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Soft Skills: A Key to Success

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Abstract

The word soft skill has been hovering round as a buzzword among business and academic community for quite some time. These are the additional or extra skills required by professionals of the 21st century. Soft skills play a vital role for professional success; they help one to excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in this age of information and knowledge. Effective communications and interpersonal skills are crucial to employability and also to compete successfully in this dynamic global environment. It provides people with a conceptual and practical framework in building, developing and managing teams. Not only verbal but non verbal communication also holds the same importance when it comes to inter personal communication. The paper examines the vitality of soft skills with special reference to interpersonal communication and non verbal language for the subsistence of an organization.

Introduction

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Literature Review

Mitchell and Wilson (2007) defined, “Soft Skills include all those skills that are not technical in nature: interpersonal skills of all kinds such as teamwork, conflict resolution, creativity and leadership.” They also list

self-management skills like work ethic, courtesy, teamwork, self-discipline, self-confidence, conformity to prevailing norms, and language proficiency as soft skills.

Glicin and Reanne (1998) carried out a study in which they concluded that the prevalence of soft skills at the workplace determine the female-friendliness and their work culture.

A fundamental definition of soft skills reads like, “the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark each of us to varying degrees.”(Career Focus, 2007)

A survey of 303 employers across the country by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci) in 2010 found a majority of graduates lacked adequate "soft skills" to be employed in the industry. Apart from technical knowhow, the HR team focuses on soft skills of the individual to be recruited at a managerial position. Since individuals holding these positions are required to take business-related decisions, decision-making strength is one of the important competencies looked for. Rapid changes in economy demand prospective candidates to show agility to adjust to changes, ability to improve processes and ultimately willingness to learn new things and technologies, with right attitude towards organisational development.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal Communication is the process by which people swap information, feelings and impart through verbal and non-verbal messages. Effective Communication skills do not occur to us automatically just because we all have been communicating with others since birth. As a process innate to human existence, communication is instrumental in achieving desired ends, and in expressing socio-emotional context, a message along with barriers, and feedback. We can manage the accuracy of communication by managing the attributes related to the sender, the receiver, the channel, the message and the topic.

Interpersonal Communication Styles

Communication styles can be classified into the following types:

- (1) Aggressive
- (2) Passive
- (3) Assertive

In Aggressive style of communication, one always stands up for one's rights. In the process they neglect others' rights. These kinds of people have a feeling that they are always right and do not possess much respect for others' feelings. Such communicators give the impression of being superior in attitude, domineering and self-important. Their non-verbal cues are narrow eyes, clenched fists, pointing fingers, rigid posture and hard stares. These types of communicators often face disrespect from others. They consider their contribution to be highest and others' to be negligible. Their ultimate aim is to win at any cost.

The Passive style of communication allows the communicator to put others' rights before his and thus reduce his own self-worth. They consider themselves inferior as compared to others. They negate their feelings, opinions, beliefs and rendering themselves unimportant. They lose respect in the eyes of others as they always try to please others. They create a negative impression on others by their non-verbal signals. They shy away from maintaining eye contact with people. Their downcast eyes, stooping posture and excessive nodding of the heads may indicate lack of drive and motivation. They are easily victimized and exploited too.

The Assertive style of communication teaches one to stand up for one's rights while having respect for others rights. These communicators give importance to themselves as well as others. They demonstrate confidence in whatever they do and own up the responsibility for their action. Talking straight on the face, looking directly,

always at ease with oneself and others, relaxed and smooth body movements are some of the strong characteristics of any assertive communicator. They have a positive attitude towards life and are very lively. Amongst these three distinctive styles of communication, the Assertive style of communication is the one to strive for.

Patterns of Communication in an Organization

There are regular patterns of communication in an organisation. They are referred to as communication networks. These networks can be formal or informal. The formal network functions as a chain of command. It enables the organisation to disseminate information throughout the organisation and also gather information in the form of formal reports, letters, memos, announcements. In a healthy organization where there is exchange of ideas, information mainly flows in three directions: downward, upward and horizontal.

Downward communication occurs when decision makers such as top executives and directors or CEOs pass down information related to organizational goals, mission, plans, or expectations from employees or make any formal announcement. Absence of downward flow results in role ambiguity, stress and anxiety among employees. Group meetings, budgets, operational procedures, circulars, company publications etc are the examples of typical downward communication. To avoid distortion of such communication it is essential for managers to use effective communication techniques (simple and appropriate language, clear instructions, brief points, no roundabout language) that remove ambiguities and misunderstandings.

Upward communication occurs when subordinates initiate discussions (seeking solutions, resolving problems, raising an important issue, making the superiors aware of certain problems and issues) with their superiors regarding their responsibilities. Face-to-face talk, emails, messages, memos and reports, and phone calls are used as channels for such communication. However, because of the hierarchical nature of the organisation there may be a perceptual difference regarding certain issues and a manager may not see eye-to-eye all the time with subordinates. Upward communication encourages employees to participate in the decision making process and to submit valuable ideas. It also provides feedback on how well subordinates have understood downward communication. As organisations recognize the potential and importance of information that comes from people on the floor, they encourage upward communication in the form of feedback or review meetings and have an „open door“ policy.

Horizontal communication occurs when employees working at the same level or peer group exchange information. This works best within a congenial working environment when there can be free flow of ideas, best practices are shared and colleagues are supportive of each other. It leads to the development of friendship and informal work groups. The significant purposes of this kind of Communication are task co-ordination, problem-solving, information sharing, and conflict resolution. (Aswathappa, K, 2011) An organisation can benefit from such lateral communication when the people involved in them use it for productive purposes to exchange views, get feedback, ask for help or share knowledge. However, professional rivalry, ego problems or inability to use such channels appropriately may act as barriers to such communication.

Communication Roles

“Communication role is the specific role an individual plays in a firms“ communication network.” (Aswathappa, K, 2011) These roles are categorised into four types: gatekeeper, liaison, isolate and cosmopolite.

Gatekeepers: A gatekeeper is the person in the organisation who controls the information. How and when it is to be released is decided by the gatekeeper. This is important as it controls the final decision.

Liaisons: It is an individual who serves as a bridge between two groups. He himself is not a part of any group but serves as a communication link. Organizations that use liaison work more effectively than those who don't.

Isolates: An individual who has little or no conflict with others, as he keeps aloof from others. They do not socialise with other co-workers which results in their being uninformed about certain things.

Cosmopolites: These individuals try to extend their communication network as much as they can. They frequently switch over their jobs and have stronger professional links.

Barriers to Effective Interpersonal Communication

According to Aswathappa (2011), Barriers to Effective Interpersonal Communication can be classified into three categories: Sender related Barriers, Receiver related barriers and situation related barriers.

Some of the sender related barriers are improper diction, inconsistent non-verbal signals, differing frames of reference, either or thinking, fear etc. Barriers related to the receiver are selective and poor listening, perceptions, lack of responsive feedback, meta communication etc. Several communication barriers are attributed to factors other than the sender and the receiver. These barriers may be jargon, information overload, time pressure, noise, distance, mechanical failure, cultural difference etc.

Overcoming the Barriers to Effective Interpersonal Communication

Proper efforts can trounce these barriers. There are certain things that are to be taken care of by the sender and receiver to overcome these barriers. Some of them are simplifying language, controlling emotions, listening ardently, encouraging feedback, developing harmonious climate, etc. Good interpersonal communication knacks support of such processes like intimate relationship, counselling, management, selling, conflict management and others.

Importance of Interpersonal Communication for Managers

Strong interpersonal communication skills, utilizing a variety of styles and techniques, are particularly important for small business owners who must supervise the work of others. Bateman and Zeithaml (1990) described some of the characteristics of supervisors who receive high marks from their employees. First, these managers tend to communicate more than other managers, explaining the reasons behind decisions and providing advance warning of changes. Second, they tend to employ an egalitarian rather than controlling style when communicating with subordinates, asking for instead of demanding their compliance. Third, they tend to take others' needs and feelings into account when communicating. Finally, most effective managers are good listeners, giving careful consideration to employee concerns and taking the time to respond to questions and complaints.

Working with others is an integral part of being a manager. It becomes crucial to employ effective communication to perform well as managers because the manager's job is to ensure that work gets done. This can be ensured only if the channels of communication are open and the manager employs the right style and technique to get the best out of the team. Effective communication requires us to have clarity of thought and to be able to communicate that thought in unambiguous terms. At the same time it also involves actively listening by empathising with the interlocutor and making a sincere effort to understand what is being said. Managers, in general, spend as much as 37.5 hours per week in communicating. (Klemmer and Snyder, 1972) Managers can carry out management functions only by interacting and communicating with others. If a manager is a good

communicator he is a good leader. It is through good interpersonal skills that half the work is done. He can plan, organise, lead and control things in a better and systematic way.

For good interpersonal communication skills

To cultivate good interpersonal communication skills a person should acknowledge others communicating verbally and non-verbally. It is often good to rephrase and repeat what is being said, back to those who are speaking. This ensures that you understood what they said and more importantly, what they meant. Using examples or personal experiences is a helpful way to communicate ideas. Speaking clearly and distinctly is extremely important. People may miss your point if you are hard to understand. Therefore it is important to use correct diction. Communicate with a positive attitude. People will be more interested if we are using a positive sentence. Establish (in clear terms) some unwritten rules regarding team dynamics and roles so that everyone knows what is expected of them. This helps to remove ambiguities and misunderstandings about who is supposed to do what, report to whom or hand over their completed work to whom. Listening is the key in developing any type of relationship. Active listening is an important way to bring about changes in people. Clinical and research evidence clearly shows that sensitive listening is the most effective agent for individual personality change and group development. Read between the lines of what is being said. Some people have a hard time expressing themselves. They can be helped by trying to interpret what they mean. Sharing your ideas is a personal effort to relate to others.

Build a bond of trust between you and the others in the conversation. Make them feel more at ease and they will be more likely to exchange ideas. True communication requires a connection between the parties to a conversation. Find a common ground or common interest to open the way to a good conversation.

Effective communicators are generally good at reading both, the verbal and nonverbal content of the message and at checking their internal consistency, at segregating communication problems from all other problems, listening, questioning, as well as at giving and receiving feedback.

Role of non-verbal communication in interpersonal communication

Good communication is the foundation of successful relationships, both personally and professionally. But we communicate with much more than words. In fact, research shows that the majority of our communication is nonverbal. Nonverbal communication, or body language, includes our facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, and even the tone of our voice. Non-verbal communication (body language, paralinguistics) has been a focus of attention for some time in areas such as the refinement of presentation skills, developing social skills, dealing with teams, public speaking etc.

Nonverbal communication cues can play five roles:

- **Repetition:** they can repeat the message the person is making verbally
- **Contradiction:** they can contradict a message the individual is trying to convey
- **Substitution:** they can substitute for a verbal message. For example, a person's eyes can often convey a far more vivid message than words and often do.
- **Complementing:** they may add to or complement a verbal message. A boss who pats a person on the back in addition to giving praise can increase the impact of the message
- **Accenting:** they may accent or underline a verbal message. Pounding the table, for example, can underline a message.

In terms of skills development, non-verbal clues should not be underestimated when developing both the listening and speaking skills. Like grammatical structures, nonverbal communication has form, function and meaning, all of which may vary from language to language. The ability to understand and use nonverbal communication is powerful tools that will help one connect with others, express what he really means, navigate challenging situations, and build better relationships at work.

Conclusion

Soft skills play a vital role for professional success; they help one to excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in this age of information and knowledge. Good soft skills -- which are in fact scarce -- in the highly competitive corporate world, will help one stand out in a milieu of routine job seekers with mediocre skills and talent. When balanced with a good management team and an effective human resource management system, soft skills provide a way to get the highest return on the investment in terms of human capital.

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