

People Skills are the Hard Skills

In corporate offices across the nation, the core skills of managing people, active listening, problem solving, and relationship building, are often discounted or marginalized as non-essential. They are referred to as “soft skills.” These *intangible* skills seem harder to quantify relative to other skills geared toward specific financial, technological and procedural operations which can be easily measured and monitored.

Regardless of where you work, consistent and superior business results are a function of *how people relate to each other*. *How people relate* includes the ability to communicate directly AND respectfully, the ability to give, receive, and respond to feedback without getting defensive, and the ability to resolve conflict AND maintain trust. While you may concur with this premise, what is actually *being done* to address the “how we relate” quotient inside your organization?

As a consultant and coach to many Fortune 1000 companies, I have noticed that lower standards of conduct have become commonplace inside most organizations. Complaining, victim mentality, blaming, and gossip have become a normalized part of many corporate cultures. We tolerate, accommodate and avoid that which we don’t know how to deal with and we do it in the name of expediency and efficiency.

For anyone who has ever endeavored to have the more difficult conversations, they know that these skills truly are the “hard skills.” Can you tell someone that their performance is not meeting expectations without them getting defensive? Can you ask a coworker with a loud and obnoxious voice to tone it down without inciting a conflict? Can you “manage up” and hold your own manager accountable for higher standards of leadership without being rebuked?

Interpersonal issues are to organizational morale like weeds are to gardens. Each day, more weeds. If attended to directly and promptly, the garden thrives and plants continues to grow. If ignored or left alone, weeds will eventually take over the entire garden. When we don’t know how to do something OR don’t feel confident in our ability to be successful, we avoid addressing the interpersonal and organizational “weeds.”

There is a cost. When walls go up, communication, innovation and productivity go down. According to a Gallup Organization study that synthesized twenty five years worth of interviews with more than a million

employees: “the single most important variable in employee productivity and loyalty turns out to be not pay or perks or benefits or workplace environment. Rather, the relationship between employees and their direct supervisors.”

Furthermore, high turnover and loss of good people costs organizations untold millions of dollars. In their book, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman write: “People leave managers, not companies.” How many quality employees have left for greener pastures? How much does it cost your organization to attract, recruit, interview, orient, train, and get a new employee up to speed?

Want to become a high-performance organization? Invest in your own, and your organization's, people skills. For every hour you spend upgrading your administrative, procedural, and technical skills, consider matching that effort with an equal investment in training and development in “people skills.” Follow the lead of such companies as Hewlett Packard, IBM and Motorola, who realize that training their people to weed is the quickest way to a healthier, happier, and more profitable garden.