

The Value of Soft in a World of Hard

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Once upon a time, in the world of speaking and consulting, not too very long ago in the 20th century, there was an attitude toward “soft” skills, that they were unnecessary, a waste of time, and a dead end in terms of marketing for engagements. Well, things have changed with the turn of the century.

When Daniel Goleman’s transformational book, simply titled, *Emotional Intelligence*, broke through all the best-selling barriers and gave way to a plethora of follow-ups, there was clearly a paradigm shift that affected the world of business around the globe. In the past few years, there seems to be a renaissance of this topic and other soft-skill areas which takes us beyond the tipping point. Now, soft skills are most important, overshadowing their former rival, hard skills.

So what value does this focus on soft skills, now more popular than ever, bring to the table? Well, we know that nothing gets done, no matter how important the “hard” skills may be, if communication between and among people does not go well. Poor communication can undermine the best of technological capabilities.

Here are some of the benefits of soft skills:

1. **Seamless communication** to ensure that projects get done by groups and teams.
2. **Effective persuasion** to resolve conflicts and ideological differences.
3. Ensuring that associates feel **deeply understood** regarding the values about their work, leading to loyalty and devotion to the goals of the organization.
4. A dynamic of **more effective leadership** that makes for a greater probability of bottom-line success.
5. A keener **insight into the human factor** involved in the process of successful business.

How important can emotions be in the workplace, you might ask. Isn’t getting the job done, regardless of your mood, what really matters? Well, guess what. Brain research has revealed to us that it doesn’t take much to increase our stress levels to the point of interfering with the smooth functioning of our brains.

You may have heard of the term, “amygdala hijack” but, in case you haven’t, here’s the headline on it. On each side of our brain is a little structure, about the size of our thumb, called the amygdala. Its primary function is to warn us to get away from any saber-toothed tiger crossing our path. To run, flee, make ourselves scarce. Or—if the animal is smaller than us, and might taste good over the grill—attack it with all the fury we can bring to bear—in other words, fight or flight.

Well, I haven’t come across any saber-toothed tigers lately, except for the occasional photo in a *National Geographic* or a public-TV documentary. They’re kind of scarce these days.

What’s not so scarce, the brain scientists tell us, is that we still experience the fight-or-flight reactions on a daily basis, and at work, no less. You see, it doesn’t take that much to stress us out, they tell us; even social snubs can do it. Here’s a list of what can put us into a state of wanting to fight or get out of Dodge (or wherever your office happens to be):

1. Contdescension or lack of respect
2. A sense of being treated unfairly
3. Lack of appreciation
4. Not being listened to
5. Unrealistic deadlines

Can you relate? As speakers, many of us experience all those 5 on a daily basis. Does our topic always get the respect we think it deserves? Are we always appreciated for what we have to offer? What’s so fair about being compared to other speakers who seem to speak about the same topic, but really don’t? I tell you, we don’t get no respect.

These days, communication trumps all other aspects of business. Over 40 years ago, Marshall McLuhan predicted a global entity with seamless communication across geo-political boundaries. Well, the Internet came along and proved him right. According to Marc Benioff, CEO of Salesforce.com (an entity worth over \$2.5 billion),

“There’s also a level of openness and transparency that we’re not used to ... Organizations and governments who don’t move to that speed and with that transparency will rapidly become obsolete.”

Soft skills, whether communicated electronically or in person, are here to be reckoned with. If you’re still in doubt, here are some stats for you:

- Sanofi-Aventis, an Australian pharmaceutical firm, enjoyed a 12% increase in sales when they trained their sales force in soft skills.
- Insurance agents trained in soft skills, according to the Hay/McBer group, sold policies averaging \$114,000 compared to the average \$54,000 sales figures of their less trained associates.
- At L’Oreal, sales agents with such training sold \$91,370 more than their less-trained counterparts, resulting in a revenue increase of \$2,558,360.

So, sales figures go up with soft-skill training. But what about a topic that so many of us speakers focus on—superior leadership skills?

Well, here are the findings of a study of no less than 64 organizations and their 108 senior leaders and 325 reports: “emotional expressiveness [a soft skill if ever there was one] was strongly related to visionary leadership.”

In another study, a test measuring soft skills was able to distinguish between 51 “high-powered” managers and 51 “regular” ones.

What about another popular topic for speakers—team-building and team performance?

- In a study of several hundred managers across 12 organizations, soft skills were found to be linked to superior performance.
- In another study of more than 300 top-level executives from 15 global companies revealed that “organizational awareness,” another soft skill, distinguished star performers from their less aware colleagues.
- The military is typically associated with hard rather than soft skills. Yet an exploration of the relationship between soft skills and team performance revealed a strong connection between the two.

Here’s the most impressive finding, in my opinion.

- In the U.S. Air Force, recruiters who were tested as high on soft skills were three times as successful as their less aware counterparts. By choosing recruiters who had the soft skills, the Air Force was able to save \$3 million a year, **according to a Government Accounting Office report.**

So, what exactly are these soft skills that make for all this proven success? Well, I’ve discussed this with my friend and fellow speaker, Jim Cathcart. Here’s what we came up with.

Soft skills have to deal with:

1. An **awareness factor**—the ability to read others well, know our own emotional dispositions, and understand the interpersonal dynamics of the business context.
2. A **performance factor**—including presentation skills and the ability to communicate to others that we do actually hear them and recognize their needs.
3. An **outcome factor**—understanding the “core group” through which goals are achieved and identifying those who contribute meaningfully, as well as creating a presence of caring about these individuals and their contributions.

Now that we know what makes up the essence of soft skills, how do we measure them? At three levels:

1. At the **personal level**, tests measuring **emotional intelligence** are very popular.
2. At the **group level**, there are such factors as trust and seamless communication that can be measured in **360-degree** fashion.
3. At the **organizational level**, there are the usual metrics, such as **sales volume**, **bottom-line profits**, and even decreasing figures on turnover.

These days of slow economic recovery, there is a strong interest in innovation as one way of coping with struggling figures. I have formed the opinion that soft skills are an essential aspect of innovation, by offering social support with the following challenges:

1. How to define the meeting's goals
2. How to define the scope and timeline
3. How to prepare the meeting agenda
4. How to assign roles

All these questions can benefit by open communication among the members of a group focusing on innovation. Only by sharing their feelings as well as factual knowledge can the group members enhance their pursuit of those successful options that may eventually work.

According to Klaus Haasis of Stuttgart, Germany, a builder of innovative networks in Europe, the process of successful innovation includes the following:

- **Building up relationships** and linking to each other.
- **Sharing knowledge** and learning from one another
- **Open collaboration** and developing common projects

Distilling his 16 years of experience in constructive innovation process spanning industry, advertising and politics, he sees soft skills as essential, with the importance of:

- **Process** over project
- **Context** over text
- **Dialogue** over discussion (i.e., more listening and understanding)
- **Rule breaking**, which involves overcoming conflict
- **Self-revelation**, based on building trust
- **"No tables,"** meaning avoiding that physical barrier so that soft skills can flow more freely when people sit in a circle without tables

So, are soft skills important? Are they marketable? Have they reached a level of importance that is undeniable? Is the Pope Catholic? Well, forget that last one—some may doubt that, based on his latest statements about provocative issues.

But, yes, soft skills are the new hard skills, if that makes sense. We've been able to measure them, their contribution to bottom-line success, and their pervasive presence in such factors as leadership, team performance and even the process of innovation.

So next time someone calls you a softie, as you offer a presentation on leadership, communication or innovation, consider it a compliment.

Sidebar:

How to make a presentation on soft skills:

1. Begin by modeling: Just do it on the platform—yourself, to show how
2. Create a “safe place” for change—without judgment but with support in small groups
3. Distinguish between factual knowing and personal feeling—start with “I feel ...”
4. Tell a personal story about the power of the soft skill—that affected your life
5. Tell another story that reveals your vulnerability—become transparent, for the moment
6. Get consensus from your audience—feedback from small group interaction
7. Model openness to different opinions—engage your audience
8. Offer free consulting and feedback for the following week—give more than expected
9. Demonstrate how soft skills win in the long run—another story opportunity
10. Summarize with practical applications—people smart always win

What soft skills are all about:

1. Interpersonal connection: Share power rather than lording it over others
2. Authenticity: Don't waste energy trying to fake it
3. Matching skills with challenge: Make work meaningful and enjoyable
4. Respecting differences: Avoid stereotyping genders or ethnic groups
5. Adaptability: Go with the flow
6. Accepting failure—as a step to learning: Hold others accountable to learn from errors
7. Emotional intelligence: Acknowledge your emotions and understand others' motivation
8. Taking charge of your life: Become accountable—to yourself and others