

# Focus On Soft Skills: A Leadership Wake-up Call

By Carole Nicolaides

Focus On Soft Skills: A Leadership Wake-up Call

Carole Nicolaides  
carole@progressiveleadership.com

Progressive Leadership <http://www.progressiveleadership.com>

By Carole Nicolaides, Copyright © 2002, All Rights Reserved  
<http://www.progressiveleadership.com>

The rules for succeeding in business are changing daily. Yet people are still asking for the magic formula that contributes to a successful organization. Is it talented, knowledgeable people plus innovative products? That's a great start, but something vital is missing from this equation.

More and more corporations around the world recognize that, in order to gain a competitive advantage, they also need to make sure their people know how to handle themselves at work and how to relate with their customers and peers. From showing empathy and optimism to extreme self-awareness to knowing what's going on around them, these vital competencies are an integral part of a progressive organization. They fall under the umbrella of Emotional Intelligence (EI).

These soft-skills, or emotional intelligence skills, revelations open the door to a lot of discussion. The western civilization and our traditional management theories tend to lead us in the direction of individualistic promotion. They display our strengths rather than the demonstration of our humanness. These ideas have been so tightly woven into our leadership mentality that they can be challenging to break.

Unfortunately, most graduate schools don't teach you how to cultivate your soft skills. While courses such as Business Writing and Public Speaking are offered, I have never seen a course entitled, "The Effective Art of Listening to Your Customer." We live in a society that measures intelligence through quantifiable metrics. A professor will give you good grades once you know XYZ, but he or she will not increase your grade for being able to deal with a difficult situation, showing compassion, or solving an unexpected problem. Yet most compliments that you or your employees receive deal more with the use of soft skills than with your actual knowledge about a particular situation. Most customers appreciate a "willingness to help" and the fact that "she listened to my complaint." The use of these skills is what elevates your organization above the competition.

You don't compete only with products anymore, rather with how well you use your people. Too often we focus on what employees need to "know" when evaluating and hiring them instead of "who they really are." I will illustrate this with an example.

John was promoted to Technical Project Manager at his consulting company. Some people wondered why John had risen to this level of management. His educational level was lower than others in the firm and his degree wasn't in an area that pertained to consulting. However, one of the

strengths that was nowhere on his resume was his ability to be positive in all situations and to naturally motivate people. He was quick to smile and see the positive side of every project. He was generous in praising people and was consistently happy. These were his strengths - his natural attributes. They made up the sum of who John was. These soft skills are just as important as what John knows.

The challenge nowadays is to introduce a program that will allow your leaders to learn and capitalize fast on their soft-skills competencies. Soft skills are important and always have been. It seems we have laid them aside and opted to emphasize too much on expertise and credentials. Let's get back to our values and the basics of good internal and external customer service.

Soft skills are the underlying principles that trademark a company for professionalism and excellent customer service. They provide differentiation between all the cookie-cutter look-alikes and play a vital role in customer loyalty. In today's working environment, where customers and employees are demanding more, instilling the use of soft skills in your team members is something you simply can't survive without.

When it's time to focus on soft-skills training as a tool to improve performance, leadership potential, and bottom line organizational success, consider the following:

1. Start Slowly - Instead of getting a large number of people in a room and preaching to them about their soft skills - move slowly. Introduce the concept with an informative and fun workshop. The program should also be designed to enhance their skills.

2. Involve Your People From the Start - Involve as many employees as you can on the decision to create a program, what to include within the program, and how to maintain the program. People support what they help create. Engage them, give them the possibility to make changes with your training curriculum, do a pilot program with key people, and use the pilot program as an introduction to the group.

3. Hire Expert Help - Coaches and Organizational Consultants are experts in building rapport and establishing the right culture for these initiatives. With the right culture and the appropriate training, managers can continue the task of training and cultivating good relationships.

5. Recognize Individual Achievement - There is so much talk about teamwork today that we forget to emphasize how important it is to praise individual achievement as well. From time to time praise your stars. Recognizing personal contributions to the team is an excellent morale booster.

6. Discover the Group's Soft-Skill Identity - All people are not the same, so their soft skills and strengths are not the same either. Once you know who you have on your team, leverage their strengths and differences because these are the facts that will help distinguish you and your organization from the competition. Illustrate how they can leverage each other's strengths inside the team to develop a new group "identity."

The essence of your business is your people. Making soft-skills development a priority will bring your team to a new level because it focuses directly on them. By allowing the human aspect of your employees to shine through, you are encouraging them to do what comes naturally to them. Don't overlook these all-important skills when evaluating areas of improvement for your team. Find a way to incorporate soft skills into your leadership development programs and see results immediately.

Carole Nicolaidis is President and Executive Coach of Progressive Leadership Inc. who thrives on helping individuals and organizations achieve results by coaching them on how to discover and build upon their strengths and cultivate their soft-skill set. Visit <http://www.progressiveleadership.com> for

more info & subscribe to her FREE Ezine.

[Get-Articles.com : 1000's of reprintable business and internet marketing-related articles.](#)

[Submit your article for reprint.](#)