

Facilitating the Acquisition of Soft Skills Through Training

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Acquisition of managerial soft skills through training is essential and leads to better performing managers. Organizations recruiting managers would be encouraged to look beyond traditional skill-based training. The success and performance of managers depend not only on effective job-based training, but also on soft skills development. This paper offers insights into the ability to accurately assess the effectiveness of training in the soft skills arena. Contrary to the mainstream literature that focuses on hard skill development through training sessions, this paper draws attention to the capacity of training sessions to foster the soft skills required to be a competent manager.

Introduction

The value of soft skills has been highlighted by a growing body of research and evidence over the past three decades. Soft skills have become an essential quality for managers to effectively manage their team and job in the corporate world irrespective of the sector. Along with professional qualification and domain knowledge, today's professionals need to possess a high soft skills quotient in order to succeed in this competitive era (Jessy, 2009). Hard skills contribute to only 15% of one's success, while the remaining 85% is contributed by soft skills (Watts and Watts, 2008). Research shows that individuals with good interpersonal and self-management abilities have better career success and contribute far more to their organizations rather than people with only excellent technical skills (Bush, 2012).

According to Parente *et al.* (2012), the complexity of skill development, regardless of how it is done, is readily evident when it is recognized that not only is there a set of traditional management skills (so-called 'hard skills', e.g., planning, decision-making and problem-solving) that managers must possess, but that managers also need a set of soft skills (e.g., leadership, motivation and conflict resolution) in order to be effective (McManus, 1995; Halfhill and Nielsen, 2007; and Lyons, 2007). In addition, recent trends have seen an increasing emphasis being placed on teams to tap into higher levels of diversity. These pressures in turn require managers to acquire experience and skills

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in working and managing in a team environment (Michalisin *et al.*, 2004a) and in effectively developing and utilizing more diverse workforce (Roberson and Park, 2007; and Qin *et al.*, 2009).

It is often claimed that many crucial management skills can be taught and management perspectives may be developed and enhanced through education (Doh, 2003; and Haro and Turgut, 2012) and training. Some organizations invest a great deal of time and effort in elaborate training programs designed to improve the soft skills.

Regardless of this, many businesses continue to underinvest in soft skills training. In spite of such great relevance of soft skills in the present corporate world, some organizations are reluctant to provide concrete training on developing soft skills or are yet to introduce soft skills in their training programs. There is a common misconception that capabilities like interpersonal communications, leadership, or coping with change are innate and cannot be taught or learnt (Bush, 2012). The other reason for neglecting such soft skill-based training is the difficulty in measuring the results. It is easier to measure tangible results on hard skills training than it is to track the benefits of teaching someone to be a better manager and leader.

Research shows that soft skills can indeed be effectively learned, and studies have identified a number of best practices for teaching them (Bush, 2012). By making soft skills a priority, organizations can drive success, growth, and greater return on their training investment.

No organization can afford to employ an underperforming manager who fails to add significant value to the business (Garwood, 2012). For a company's survival and long-term economic competitiveness, effective managers with apt soft skills are essential who can increase productivity and profit.

Soft Managerial Skills

Skills such as analysis, critical thinking and problem-solving have been labeled as traditional management or 'hard' skills (Poulet, 1988; Michalisin *et al.*, 2004b; and Whetten and Cameron, 2007), growing out of a traditional list of managerial requirements which include skills such as planning, organizing and controlling (Robbins and Hunsaker, 2000). These hard skills describe what a manager can do in direct business issues (i.e., technical knowledge), how to do it (i.e., competencies), and why he/she does it (i.e., values, motives, and unconscious dispositions). We classify these essential skills as either technical or conceptual. Managers need certain analytic and decision-making skills to deal with a dynamic business environment (Haro and Turgut, 2012).

If using the analytical side of decision making is regarded as drawing on hard skills, then using the anthropological side of decision making draws on soft skills (Haro and Turgut, 2012). Juxtaposed against these traditional or hard skills are managerial responsibilities such as the motivation of subordinates and influencing people (Castelli, 2008)—what Katz (1974) referred to as human skills. Soft skills include providing clear

communication and meaningful feedback, resolving and/or managing conflicts, understanding human behavior in group settings (Stevens and Campion, 1994; Salton, 2000; Rapert *et al.*, 2002; and Halfhill and Nielsen, 2007), mentoring subordinates (Bryant, 2005), developing cohesive top management teams which have been shown to yield better firm performance (Michalisin *et al.*, 2004a) and facilitating the sharing of information and knowledge, which is increasingly important in this age of competitive advantage (Chen and Barnes, 2006; and Nik *et al.*, 2009). Soft skills are behavioral competencies, also known as interpersonal skills or people skills. Soft skills primarily are defined as interpersonal, intellectual, and communication skills (Bosley, 2007). In general, however, such soft skills include the following (Bosley, 2007):

- Interpersonal: diplomacy, leadership, ethics (philosophical and behavioral), teamwork, collaboration and understanding diverse cultures;
- Intellectual: problem solving, decision making, critical thinking, and analytical reasoning; and
- Communication: writing, speaking, listening, reading (literacy), and cross-cultural communication.

A key distinction between hard and soft skills is that hard skills tend to be easier to identify and influence and are more tangible. Soft skills are more ambiguous and are harder to identify or assess via standard questionnaire-type instruments (Mullen, 1997).

Competent managers need to have a deeper understanding of human beings, especially their employees, customers and stakeholders (Mintzberg, 1992). Soft (or people) skills help us to understand what a manager can do in indirect business issues (i.e., social knowledge), how a manager can handle them (i.e., group process), and why a manager feels the need to manage them (i.e., emotional intelligence).

Acquisition of Soft Managerial Skills Through Training

These days relying only on business schools or management education training does not serve the purpose. There is a significant difference between training and education. Education typically takes place in a classroom and involves a transfer of knowledge through the use of formal methods such as lectures and directed discussion (Hughey and Mussnug, 1997). Managers with management degree do not necessarily get polished with soft managerial skills, as the curriculum focuses more on developing technical aspects and knowledge. Also, the school environment does not support the basic need of developing such skills. Training, on the other hand, typically entails personal involvement, commitment and experiential gains. It involves learning by doing. The corporate setting compels and drives such managers with reasonable people skills to get trained. Also, the workplace is the best place for such managers to acquire hands-on people skills through training, rather than just learning it in the classroom.

Currently, most researchers working on managerial competencies would agree that there are cognitive, interpersonal, personal and motivational competencies which, under

certain conditions, differentiate the more effective from the less effective managers (see Cockerill *et al.*, 1995; and Hunt and Baruch, 2003). To enable such less effective managers as better managers, the organizations or Human Resources (HR) department should take the decision of training them on soft managerial skill development. Also, it is essential to focus on training programs that do not delve into the affective domain. The purpose of such training is to enhance behaviors, not attitudes. According to Hughey and Mussnug (1997), keeping the training objectives focused on skills and competencies leads to attitudinal changes.

Soft skills training commands a large percentage of expenditure on training in organizations and is the focus of most leadership (Crosbie, 2005) and management development. But when it comes to soft skills training to managers, especially when limited financial resources are available, many companies seem to favor a more cost-sensitive approach or completely neglect training. Many departments are investing their increasingly restricted training budgets in areas that sound more impressive (Garwood, 2012). Ironically, many individuals and their managers hope the acquisition of soft skills can be achieved through reading an interesting book or attending a motivating keynote presentation (Crosbie, 2005). But neglecting training on soft skills that are essential to new or promoted managers would be an irresponsible and shortsighted action on the part of the company.

The training provided does not have to be costly and focusing on management theory, but should aim to build the essential skills and confidence in performance management, managing difficult conversations, effective team meetings, delegation and communication skills. When employers cut their training budgets to save money, they often fail to appreciate the resulting cost in poor management and decline in productivity, as good managers are the most cost-effective resource that an organization has (Garwood, 2012).

Providing training is essential and trainers and programs are available in abundance. But it is also important to evaluate the desired outcomes from these trainings. It is easier to see an immediate, tangible result from training someone to use a new software program or master a new technical skill than it is to track the benefits of teaching someone to be a better manager and leader (Bush, 2012). It is important to remember that training soft managerial skills should only involve tangible, hands-on skills and observable behaviors. Training goals and objectives should not involve feelings and emotions.

According to Hughey and Mussnug (1997), most soft skills trainings are never put into actual practice—i.e., the information covered in these types of training sessions is almost never utilized in concrete on-the-job situations. For example, a lot of companies today are conducting ‘team’ training without first defining what the desired outcomes of the training are, or how the teams should be able to function at the conclusion of the training program. These kinds of training and structured exercises are good soft skills development programs and stress-relievers, but they should never be allowed to become a primary emphasis. Role playing, games and simulations help to present the ideas in a more palpable context, but they seldom precipitate the acquisition of useful

skills. Those who attend such training rarely get a real 'feel' for how to implement what is presented in a realistic context.

Hence, training on the following combination of soft managerial skills leads to better managers and good management of work, team and business.

Self-Awareness

There are managers who are newly promoted or who feel threatened by junior members of staff or other colleagues or bosses. It is important for managers to take time to give honest consideration to their own strengths and weaknesses. They need to be trained on how their language and behavior affect others and identify their stress triggers and strongest motivators. The training should provide an insight into the behavioral style of others; only then can the managers be in a better position to manage the team more effectively. Managers also need to be trained on the old-fashioned and under-used skills of listening to employees, colleagues, customers; questioning and enquiring on doubts and developments and finally on observation skills.

Communication

Communication skills are rarely taught, but they underpin everything that a manager does. Whether it is presenting a new strategy, motivating a team, managing performance appraisals or chairing meetings, managers will succeed or fail based on their ability to communicate well with a variety of people in a range of situations (Garwood, 2012). It is all too easy to use technology to communicate for us, but an e-mail or text message is no substitute for face-to-face discussion. Managing meetings, keeping the focus and making them meaningful are difficult skills to master and definitely improve with experience. It can also be greatly enhanced with a little training—but is an area that is rarely invested in by many businesses.

Organizational Skills

Managers can be promoted for a range of reasons: their knowledge of the industry; a proven track record; great sales figures; or simply as a reward for time served. However, none of these qualities or achievements automatically means that they are great organizers. The job of a manager inevitably becomes more complex as incumbents immediately become responsible for others—which in turn means that they need to be able to organize not only their own time and processes, but also those of others. To be effective, managers need to become comfortable with time management, planning and the consistent application of systems and business processes. This does not come naturally to everyone, hence training on these areas ensures that standards are consistently applied and managers possess effective organizational skills.

Conclusion

Training on soft skill development is criticized for being unable to develop better competent managers. Today's business is very complex and requires managers with

sophisticated skills. Managers have a lot riding on their shoulders and a lot is expected of them. They need to be given the tools and training to carry out their role effectively. Experience-based training is a very fruitful method for training managers. What is essential from such training is that managers are able to actually use what they have learned. Successful employee training programs result from thoughtful and serious planning. A great deal of attention must be paid to detail and desired outcomes. A manager past qualification and experience does not guarantee great soft managerial skills. To acquire these or polish them for effectively managing team work and business, requires them to undergo training that facilitates better competent managers.☉

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