

# Chapter 1

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## The Soft Skills Gap

*No matter how careful you try to be in your recruiting, selection, and hiring process, it is getting harder and harder to figure out which job candidates to hire. Should you hire the promising new graduate with impressive, freshly minted credentials indicating valuable technical skills, even though they seem like they might be yet another new potential hire lacking in some of those elusive yet critical "soft skills"?*

*It seems like a higher percentage of new hires are not working out, one way or another. What goes wrong? Too often they don't seem to appreciate that they are entering a pre-existing scene; joining an organization with its own mission, history, structure, rules, and culture; integrating with a group that has its own established dynamic; and engaging with individuals, each of whom has their own story and many of whom have been part of this scene in this organization for years on end or longer.*

*Too often they say the wrong things or speak at the wrong time – and they fail to ask the questions they should be asking. Heck, sometimes they can't even get to work on time. Anyway, they spend too much of the workday on their devices instead of focusing on the work. That really comes through in customer service scores, along with other complaints about front-line service personnel. Sometimes their lack of interpersonal skills leads to misunderstandings and even conflicts on the team.*

*You have to worry they have one foot out the door from the day they arrive, all the while asking for more of something – or more of everything. Even the superstars nowadays don't seem to want to come in early, stay late, work through meals and weekends and holidays, bend over backward, and jump through hoops like the superstars of yesteryear.*

What is a soft skill? I use the term “soft skills” because most people understand the term is used, in contrast to “hard skills,” which are technical, to encompass a wide range of nontechnical skills ranging from “self-awareness” to “people skills” to “problem solving” to “teamwork.”

These skills may be less tangible and harder to define and measure than many of the “hard skills,” but they are absolutely critical to the success or failure of any individual in the workplace. The problem is that these old-fashioned basics – professionalism, critical thinking, and followership – are out of fashion and so they are too rarely spoken of nowadays. Today’s young talent is not being indoctrinated in these old-fashioned basics either at home or in school. Usually, by the time they get to the workplace, employers figure it is too late to focus on them. Certainly, most managers figure it is not their place, nor do they have the time or resources or know-how to deal with their employees’ soft skills gaps.

So, the soft skills gap continues to grow, hiding in plain sight, despite the fact that it costs organizations a fortune every day.

I’ve asked tens of thousands of managers: “How much do these so-called ‘soft skills’ matter?” The answer is nearly universal: Soft skills matter a lot. The cliché is that people get hired because of their hard skills but get fired because of their soft skills.

When employees have significant gaps in their soft skills there are significant negative consequences: Potentially good hires are overlooked. Good hires go bad. Bad hires go worse. Misunderstandings abound. People get distracted. Productivity goes down. Mistakes are made. Customer service suffers. Workplace conflicts occur more frequently. Good people leave when they might have otherwise stayed longer.

It robs so many employees of greater success and causes so many managers so much aggravation and unnecessary costs. The soft skills gap is not a household term like the technical skills gap, but it should be because its impact is monumental.

Like the technical skills gap, the soft skills gap in the workforce has been developing slowly for decades. But the soft skills gap runs across the entire workforce – among workers with technical skills that are in great demand, every bit as much as workers without technical skills. What is more, the soft skills gap has gotten much worse in recent years.

How much of this can we blame on the newest youngest workers?

## **The Soft Skills Gap: Growing Steadily from Gen X to Millennials to Gen Z to Whoever Comes Next**

Since 1993, I've been tracking the attitudes and behavior of managers and employees in the workplace and their impact on organizations, especially the impact on working relationships.

I started out as a frustrated young lawyer seeking to understand why the older, more experienced lawyers were so annoyed by those of my generation, Generation X (born 1965–1977). I quickly realized that it wasn't just the older, more experienced people at my firm who were annoyed with Gen Xers. It was nearly everybody older and more experienced in workplaces of all shapes and sizes.

That's when I started conducting in-depth interviews with young people and their managers, the original research that led to my first book, *Managing Generation X*. I formed a company to continue that research and we've been conducting that interview research for decades now, tracking workers of all ages, always including the ever-emerging and ever "newer" new young workforce. By the late 1990s, we were tracking the first wave of the great Millennial cohort (born 1978–1989). Then the second wave of Millennials (born 1990–1996), followed by Generation Z (born 1997 and later), and we'll interview new young workers as long as we endure.

Since the mid-1990s, I've had a front-row seat on the front lines and behind the scenes in organizations of all shapes and sizes. We've interviewed more than a half a million workers in just about every industry – health care, professional services, restaurants, retail, research, finance, aerospace, software, manufacturing, the public sector, even nonprofits, you name it. Based on two decades of research, I can report that the overwhelming data indicates a steady diminution in the soft skills of the workforce. Going forward, workers are increasingly likely to have significant notable weaknesses in one or several key soft skills.

Why is that?

## **Something Much Larger Is Going on Here: The Post-Boomer Generational Shift**

Of course, the older, more experienced people are always more or less annoyed by the attitudes and behavior of each successive new

young generation. New young employees are, by definition, always younger and less experienced and, therefore, lacking in the corresponding maturity and patience. As they step into the adult world with youthful energy and enthusiasm, young workers often clash with their older colleagues. That's always part of the story. But there is something much bigger going on here.

On a macro level, Generation Z represents a tipping point in the post-Boomer generational shift transforming the workforce. With Boomers retiring in droves, they are taking with them the last vestiges of the old-fashioned work ethic. The workforce of the near and intermediate future is a post-Boomer workforce – dominated in numbers, norms, and values by the Millennials and Generation Z as well as the aging Generation X. Plus, the workforce is even younger in Africa, South Asia, and South America.

The new workforce is fundamentally shaped by this era of profound change and uncertainty driven by a confluence of epic historical forces:

#### **GLOBALIZATION**

We are all global now, whether we like it or not – connecting and traveling to work across borders in every direction and combination. We can all look forward to a future of interdependency and competition with a rising global workforce from every corner of this ever-flattening world.

#### **TECHNOLOGY**

The pace of technological advance today is unprecedented. Information. Computing. Communication. Transportation. Commerce. Entertainment. Food. Medicine. War. In every aspect of life, anything can become obsolete any time – possibilities appear and disappear swiftly, radically and often without warning.

#### **INSTITUTIONAL INSECURITY**

In the post-9/11 era, we all live in a world threatened by terrorism and environmental cataclysm, a world where the economy fluctuates wildly from boom to bust, governments sometimes shut down or run out of money, and great companies conquer or fail or merge or continually downsize, restructure, and reengineer. Our greatest institutions are in a perpetual state of flux in this constantly changing world.

It's harder and harder for people to anchor themselves reliably to even our greatest institutions.

#### **THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT**

Gen Zers are the first true digital natives, but we've all been learning how to think, learn, and communicate in a never-ending ocean of information facilitated by handheld supercomputers. We all live in an information environment defined by internet ubiquity, wholesale technology integration, infinite content, and immediacy. From a dangerously young age, we have infinite access to information and ideas and perspectives – unlimited words, images, and sounds – a context completely without precedent.

#### **HUMAN DIVERSITY**

In every dimension, the world is becoming more diverse and more integrated. Generation Z will be the most diverse workforce in history, by far. That's true in terms of geographical point of origin, ethnic heritage, ability/disability, age, language, lifestyle preference, sexual orientation, color, size, and every other way of categorizing people. Equally important, Millennials and Gen Zers tend to look at every single individual, with their own combination of background, traits, and characteristics, as their own unique diversity story. They value difference, uniqueness, and customization, most of all their own. Meanwhile, the entire workforce will include a global mix like never before.

At the same time, the emerging workforce is increasingly shaped by two very important microtrends:

#### **HELICOPTER PARENTING ON STEROIDS**

By the late 1990s, the Boomer-esque self-esteem-based “everyone gets a trophy” style of parenting was morphing anew. “Helicopter” (hovering) parenting has been appended with the even more aggressive “snowplow” (clearing away obstacles) strategy. As one Gen Xer parent told me, “I don't want to make my kid just feel like a winner no matter what happens. I want to do everything I can to set him up with every possible advantage to make sure he has a big head start in the real world so he can win for real.” Parents (and contingent authority figures) are thoroughly engaged in supervising and supporting the child's every move, validating their differences, excusing

(or medicating) their weaknesses, and setting them up with every material advantage possible.

Young people today spend so much of their time ensconced in their own highly customized safety zones – the private comfort of protection and resources provided by responsible adults who are always supposed to be looking out for them. They expect authority figures to be always in their corner, to set them up for success, and to be of service. They are often startled when authority figures see it otherwise.

### **VIRTUAL REALITY**

It's not just that they are always looking down at their handheld devices. Today we are all always plugged into an endless stream of content and in continuous dialogue – through social media-based chatting and sharing and gaming – with peers (and practical strangers), however far away (or near) they might be. We are forever mixing and matching and manipulating from an infinite array of sources to create and then project back out into the world our own ever-changing personal montage of information, knowledge, meaning, and selfhood.

We can try on personas, virtually. Social media makes it easy to experiment with extreme versions of one persona, or another; more or less (or much more) a crass means of expression.

The youngest among us are perfectly accustomed to feeling worldly and ambitious and successful by engaging virtually in an incredibly malleable reality – where the stakes can seem all-important one moment, until the game is lost and reset with the push of a button.

## **Soft Skills Are – Sort of – About Conforming in an Age of Nonconformism**

If you think about it, soft-skills are mostly about “fitting in” –making an effort to conform one's attitude and behavior to established standards of conduct – in order to engage and work together effectively with others in a shared enterprise.

Here's the thing: The workforce of the future will be the ultimate nonconformists in an age of nonconformism.

For some time now, the pendulum of the zeitgeist has been swinging – more or less – away from conformism. Nonconformism is the belief that it is better for individuals to be unique and emphasize

their individual differences from the group; conformism is the belief that it is better for individuals to subordinate their individual differences and adopt the normative/dominant attitudes and behaviors accepted by the group in order to “fit in.” Of course, in any era, there are conformists and outliers, regardless of the zeitgeist. But the pendulum does swing one way or the other: Think of the relative conformism of the 1950s – when so many were trying to assimilate and come together after the global upheaval of World War II and its aftermath. The revolutionary nonconformity of the 1960s yanked the pendulum in the other direction and it’s been swinging that way ever since. There have been ebbs in the swing – notably in the middle 1980s and the years immediately following 9/11. Still, the pendulum has kept swinging away from conformism and toward a broad cultural relativism – for many good reasons.

It is unfortunate that cultural relativism has been widely misunderstood and is often misappropriated – in a classic case of *reductio ad absurdum* – by those who wish to argue that no expectations of conformity to any norms of conduct are legitimate. This is the kind of thinking that leads to the wishful notion that “all styles are equally valid.”

The problem with that notion should be obvious. If everybody has their own style and some styles are mutually exclusive, then how are we all supposed to get along and work together in a shared enterprise? Try to imagine a communication system where everybody speaks their own language. Or picture a style of greeting strangers by punching them in the nose. These suggestions are ridiculous.

Yet, there are, in fact, many different ways to greet a stranger appropriately, depending upon the community – or the time period – in which you live: Some people would bow. Others would shake hands. Some would hug. Others kiss on both cheeks. More and more people are bumping fists these days, partly due to the rise in awareness of especially pernicious contagious germs. Social norms are indeed highly variable depending upon context – manners and etiquette, appropriate attire, hairstyles, good grammar, even the very meaning of words in the same language. When I was working in Ireland in the 1980s, I asked a woman for a “ride” home. It turns out I should have asked for a “lift”: “ride” meant something very different in Ireland from its most common meaning in the United States. Perhaps nowadays asking someone for a “ride” in Ireland would be

less shocking, with so much more shared global media. To wit, social norms also change over time.

It is easy to see why cultural relativism is so important to understand. It provides much of the intellectual underpinning behind some very important long-term cultural/social trends away from oppressively hierarchical systems and one-size-fits-all rules. Strict hierarchy and one-size-fits-all rules are extremely limiting: By design, they prescribe and proscribe the behavior of those who wish to belong. They constrain individual expression, creativity, and innovation. They exclude those outside the norm or unwilling to conform. Sometimes they exclude people for very bad reasons, sometimes even with malice, as in, “No Irish Need Apply,” a sign common in US workplaces in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Cultural relativism teaches us that differences in norms and values are not an indication of moral failure. There may be many different ways to think about or do things that are equally legitimate, on some fundamental level, even if they might be more or less appropriate in one culture versus another. Plus, being open to people with differing norms and values can lead to valuable new opportunities and possibilities. Still, none of this means that “all styles are equally valid.”

What it really means is that a style that may be appropriate in one time and place may not be appropriate in another. As any cultural anthropologist will tell you, the way to get along in a different culture is to adjust your attitude and behavior to what is appropriate in that place and time. That doesn’t mean you have to compromise your values or integrity or abandon your “true self.” It just means that if you want to develop good relationships with others and be effective, you need to be adaptable.

Dress codes offer a simple example. I often say, “If you don’t want to wear a uniform, you shouldn’t become a police officer, a firefighter, or a soldier.” Uniforms function to help police, firefighters, and soldiers to identify each other in a crowd; signal to outsiders the special role of those in uniform; provide important information such as name and rank; and have built-in equipment for doing the job. Uniforms can make a lot of sense in some jobs. So where do you draw the line? What about suits and ties for men? Skirts and jackets for women? When I was a young associate at a Wall Street law firm in early 1990s, there was a serious brouhaha among the young associates over women lawyers being required to wear skirts instead

of pants. In the 1990s! The Gen X lawyers had a mini-revolt in favor of women being able to wear pantsuits. What rebels! This may seem like a bit of ancient history, yet “skirts versus pants” for women was truly contested ground in many workplaces well into the 1990s. The inequity of the requirement for women was hiding in plain sight.

Some standards of conduct are more burdensome than others. Some are arbitrary, exclusionary, constraining, and worth resisting. Others are necessary, efficacious, and worth some inconvenience. How does one tell the difference? This question holds the key to bridging the soft skills gap with today’s young talent.

The bottom line is this: You simply cannot have a functional workplace where everybody makes their own rules of conduct. Imagine an organization where some employees support the mission, but others support the opposite mission. Where nobody agrees about who is in charge. Where people come and go whenever they feel like it. Where some people wear pantsuits and others wear bathing suits. Where people only work on the tasks and responsibilities they enjoy, insist on doing everything their own way, and only work with the people they like. Where meetings are held with no particular agenda and people are encouraged to blurt out whatever pops into their heads. Where people may or may not return each other’s calls and emails. And so on.

Sometimes conforming makes a lot of sense. Consider the essential soft skills such as the elements of professionalism, critical thinking, and followership. These are old-fashioned basics for a reason: They are time-tested best practices. They work.

Nobody needs workers of any age, shape, size, or persuasion to give up their uniqueness as individuals, their overall nonconformism, or adopt too many arbitrary, exclusionary, or overly constraining standards. But most managers would very much like their employees to make some reasonable adaptations – to adjust at least some of their attitudes and behaviors to the realities of the adult workplace.

## **The Soft Skills Gap: The Missing Basics in Today’s Workforce**

The problem is that more and more of today’s workforce are neither accustomed nor inclined to conform their attitudes and behavior for an institution or an authority figure.

They apply for the job. They accept the job. They might be excited about the job. They might want your approval. They usually are very keen to succeed. They definitely want the paycheck. Nonetheless, they usually do not realize just how much “just doing their own thing” makes their attitudes and behavior maladaptive in the real world of the workplace.

Many have no concept of the incredible power of the old-fashioned basics. They are usually just not familiar with the old-fashioned basics – and certainly, they have very little experience. And like any skill, if one does not practice, one simply cannot master the essential soft skills.

Let’s go back to the ur-conundrum of the soft skills gap: The promising new candidate with impressive credentials – especially in-demand technical skills – who is nonetheless lacking in soft skills. If you interviewed them privately, as I do all the time in my research, they would probably say something like this: “I have, like, the hard skills they need. So they, like, shouldn’t care so much about the soft skills? So I come in a little late or leave a little early or blow off the occasional day? So what?! They should just, like, tell me what they need me to do? Give me, like, the resources I need. And I’ll get the job done. Why do they keep, like, insisting I do everything their way? Their way, like, makes no sense! My way is, like, so much easier. And I’m, like, not afraid to say so!”

This person is in a real quandary. It is a quandary shared by so many workers – not to mention their coworkers and managers – everywhere I go. Today’s workforce has so much to offer – technical skills, ideas, perspective, energy. Yet too many of them are held back because of their weakness in a whole bunch of old-fashioned basics.

What are the soft skills that so many people are missing nowadays that managers miss the most? There are so many of them. I’ve boiled them down to some key behaviors in three old-fashioned categories:

- 1.** Professionalism;
- 2.** Critical thinking; and
- 3.** Teamwork.

Let’s take a closer look.

**#1 OLD-FASHIONED "PROFESSIONALISM"**

Why don't people today hold themselves to a higher standard when it comes to their attitude, work habits, and people skills?

There are five reasons:

First, the newest workers are usually coming to you straight from school. So, maybe they have the most in-demand technical skills, coming from college or university, or maybe graduate school. That means they've probably become quite accustomed to a very luxurious situation: Room and board are not only covered, but also arranged conveniently in close proximity to campus. College students are surrounded by their peers all the time and often with intimate friends. College students have access to the resources of a major institution, but their only responsibilities are those of a valued customer. They have the support and services of staff, administration, and faculty, but their social status is determined by where they fit in with their peer group. Their "job" is a privilege for which someone else is paying (even if it is paid for by student loans, the tremendous cost of all this is deferred). They have very little supervision and a great deal of latitude in all manner of their personal habits and conduct. How many college students who come to work for you have gotten in the habit of staying up too late hanging out with their friends? Skipping too many classes? Doing their work at the last minute . . . or not at all? Then expecting to receive an inflated grade?

That takes me to the second reason: More and more of the new workforce has been raised by helicopter parents on steroids. Even after they arrive in the workplace, young workers are only a phone call (or text) away from their parents. Maybe they are on their own now, for the first time, after being reared by parents (and their parenting posses) who did a lot of the work for them of closely scheduling, managing, and supporting their every move. With their parents doing so much of the work, many young workers never mastered the basics of taking care of themselves.

Third, the customization of everything – growing for decades now – has entrenched in the newer workforce a fundamental expectation that individual accommodation is the norm. Even if they, themselves, did not homeschool, never had an ILP (an Individual Learning Plan, very common in schools nowadays), and never took meds for their special "diagnosis," they surely grew up among kids

who did. And surely too many people told them each and all, way too often, “You are a special case.” Meanwhile, there has long been a growing current of personal customization in every sphere where consumers dwell – especially media. Of course, all of this dovetails with the long-term zeitgeist swing toward relativism – i.e. “all styles are equally valid.” Increasingly, the basic assumption is that workers should be able to just “be themselves” and “express” their true identity at work.

Fourth, when it comes to people skills, it is easy to blame the fact that people of all ages have become so accustomed to electronic communication that they are losing the ability to communicate well in-person. That’s surely a big part of the story. Communication practices are habits and most people are in the habit of remote, informal, staccato, and relatively low-stakes interpersonal communication because of their constant use of handheld devices and the mores of social media and instant messaging.

Fifth, much of what older, more experienced people might see as matters of professionalism – attitude, self-presentation, schedule, and interpersonal communication – today’s workers are more likely to consider highly personal matters of individual style or preference and really none of their employer’s business.

## **#2 OLD-FASHIONED “CRITICAL THINKING”**

Why are today’s workers not better at “thinking on their feet” – learning, problem solving, and decision making in their own heads without a device?

What managers tell us regularly in our interviews is summed up well by one senior-level nurse manager with more than three decades of experience managing nurses:

They just don’t think on their feet the way they used to. They know a lot. But if they are not sure of something, they go right to their device. If there is not an obvious online resource to answer their question immediately, then they turn right to another person – whoever is available – another nurse, a doctor, or anyone they run into next. What they never seem to do [enough] is just stop and think. They can often find the “right” answer, but often they don’t always fully understand the answer they’ve found. It’s not just a lack of experience. It’s a different way of thinking. They don’t puzzle through the problem and they don’t stop and reflect on why the right solution is the right solution.

Why don't they stop and think on their feet, puzzle through problems, and reflect more on the best solutions?

Of course, there is one big reason: So many people today have never had the need. Today's information environment offers infinite answers to every question under the sun and they've always had powerful, easy-to-use information technology at their fingertips all the time.

On this subject, I often remind older, more experienced people, "Do you remember when we used to have conversations with very smart people about meaningful things that sometimes ended with a giant chorus of 'I don't know,' 'I don't know,' 'I don't know,' and 'Neither do I'? Or maybe you remember having those 'I wonder if \_\_\_\_' conversations with yourself." Are you old enough to remember those conversations? Well, young people today have never had that conversation – with themselves or anyone else. As long as they can remember, when they reach that point in a conversation – "I wonder if \_\_\_\_" – they (or someone else) would go immediately to a hand-held device to get answers, or a short related video, or a giant detour that distracts them from the original inquiry altogether.

With computers and content providers to do so much of their thinking for them, so many people nowadays have hardly any experience digging deep, puzzling, and reflecting. They have a built-in expectation that learning curves are instant. They think of learning in small increments – filling skill and knowledge gaps as they run across them. The long learning curve is a rarity and a bit of a mystery.

When it comes to the learning habits of most of today's workforce, most experts blame changes in the emphasis of the education system at all levels. Teaching to the test has been way too common for far too long. It is all too rare that schools teach students to assemble and evaluate evidence, construct multiple competing arguments and understand multiple sides in a debate, untangle seeming inconsistencies, and wrestle with complexity. In college, university, and graduate school, those learning technical skills are likely to continue throughout their education on that "learning for the test" pedagogical trajectory. Those being schooled in the liberal arts often err all the way on the other end of the spectrum. Young liberal arts graduates may become so convinced that "all styles are equally valid" that they have difficulty vetting information for legitimacy, use-value, and broader implications in the real world.

This takes me to another disturbing factor in today's information environment: the proliferation of half-baked experts spewing content on just about everything. Nowadays you can find an expert to support nearly any proposition: "My expert says that two plus two equals five." What is one supposed to do with information like that? Yet such information is everywhere. The impact of this factor goes way beyond the common internet search misfire in which "two plus two equals five." Far more damaging, the organic pluralism of the internet has led to a false sense of intellectual pluralism, a world in which people think, "Maybe two plus two does equal five." This has led to profound distortions in the public discourse – in all media – in which pure fiction, gut feelings, and opinions are given the same weight as well-researched facts, rigorous analysis, and strongly constructed arguments. This phenomenon dovetails with the swing of the zeitgeist pendulum toward cultural relativism more generally and with the weakening of institutional credibility. After all, what authority figure in what institution has the staying power to say, definitively, that "two plus two must equal four"?

Maybe we shouldn't be so shocked when they sometimes tell us, "It appears that two plus two may actually equal five." After all, in virtual reality, this equation probably has very few negative consequences. It's only now that they are entering the real world of the workplace where – all of a sudden – their lack of skill and experience in the basics of critical thinking can have very real consequences.

### **#3 OLD-FASHIONED "TEAMWORK"**

Why don't people today respect authority – in terms of citizenship, service, and playing your role?

"Question Authority!" has not been a slogan for a long time, but is a rather hackneyed cliché. So maybe it is too easy to explain away today's workforce's seeming disregard for joining something larger and making personal sacrifices for the greater good.

Why don't more people value citizenship, service, and playing one's role on the team?

Four reasons:

First, people today think more like customers than like players. Yes, they know that their employer is the one paying them. But still, they look at their relationship with any established institution, no

matter how small or how large, and they think, “What do you have for me? And what currency do I need to use to get what I want/need from you?”

Most workers are grateful to have a source of income and maybe some benefits. They are grateful to be accepted, validated, and wanted. They are grateful to have access to a hub of resources from which to acquire experience, training, networking – a place to be, with computers and phones and bathrooms, maybe a kitchen or a gym, and possibly some office supplies. They are grateful for the future doors that might be opened by this current job. But let’s not get carried away. It’s not as if they are likely to be here for a long time anyway.

Most people today realize they are much less likely than those of prior generations to have long-term uninterrupted careers with one organization. They are also unlikely to be exclusively employed by one organization at any given time, to work full-time and on-site, or to trust the “system” or the organization to take care of them. Thus, they tend not to show what looks like loyalty – a desire to belong, deference to authority, a willingness to make short-term sacrifices for the good of the whole, and an eagerness to contribute regardless of credit or rewards.

Second is the way workers today think about their relationships with coworkers not in positions of authority. These relationships involve a high degree of interdependency in pursuit of concrete goals every step of the way, and the stakes are high. Adults are in the workplace to earn their livelihoods. There are lots of opportunities to disappoint and/or be disappointed.

Third is how they look at individuals in positions of authority. Once again, they think like customers. In this case, specifically, your customer! Workers do not typically look at other people in the workplace trying to figure out “their proper place” in the context – how to adapt in order to “fit in” with others who clearly have long-standing relationships and a well-established course of dealing (i.e. an established way of doing business together). Instead, they look at you – and everyone else in the room – and think, “I wonder what role you might play in this chapter of my life story?”

Fourth, almost nobody anymore is planning to follow the old-fashioned career path, so they figure they are probably just passing

through your organization anyway. Why go to a whole lot of trouble adapting to your approach to how they should manage themselves when they won't even be here that long? They are thinking, "Seriously, what am I supposed to do? Adapt my schedule and work habits and style and attitude for every new job?" Even if they could be convinced to adapt for an employer eventually, they are very unlikely to be ready to do it from the get-go, certainly not early in their first or second real job.

## **Face the Hard Realities of the Soft Skills Gap**

Maybe you are thinking, "Wait a minute. I know plenty of people who are great at professionalism, critical thinking, and teamwork!" Of course, you do! And I do too! It seems like now is a good time for me to make it clear that even nowadays, there are many people with excellent soft skills. It's just that there are not enough of them – it's a matter of supply and demand. That's especially true among people with in-demand technical skills, of whom there is a shortage to begin with. Over and over again, we hear from leaders and managers at all levels that the soft skills gap is not going away. If anything, it is getting worse. And it's not just about the youngest people in the workplace. Overall, this gap has been developing for decades. The costs are great, the opportunity costs are even greater, and yet the problem stands right there in plain sight, not even hiding. Why does this problem evade solutions?

There are three reasons:

First, you cannot hire your way around the soft skills gap, at least not entirely. If you are hiring for a low-supply, high-demand technical skills job, you probably won't be able to select out all those with weak soft skills. If you are hiring for nontechnical jobs, then soft skills are among the only criteria, making the demand for those with strong soft skills very high, despite the low supply.

Second, soft skills cannot be spoon-fed to people or forced upon them. Soft skills are all about the regulation of the self. They must be fully embraced in order to be learned. You have to get workers to care enough about soft skills that their self-building drive is activated and focused on mastering the missing soft skills.

Third, you probably don't have a bunch of extra time or resources to pull your people out of work and send them for soft skills training,

or to create your own boot camp (like the Marines) to break down every worker and systematically rebuild them. If you are like most managers, then you deal with soft skill gap issues when they arise – when an employee is late, or inappropriate, or makes an error in judgment, or when there are conflicts on the team or a bad customer service interaction. You deal with the problem. Maybe you note the issue. Maybe if it is a recurring, ongoing issue with an employee, you really drill down and try to deal with the problem. In any case, unless you are the rare exception, your approach to dealing with the soft-skills gap is pretty much ad hoc, hit or miss.

In our training seminars, when I start talking about these difficult realities, managers start nodding their heads and listening carefully. I often say, “I don’t have any easy answers because easy answers work only in fantasyland. What I do have is a lot of difficult partial solutions.” That’s when managers in the real world know that I really have something to offer them. All I do in my seminars is teach managers how to imitate the best practices that the most effective managers are doing successfully every single day. How are the most effective managers bridging the soft skills gap in their organizations, as a daily routine?

Here’s the number one thing they have in common: They recognize the incredible power of soft skills – in themselves and others, and in organizations and teams. They understand what can go wrong when individuals, teams, or organizations have big gaps in their soft skills. Even more important, they understand how much can go so incredibly right – the extraordinary potential for added value – as a result of unlocking the power of soft skills. Consequently, they build soft skills development into every aspect of their people strategy and management.

