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LEADERSHIP SKILLS

The term 'soft skills' refers to a group of skills and personal qualities that present-day employers look for and value in their employees. Soft skills relate to excellent communication skills, both spoken and written, positive personality traits, social skills and personal attitudes. In this sense, soft skills complement hard skills, which have to do the technical requirements of a job. Hence, you may have the right professional qualifications, be academically brilliant and perhaps even have the required work experience, but you will be successful in an organisation only if you know, for example, how to work as part of a team or how to get along with both your senior and junior colleagues. In other words, soft skills are all about how you deal with people. They are very important in the present-day professional context that requires constant interaction and communication. Thus, it is not surprising that very often, an interviewer talking to two different candidates with equally impressive CVs, decides in favour of the one who seems relaxed, open, friendly and well-adjusted. Of course, a neat and pleasing personal appearance also does make a positive impression in such situations.

While soft skills are acquired early in life and depend to a great extent on the environment in which you were brought up, they can also be consciously learnt. The process could begin either by asking someone who knows you closely to decide whether you possess the soft skills concerned or through doing an honest self-appraisal. You can begin by looking at some of the soft skills recommended by behavioural training experts.

In short, soft skills are personality traits that determine a person's interaction with others and the ability to be successful at work. Soft skills complement a person's professional skills.

and affect his or her performance at work, relationships with colleagues and career prospects. Some important soft skills employers look for in the people they take on are attitude, adaptability, goal setting, motivation, time management, stress management, critical thinking and problem solving, team work and leadership. In this chapter, we will briefly discuss a few of these skills.

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These involve the ability to take decisions, to take initiative, to motivate and lead by example, to use reason rather than emotion to resolve conflicts, to take blame when things go wrong, to handle emergencies and unforeseen situations, and good organisation skills. We will briefly discuss some of the characteristics of a good leader.

- A good leader is a motivator: he/she will be able to inspire confidence in co-workers and team members and will be able to motivate them to perform the task at hand.
- Honesty is a key quality: a good leader will be able to take honest and right decisions to protect the team members and the organisation.
- Trust the team: a good leader trusts his/her team to perform well.
- A good leader will be able to delegate work: a good leader will be able to delegate work to appropriate departments and personnel, instead of letting work pile up on his/her desk. S/he will trust the team to play their part well in the project. For this, the leader should also be able to identify the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the team members.
- A good leader will be a good communicator: s/he will be able to let the team know the tasks each of the members are supposed to perform. The ability to communicate, both orally and in written and other forms, clearly is key here. Being a good communicator also means that the leader should be able to listen to the team members, and be sensitive to their needs. Most managers promote an 'open-door policy' for his or her colleagues, encouraging

co-workers and junior colleagues walk into their offices and communicate on a one-on-one basis. Show your leadership skills by being assertive, not aggressive.

- Confidence: A good leader is confident of himself/herself as well as his/her team. The shows especially during crises. A good leader, even during the bad times, will affirm his/her confidence in the team members.
- Positive attitude: The leader's positive attitude will inspire the team to do well. A positive leader helps to keep the morale of the team up.
- A good leader leads by example: s/he sets standards for the team to follow. For instance, a manager who is always punctual to his/her meetings can always ask the team to follow that example.
- Humour sense: A leader with a good sense of humour will help the team to see the bad times through. It will keep the morale up and wipe away all tension and negativity.



A good leader communicates clearly, whether it is in group meetings or one-on-one interactions.

Source: Wikimedia commons/@WikimediaUKyfr0

This is by no means an exhaustive list. Read success stories of people like Indra Nooyi and N. Narayana Murthy, to learn more about how good leaders build successful and enduring organisations.

To become the leader of your team, you need to ensure that you seize the opportunity to take the initiative. You have to be active in your team meetings. Expressing your genuine enthusiasm for the tasks given to you, exuding confidence and a 'can-do' attitude, willingness to put in extra effort in performing the tasks and to help your colleagues, your ability to step in and resolve problems—all these go a long way into persuading your peers to accept you as a leader. It is also important that you hone, refine and develop your professional skills to remain an asset your organisation.

EXERCISES

1. ***Explain the term 'soft skills'. How are they acquired?***
2. ***What are some important soft skills employers look for in prospective employees?***
3. ***Note down five qualities of a good leader.***
4. ***A good leader leads by example. Comment on this statement.***

TEAMWORK SKILLS

Every organisation looks to recruit people who have the ability to work as a team, to cooperate and help with one another. In short, to be a successful professional you need to be a 'team player'. There are a few essential qualities that one needs to develop to be an effective team player. We will discuss a few of them below.

To be an effective member of a team, one needs to develop the ability to work with people from various age, gender, educational, ethnic and other backgrounds. This would often mean that one needs to 'adapt' to different kinds of people. Adaptability is the ability and willingness to adjust ourselves to changes or new situations so that we are able to function in them. It helps us respond positively to unfamiliar circumstances and ways of working and move forward in spite of difficulties. Adaptability, also sometimes referred to as flexibility, is thus an essential skill to be able to work with people and groups. However, this does not mean that one needs to lose one's individuality. Every member of a team will have his/her own specific skills, individual perspectives and opinions and approaches. It is important that these are utilised in the team work. A good employer or manager will be able to harness these individual skills into a team effort. In short, an ideal employee is one who knows how to work as an individual as well as a part of the team.



In teamwork every individual has his/her own part to play.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

To be an effective team, each member of the team needs to know his/her roles, the part he/she is meant to play in an assignment. These roles may differ according to the group's assignment. You also need to understand your strengths and weaknesses so that you are able to choose the right and best-suited role. Team members should also be ready to rotate roles so that everyone gets to learn a wide range of skills.

Teamwork involves working within a group, and to do this effectively one needs to be a good communicator. Most importantly, the members of the team need to be able to listen to one another. Listening plays an important role in how well you do in a group because it allows you to respond appropriately to the viewpoints and arguments of the other members. It also helps you check if the others have understood you. Participate actively in the discussions within the group by giving your ideas, opinions and arguments, by encouraging other members to contribute to it and adding to what they say. Sharing ideas helps the team as a whole. Often, once a good idea comes to the fore the team as a whole can start contributing to the discussion, building on that idea and contributing various perspectives on the idea.

Team members should also be able to question one another. However, avoid conflicts by being flexible and open to the points of view of the other members in the group and by respecting their beliefs and ideas. Do not put down the other participants, laugh at them or attack what they say. It is perfectly all right to disagree, but do not use a harsh, aggressive or offensive tone. Instead be polite and tactful. Thus, instead of saying 'You are wrong' or 'That doesn't make sense' or 'I'm sure that won't work', you could say 'I am not sure I agree with that argument because . . .' or 'I know what you mean, but I think we can look at this in a different way' or 'I see your point, but there could be some problems.' When you disagree with someone in the team, explain your reasons for doing so or admit that you did not understand their argument and, if necessary, ask for clarifications. This should lead to a healthy interaction and debate, and conclude on a consensus. To arrive at a consensus, you should also learn the necessary persuasion techniques. They include not only the spoken/written word, but also body language, facial expressions, tone and even silence. All these are tools to be used in the process of persuasion and negotiation. It is also important to give one another honest feedback about the work each member has done. Members should not be made to feel that they are being 'judged'. Feedback should be constructive and aimed at improving the team as a whole.

It is also important to respect one another. Team members should put forward their ideas in a way that shows their respect for one another. The key in ensuring good teamwork is to channelise work and debates in a way that focuses on what each member can learn from one another than on pinning blame on a particular group member or finding fault with anyone. This respect also involves team members showing their willingness to help others in the team in achieving the goals. A good team is brought together by a sense of team loyalty and by members helping each other during difficulties. To be a team player, one needs to learn to look at fellow team members not as competitors but as collaborators.

EXERCISES

1. *'To be an effective member of a team, one needs to develop the ability to work with people.' Explain the importance of teamwork skills in the light of this remark.*
2. *Write down five qualities you possess that you think will make you a good team player.*