



People Skills Matter Most



As we sat around the conference table in the small but very successful firm I couldn't believe what I was hearing from the staff.

We were discussing the importance of finding the right chemistry in the new hire that would be eventually added to their team. We talked about the importance of being very selective in the choosing of the right applicant who would potentially be a perfect fit for the team. One by one they listed what traits they must look for because to move to quickly to fill a position could be disastrous and change the dynamic of the entire team.

What left me stunned was the list of desired qualifications they thoughtfully stated as I wrote them on the white board.

What surprised me the most was that in the entire list there wasn't a single technical skill stated. I mean after all, this was a company that performed a broad range of technical, creative, and strategic tasks on behalf of its clients. These skill sets are better known as "hard skills."

The qualities they were mentioning, however, were: integrity, trustworthiness, kindness, positive attitude, self-motivation, good communication skills, friendliness, excellent customer service, and flexibility which are referred to as "soft skills."

When I mentioned that their list didn't have any technical or hard skills mentioned, the consensus was that those skills can be taught and learned but people skills and integrity come from within.

Then, not long after that meeting, I was facilitating a discussion at a clinic in the dental industry. The Dental Specialist proceeded to tell his staff that he was very selective in his hiring process. He went on to say that the quality he looked for first from applicants was someone who was personable, friendly, had a good work ethic, and had the ability to get along with co-workers and patients.

People Skills Matter Most



What is of further interest is that I frequently find the people (management or staff) that have the best clinical or technical skills, and have been with the company or clinic the longest, in many instances can be grossly deficient in people skills!

I had a physician recently tell me that he had to terminate his brightest clinician who had been there the longest because of his lack of ability to be a team player, and the exiting clinician replied that he was the most experienced and had the most knowledge at the clinic. The physician promptly replied, “that’s the problem—all you have is clinical knowledge.”

Keep in mind that one of the biggest complaints from staff in the workplace is that management will not address the problematic staff and managers in the organization or wait until it’s too late to address the problem.

One of the reasons management gives for not being proactive is those particular employees causing problems are too knowledgeable to lose and it’s hard to find a replacement for them.

My theory is, if an employee lacks tact and is allowed to get away with a lack of people skills, the loss of morale will be great and the inability to retain staff will financially cost more than finding a replacement, not to mention a loss of respect in leadership for not responsibly handling the situation earlier.

It’s no secret that in the last 25 years Corporate America has put a greater premium on attitude over aptitude when hiring, maintaining, and advancing staff. Of course, it’s obvious that with certain vocations such as healthcare, finance, law, engineering, social work, or licensed counseling, etc., you must have proper certification, licenses, education, and degrees to even

People Skills Matter Most

get your foot in the door. But getting your foot in the door and keeping your foot in the door are entirely different propositions.

Author and psychologist, James Dobson, and his research team report that only 20 percent of workers are terminated for a lack of technical skills, while 80 percent of workers are fired for a lack of people skills.

Another issue I have observed is that for far too long the annual evaluation process in many organizations has focused on the progress of the employee that can be measured through an employee's hard skills such as trainings, further certifications, goal setting, increased sales, or attaining better outcomes, which of course, are all needed and necessary.

Little has been said or emphasized in the evaluation process that measures a person's growth and performance based on the professional abilities of building morale, strengthening the team, communicating well with staff and clients, as well as handling conflict, with resolution, in a mature way.

Does this not make sense? If 80 percent of workers are terminated because of a lack of people skills, resistance to authority, a sense of entitlement, and inability to get along with others, and only 20 percent are fired because of an inability to meet the technical needs of the organization, then shouldn't a company measure the success and performance quality of an

employee based on their "soft skills" such as attitude, pleasant demeanor, kindness, integrity, and good relational skills that come from within rather than the technical and clinical skills that can be learned?

Thus, overall, people skills do outweigh technical skills. If you, like the above-mentioned company, sense a huge need to emphasize the need for staff and new hires to have strong people skills, here are some brief suggestions to consider going forward.

Final Suggestions

1. Modify and recreate the types of questions that are used in the interview process when hiring.
2. Give more emphasis in the Annual Evaluation process regarding communication, conflict resolution, and relational skills.
3. Management should reinforce that this culture change will be implemented and that training, discussions, or morale building steps will be taken to emphasize this side of professionalism for the company.
4. Update the policy or procedure manual to reflect these qualities of the organization.



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.