

Directions

The following articles appeared in our April 2010 email newsletter. *We welcome your comments on any of our articles. Send an email to info@ecdavis.com.*

What I have learned about “Soft Skills” development

by Ellen Davis

Some people will tell you that “soft skills” are so personality- based, or so impacted by childhood and environmental experiences, that they cannot be effectively taught to adults. I understand that view, and to some extent, I agree. But on the whole, I believe “soft skills” can be learned and that substantive development in behavior is possible.

As a trainer for more years now than I like to admit, I’ve seen a lot of bad efforts and failed outcomes. But, through it all, I have witnessed some very successful efforts too. Here are simple, common elements from among the success stories which you might consider as criteria when evaluating workshops and programs in the future.

1. *A powerful punch.* Don’t give me a book to read about conflict resolution techniques if I am typically a bull in a china shop! Don’t send me to a half-day class with 20 -30 other folks and expect much change when I return! Instead, get me into something that will force me to see what I am doing and the impact it is having on others. Make sure I get a personal wake-up call about my own behavior.
2. *A rifle approach, not a shotgun.* A generic workshop on communications can cover the waterfront, be intellectually interesting, and even fun. But it will likely only spend a very short while on MY particular need in communications. Far better to pinpoint my need and target a learning experience focusing on that. Workshops that are going to “Make you a Leader” in 3-4 days can provide generic understanding of a leader’s role and skill requirements; they are not likely to create substantive behavioral change and development.
3. *Credible experts who will coach and reinforce.* Once I have a clear wake-up call regarding my specific, pinpointed behavior, my need to know what to do about it is typically heightened. So don’t leave me hanging! Ensure the trainer will spend time with me personally, talk through my behavior patterns and the situation back at work. Get me a credible trainer who is skillful with straight-talk, who encourages me, and who can balance corrections with reinforcement when s/he catches me doing something right.
4. *Practice that helps make perfect.* Okay, I know everyone seems to resist role-play ... me included. Why? Because it forces us out of our comfort zone to actually do something we aren’t very good at; and then we get feedback on what we did. Ideally we even see ourselves on video. Also, effective role-play is realistic and simulates the actual workplace. In any case, behavioral development without behavioral practice and feedback is a waste of time.
5. *Bridging between the workshop and the workplace.* The classroom can offer a lovely learning environment and the trainer can be an attentive coach; unfortunately, neither of these things is likely to mirror “the real world.” So, realistically, how can I possibly take these newly honed skills back and sustain them? Is there a way for my manager or my peers to help me? Is there any documentation that can be a reminder? Is there any check-back system with the trainers? Without a sound process to keep me propped up for at least awhile, you can bet that those new skills will soon disappear!

At EC Davis we are committed to providing training that meets the criteria above. For that reason we offer only one public workshop. It is called the Team Manager Development Center, and we have been running it for almost 20 years. There are six participants to a program with two instructor/coaches. Individual attention is a cornerstone. A realistic workplace simulation engages participants without the typical artificiality of role-play. Video reviews and developmental coaching focus on pinpointed improvement opportunities as the workshop progresses. Documented feedback, personal tips, and coaches suggestions go home with each person. Later a conference call is held with the coach, participant and back-home manager to review the feedback and discuss development. We are proud to say it carries an effective and a powerful punch.

Otherwise, our workshops are customized for each client. Certainly, we pull from basic materials that we have developed and proven over the years. But then we customize closely to the client's precise needs and situation. It can be done and it can be cost-effective. We encourage you to consider that approach for your needs as well.

Whatever you choose to do, don't compromise on the criteria! My lesson learned would be that you are likely throwing money away if you do.

Team Manager Development Center

We are extending our limited time offer: only \$1500 per TMDC participant!

This represents 25% savings over our current pricing. Take advantage of this offer by registering for our upcoming programs in Charleston, SC:

September 20 – 22, 2010

November 15 - 17, 2010

To register or for more information, send an e-mail to admin@ecdavis.com. If you're not familiar with this program, read about it [here](#).

Robin Ready's tips on successful "Soft Skills"

by Tommy Davis

Robin Ready knows better than most the importance of "Soft Skills" in leaders. And he has seen some really great use of Soft Skills over the years. If you are trying to hone up your own, consider these tips:

Really know your team members.

- What are their needs, motivation and skills? Remember that your team members may not do things exactly the way that you would. Everyone is different; therefore their needs, motivation and skills will be different. Spend time talking with and observing your team members; check out your assumptions and be sure you are utilizing all their experience, knowledge and talent. There are no perfect team members, but successful managers are able to set their team members up for success.

Create and model effective working norms, communications, and standards.

- Make caring about team members as people a working norm. Be consistent in how you treat them. Let them see that you do not waver in your beliefs and your approach. Expect them to do the same for one another. Create ownership and engagement through involvement, compromise, and collaboration. Reinforce their strengths, and work with or around their weaknesses.
- Communicate and seek input daily about the business and how the team's daily work impacts or is impacted by the business. Provide specific developmental feedback that focuses on progress and growth. Let your team members know how they are doing so they can keep it up and/or make the needed corrections for success.
- Set and share the standards. Your team members need to know and align to the daily targets and longer range goals. Such standards drive learning and will improve communication when used as a common language. Expect availability, partnership, and communication from your team members.

Create an environment that promotes team members' full use of their talents, knowledge and experience – to do their very best.

- Know what your team members are good at doing and put them where they can do it. Align the tasks to the team members — not the team members to the tasks. Then spend time making sure that your team members know what is expected of them and that they have the needed resources to accomplish their work.
- Be sure you check with your team members to see what is working well and communicate those back to all the team. If things need to be improved, make changes and communicate the changes and reasons why they were made.
- Be deliberate in delegation. Everyone has skills, knowledge and talent in something. The magic of a successful manager is to find that "something" and tap into it.
- Remember to find some time each day to encourage and praise your team members. We all need to know we are cared for and that others recognize our efforts. Say "thank you" and smile more!

Reader survey on development of "Soft Skills"

Where are companies finding success? Share your experiences and learn from the experiences of others. Please respond to our short [survey](#) this month and we will post results in our June issue of **DIRECTIONS**.

Since certain behaviors are difficult to train, could you do a better job of HIRING for them?

by Ellen Davis

The short answer is *YES, you can!* For one thing, you can improve your interviewing approach. For another, you can incorporate an assessment center. Here's a short summary of each of these improvements when selecting for those difficult behavioral skills.

Traditional interviews are about the WORST thing you can do!

Most of us are far too easily lulled into a discussion that yields little truly helpful data. Here are some instant improvement tips:

- Form an interview team and agree ahead on who will ask what questions. Consider having two interviewers for every interview rather than the normal 1-1. That way one of you takes notes or prompts for new information, while the other takes the lead in the interview.
- Predetermine the questions and ensure they will extract useful behavioral information. An example might be "Tell us about a time when you had a conflict with another person and how you handled it." Keep in mind that past behavior is a great predictor of future behavior!
- Ask every interviewee the same questions. Then you have more comparative information. Of course, follow-up questions and probing can vary by person.
- Bring the interview team together for a consensus meeting, preferably after all applicants have been interviewed. Hearing what other interviewers say can help surface patterns or relieve concerns.

Get them to SHOW what they would actually do, not just talk about it!

Although challenging to design, an Assessment Center approach lets you put the applicant into situations which mirror the job and see what they will actually do. This takes you a long leap forward from interviewing alone. Assessment Centers have been around since World War II, and we have had the opportunity to work on them recently at two large manufacturers in the US. Several important rules-of-the-road for selection assessment centers include:

- Determine the competencies through a valid job analysis, ensuring the assessed behaviors really are required to perform the role effectively.
- Employ multiple assessment techniques to elicit information regarding the behaviors you want to assess.
- Incorporate job-related simulations.
- Use multiple assessors who are trained to observe and evaluate candidates.
- Achieve consensus agreement among the assessors.

If you want to know more about the assessment centers we have conducted, we'll gladly help you contact our clients.

Lastly, when in doubt...

A few years ago, a successful plant manager, who is also a client and friend, advised a group of managers we were working with that her rule is simple: "When in doubt, keep them out." It sounds tough, but keep this in mind – an individual is putting his or her best foot forward during the application period. If what you are seeing then makes you uncomfortable, don't be reluctant to keep on looking.