

The background of the cover is a dynamic photograph of a forging process. A large, dark metal die is visible on the right, and a glowing, orange-red metal workpiece is being shaped. A shower of bright sparks is being ejected from the point of contact, creating a sense of intense heat and activity. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

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The Hard Facts About Soft Skills

By Ray Harkins

Last summer while visiting my hometown I ran into Sam, an old friend who works in a senior technical position for a large organization. During our conversation, Sam told me about a recent discussion he had with his division's manager about the possibility of moving up in the company. He was trying to learn if his boss would recommend him for a promotion to a particular supervisory position that had just opened.

His manager's reply was provocative. He said, "Sam, you're excellent at your job. I don't know what we'd do without you. But before I could recommend you for a team leader position, you're going to have to work on your soft skills."

Ouch! As soon as Sam said "soft skills", I knew what his boss was getting at. Having studied engineering and economics in college and working with technically adept people ever since, I have met my share of introverted, arrogant, or otherwise socially impaired colleagues. These were people who were very competent in their hard skills – programming, statistics, metallurgy, etc. – but were simply difficult to understand or get along with. As two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee and author of the landmark best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman skillfully explains:

*"The rules for work are changing. We're being judged by a new yardstick: not just by how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other. This yardstick is increasingly applied in choosing who will be hired and who will not, who will be let go and who retained, who passed over and who promoted ... The new measure takes for granted having enough intellectual ability and technical know-how to do our jobs; it focuses instead on personal qualities, such as initiative and empathy, adaptability, and persuasiveness."*¹

Adding to Goleman's examples, soft skills encompass a range of attributes loosely grouped into two categories: self-management skills (such as resilience, persistence and perceptiveness) and people skills (such as active listening, effective mentoring, and clear communicating). According to a Harris poll of over 2,100 hiring managers, it is these skills that, when coupled with the appropriate training and technical abilities, will earn candidates the positions they desire. The study revealed that a whopping 77% of hiring managers believe that soft skills are "just as important as hard skills" when evaluating potential candidates for a job. Sixteen percent said they were even *more important*.²

Studies identifying which soft skills are the most important in business vary based on the specific industry and rank within an organization. An IT director, for instance, requires a different (and certainly broader) set of soft skills than an entry-level manufacturing engineer. However, both executives and apprentices require skills that fall under one of the three categories: communication, teamwork, and the willingness to learn.

Communication

Communication is the lifeblood of every organization. Without it, each person remains an island, isolated from everyone around them. Consequently, utilizing a spectrum of communication skills to achieve the organization's goals becomes the real work of its leaders. These skills include actively listening to the concerns of their subordinates and superiors, properly addressing difficult situations, and the ability to teach concepts and procedures to new audiences. It is the right communication that unites an organization's members behind an overarching strategy.

Some display communication skills more naturally than others, but mastering these skills becomes more of a journey when each new situation provides an opportunity to learn. For example, some people provide one-on-one coaching to a protégé but find it difficult to present information in a group setting. Improving one's communication skills is accomplished by learning the fundamentals of a method, such as negotiating a resolution to a conflict, and then inserting themselves into situations that require use of what they have learned. Much like taking music lessons, learning to play an instrument and actually playing it overlap substantially.

Teamwork

Another contrast between hard and soft skills is that a job hunter's hard skills are typically spelled out on their resume, but their soft skills do not reveal themselves until the interview. In other words, hard skills get interviews, but facility with soft skills may help separate leading candidates from their peers. One's ability to "get along" with other people is being evaluated by a potential employer from the moment a job hunter walks into an interview.

Assessing someone's ability to collaborate with others is difficult in a single interview. It usually takes multiple interviews and reference checks to determine if a person possesses the attributes helpful for working well on a team. For a person seeking a promotion within their organization, however, their ability to function effectively on a team is already known and will determine much of their success.

Marty Brounstein, leadership consultant and author of *Managing Teams for Dummies*, identifies ten key qualities of an effective team player. These include reliability, active participation, flexibility, and a pattern of treating others in a supportive and respectful manner. Solid team players, as Brounstein explains, "look beyond their own piece of the work and care about the team's overall work"³. By doing so, they also position themselves for greater opportunities within their organizations.

Willingness to Learn

The willingness to learn is a hallmark of every great leader. As W. Edwards Deming once tersely stated, "Learning is not compulsory... neither is survival."⁴ Likewise, up and coming professionals in every field do not just draw from their reserve of experience to achieve their goals, but are continually adding to their proficiencies. The willingness to learn is also a choice. When you're reading the news and encounter a word you have never seen, do you skip over it? Or do you right click it to search for its definition? The willing learner tends to right click.

The willing learner is also more likely to raise her hand in a training session to ask for clarification or seek out the opinion of a mentor regarding a sticky problem, or receive criticism without reacting defensively. This type of curiosity and adaptability is a trait that nearly every employer values.

Now What?

Thankfully, obtaining soft skills is not simply a matter of getting a good draw in the genetic raffle or being endowed by the "Soft Skills Fairy". Rather, like their hard skills counterparts, these too can be learned and honed. By seeking out the right information, practicing what one has learned, and then soliciting from others honest feedback, professionals can further develop their soft skills and become a more effective and harmonious part of their world.

Reading the right books or taking a class that teaches these skills is a fabulous place to start. Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is the seminal text on developing people skills. Dave Ramsey's *EntreLeadership* or John Maxwell's *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* are also excellent books on the topic. Training videos from learning platforms like [Udemy.com](https://www.udemy.com) also provide several entry points for developing these skills.

Joining new teams or committees at work — something outside one's current sphere of influence — make excellent forums for putting newly learned soft skills into practice. Volunteering in one's community or mentoring students and younger professionals are also tremendous opportunities to interact with new people in new ways.

Lastly, soliciting some candid feedback, especially people recognized as having a firm foundation in the soft skills, is remarkably valuable. Nothing opens the door of feedback like asking someone, "How can I improve the way I interact with other people?"

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: soft skills pay dividends. When coupled with the appropriate hard skills, soft skills open the doors of better job opportunities and promotions. Actively listening and engaging with others, exercising empathy, and utilizing an ever-widening range of soft skills will also lead you toward becoming a more enjoyable and inspiring person. And that journey is a reward in itself.

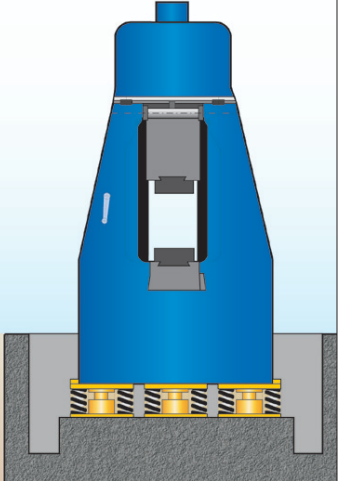
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Ray Harkins is the Quality and Technical Manager for Ohio Star Forge in Warren, Ohio. He earned his Master of Science from Rochester Institute of Technology and his Master of Business Administration from Youngstown State University. He also teaches manufacturing and business-related skills through the online learning platform, Udemy. He can be reached via LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/ray-harkins](https://www.linkedin.com/in/ray-harkins) or by email at rharkins@obiostar.com.

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