

Sharpening the Soft Skills (Which Aren't Really Touchy-Feely)

Marci Alboher

When I was struggling with my discomfort about doing the self-promotion needed to successfully market my book I spoke to Peggy Klaus, a consultant who is best known as the author of the book, "Brag!" Ms. Klaus quickly persuaded me that self-promotion is a necessary skill and that if done properly, there is nothing unseemly about it. Self-promotion is just one example of what Ms. Klaus calls the "soft skills" a subject she tackles in her latest book, "The Hard Truth About Soft Skills."

Ms. Klaus coaches people inside companies like JPMorgan Chase, Chevron and the National Football League on how to master these soft skills. And in her view, these are the areas where careers are made and unmade.

I spoke with her last week about why so of us many neglect these skills and how we can stop getting in the way of our own success. Below are excerpts of that conversation.

Q. What exactly are soft skills and why should we be worried about them?

A. The hard skills are the technical expertise you need to get the job done. The soft skills are really everything else — competencies that go from self-awareness to one's attitude to managing one's career to handling critics, not taking things personally, taking risks, getting along with people and many, many more.

Q. Do you really think these skills are undervalued -- after all, David Allen's "Getting Things Done," a book about staying organized, has been perched on top of business best-seller lists for years?

A. I absolutely think people aren't paying attention to these things. I see it in academia. Recruiters come back and say this batch of second-year M.B.A.s are brilliant at quantitative skills, but they don't know things like how to get along, work in a team or be good communicators. And until recently, they were also undervalued in corporate America where everyone thought going to the right schools was what would make you successful.

Q. Why do you think these things have a reputation for being touchy-feely?

A. When I tell people what I do, people say, "You teach those warm and fuzzy skills." I say, "What is so warm and fuzzy about how to deal with a colleague who steals credit, pitching an investor for his multimillion dollar portfolio or inspiring and motivating people after your company has laid off thousands?"

Q. With so much talk of recession and inevitable layoffs, what are the most common issues coming up with your clients?

A. People are very frightened and anxious. So what they do is they play the ostrich. The head goes right into the sand and they hope the whole thing will blow over. Instead, they should act like detectives — finding out what's going on in the company, talking to the boss and the boss's boss and checking out the rumors. That's the first huge mistake. The second is not letting people know what it is that they are doing — not, if you will, self-promoting to their boss, the boss's boss or across silos in their organization or their clients. So people don't know why they are indispensable and shouldn't be let go.

Q. You say that procrastination is not necessarily a bad thing and that it is usually telling us something. What can our procrastination tell us?

A. It really can pinpoint when you don't have the needed information, the resources or the help that you need. It can also mean that a certain project or a certain kind of work is no longer interesting to you and that you need to stretch yourself.

Q. Every week produces another research study about generational divides in the workplace. What is happening inside the companies where you consult?

A. The biggest issue is the lack of respect for one another. I find that boomers have little respect for the Y generation because they see them as being coddled by their parents, not willing to put in the time and effort, and expecting to have things given to them immediately. They also find them lacking in some very basic soft skills such as ability to communicate. Boomers claim that newer hires are inarticulate, can't spell and fail to use the social niceties of please, thank you, let alone a formal thank-you note.

On the other hand, the Y generation thinks boomers are stuck in their ways, cannot wrap their minds around new technologies and should basically retire and get out of their way.

Q. You do see some positives here, right?

A. It's an incredible opportunity for generations to learn from each other. I give an example in the book of an important bond that was created when an older worker needed to get a presentation out the door and a guy in his mid-20s who he barely knew was able to Photoshop it for him in a few minutes. As a boomer myself, there is a whole new zeitgeist around culture that young people clue me into. It might be my prejudice as a boomer, but I think there is so much that younger people can learn from the older people — political savvy, networking, how to navigate a career, how to take calculated risks and what is not worth wasting the calories worrying over?

Q. Now it is time for my own personal bugaboo. What is your advice to those of us who have difficulty saying "no" and then wind up overwhelmed with the number of projects on our plate?

A. First, I think it's important to ask yourself why you have difficulty saying no? Is it because you are truly interested in all of the things you're being asked to do? Or do you feel guilty about saying no? Or do you think it is in some way going to hurt you and your career to say no? If it's about guilt, get over it. If you really do want to say yes, then prioritize the projects that are already on your plate, figure out how much time you need to complete each project, and decide whether you can fit one more. If you fear career damage, then define how you think it will hurt you and whether the fear is legitimate or you are being paranoid.

Q. Is there a best way to say no, especially if it is a request from a boss or major client?

A. The key is to express your interest and appreciate that they've asked you, making sure to leave the door open for some time in the future. Also, express that it would not be good for either of you if you took on the project. If the person asking is your boss, sit down and show a list of things you are already doing and ask for some help prioritizing where this new project fits in.

Q. You encourage telecommuters to come up with a visibility plan to make sure they don't fall off the radar. How does that work?

A. Working outside the office should not mean that people in the office never see you. If there are opportunities to go to business lunches, retreats, conferences, find them. Seeing a face is just so important, especially in a down market.

Q. Do you have any tips for how to handle it when your mentor, your boss, the person who brought you a client or some other person crucial to your success leaves their position?

A. This is the problem with having one person as a key cheerleader. You should have people across the company who know of your expertise and brand, and you should be building those relationships from the moment you walk in the door. Often, we think we have a mentor, but the more people you have the better.

Disponível em: <<http://www.nytimes.com>>. Acesso em 14/4/2008.