

## Why Soft Skills Are Hard

Creating a Productive Work Environment  
By Marsha Petrie Sue, MBA

Soft skills training is frequently deleted from organizations' budgets without even a second thought. This is a painful reality for exceptional leaders because they know the positive outcomes derived from "soft skill" training. We must take a new look at this and dump the old moniker of "no value to investment."

Cost:

Depending on whether the organization training its employees to sharpen soft skills considers it an investment or a cost. Here's the rub: Investment firms are looking at training as a reason to encourage investors to put their money in firms. How will your company do? Laurie Bassi, former professor of economics at Georgetown and VP of the American Society for Training & Development, has a simple solution: require companies to report how much they invest in their employees. They already make disclosures for research and development. Why not for training?

The reason? Maria Sullivan, VP for CDW (computer sales), says learning and development to create highly trained employees help the company stand out. To judge by CDW's stock price, the training investment is paying off. In the past five years the stock market has gone down, but CDQ shares are up 50%.

Stock market pressure isn't the only reason firms don't spend more on training, Bassi acknowledges. Many decision makers aren't convinced training is productive or they worry workers will leave once they get trained.

These skeptics get two answers. Statistic-filled studies find that training pays off. People like Laurie Bassi are putting their money where the facts are. They invest in companies that invest heavily in employee training.

This is laborious work, as most companies do not have this information readily available. She has found the typical firm investing 2% of payroll in training and she looks for firms that double that. The results on her portfolio are stunning, with 24% return a year for the two years since she founded Human Capital Portfolio.

You cannot outperform your own self-definition.

The soft skills that reduce turnover, improve outcomes and build profitability include:

1. Communication Skills – developing flexibility to others' styles. Consideration: provide training of leaders and employees to magnify the importance of personal responsibility by increasing self-awareness.
2. Conflict Management – learning to use conflict as a brainstorming and creativity tool. Consideration: create mentoring and coaching opportunities for individuals struggling with interpersonal skills.
3. Relationship Building – strengthening every person's diverse connections. Consideration: walk your talk whether at work or at home to become a better role model in relationship development.
4. Team Building – building teams that function through chaos, too much to do and not enough time. Consideration: provide team-building activities whether through assessment tools, buying a cake for celebration or having a simple potluck.
5. Empathetic Listening Skills – Hearing the message from every person and keeping an open mind. Consideration: learn to put your own thoughts aside, stop thinking about what you will say next and really hear what the concerns of the other person.
6. Building Self-Awareness – understanding individual preferences to heighten flexibility in all situations. Consideration: Develop the attitude of a life-long learner and read about human behavior. This is guaranteed to help you both personally and professionally.

Having queried thousands of people in all types of organizations, I have found these six

elements to be the resounding issues that all employees want to improve. Many consider these soft skills. If, as Daniel Goleman says, they do contribute to the financial strength of the organization, it becomes prudent to increase training budgets and engage every person in a “winning together” focus. The term of becoming a “learning organization” has never been more important.

More training = more opportunity.

Training is no longer a pure operating expense. It is an investment to help leaders and employees hone their soft skills. Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence at Work says 10% of our success is because of cognitive, learned skills whereas 90% is because of our emotional quotient [EQ].

How do you rank in the Training Department? Do you invest in your own learning? Do you uncover goals of others and help them set a plan for their next educational opportunity? Does your company support a training perspective? Congratulations if the answer is yes. If not, what are you going to do? What suggestions will you make? The excuse of “I have no control” no longer works. No matter what your position, level, or experience, you are the one who must take the first step. Soft skills are hard!

All wisdom is plagiarism. Only stupidity is original.

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