



Soft Skills of Leadership

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Corporate leaders need to know their business, know their customers, and have the ability to execute a strategy successfully. And leaders need to be especially agile to stay current with their business as the pace of change has accelerated so dramatically. Great leadership also requires not only understanding customers' current needs, but accurately predicting future needs as well. This knowledge of business and customers becomes relevant only when leaders also have the ability to execute a strategy that drives growth.

In a recent study by the Institute for Corporate Productivity in partnership with the American Management Association, some 600 employees working at the manager level or above in a wide range of industries were asked to pick from a list of 14 leadership competencies. Not surprisingly, the three items mentioned above were at the top of the list. The three that followed, however, may surprise you:

- Building good relationships
- Having good communication skills
- Creating an environment of trust and respect

These three competencies were cited more frequently than the ability to develop a strategy or knowing how to align the organization well. The technical skills of business are as important as ever, but unless they are coupled with these other competencies, leaders cannot be nearly as effective. So what does this tell us about the nature of these so-called soft skills?

The context for leadership has changed dramatically in the last five years. Customers are harder to find and harder to keep, profit margins are slimmer, and many employees live with anxiety, stressed by overwork and job insecurity. As a result, corporations require leaders who know how to handle themselves in this complex environment. This means demonstrating empathy to others. It means actively listening so that they really hear what is being said even when it conflicts with what they want to hear. It means having extreme self-awareness. These soft skill competencies often fall under the heading of Emotional Intelligence and are important to any progressive organization.



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Building good relationships is especially important because people are obviously the most important element in any business. An ability to really know and relate to others enables leaders to get things done. Strong relationships with employees, suppliers and customers can often be the difference between success and failure. In the same way our personal relationships need care and constant attention, so too do our professional relationships.

Communication skills are one of those things most of us believe we have a talent for. But do we really? Communicating well means more than the ability to write well and feel comfortable with public speaking. The ability to really listen and let others know that you have heard them is important. Leaders also need to share difficult information and explain why decisions were made. This is because unpopular decisions that are fully explained will be perceived more favorably than those that come down without full disclosure. Good communication skills require being a good listener and being articulate and authentic in words and deeds.

To create an environment of trust and respect means many things. First and foremost, it means being approachable and friendly because people trust and respect leaders they like. Balance the need for results with being considerate of other's feelings. Work hard to win people over without misusing your position of power. Make sure that your words match your actions. Use paraphrase to ensure you understand what is being said. And demonstrate support for your people, especially when they make mistakes.

Leadership soft skills will continue to play an increasingly important role as leaders need to do more with less and effectively manage accelerated change while nurturing themselves and their people. A leader's ability to speak clearly and honestly will result in employees who understand and want to step up to the challenge. Authentic transparency is what employees want in their leaders. Creating an environment of trust and respect means a leader actively demonstrates his trust and respect in every interaction with employees, customers, suppliers and shareholders. Soft skills such as these enable leaders to walk their talk and this is fundamental to great leadership.

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