

The Soft Side is the Hard Part

It is common knowledge that businesses look at hard costs, technical skills, and the bottom line long before paying attention to the people issues- often called "the softer side" of business. I've yet to discover why companies don't put people issues at the top of their priority list- but then, if they did, I probably wouldn't have any work 😊

It became obvious to me decades ago, that what seemed so blindingly obvious to me was not obvious to business leaders or managers. **Only when people were experiencing difficulties or presenting challenges, did managers or business owners notice that people concerns were essential to their well-functioning company.** When people were just doing their jobs, they seemed to fade into the background. (The squeaky wheel gets the grease). Those of us who focus on people strategies pay careful attention to this phenomenon/practice. The well-being of any company depends on the well-being of its employees. Makes common sense, doesn't it? (This is a truism in our families as well)

In more recent years, I would say perhaps maybe the last decade, Human Resources has played a much bigger role in business, and have what many refer to as "a seat at the table" with the CEO, COO, CFO, and maybe CIO. Human Resources tended to be seen and treated as "the underwear" of the organization. You needed to have it- it would be unthinkable not to- but only if something went wrong, did it seem to get much attention.

Most all of us have learned the hard way that relationships are the fabric of any organization. Knowing how to communicate well, manage conflict, have courageous conversations and navigate relationships with our boss, our direct reports and our peers are the keys to success in any organization- from the smallest family business to the largest corporation.

I often tell my clients that this work is not rocket science, but because it's done well so rarely, it looks like rocket science when it's done well. Last year, I was brought in to meet with a manager of one of my corporate clients. She was highly valued, but was being demanding and pushy with one of the company's partners, because she was being passed over to replace her boss. Naturally, her very behavior was exemplary of why she wasn't being considered seriously. I explained what I did as a business coach. Her response was "isn't that what a good manager does?" and I replied, "Absolutely- in the perfect world that is exactly what a good manager does- develop and coach their employees. Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect

world." So she agreed hesitantly to work with me for a month, to develop more self-awareness and professional finesse in achieving her professional goals. Three months later she was promoted to the Director position in her company.

So, what is known as soft skills often become the hardest part of business- because people are messy beings- and very labor intensive. Human beings are not pieces of machinery that can be manipulated to suit the company's needs. Human beings also have a life outside of work which they bring with them to the office. I used to have a New Yorker cartoon on my refrigerator that showed two men sitting across the desk from one another. The boss says to what must be his employee, ***"It has come to my attention that you have a life"***. Somehow, this reality is lost on many a business.

I developed a leadership training program for several of my clients that address some of the valuable people skills that can enhance professional success. Throughout my career of three decades- the one common theme regardless of the kind of company- manufacturing, banking, healthcare, advertising or professional services- has been the difficulty for people to communicate their thoughts and feelings in a healthy way.

Great leaders are facile communicators- we need only look at President Obama. The ability to strengthen relationships- be it your co-workers or your customers- is a skill worth growing. Some people are born charmers, easily building relationships wherever they go, with humor, curiosity and enjoyment of others. However, it is absolutely possible to develop better listening skills. Practicing better communication skills can and does create improvement in your personal and professional relationships, and promote more successful work experiences.

Here are six workshop session topics I've developed for several clients:

1. **Professional Communication, Collaboration and Finesse**- learning how to find the time, place, and appropriate language to communicate both information as well as feedback to clients, co-workers, and boss as well as learning the critical nuance and professional polish necessary in reading and negotiating challenging terrain with clients and co-workers. (Why paying attention and listening well are so critical)

2. **Client relations development and engagement**- Learning sensitivity to customer issues, and managing internal and external customer expectations and relationships, including managing your boss and your client's perceptions.
3. **Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Social Intelligence Development**-learning the art of EQ and SQ and its powerful impact on all professional relationships, including developing self-awareness and reflection.
4. **Professional success strategies: Learning better strategic and assertiveness behaviors** that serve your best personal and professional objectives, including learning how to take initiative and be more proactive and courageous in all professional relationships. (e.g. handling conflict in a healthier way- can you really afford not to?)
5. **Professionalism**: Learning how to practice business etiquette and maintain professional demeanor in a casual work environment that tends to foster casual behavior. Remembering to treat co-workers, bosses and clients with professional respect in all communications is essential, because doing less tarnishes your reputation, regardless of how friendly you feel towards these individuals.
6. **Your Value Proposition**: Identifying your own value proposition for R/T, and more globally, so you are continuously upgrading your experience and value to remain a valuable asset to your company. Nobody is hired or keeps a job because they need a job- but rather because your company sees your value to the team in achieving its business goals. Forget or ignore this truth at your own peril.

In summary, the soft side of business is the hardest part because it was gotten short shrift over the past many decades. It's difficult to track improved people skills to the bottom line- though one can make the case that improved customers relationships absolutely contributes to the bottom line. My contention is that individuals need to make it their business to grow these skills, since it's doubtful that many companies will invest in developing professional communication and finesse, particularly in these tough economic times. If you want to grow your own leadership role, it is essential to develop the professional polish commensurate with your technical skills. Growing your own people, department or team in these ways is the gift that keeps on giving.