



SOFT SKILLS IN A HARDNOSED JOB

ABSTRACT

For the new manager, the struggle to hold the balance between top management and the employees is fierce. The new manager needs a lot of preparation

Motivation Matters Limited



Introduction

Anyone who has ever been a child was practised at the soft skill of persuasion: converting others to your point of view. Of course the negotiation around the change of point of view is one sided. The adult is tired, stressed and has a long to do list while the child has a laser-like focus on achieving the desired outcome.

A baby is totally reliant on a grown up to look after it. We are born with soft skills to appeal to and persuade an adult to look after us.

Why do we lose our soft skills and change into macho managers? What can be done to bring soft skills into management practice? This is the foundation stone of any employee engagement strategy after all, so it is a critical success factor for organizational survival.

Survival is not compulsory.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a label for soft skills.

Simply put, it comprises of four elements.

Awareness of another's life

The ability to put oneself in their situation is powerful. If you can understand their decision making drivers, you have a much better chance of achieving an agreement. This is a rare skill much improved through practice.

Personal resilience

Managers need to understand the difference between managing with emotion and emotional intelligence. Understanding the emotional issues of the other person is intelligent. Launching into a hot-headed rant with a display of your own emotion is not intelligent.

Empathy

Empathy is a rare quality. This makes others see you as someone who listens, someone who cares, someone who can make a difference to them.

Communication skills

All of these abilities rely on communication skills for delivery. The communication skills include physical, spoken and written messages.





Stepping into your first supervisors job

I remember having sleepless nights when I was told I would be managing my first two people. One of them was 15 years older than me. I thought he was better at the work than me too! I had received no training at all in managing people.

I didn't know how to talk to them. I wasn't entirely convinced I wanted the job anyway!

As is often the case, the pathway to a higher salary led to the appointment. I wasn't going to turn down that opportunity.

Fortunately my manager was extremely approachable. He let me talk through several "how do I?" scenarios until I gained a little confidence.

The negotiation

My promotion was made possible by a restructuring of the department. It changed from a flat structure to a number of specialist teams, and I led one of the teams.

My two people were still doing the same work they did before the restructure but now reporting to me not to my manager as they did previously. They could see my promotion as a demotion for them. The atmosphere was frosty and made me want to avoid talking to them. Anything I asked was met with negative comments.

However, I realised that was not a success strategy. I had been put in charge for a reason and I was going to make it work. Fortunately I was rather good at the work myself and did show my team that I was worth listening to in that respect.

I was able to make the team more successful, not least through some extra work myself, and as a result our pay rise that year was good.

Slowly they realised I wasn't interested in grabbing the credit for their work, but rather for the team as a whole. It took most of the first year, but we slowly changed from silent awkwardness to positive collaboration.

How to learn

I was extremely fortunate in my manager and my first team too. They were all good people. My team had been upset by the structural change and were always going to take it out on the new guy. It just happened to me.

My manager was very patient, coached me and supported me through some difficult times. Without his support the organization could have lost the entire team to other jobs!

In today's pressured organizations where does the new supervisor turn for advice? There is so much "just tell them "work hard or go" attitude around, where do you turn for sensible advice?





Support

Does HR still have this repository of wisdom? Or is HR's role limited to ensuring the "go" part of the management advice is conducted properly through the disciplinary procedures? Has HR morphed from Human Resources to Hiring (and firing) Regulations?

The new supervisor, first time manager, needs coaching in what to do and how to behave.

Management training is useful. It gives you some words on what you should do. That is far removed from knowing how to do it. If you have to make a lot of mistakes to find out how to do it, you risk alienating your team forever.

A supportive boss is necessary for success. You need to ask, question and understand what you believe you should do. You need an experienced manager to provide that view.

We can't leave out coaching and personal development. If the boss can't be supportive then bring in outside help. It isn't expensive compared with the new team messing up.

Personal characteristics

There are three personal characteristics that stand the new supervisor in good stead.

Self-motivation

Taking that first supervisory role is tough. You need a strong will not to give up or concede to your team. There will be times when you have to apologise for getting it wrong. You need the will to stick to your guns.

Vision

You can't lead a team without leading them somewhere. You need a vision of where that place is and why it is better than here.

Emotional intelligence

You need all those skills I listed earlier to communicate effectively and bring your team along with you.





Conclusion

I don't see any alternative to equipping the first time manager with the training and resources needed to develop their management skills. This is a massive opportunity for the training industry if we can develop practical "how to" content to go alongside the "what to" that is traditionally provided.

The new manager needs self-motivation, resilience and a vision that will carry them through that difficult first year.

All in all, soft skills are hard to do! It is easier to hide behind your desk, or a barrage of hierarchical orders to avoid putting yourself at risk of criticism. Learning is a trial and error process.

MOTIVATION MATTERS LIMITED

VISION

Inspiring good management, and thus achievement, within organizations will improve employee attitudes, engagement and job satisfaction to create stronger companies with more productive people.

More productive companies build competitive advantage creating a sustainable business with safe growth, healthy profits, secure well paid jobs and contribute to the well-being of the UK.

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