

Sharpen Your Tools

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There is Nothing Soft About Soft Skills

What the best do and the rest don't

When leaders describe their best employees, they describe their “soft skills” and attributes. For example, “They are passionate, committed, hardworking, positive, great communicators, accountable and have strong selling skills and a true desire to grow and improve.” Yet most leaders still focus on industry experience and knowledge when hiring someone or managing their teams.

Most people in business place too much value on experience and knowledge over attributes and skills. Experience and tenure do not determine one's value; their effort does. People must see themselves as more than vessels of industry knowledge or company experience. People who want to maximize their careers need to spend less effort measuring how much time they have been in a job or industry and more effort measuring how much time they commit to developing themselves and those they lead.

Soft skills determine the success and failure of nearly every employee at almost every level. The best CEOs have better soft skills than others, and the best front-line staff at a fast-food restaurant have better soft skills than the rest. The key to being the best and leading the best is to focus on improving those soft skills and attributes, and spend less time being prideful on product knowledge or other industry tidbits.

Table Stakes

Of course, everyone must be knowledgeable about whatever product or service they sell, serve or represent. And everyone needs to be competent and knowledgeable about their industry and competitors—but those are just table stakes. Obviously, knowing your industry and how to do your job are imperative. However, understanding that is just the beginning.

Soft skills are about going beyond knowledge. They are about one's total contribution and total capacity for growth and success.

Want to be the Best?

If a person wants to be the best, they must prepare and practice like the best. This is why sports analogies are so common in business; because in sports it's all about players' skills and discipline that will determine if they are great, average or bad—just as it is in business.

To be the best person, one must first recognize what the best do. The best are life-long learners, always looking to grow, expand and dig deep. The best demand their leaders to develop them and hold them accountable. The best know they must have a positive attitude even when they don't feel like it. The best know how they talk to peers, customers or the boss means a lot more than what they say. If a person wants to be the best, they must always be working on getting better, no matter how good they already are.

Soft Skills vs. Attributes

Soft skills are things like communication, work ethic, teamwork and adaptability. These skills can be taught to complement a person's attributes. Developing one's soft skills requires discipline and practice. The discipline refers to how one behaves, prepares and works, and the practice is the process through which he or she works to increase performance.

The key is to think like a star athlete who is committed to becoming the best. Decide what would be the best skills and disciplines for yourself and your staff. A great example to which most of us can relate to is customer service at a restaurant. Consider how a restaurant employee should greet guests: What are the skills and attributes of the absolute best? The greeter who rushes to open the door for guests and gives them a warm smile and an enthusiastic welcome? Or a waiter who barely acknowledges a table and then complains about how busy he is when he does?

Also consider who is demonstrating what great service looks like to the team. The leader? Owner? Boss? Great service is something everyone wants and expects but does not always do themselves. Soft skills—not knowledge and experience—determine great customer service.

Don't Say 'Can't'

Many adults get upset when they hear their kids say "I can't." Developing soft skills helps those who can't turn into those who can. If someone doesn't have the soft skills necessary, it's rarely a lack of true skill but more often a lack of will. To be great, a person must have the will and desire to be great. Then, and only then, can they learn the necessary skills.

Develop a Practice Program

No matter whether it is little league sports or professional sports or even hobbies, to get better one must practice. The same is true in business. Leaders must develop a consistent practice program that includes weekly group practice sessions and daily individual practice sessions.

The more a person practices, the better they become. The goal is to turn the discipline into a habit. Create a habit to be better at the stuff that matters: the soft skills.

The key to being the best employee who everyone wants to hire or the best leader everybody wants to learn from is not about industry knowledge and experience. It's about the commitment to making people better and being the best version of yourself. Soft skills are anything but soft: They are the hard differences that make organizations great.

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