

BRUSHING UP ON YOUR SOFT SKILLS

WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS? CAN THEY BE LEARNED? AND HOW CAN THEY HELP YOU ON THE WAY UP THE CAREER LADDER TO SUCCESS? WE PROVIDE A USEFUL INSIGHT.

Soft skills are often dismissed as management psychobabble but in truth some soft skills, such as the ability to communicate well or project manage efficiently, separate all-round team players from the merely technically proficient.

Almost any 'non-technical' skill can be labelled as 'soft' and as a result it is difficult to know where they begin and end. After all, if a good telephone manner is a soft skill then, presumably, so is a courteous discussion around the water cooler with work colleagues. And if that counts, then what about buying a round of drinks at the pub after work?

Of course, it would be ridiculous to make a science of every tiny aspect of working life, but the fact remains that soft skills are a valuable part of the business skills repertoire. The good news is that the best all-round business people are made and not born. Most, if not all, soft skills can be learned. A wealth of training literature has sprung from a realisation among senior management that educating employees to a high standard in soft skills will pay off both from an individual and a corporate perspective.

A short introduction to many of the broadly recognised areas of soft skills, outlined below, will help you decide where your strengths lie, and which areas may need more attention.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS. Some leaders are born, but most are made. Unfortunately, British business does not have a particularly strong track record in creating strong leaders in the workplace. In fact, the UK government has blamed unmotivated workplaces and insufficient leadership education at middle management level for the country's poor production rate. Last year, the Council for Excellence in Management & Leadership concluded that the UK's economic performance was being held back by a shortage of appropriate and practical leadership skills.

In the US, leadership training is widely accepted as essential to career development and staff often begin their leadership-related training at a relatively managerial low level. The UK, by comparison, is lagging behind, but companies such as Tesco are pioneering leadership programmes that give selected staff access to intensive training in the combination of communication, motivation, people and business skills that can produce a leader of the future.

In general, the characteristics of a good leader are:

- a willingness to embrace change;
- a willingness to take risks;
- excellent communication and motivation skills;
- a positive attitude;
- self-discipline;
- sound problem-solving skills; and
- a willingness to look at the broader perspective.

PRESENTATION SKILLS. Many people dread giving a presentation, but if you want to move up the career ladder they are difficult to avoid. But whether the presentation is an informal briefing to your team or a full-blown address to a roomful of delegates, the basic rules are the same. A crucial element of a successful presentation is preparation. As a general rule, each five minutes of talking should take an hour's preparation. If you plan your talk to take half an hour, a day's preparation is quite reasonable. The most important point to remember in approaching any presentation is that the ultimate objective lies not in the transmission but in the reception – the ability to make your message understood and remembered.

The starting point is to decide what your objective is and you can do this by forming a clear statement of intent. Is the purpose of the presentation to attract clients? To evaluate a proposal? Or to motivate a team? Second, you need to identify your audience. What are their aims in attending the presentation? All speeches should have a definite structure: get the audience's attention; establish your theme; create a rapport; present an argument; end effectively.

Once the presentation has begun, use your body language to help get your message across:

- **Eyes** – try to hold your gaze in specific directions for a few seconds at a time.
- **Voice** – slow down and take your time. Think about your breathing and keep it regular.
- **Expression** – don't try too hard, but natural expressions are much better than forced smiles.
- **Appearance** – dress for the audience, not for yourself, but try and be

as comfortable as possible.

- **Manner** – try not to wave your hands about, but gesticulate meaningfully if you feel inclined.

The final impression you make on the audience is the one they will remember. So it is worth planning the ending of your presentation extremely well. As with the beginning, it is necessary to get the audience's attention, which will invariably have wavered. A change of pace, a new visual aid or a fresh idea will help re-ignite their attention and enable you to finish on a high.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT. Project management is less frequently described as a soft skill, often because individual projects rely on specific technical skills. But the ability to manage the overall project from conception to conclusion is not a skill that you are necessarily born with – the general principles can be learned.

The first stage of successful project management is to form a written specification of what is required, which must be agreed by all involved. A clear, defined outline has several benefits: it clears up any potential misunderstandings, exposes any technical and practical details and, most importantly, it forces everyone concerned to read and think about the details. There are a number of potential problem areas in any specification, so look particularly carefully at the global context (if relevant) and whether the work is compatible with others, the time-scale, any external dependencies and the resources available.

Although the specification need not be cast in stone at this stage – indeed, it may simply comprise bullet points with a line or two of explanation – once it is agreed by everyone working on the project, it can be turned into a complete set of tasks.

Again, at this stage, too much detail will hinder, not help. It is advisable to stop when you have a sufficient description of each activity, which gives clear instructions for the person who will actually do the work and gives a reasonable estimate for the total time and effort involved.

Task allocation is not simply a case of handing out the various tasks on your final list to the members of your team. It should also be approached as an opportunity to increase the skills and experience of your team.

Once the project is underway, communication is everything – as a means of monitoring progress, receiving early warning of danger, promoting co-operation and motivating the team through their involvement. Regular reports will be invaluable.

At the end of any project, time should be allocated to review the lessons and information on both the work itself and the management of that work. Often the most useful approach is an open meeting, with open discussion, with the whole team.

TIME MANAGEMENT. Time management and stress management are often bundled together in the same package, probably because failure to do the first results in a necessity to implement the second.

How effectively do you use your time? The easiest way of assessing your time management skills is to use an activity log to evaluate your use of time (and your energy levels at different times of the day). The log will help you understand how much your time is worth and as a result which tasks should be avoided, dropped or delegated.

Once you have established how effectively you use your available time, consider the ways of improving it by:

- doing important work in a designated 'quality time';
- eating properly and resting effectively so that you spend more time performing well;

- running and attending meetings effectively;
- using time spent waiting;
- using travelling time effectively;
- improving reading skills;
- dropping unwanted tasks, and
- using delay effectively.

It is possible to create more time by delegating effectively and control distractions by getting rid of unwanted jobs, blocking unwanted visitors, communicating when you need to be left alone and handling interactions effectively.

TEAMWORK. Team skills are an essential part of corporate culture but, as electronic communication has developed and grown, we are increasingly leading isolated lives. The business world has tried to address this problem in various ways. Team building exercises became fashionable during the 1980s and are still considered by some to be the only effective way to create a team today. But you do not have to be plonked in a field with a compass for a rainy weekend with your work colleagues to help understand and improve your teamwork skills.

The best approach to improving team working skills is to begin with a clear understanding of what working in a team means. So, in general, a good team worker will:

- recognise their own and others' contributions;
- understand the team (and individual) goals and ground rules;
- accept and provide feedback in a constructive and considerate manner;
- be flexible, respect and be open to and supportive of the thoughts, opinions and contributions of others;
- acknowledge people's diversity, individual differences and perspectives;
- lead or support when appropriate – motivating the group in the process – follow through; and
- participate in team activities (both formal and informal).

EFFECTIVE DELEGATION. Arguably, delegation can be used either as a way of passing the buck and heaping failure onto the shoulders of minions, or as an important motivational tool that will train your team and help them realise their full potential. A word of warning, though. Certain functions such as motivation, training, performance reviews and other personnel issues, should never be delegated.

The purpose of delegation is to get the job done by someone else, but to do that you must make sure that:

- the person assigned to the job knows what you want;
- they have the authority to achieve it; and
- they know how to do it.

When you delegate a task, agree upon the criteria and standards by which the performance will be judged. Establish a system to enable the flow of information and make sure you can deal with the lack of control, should it arise.

There are many situations you will come across during your career that will require some form of 'soft skill'. In any situation, it is attention to detail that will lead you through – whether that means remembering to buy the new member of the team a drink in the pub at the end of their first week, or making the best use of the hour spent on a train travelling to an important meeting. Small details, perhaps, but details that could lead you to bigger things in the future. ■