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It's All About Buy-In

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In the article, "*The Myth of Soft-Skills Training*," you are instructed to prepare for a training session by asking participants to bring business-improvement ideas to a meeting. Then you are supposed to open the meeting by describing the "soft" skills likely to be most useful in gaining support and commitment for those ideas.

The alert reader may have paused at that point, sensing a skunk in the rosebush: "You say this approach can be used to teach all kinds of interpersonal skills, from leadership to selling to teamwork. If I've got 10 or 20 people in the room, and I don't know what ideas they're going to pitch, how do I know in advance which skills they're going to need? And as far as that goes, it sounds as if the only thing anybody will be learning in this session is how to gain followers or commitment of 'buy-in' for a proposal. Maybe that is essentially what leadership and sales skills are about, but teamwork?"

Glad you asked.

I would argue that when it comes to doing business with one another or accomplishing work together, there really is only one set of interpersonal-communication skills that is truly significant. This skill set (or "master skill") is the one that enables us to achieve a state of rapport, trust, accord, mutual commitment-the condition known in the business world as "buy-in."

The skills taught (or talked about) under the headings such as listening, influencing and negotiating are all elements of the skill set that leads us to buy-in. So are the interpersonal pieces of the skills taught under the labels of problem-solving and decision-making.

In the business world, very few of our attempts at interpersonal communication are intended merely to achieve understanding or agreement on an intellectual level. What we're after, most of the time, is buy-in.

Buy-in is what you and I get when we are in union both intellectually and emotionally in regard to a given course of action. When we reach that state of mutual commitment on some recommendation, we will act on it without reservation. In a sales situation, I will gladly buy your product. In a "teamwork" situation, we will put forth our best effort. We will keep our promises. We will strive for "quality" performance.

So, yes, you can call it teamwork, as well as leadership or sales or management or anything you like. It all involves the same skill set for the same intended outcome: buy-in.

And these skills are not mysterious or difficult to measure. You can measure my skillfulness at leadership or selling or problem-solving simply by observing my ability to move another person (or people) toward buy-in. You can watch this happen. Whether I'm trying to sell Joe a three-piece suit or enlist his support for my new technology task

training

force, you can watch him move, say, from indifference to hostility to competitiveness to moderate interest to full-fledged commitment.

The skills that move Joe toward buy-in are not only measurable, they are teachable. In bits and pieces, they are taught every day in corporate classrooms. But since the classes take an educational approach rather than a training approach - everyone learns about the skills instead of practicing them - nobody really becomes skillful.

If you want to train people in interpersonal business skills, have them practice gaining support from one another for real proposals, and coach them while they do. Make them practice and repeat each skill until they can perform fluently-with competence and confidence.

What skills are they practicing? Here are the basic ones. I would go so far as to propose that all "soft skills" are derived from these:

- The ability to open a conversation or interaction in a way that elicits open-mindedness.
- The ability to articulate goals.
- The ability to diagnose another person's needs and problems by listening effectively and asking good questions.
- Demonstrating respect for other's views.
- Obtaining respect for your own views (advocating).
- Raising the conversation "up" the intellectual and emotional ladder in a way that the other person is willing and able to follow (by resolving conflict, forming solutions that meet the other's needs, negotiating for change and so on).
- Carrying the interaction all the way to "buy-in." (The other person is confident and firmly committed to the proposal; she agrees to act on it.)

Most people can learn to do these things skillfully and successfully, at a level of conscious competence. But it takes real practice-practice that leads to a successful result that the person really desires. Education won't do the job. It requires training.

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