

“The Hard Realities of Soft Skills”

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CHAPTER 3

GENERAL ISSUES IN MANAGEMENT

The Hard Realities of Soft Skills

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Abstract

Soft skills are ignored because of an obsession with tactics at the expense of strategy. Pressed with immediate needs, firms put their emphasis on individuals who excel at primary or core skills. While they may grudgingly admit to some belief in the value of soft skills, it is falsely felt that these non-core skills are a priority that can be deferred. However, once caught in the deadly embrace of over-reliance on short term priorities in goal delivery, the cycle of hard skill emphasis becomes internalized. The full potential of strategy is consequently never reached, primarily because of a workforce that is either not fully equipped to do the job, or is discouraged to do so because their 'other' qualities are not valued adequately.

Key words: Soft Skills, Hard Skills, Management Focus, Communication, Productivity.

Introduction

The insolence of authority is endeavouring to substitute money for ideas.

Frank Lloyd Wright, (1869-1959) American Architect

In reference to Mark Twain's quip, soft skills are much like the weather in that everybody talks about them but nobody seems to do anything. Or so it might seem.

Soft skills have been the subject of much discussion and debate. In certain places there seems to be support for them, but the words are not followed by action. There are many reasons for this. Results are often intangible and therefore hard to quantify. Furthermore, the benefits are best realized in the long term. In today's competitive environment and one in which the struggle is to make the next quarter's numbers, it is harder to justify expense and effort that may not show its full potential until long after the leaders have been sacked for poor financial performance.

Strategy and Tactics

It can be argued that the same problem exists when a company loses focus on its strategic goals and tactical goals preoccupy attention to get to the end of this fiscal period. The comparison between strategic versus tactical is not logical convenience to illustrate soft skills versus hard ones. In fact, proper execution of corporate strategy should include provision for building strength in soft skills. At the end, these are the soft skills that are really needed to properly communicate and execute strategy.

Recent events have shown the wild ride of irrational over-exuberance followed by a crash of spectacular proportions. The dot com bubble burst was followed by the decimation of the leadership cult as stalwarts such as Arthur Andersen, energy giant Enron, communications conglomerate WorldCom and others with feet of clay. How did we get here?

We exist in a business culture that trumpets success. Despite the perennial chase for success, there is a pathological flaw in our business culture that leads us, siren-like into the rocks of excess, amorality, tunnel vision and sheer blindness to the needs of a justifiable, sustainable course

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of action. In the pursuit of shareholder value, organizations have been forced to conduct business in order to maintain the next quarterly returns while cannibalizing assets, human and hard, that would serve longer term growth. What is a business manager to do?

The Zeitgeist has fostered limited business enlightenment. We have been raised in the *I need it now* mentality of our age. It is not the point here to say that if we return to "good old-fashioned family values" everything will be well. In fact it is worth noting that despite the overall decline of Christian worship in western society, the notable exception has been the growth of evangelical and fundamentalist congregations who are no strangers to moral relativism. Thou shalt not kill (unless it is an abortion provider). Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's possessions (but accumulation of vast amounts of material wealth will ease that pain). You will love your neighbour as yourself unless of course, he chooses to worship Allah or oppose gun control. To hear an evangelical speak of his regular two-way conversations with God stretches credibility, claiming permission given by the almighty (but without witnesses). Trust me. It may not stand up in a court of law, but nonetheless, these agents of the Lord act comfortably with this justification. It reminds one of the remark, "If you talk to God, it's prayer. If God talks to you it's schizophrenia."

All the same, there are those who worship at the secular altars of free enterprise and capitalism and are no less guilty of inventing self-serving permissions. Miscreants such as Dennis Koslowski when caught with their fingers up to the third knuckle in the corporate pie often protest that they are acting on their entitlement. But even legal practices of business leadership beg the question of what greater good is self-servitude is being served? It is an accepted truism that in order to attract top leadership material, it is not only acceptable, but encouraged to reward leaders handsomely for the successes. The reward system is so entrenched, so automatic, that leadership is often handsomely rewarded *in spite of their lack of success*. This reflects on the reality that business, in spite of the belief that it is being run by hard-working professionals adhering to the highest capitalist principles to achieve the greatest good, is actually a hodgepodge of methods and practices well-suited for rewarding those in the fortunate positions with no greater connection to a grand design. With so much focus on the key players taking care of their own needs first, it is understandable that the holistic view takes a back seat.

Soft Skills – An unmet challenge

There is a rising tide in business literature regarding soft skills. By the volume of words written on the subject and the amount of attention apparently being paid to it, one might believe that the message has finally pierced through. Talk is good. And unlike the weather, which everybody also talks about, something *can* be done about soft skills. While there may be a decided improvement in the appreciation for this subject, a deeper look into the execution of these utopian ideals paints a different picture.

The reality seems to be that soft skills is the corporate equivalent to the ubiquitous self-improvement movement, at first it sounds like a good idea but it's just too difficult to get at it right away. Business can even justify foregoing development in these areas as some kind of sacrifice, an indulgence to be saved for more prosperous times. Using guilt just intensifies the resistance but this is dangerous thinking. In our technological economy, there is a great emphasis on skills. They are essential, of course, and there is always a shortage of the right talent. Even IT, which is suffering lower employment levels since Y2K and the more recent dot com collapse, suffers from excess capacity in the wrong skill areas. There are still jobs going unfilled in areas such as enterprise software programmers. Employing staff strictly on a skills-based measure may provide an answer to tactical needs. When staff is largely technical yet deficient in communications and people skills however, the ability of an organization to execute its strategy is compromised.

The skills lock appears to be the main culprit, at least in organizations where technical products and services are the main driver. This is particularly true in supervisory and line management roles. In these situations, it is reasonable to expect supervisors and line managers to have a technical comprehension of the work that they manage. It is, therefore, a logical extension to recruit for these more senior positions from the skilled ranks. If the process is run properly, suitable candidates with the technical know how *and* the soft skills are recruited. This can happen by

accident or design. But if there is no design, there is a good chance that it will not happen at all. This results in supervisors and managers who can serve well as technical consultants to their staff but when it comes to those other soft areas, the role falls apart. In “No 'soft skills' for us, we're techies” (Thompson-Moore, 2002), the title puts it in a nutshell. To the *techies*, soft skills have no perceived value. Yet in her article she cites several examples of tech managers who lament the lack of suitable candidates to grow beyond the code-cutting trenches. A prime advantage of soft-skills suggests more effective product delivery by optimizing communication from production through to the customer. Technical types, on the other hand, fear the world of open communications because they are disarmed of what they see as defensive weapons, their technical speak and jargon which, by definition, isolates them from the broader world. As the emphasis on customer service increases, the ability to function outside one's own technical silo becomes indispensable.

Another advantage of soft skills is the ability to find solutions beyond the normal technical ones. This is particularly important in IT. While it is an objective to develop foolproof applications, realistically, this is impossible as the adage goes, “because fools are so ingenious”. Faced with a user community that will find no end to the ways to do something wrong, it takes more than a technical solution to get things working the way they are intended. A technical specialist who can speak the user's language and be conversant in the user's working context has a decided advantage (Anten, 2003).

Half way there

There is no shortage of literature and business press extolling the virtues of soft skills, yet like other housekeeping tasks, when setting the priorities for such things, *manana* seems to be the operating word of the day. Well, yes, it is important but there *are* more pressing needs. When next quarter results are bearing down, it is hard to justify investing in skills and training that best offer results that won't be fully realized for months or even years. And people assets are hard to quantify in a balance sheet beyond some ethereal component of goodwill, itself a measure that is subject to some discussion and controversy.

But the reluctance to invest in soft skills goes beyond budgetary expediency. Within our culture there are factors afoot that make all of this inevitable. Those who lament the lack of soft skills in business might have you believe that our hard-nosed approach to business has slowly but completely removed them from our world. More probably, these laments are inspired by disappointment. As our culture and business evolved we had become aware of the potential and eagerly awaited this brave new world. Unfortunately, we haven't evolved as quickly as some might like.

Nostalgia for better times long gone is not a new phenomenon and longing for the good old days an exercise in denial. In spite of some retractions after the indulgent practices that we witnessed in the dot-com bubble, working conditions are still, in most respects, idyllic compared to even as recent as the sixties and seventies. Employers who capriciously fire employees without a justifiable and defensible cause do so at their peril. Even when an employee deserves to be let go with cause, the employer takes the expedient ‘package out’ route just to avoid the messy aftermath.

Managers may not be guaranteed an office with a personal secretary, but at least she has the opportunity to be a manager now. Dilbert cartoons may make fun of cubicle culture but at least cubicles are an improvement over the old open-concept offices with row upon row of desks lined up, allowing no privacy whatsoever. Not only did you have to be discreet about personal habits, you had to be witness to those with less discretion than you.

The list could continue from relaxed dress codes to flex-time to telecommuting and hoteling. But this discussion is not about working conditions. Hygiene factors are all part of the infrastructure of the workplace and for the most part, when executed properly, improvements could be expected to improve productivity and as a side benefit, improve the lives of those who conduct your business. But working conditions are visible and easy to define.

What has this to do with soft skills? These workplace improvements underscore some recognition for the world of work beyond our primary justification for a pay cheque. Furthermore, it implies some understanding beyond the narrow skills frame of reference. But we are hired for our skills and for the products and services they assist in delivering. Employee incentives notwith-

standing, let's take it on faith that improved working conditions contribute, at least to a limited extent to the bottom line. Would not improvements to the psychic landscape also provide similar advantages?

What Do We Mean By Soft Skills?

Not only the skills are soft but so are the criteria that define them. However, research on the subject usually shows a few categories in common. Communication skills tend to be at the top. It is one of the great ironies of the information age that a dangerously large proportion of highly skilled professionals is lacking in this group of very fundamental skills. In a technical environment, these non-communicative types often find their way to a supervisory or management position. At this point, the deficiency becomes critical.

Part of the criticism of soft-skills (primarily by those who lack them) is the touchy-feely reputation of the genre. This criticism is quite often associated with relationship building. Putting aside that the actual term relationship building is often abused, it describes a broad collection of human interaction whether it is with colleagues, managers, subordinates, clients or suppliers for example. In spite of almost automatic demand for team players little attention is paid to relationship building. In our skills-based professional environment great care is taken to assemble the right collection of skills while it is hoped that the cohesion of the group will just magically happen. It is not wise to believe in magic.

Another ethereal sounding area is actually a subset of the field, that of Emotional Intelligence and its related index, EQ. Just as with soft skills in general, Emotional Intelligence defies a hard and fast definition, but it definitely covers much of the same zone as soft skills. And no discussion of soft skills would be complete, particularly in this age, without discussing integrity and ethics.

Purdue University has its own list of soft skills, or as they describe them, as *Illustrative Soft Skills*.

Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job. The ideal, of course, is someone strong in both job and personal skills, but as one employer put it in a recent report, Hard Work and Soft Skills, "Don't worry so much about the technical skills. We need you to teach them how to show up on time, how to work in teams, and how to take supervision" (Purdue University, 2002).

Illustrative Soft Skills

Work ethic: A motivating belief that employees owe their employer a full day of diligent work including following their supervisor's instructions.

Courtesy: The habitual use of "please," "thank you," "excuse me," and "may I help you?" in dealing with customers, supervisors, and colleagues.

Teamwork: The ability to share responsibilities, confer with others, honor commitments, help others do their jobs, and seek help when needed.

Self-discipline and self-confidence: The ability to arrange one's own tasks for best performance, to learn from experience, to ask questions and correct mistakes, and to absorb criticism and direction without feeling defeated, resentful, or insulted.

Conformity to prevailing norms: The ability to govern one's dress, grooming, body language, tone of voice, and vocabulary according to the particular culture of the given workplace.

Language proficiency: The ability to speak, read, and write standard English in a business-like way. One may have the "hard" skill of knowing what usage is correct and what is incorrect but lack the "soft" skills of knowing when to use only standard forms and in what tone to do so.

It is an encouraging thought that Purdue titled their article "Soft Skills: A key to employment today" and their arguments in support are laudable. But as will be discussed further, the lack of support and the failure to value soft skills by those who hire and fire are, in large, responsible for the deficiencies in this field.

Communications – Who said what now?

Communications skills are fundamental to business. In “Hiring the right IT staff”, Vivienne Fisher cites communications at the top of the list of desirable soft skills (Fisher, 2003). Not only does it help the IT professional communicate outside the team, the advantages of effective communication extend within the team as well. This view can be applied broadly. It is inconceivable to even imagine a business where there is no contact with someone at some level some time. Staff talk to peers, supervisors talk to staff and report to management. Management talks to the board that is answerable to shareholders. One would hope someone is talking to customers, real and potential. In all of these communications there should be a message. The operative word here is *should*. For a lack of better communications skills, there are too many empty messages bandied about. But each communication should be part of a message continuum. As trite as the concept has become, every organization should have a purpose, mission, or *raison-d’être*, to justify its existence. Apart from idle chit chat during smoke breaks and lunch, no matter how trivial, the communication in a business is part of this continuum. Whether the subject is excess accounts receivable or grease on the assembly line floor, it is all contributing to the operation of the business. And however seemingly inconsequential a communication is, if it is not communicated effectively to the right ears, (and the left ones, too) important actions or decisions may not happen.

But this is more than dealing with inexplicable nuts and bolts found on the shop floor. It is incredible how many companies that, while failing to communicate key initiatives, are genuinely surprised that their staff is failing to deliver. This is reflective of another dimension of poor communications, that of failure to consult. While management is ultimately responsible for the decisions it makes, it just makes sense to consult those who will ultimately be required to execute these decisions. And while it may seem unfair to the underlings, they may share some of the blame for not adequately communicating upward useful information that relates to their work. Just as silence means consent, a failure to report show-stopping issues creates vulnerabilities that may not present themselves until they are real problems.

Emotional Intelligence

This is a growing area of education and its boundaries are hard to define. In his paper, Cherniss (2002) cited the definition of Emotional Intelligence by Salovey and Mayer who also coined the term Emotional Intelligence:

“A form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Roughly it can be said that those in possession of developed emotional intelligence embody what is often referred to as *character*, or in the Yiddish idiom, a *mensh*. (The literal translation of *mensh* is *man*. But to be a *mensh*, is to, in the humblest of terms, be all that a man should be, not in any macho sense but as in being a *good* man.) It includes those abilities to co-exist with your peers, subordinates and leaders. It requires an individual who is confident of one’s abilities and limitations and apologizes for neither. It engenders appropriateness in decision making. It is intertwined with ethics, responsibility and maturity. Because it is hard to measure in a quantifiable sense, a person possessing high EQ (a term coined to reflect some measurability to this capability), is desirable to be around in terms of stability, reliability and the ability to contribute. Persons with a well-developed emotional intelligence are the archetypical team players. They know the difference between being nice and being good. Cherniss also made reference to a number of studies (primarily of Salovey and Mayer) which noted that those of high EQ were not only able to recover from disturbing experiences more quickly (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey & Palfai, 1995.) but who “scored higher in the ability to perceive accurately, understand, and appraise others’ emotions were better able to respond flexibly to changes in their social environments and build supportive social networks” (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999). The attractiveness of these skills in business needs no explanation.

Relationship Building

Virtually any business enterprise is composed of an intricate weave of individual tasks and functions, each being delivered by teams and individuals. Within an organization, each of these functional areas is worthless outside the organizational context. Placing a sales order is of no good if the product can't be delivered. Building a component is pointless if it is not installed in a finished product. But each team or individual has its own challenges in performing respective tasks. As a skill closely related to communication, managing relationships are essential to business. It is the link that integrates all organizational components. As well, it is a necessity when dealing with customers and suppliers.

Relationship building is another one of those areas that some would argue is intangible, hard to measure, and therefore hard to justify. Baker (2003) disputes this position and maintains that relation-building offers many measurable results:

- Managers with large, well-diversified networks get promoted faster and at younger ages.
- People who find jobs through personal contacts find better, more satisfying, better paying jobs.
- People with strong social support networks are less likely to become ill.
- Leaders who take charge of new situations are much more likely to be successful if they build Solid working relationships.
- Strong customer relationships save money. It's much cheaper to keep an old customer than to get a new one.
- Supplier partnerships yield lower costs and better quality products and service.

Furthermore, he maintains that relationship building is essential for success, it is an ethical pursuit in business and most importantly, it can be learned (and therefore taught).

Ethics

It should hardly be necessary to make a case for this one. While there exist a good many of factors affecting the stock market, the recent malaise suffered by North American stock markets is lack of confidence in these markets engendered by the appalling examples of bad ethics. Enron only opened the door to such displays. Tyco, Adelphia, Worldcomm, the recently convicted Martha Stewart, Arthur Andersen are just a few examples in this decade that have demonstrated stunning lack of ethics. What is disturbing in these cases as much as the breach of ethics is perhaps the lack of contrition. What should be noted that even if your internal makeup prevents you from resisting the unethical, your business sense should prevent you from doing the unethical. When you steal billions, eventually someone notices. Where does this hubris come from? In part, it seems like a sense of entitlement. One can be reminded of Leona Helmsley's famous remark, "Only little people pay taxes" (Cyber Nation International, 1999).

The Roots of this Evil

The curious thing about soft skills is that nobody is really against them. After all, they describe a well-rounded approach. In general business doesn't suffer from good communications, relationship building, strategic thinking, you name it. But no one objects to the idea of eating a healthy diet or getting enough exercise. We just let other 'priorities' distract us. It is difficult to discuss how it works in the rest of the world, but certainly in the colonies in North America, the roots of these distractions go back centuries. We had nations to build and hard work to do. This required skills. As the industrial revolution dominated the economy in the 19th and the first part of the 20th century, the demand grew for skilled workers to fill the needs of industry. Social and educational goals were set to feed this need. But by the 1960s, there was a culture shift that began to see liberal values begin to supplant the more traditional Protestant work ethic that was deeply ingrained in the earlier generations that had lived through two world wars and the Korean conflict. This liberalization began to take full force by the time the baby boomers had come of age. The

serious post-war Eisenhower conservatism gave way to the Kennedy-Camelot years. After Kennedy, as the cold war and Viet Nam dominated the political arena, the social agenda took on a life of its own. While the United States from its inception was built on the primacy of the individual, the actual culture that evolved was somewhat different. Having had to pull together through the wars and the depression, fuelled by fears of the red menace, true blue Americanism required an *us or them* conformity. But by the sixties, the boomer generation, raised in relative comfort and prosperity began to embark on a different path. The beat generation quickly gave way to the rock and roll generation. Just as a new liberal sensibility was on the rise, the harsher realities of life would continue to assert themselves. The Vietnam War was arguably the most divisive event in American history creating a political watershed that persists to this day. In the sixties, the bumper stickers read "America – Love It Or Leave It". To this mindset, the home of constitutionally protected free speech was reserved for those espousing the right views. After the September 11th attacks, those expressing concern over the suspension of civil liberties in the name of homeland security were routinely attacked. Critics of the recent war on Iraq have suffered abuse and worse, as have others such as The Dixie Chicks and countries such as Canada, France and Germany. This demand to have unquestioning respect for (U.S.) authority and motives reveals an underlying thread that runs the length and breadth of the fabric of North American business. You will do what you are told because we know what's best. In a recent article, *The Independent* (2003) describes how journalists who ask the wrong questions or question the official White House line are officially shut out. A journalist must face the choice of standing by principles or make the compromise necessary to get some, if not all of the news. Observers of fledgling democracies in Africa have described the perplexity of the new democrats in embracing multi-party democracy. Elected governments were one thing, but why should the losers have a say in the new government? In the U.S. the dominance of the Republicans ruling both houses of the legislature, the Executive Branch and a solid representation of the Judicial Branch in the Supreme Court pitted against a weakened rudderless Democratic party are now poised to create a one-party government (Krugman, 2003). Similarly, in Canada, the only political debate about governance is just how sure a thing is it that Paul Martin will remain the next Prime Minister?

This brings to the fore an anonymous quote. "Why worry about conspiracy when stupidity explains so much?" The narrowing of thought is not likely the result of conspiracy (or stupidity, for that matter) but distraction by the here and now from those things we should worry about. The more worrying thought is that tunnel vision comes in degrees. In our dangerous times, the scope has narrowed to a dangerous pinpoint.

This reflects back on the some recent trends in business and in particular, with business leadership. It is a form of intellectual laziness that we throw all faith in trends, letting healthy scepticism lapse. The tech stock bubble and the cult of the celebrity CEO are just two examples. In earlier decades we witnessed Japanese management principles, which, while effective for the Japanese, failed to really take hold in North America because of fundamental differences in the North American character. But judging by the recession in Japan, it's just as well. The current mantra is Productivity with a capital 'P'. That's capital 'P' productivity because the emphasis is not on an organic understanding of what truly contributes to productivity but rather what directly feeds the indicators of productivity. Workforce reductions may appear to improve productivity in terms of financial performance but it remains to be convincing that these reductions are really fine-tuning production. Instead of removing non-productive staff, reductions take out under-performing product lines and divisions. Improving a firm's performance through accounting is much easier and quicker than patiently rebuilding a workforce capable of delivering on strategy. The problem is, it doesn't work in the long run.

It is a natural human tendency to prefer the simplest solution because it makes sense to use the simplest solution that works. But simple should not be equated with simple-minded. Every organization needs a strategy to survive and flourish. It is naïve to believe that strategy will succeed by leaving the tacticians to their own devices. Without an organization skilled in communications, relationship building and general strategic skills, it's just not going to happen. Even in organizations where there is a clear strategic vision, eschewing the integration of all facets of the organization in such a way that these goals are not only recognized, but chased after at every level,

can stymie good intentions. There is a saying in landscaping that the best time to plant a tree is fifteen years ago. Such is the case with soft skills. Hindsight is 20/20 and it may be of little comfort in a crisis that perhaps, yes, it would have been a good idea to have paid more attention to these skills a few years back. But you don't want to be making the same observation a few years from now. At some point the recognition must be made that you have to invest in the future if you plan to have one. And that investment needs a plan.

The Prescription

While the implementation of a soft skills regimen in an organization requires time, commitment and money, the good news is that it can be relatively easy to integrate it into existing systems. Essentially, soft skills are built and maintained from the recruiting process, through employee assessments and appraisals and of course through training. Nothing, however, is more important than the messages and examples set by an organizations leadership. For soft skills to be successfully promoted and adopted, they must be valued. Recruitment and training are already skills based. With the help of research and, if necessary, consultants, job descriptions should be defined to include the need of demonstrated capability in these skills. This would then be reinforced in the appraisal process. As in most appraisal systems, noted deficiencies would be addressed with training. Highly skilled people who lack people skills have an inherent limitation in their organizational effectiveness. In an organization where such skills are an asset, the unsocialized specialist would no longer be the tail wagging the dog. In other scenarios, an individual's performance may be highly rated, even when anti-organizational behaviour causes a serious detriment to all who work with him, nullifying the benefit of the 'star' performance of the prima donna.

As in any prescription for better business, it ultimately falls on the shoulders of senior management to lead the way. Not only must they support soft skills development, but must also resist the temptation to support activities with short-term payoff at the expense of soft skills development. In other words, stay the course. But just as important, senior management must lead by example. We have just passed through an era of business leaders whose unethical actions have brought ruin to many. A leadership imbued with the values of communication, ethics, relationship building can still be fiercely competitive. A common cliché is to describe a business "firing on all cylinders". Leadership needs to work and communicate with these "cylinders" if it wants to succeed.

Conclusion

Soft skills aren't soft at all. They require broader thinking, a wider focus and more subtlety of execution. But ultimately, they bring a competitive advantage. They lead to a more integrated operation, more effective management at all levels and most importantly, they help integrate strategic goals with all levels of an organization. There is much to be done in the field of soft skills and hard realities. Hopefully, the discussion engendered here will lead to a veritable host of other voices and ultimately, the glory and heraldry of concerted action.

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