</p> <p>Strategic planning</p> <p>Quality assurance</p>	<p>Independence</p> <p>Diplomacy</p> <p>Decisiveness</p> <p>Vision</p> <p><b>How well do your key people rate on these competencies?</b></p>



The presence or absence of psychological competencies can impact one's career. Consider strengths like motivation, commitment, resilience, confidence, and insight. These are psychological in nature, subject to development, and they often lead to professional advancement. Conversely, psychological obstacles such as resistance to change, conflict aversion, impatience, and egocentricity often result in stagnation and uninspired leadership.

How do we develop valuable psychological competencies? They arise from a combination of *how people are* (traits) and *what people do* (behaviors). No wonder that it's virtually impossible to teach competencies in a seminar or to learn them from a book, no matter how inspirational the author. Traits and behaviors can be broadened and modified, but it takes significant time and effort.

Individuals can indeed change, but the most substantive and permanent change is realized when people develop from *the inside out*. Real change has to start from within beginning with self-awareness – an elusive element at best. By analogy you can probably do an acceptable job of combing your hair while staring out the window, but chances are you'll achieve better results by using a mirror.

Self-awareness is critical because it allows a person to consciously emphasize their productive traits and behaviors, while self-managing the counterproductive ones. Consequently, the surest strategy is to begin by focusing on the *inside* (that is, self-awareness and self-understanding) before the *outside* (that is, skill building and on-the-job development).

The formula for acquiring and expanding psychological competencies involves three important ingredients:

1. **feedback** (both broad and deep) – this is the data that fosters self awareness
2. **multi-lateral motivation** to make changes
3. **change partners** who help us to stay objective about our progress

Not coincidentally, these are the three primary ingredients in our approach to *Executive Coaching* at Gard Executive Consulting. These three ingredients if applied consistently and over a sufficient period of time can help AEC professionals strengthen their psychological competencies, allowing them to manage change, read situations more accurately, tolerate ambiguity, develop interpersonal finesse, and collaborate more effectively.