Soft Skills: Ladder to Success

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1. INTRODUCTION

To put soft skills as a ladder to success, let us go back to the ages of Mahabhharata, to the turn of the century when family members sat together at meals and shared number of activities throughout the day where they learned to partake in each others joys and achievements, understood disappointments and agonies, effectively communicated and understood each others feelings and their impact on others. They understood the importance of people related skills at that time also. However, for success analytical and logical capabilities were the main focus.

Over the years, things have changed. Now, technology has invaded in every sphere. Morning tea and dinners are spent over by television or Internet. Now real communication has given way to virtual communication, what is affected most is emotional satisfaction and enrichment of people. As joint families are giving way to nuclear families, companies and organizations are merging to become multinationals. The world is becoming more and more complex as fusion is at the core of the society. There is a change in the wind. Now, for success hard skills needs intimate support from soft skills.

2. SOFT SKILLS DEFINED

Think about Soft Skills and the most common words that come to mind are courtesy, a little tact, patience, understanding, kindness and good manners – the list is endless.

Soft Skills can be defined as:

- A set of skills that influence how we interact with each other.
- The ability of influencing human behavior positively.
- The expertise of selling your ideas, hopes, dreams to others.
- Treating individuals not as commodities, but as individuals with head and hearts and with their own strengths and weaknesses.

Let us know it better with the help of example. Imagine it is the foundation day of the institute, an important event for any institute. It was announced by the head of the institute that everyone have to be present and no leave will be granted to anyone but it happened so that the peon and one of the faculty member due to some genuine reasons wanted a leave for the same day.

Peon, instead of applying for the leave went personally to the head of the institute and very apologetically asked for the leave giving the reason that he has to celebrate his grandsons first birthday and all arrangements have been made. In fact, he also invited him to come and bless the child. In contrast consider the behaviour of a faculty who wanted a leave to celebrate his 25th marriage anniversary. He directly applied for the leave and refused to give any explanations on asking. The result was that the leave was granted to peon but not to the faculty. Reason was former was granted leave only because of his ability to convince others by using soft skills whereas the later being technically sound did not get the leave because he lacked it. Hence it can be said that soft skills are those set of skills that make you user friendly to the context under consideration.

3. THE HARD CASE OF SOFT SKILLS

Factors like qualification, education, technical skills, training, opportunities and lucky breaks certainly contribute to one’s success. But they are not enough. Success whether, at individual or group level, at work place or home, and in any other sphere is much more than mere achievement of an objective. On the way to success one should take care not to loose ones family, love and affection of friends, the concern of colleagues, respect from subordinates and appreciation from seniors. To be able to enjoy success it is important to have the proximity of satisfied, happy and cooperative people. But the question arises how? The answer is soft skills.

People glue into the system because of Soft Skills. A little tact, understanding, courtesy can turn failure of individuals into success. Moreover, whenever and wherever we work, world does not operate in ideal conditions. There will be always situations where classroom theory is at best left behind. It is in such situation soft skills help people to go ahead. It is also said that knowledge skills can give you a break, but it is soft skill that enhances your smooth sailing through that break.

Consider Vinod, a Software Engineer of a government organization, who is aggressive, energetic, creative and
one of the most active members in projects. He is technically brilliant but has some concerns. His team members not prefer to come to him for solutions and go to less capable people instead. His project manager does not seem to be very warm to him either. People are not very cooperative to him in any endeavor. This is a typical scenario of any organization where an employee suffers from lack of interpersonal skills. Vinod lacks the soft skill competencies that would enable him to work more effectively as part of a team.

To make it more clear at group level, let us imagine the case of two teams having similar work but contrasting nature. Teams ‘X’, team members are unfriendly, lack enthusiasm and work only to better their lot. The atmosphere is gloomy. The work is extended with dwindling efficiency and overall results are discouraging. Teams ‘Y’, the team members are friendly and work as one good well knit family. They all work for the attainment of one common goal. The atmosphere is cheerful, and morale is high. Naturally the results are encouraging. The basic difference in ‘X’ and a ‘Y’ team is obvious. What is lacking in Team ‘X’ is in abundance in Team ‘Y’ and it is nothing but ‘Soft Skills’.

Research has shown that the higher the person rises in the ranks, soft skills are the most important to his success, because technical skills are not sufficient when it comes to progressing up the ladder. In a research conducted at Center for Creative Leadership, it was found that about a two third of senior executive derail or plateau at some time, most often due to inability to build a team. Because whether one is gold medalist or an average performer, what distinguishes him/her is how he/she applies talent in the day to day activities, making things better for the organization. Here is where soft skills come into action and play a very useful role.

4. SOFT SKILLS – ASSET OR LIABILITY

Soft Skills can be an asset or liability. It depends on us how we see it and respond to any situation.

Before we go ahead let us consider the case of two senior colleagues Mr. Kapoor and Mr. Bansal, working at same level in an IT company. Mr. Kapoor was leading a presentation to client, and the information was weak and disorganized and his team could not satisfy the clients. On that particular day Mr. Bansal was not part of the presenting team, he was simply observing. He was as surprised as clients at Mr. Kapoor’s poor performance. After clients left Mr. Bansal asked Mr. Kapoor what happened? Mr. Kapoor burst out at him defensively, “you are not my boss, so don’t try to be so, you always try to insult me, no matter what I do”. Mr. Kapoor continued to shout at Mr. Bansal and his anger was increasing. Each time Mr. Bansal spoke, Mr. Kapoor tried to interrupt him with threats. Initially, Mr. Bansal tried to remain reasonable but when Mr. Kapoor did not wind down, the exchange between the two grew worse. They broke their relationship thereafter.

Many individuals like this broke up their friendship and partnership, loose their jobs, face setbacks and failure by tackling situations badly. Most of them would have never arose if the people involved would have treated each other with courtesy, kindness and consideration.

If soft skill is such an asset, why it is so uncommon? The blunt reason is that we are born self-centered. We are overtly concerned with our own wishes, anxieties, and needs. Soft Skills require us to place other person’s concerns on a level with our own. This necessarily calls for a sense of self-awareness, but it is easier said than done. Soft Skills is not which can be learned from books or training, it exists in all of us. It is only that we do not pay attention to it quite often because we allow left part of the brain to dominate our lives. Possibly hard skills influence our decision so much that soft skill is not paid any attention.

5. HOW SOFT SKILLS LEAD TO SUCCESS?

In the age of interdependence success is not possible without having the right set of behaviour and traits which are the upshot of Soft Skills. There are various set of behaviors that are augmented with soft skills and provide a way to success. Some of them are:

5.1 Show Genuine Concern and Courtesy

It is important to remember that how you say something often counts more than what you say. “If you don’t vacate a room for me in half an hour. I will be forced to call up higher authorities”, phrases like this turn up the heat in all conversations, but this does not help us to reach to the goal, we create enemies instead. So next time when you want to snap at someone “Stop interrupting me” try this. “Can you hold for a minute, I want to finish before I loose my train of thoughts”.

5.2 Give Strokes

People think it is hypocritical to thank people for doing job, which they are traditionally or morally supposed to do, or for which they are paid. It is their privilege to think so. But consider how much pleasure one will be able to give one’s clerk for thanking him for doing daily routine official work. It will make him feel better.

5.3 Appreciate, Praise and Recognise

We can make almost every one feel happy by genuine appreciation and concern. But what we do is just the opposite. We are very miser in appreciating others.

Let us see the case of Mohit, employed in a multinational company. He worked very hard to execute a project in time. When others went home, he continued to spend late hours in office to beat the deadlines. Eventually the project was completed on schedule and everyone in the office was happy. His immediate boss Mr Mehta knew all about Mohit’s outstanding contribution. He didn’t express recognition of Mohit’s dedication even once. As a result Mohit got disheartened and stopped taking interest in further endeavors. His super senior boss noticed this behavior of Mohit and called him to his chamber. Mohit was trembling with fear as he approached to his chamber, but to his surprise his
super senior boss conveyed high appreciation for his contribution and he also promised increment and promotion to him. As a result his morale got a boost and his super senior boss generous appreciation put fresh enthusiasm to his mind.

5.4 Avoid Arguments

One day I was going down Hapur Road, Meerut with my uncle in a car. Suddenly the scooterist ahead of our car stumbled and fell down. My uncle who was driving the car braked hard and stopped the car. One other car was very close behind ours. Its driver also applied the brakes. Yet his car hit ours with a thud. Our car rear bumper got dented and headlights of other car broke into pieces. My uncle came out of the car to see the situation. The driver of the other car jumped out of the car, agitated and angry. They almost came to a confrontation. Suddenly my uncle smiled and he said courteously and with genuine concern, ‘I do not know who is at fault, but I am sorry your car lights are smashed. His words softened the other driver. He changed his angry expression to an apology for the damage to our car. They shook hands, exchanged visiting cards and parted happily. The encounter, which had threatened to become volatile, got converted into a smooth one. Thanks to the understanding of Soft Skills.

5.5 Change People without Offending Them

A person wrote and rewrote a speech to be delivered at VIP gathering. He showed to his boss for his opinion. It was a poor speech, the boss, if he is impulsive, could have said, “This is a hopeless speech. It will bore people and put them to sleep. It reads like an encyclopedia you ought to know better, if you deliver this speech as written, you will disgrace yourself.” But the boss was sensitive. Here is what he said “This speech is excellent for publication in the local newspaper”. In other words, he praised the text and subtly suggested that it would not do as a speech. The author saw the point and improved his speech.

5.6 Make others Feel Important

If you expect others to buy your plans, ambitions and hopes, make them feel important by making them part of the act. Let us understand it through a case.

In Security section of one of the organization employee were found to have lack of motivation and morale. One day an intelligent officer explained to the employees the importance of the work they do in this section. They were told that it is an important segment of the organization. The lives of so many people are dependent on the quality of their work. Now the worker felt that they belong to the organization and automatically increased their efficiency.

As the scope of this article is limited hence only few set of behavior is covered but the list is endless. If these are followed, which seem to be idealistic in the beginning, will help one to attain success.

6. HOW TO IMPROVE SOFT SKILLS?

Soft Skills can be developed by considering and working along the following lines:

6.1 Being Aware of Oneself

It is the first component of improving soft skills which makes sense when one considers that Delmic oracle gave the advice to ‘know thyself’ thousand of years ago. It means being aware of ones strengths and weaknesses, emotions, needs etc. People with strong self-awareness are neither very critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather they are with ease with themselves and with others. Thus a self aware person will be able to work with a demanding client, he will understand clients impact on his moods, “These trivial demands take us away from real work that needs to be done”. He might explain and he will go one step further and turn arguments into something constructive.

6.2 Be Accountable to Your Own Actions

At every point of time we encounter certain situations wherein we react to them in a typical manner and try locate the causes of our weaknesses to others or to situations. Although we are responsible for our on actions, we try to blame others. So in order to be sensitive, one should first focus on him or her and should accept his or her role in creating difficult situations.

6.3 Emotions and You, Separate Entities

When individuals see themselves in emotionally demanding situations, the situation itself is a learning experience for them. They should ideally view themselves as separate entities from their emotions. Such a separation coupled with intention to deftly handle emotionally demanding situations will lead to enhancement of self.

6.4 Show Empathy for Others Emotions

At any point of time either in personal or professional life, things are easier if you understand others point of view. Showing empathy to others feelings evokes a congenial ambience under such conditions. Though the person one is unrelenting with regard to his or her emotions, an imitation of emotional empathy from one side will undo the detrimental effects of flaring emotions.

7. THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Though people are waking up to the importance of soft skills, a lot still needs to be done at individual or group level, people still give more importance to hard skills. This could be for two reasons, first people have a tendency to postpone things till they become urgent and second the Return of Investment (ROI) of such skills can not be immediately calculated. Besides this there are some other reasons as well, like plane laziness to invest time in people, poor prioritizing and finally being unaware about self. The solution to the problem lies in shifting the focus to the
soft skills from secondary to primary and integrating them as part of ladder to success.

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