

The Hard Truth about Soft Skills

By Tammé Quinn Grzebyk

“Soft skills are nice to have, not need to have.” Most people would disagree with this statement, admitting these skills are important. However, few people and even fewer companies invest in developing them. Worse yet, many do not understand the negative impact of not nurturing them.

What, then, are “soft skills?” Soft skills are those personality traits and interpersonal skills that balance technical skills and quantitative job requirements. How well individuals understand and can use these skills determines their soft skill aptitude. A small sampling of soft skill development areas include: improving active listening; practicing empathy by understanding personality styles and emotional drivers; dealing with difficult people and situations; acting with integrity; embracing diversity; breaking cultural barriers; honing interpersonal communication; and working effectively as part of a team. These skills shape corporate cultures, and are the catalyst for process improvement efficiencies.

Unfortunately, though most agree these are important skills, people and companies are unmotivated to nurture these for various reasons. Some of these include:

Fear of the unknown (or lack of motivation)

Many people who are not savvy in the soft skill arena have either developed a fear of these unknown skills or are simply not motivated by them. Just as a marketing guru may fear accounting practices because of his limited exposure and the office manager may fear a new software application because of the same, so too, might technical professionals be hesitant to approach a subject with which they are not highly skilled. Ironically, since these fearful or unmotivated individuals already exude technical or specialized expertise, they stand to reap the greatest rewards from improving upon these skills.

Connotation of the term, “soft” skills

Why should we be motivated to build skills that are considered “soft?” Business is not “soft,” so why should we waste our time on such aptitudes? The truth is there is nothing soft about these skills. They are Power Skills. Hmm, now suddenly, they seem a bit more significant, don’t they? The fact is, these aptitudes bring power to an organization. A strong engineer who can also interact effectively up, down and sideways (to her manager, employee and peer) is much more valuable than the engineer who cannot. The organization that embraces open communication and the uniqueness of each individual more effectively maintains a powerful and positive corporate culture. Companies who consistently rank high among places to work would confirm the importance of Power Skills, as would their employees.

Lack of resources

Trying to do more with less often prevents employees from effectively performing all responsibilities of their job. Because Power Skills are considered qualitative and more difficult to measure, people tend to neglect them first, since they are not part of their quantitative performance appraisal. It is a lot easier for an accountant to admit communication broke down between him and his coworkers than to admit his numbers were inaccurate. Interestingly, a negative impact on the company can be just as likely due to deficient Power Skills as deficient technical skills.

Cost

So, what does it cost to believe that Power Skills are “soft?” Let’s take a lesson from a real world consulting story:

A technology company operated a successful internal customer support center. The lead employee in the support group was very friendly and helpful to his customers; those who often used support services were very loyal to him. Surprisingly, however, upper management did not seem to value this employee’s work, and the employee had an unexplained vendetta toward upper management.

After further consultation, it was concluded the employee regularly complained to senior managers on behalf of his loyal constituents. He did so in public employee forums, in small groups, and to his supervisor. His personal disdain for senior management resonated during all communication up, down and sideways. While he was cordial to his customers and peers, it became clear he was incapable of communicating professionally. More specifically, while he was able to see clearly through the eyes of his internal customers, he was unable and made little attempt to empathize with management. His unbalanced approach caused two things to happen:

1. He was prevented from moving to higher positions and bringing in higher wages, resulting in a negative attitude.
2. An “us” and “them” dichotomy between front line workers and management was created, resulting in negative morale.

Being in such a pivotal role, this employee wielded a great deal of influence that negatively affected his career and the organization’s corporate culture. Interestingly, if asked, internal customers would rate this employee’s communication and performance highly. However, he was marked for termination on numerous occasions, thanks to the chaos he brought to the overall organization.

The moral of the story?

The cost is high for not developing Power Skills within the organization. On an individual level, it will undoubtedly affect upward mobility and the strength of professional relationships. For organizations, the lack of Power Skills will limit overall success. Sure, the processes are written, the product is developed, the plans are in place, and the people are in the right roles - but unless the senior management nurtures Power Skills within the organization, they will never really know how great they could have become.

How powerful is your organization? How effective are your Power Skills? How would your customers respond to these questions? What about your boss? Employees? Competitors?

Copyright © 2007 VerbalWise, LLC. All rights reserved. You may reproduce this article by including this copyright and, if reproduced electronically, including a link to www.verbalwise.com.