

What Did I Say? Soft skills matter

Written by Julie Desmond
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Your coworker stomps out of the room. You look at the group and ask, “What did I say?” It is not what you said that bothered someone... it is how you said it. Hard skills are the measurable skills people engage in to perform their everyday tasks; soft skills are the attitudes and approach people take to communicating and accomplishing things. Hard skills like counting, measuring, typing are trainable. Soft skills are more engrained and take real effort to teach.

Do your soft skills need work? Answer true or false to the following statements to find out:

- I am often misunderstood.
- No one around here does anything right.
- I need to apologize frequently.
- I am always in the dog house.

If you answered True to one or more of these statements, you probably could benefit from a brush up course in soft skills. Etiquette, self-esteem, flexibility and handling criticism are soft skills hot spots where a little attention can make a big difference.

Etiquette, manners, is learned beginning in childhood. Please and thank you are good starting points; cleaning up after yourself or pushing chairs in and hitting the lights as you leave a conference room, show your respect. If you need to teach a coworker some manners, lead from the front by setting a strong and consistent example.

Self-esteem? What are we, a bunch of little girls? Motivational speaker and sales person extraordinaire, Zig Ziglar, says, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Try this exercise: before a meeting, while people are getting settled and getting their technology to work, ask someone how he or she is doing today. Or ask specifically

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about a project they're involved in. They might be suspicious at first, but will quickly understand you are simply interested.

Or, on a Monday, ask someone how their weekend was. You might think you don't really care how their weekend was. But you might hear something interesting and your coworker will feel slightly more connected with you than he or she did before. Start caring when the stakes are low, so you will have a relationship in place when challenges arise. By the way, try not to be creepy; friendly will do.

Flexibility speaks for itself. Choose your battles. You don't always have to win. Flexibility in how you approach people helps, too. Not everyone is like you (or me), thankfully.

Does criticism feel like a barrage of bullets coming at you that you didn't ask for and don't deserve? Why is everybody always picking on you? Here's news: they are not. It just feels that way. The best way to deal with criticism is to deal with the comment itself, not the person it came from. Don't shoot the messenger, you know? Allow yourself time to think before responding. How would you feel if you were in the other person's shoes? Would the analysis seem fair? Is there a misunderstanding that you need to iron out? If someone bothered to share a criticism with you, why? What needs to change?

Soft skills matter because the world is wide and people come from many different directions. When we work closely together, how we behave at work sometimes matters far more than how we perform.

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