Quality info

How the Soft-Skills Gap Creates Quality Problems

A lack of these basic skills contributes to temporary solutions that companies pay for in the long run

The largest problems facing businesses isn't competition, globalization, or access to capital. It is something else, something embedded in the fabric of organizations as their most important asset. Human capital, the people who make organizations work, is one of the largest single issues being faced in today's business environment.

Why is this so? With all of the tech-savvy individuals entering the workforce, both highly intelligent and technically proficient, why would they be identified as the "root of quality problems" within an organization? Basically it has more to do with what people don't have vs. what they have in the way of knowledge, skills, and competencies (KSC). Technically, they are in high demand and fit for purpose (i.e., they meet the needs of the job). Culturally, however, they are lacking some important KSCs: the soft skills.

A lot of soft skills have been lost with Generations Y (1978–1989) and Z (1990–1999). Where these skills were was an important component of corporate life for the baby boomers and some generation Xs (1965–1977), it was overlooked by a portion of the late Ys, and almost entirely by the Zs. There used to be a sense of loyalty, an urge to get in early, stay late, get the job done, and fit in with the organization. Nowadays it is more about individuality, freedom, and flexibility.

So what are these missing skills? They can be summarized by the following three traits:
- A professional attitude
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Traditionalism and adaptation

Professional attitude

Business professionals exhibit extremes in personal habits and conduct. They are continually glued to handheld devices as a means of connectivity to the world and each other. Under the banner of efficiency, they often choose to avoid conversations in exchange for short texts, abbreviated emails, or other forms of social media or electronic communication. How does this contribute to quality problems? In many cases this leads to incomplete communication or understanding of internal customer needs. Many times we "assume" or take "literally" what someone is saying as a requirement. A smooth interaction of cross-functional processes relies on understanding and agreement. It may also require secondary and tertiary discussions that best happen "point to point" (i.e., in face-to-face conversation). Without these discussions, a misunderstanding of what the specific deliverables are becomes likely. For example, in a multistep process, clarification is necessary to ensure that each step in the process is error-free or doesn't create rework.

Critical thinking and basic problem solving

The analogy of "ready, fire, aim" applies here. Conducting critical thinking and problem solving is like what blocking and tackling is to football: the basics. An inability to understand and apply the basic scientific method to a problem and solve it is a critical lack. What used to be an important fundamental skill has been overlooked for the quick answer. The tendency is to search for an answer on the internet rather than do the analysis and understand *why* something is wrong in the first place. Many times what is found is an opinion that is considered just as valuable as well-researched causation. Throwing solutions at a problem to see if they work, then trying another one, is easy. Getting to the root cause takes thinking, work, and a process. A lack of these basic skills contributes to temporary solutions that the company pays for in the long run by either living with chronic waste, or the rework of solving the problem again and again (wasting time and resources).

Traditionalism and adaptation

Today's human capital has a need to understand "what's in it for me" first rather than what's good for the team. Following a traditional career path is a thing of the past. The concept of defending the fort (i.e., the company) has taken a backseat to personal gain. Many people do not trust their organization to recognize or reward them without first understanding "what I am going to get for this." Much of this comes from considering themselves more of a customer than an employee and part of the organizations fabric. The duration of employment is short, and hopping around from one employer to the next is the quickest way to get what they need. They challenge the reasoning of adjusting their lifestyle and schedule to adapt to a culture that they will be leaving in a few years. Many organizations have created their own problem regarding this issue by fostering a culture and environment of economic uncertainty. This takes its toll by increasing turnover, increasing cost by investing in a resource only to see it evaporate in a few years, destabilizing the organizational structure every few years, and enabling a weak succession strategy.

So what can be done about this?

Agree that sustaining human capital is a long-term investment. Keep in mind the analogy, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!" Long-term investments require patience, which is often lacking in organizations. Upper management needs to change its thinking and realize that investing in human capital is also an investment in the future.

Establish a soft-skills development strategy for current positions. Review critical positions and analyze what are the soft-skills needs for these positions. Understand that they are applicable for all levels of the organization and not just the worker bees. Start with the three that are mentioned above. A basic problem-solving methodology and structure is an easy first step.

Mandate that management demonstrate these skills so people see they are important. Lead by example! Once management has achieved a breakthrough in thinking (you need to address this gap), it must then decide what professionalism, creative thinking, and traditionalism mean for the company and adapt them into day-to-

day routines. This will demonstrate and bring about a breakthrough in performance and culture.

Build soft skills into the hiring criteria. Don't just focus on technical skills. Work together with the human resources or talent management team to integrate soft skills into the hiring process criteria. Don't settle for less. When selecting candidates, test them on these skills; make them demonstrate they have them or the ability to learn and accept them.

Your human capital is your most precious resource. Treat it as such. Take the time as an organization to understand your gaps, agree on a plan of action, implement it, and measure the results. Don't assume that people will just "get it." Develop a drip education plan to touch them lightly and often. Encourage the management team to embrace these skills and show the others how they should be executed. A little time and effort given to this deficit in your organizations will help tremendously with quality issues.

Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; Nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude.

W.W. Ziege

Readers may please note that D. L. Shah Trust brings out two e-journals on a <u>fortnightly basis.</u> These are mailed to those persons or institutions who are desirous of receiving them: These two e-journals are:

1. Safety Info
2. Quality Info

If you or your friends or colleagues wish to receive these journals, you may send us an e-mail requesting for the same. There is no charge for these journals. Our e-mail address is:

dlshahtrust@yahoo.co.in **or** haritaneja@hotmail.com **or** dlshahtrust@gmail.com

You can also access these journals on our website: www.dlshahtrust.org

---