



Unlocking the Power of Soft Skills: The Missing Basics in Today's Workforce

Help your coworkers learn these essentials – and hone them yourself – with these tips.

What's missing in today's organizations? According to Bruce Tulgan, the problem – especially in workplaces that employ young people – is a lack of soft skills – the non-technical abilities that encompass self-awareness, problem-solving, and teamwork. Soft skills are less tangible and harder to define and measure than hard skills, but they're critical to organizational productivity, Tulgan observes in *Bridging the Soft Skills Gap* (wiley.com).

He organizes soft skills into three categories that capture the thousands of details of behaviors needed by today's workers:

- **professionalism:** self-evaluation, personal responsibility, a positive attitude, good work habits, people skills
- **critical thinking:** proactive learning, problem-solving, decision-making
- **followership:** teamwork, good citizenship, adaptability, respect, commitment, hard work, cooperation.

Tulgan (bruce@rainmakerthinking.com) convincingly explains why so many of today's workers lack these vital

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skills and suggests ways to help your coworkers master the basics. This advice includes:

Build soft skills criteria into every aspect of your staffing strategy and hiring process. For every position, create a job description that includes not just the hard skills for that role but also the key soft skills.

Ask staff members to take a personality test such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Enneagram (available online). Understanding one's personality is a first step in self-knowledge – the underpinning of all the soft skills.

Create an organizational culture that focuses on soft skills. Make sure people know which strengths are crucial to your organization's success. Make those abilities the foundation of your culture. Do everything in your power to support and reward those high-priority behaviors.

Explain to workers why soft skills are important to their jobs. Let them brainstorm ways to incorporate the new proficiencies into their work.

Break down each skill into steps, techniques, and tactics that can be learned and practiced. For the “people skill” of

“Young people, especially, lack the soft skills.”

“Help people turn new behaviors into habits.”

interpersonal communication, for instance, ask employees to list the key people with whom they need to interact during the next week. For each person on the list, have them write notes about when and how they'll get in touch, the reason for the meeting, what they'll try to learn, what questions they'll ask, and so on. Always suggest tasks that are as specific as possible. Just saying, "Improve your communication skills" isn't helpful.

Help employees create goals for turning the new behaviors into habits. Roleplay with them. Provide checklists to assure that they practice the new skills every day, over and over, until the new, positive habits are ingrained.

Your Soft Skill Checklist

Someone proficient in soft skills is often said to have high EQ. (EQ is short for emotional intelligence, a term coined by Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence*.) Test your own EQ by answering Yes, No, or ST (Sometimes) to these questions.

- _____ Do you laugh easily at yourself?
- _____ Are you in tune with your feelings and instincts?
- _____ Do you bounce back from misfortune and use it as a learning opportunity?
- _____ Are you almost always taking a course, reading a book, or otherwise learning something new?
- _____ Is it a priority for you to give credit to others and build teamwork, cooperation, and partnerships?
- _____ Do you have a strong sense of who you are and what values are important to you?
- _____ Are you constantly looking for new things you can learn?
- _____ Do you handle stress well and stay calm during conflicts?
- _____ Are you careful to keep yourself out of a rut by gaining new views and trying new things?
- _____ Do you listen carefully to others and tune in to their feelings as well as their words?
- _____ Are you self-motivated and able to delay gratification?
- _____ Can you see the humor in difficult situations?
- _____ Are you honest, trustworthy, and responsible for your actions?
- _____ Do you encourage people of different generations, genders, and cultures to share their perspectives?

Turn each No or Sometimes into a Yes by reading articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

In Search of the Balanced Leader (Vol. 16, No. 6)

Making Better Mistakes (Vol. 38, No. 4)

Can We Call a Truce? Tips for Negotiating Workplace Conflicts (Vol. 27, No. 6)

Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence (Vol. 27, No. 1)

Zen and the Art of Team Building (Vol. 20, No. 1)

Smart & Fast Are Not Enough: The Need for Better EQ (Vol. 29, No. 1)

Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener (Vol. 37, No. 1)

Embrace Mindfulness as a Leadership Practice (Vol. 36, No. 2)

Intuition in Decision-Making (Vol. 25, No. 4)

Is It Time for a Time-Out? Take Stock of Your Life (Vol. 31, No. 4)

Cultural Competence: What Does It Mean for You? (Vol. 26, No. 5)

Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow (Vol. 23, No. 5)

Six Ways to Get Out of a Rut (Vol. 24, No. 4)

Organizational Culture: It's in the Walk, Not Just the Talk (Vol. 29, No. 6)

What's Your Color? (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Tapping into the Next Generation: Pitfalls & Best Practices for Engaging Millennials (Vol. 37, No. 2)

To Be an Ingenious Leader, Take Charge of Your Learning (Vol. 37, No. 3)

