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Staff Management Advice

Enhancing Soft Skills Can Lead to Valuable Returns

While technical know-how has always been integral to career success, today's workplace requires that executives also possess finely polished soft skills, such as team building, communication and negotiation. According to research conducted by Robert Half Management Resources, many chief financial officers (CFOs) recognize the crucial role that soft skills have played in their success. When 1,400 CFOs were asked what qualities, aside from financial knowledge, contributed most to attaining their current positions, the top responses were overall business acumen (27 percent) and strong interpersonal skills (21 percent). Here is some advice for developing the less technical aspects of your skill set:

Building Relationships

Today's workplace is one of team building and consensus, where acting alone is far less effective than working together. Many financial executives already have in place far-reaching networks that include peers both inside and outside the organization whom they can tap for strategic advice and objective input. Above all, regular contact is necessary to keep these bonds strong. While e-mail and the telephone are simple ways to stay in touch, relationships are deepened by frequent face-to-face meetings. Personal interaction outside of business settings also strengthens trust and camaraderie.

When building relationships with employees, perhaps nothing is more important than establishing an environment of mutual respect and trust. Staff appreciate managers who roll up their sleeves and pitch in to help when necessary, so don't slough off all undesirable projects onto your team. You may even consider getting into the trenches - literally. Choosing an office in close proximity to your team or working from a cubicle, if appropriate, can reduce the "us vs. them" feeling that plagues many supervisor-staff relationships.

Communication

Peter Drucker, the famed management expert, once stated that a majority of all management problems are the result of poor communication skills. One mistake to avoid is assuming that everyone has the same opinion or communication approach as you. This is especially important as companies grow more diverse.

Good communication also involves listening. If you fail to listen, you won't understand what information staff members do or do not want, need or understand. Worst of all, they won't feel like they can discuss their needs or preferences with you.

You also must operate at a certain level of accessibility. When people request to speak with you, give them as much time as possible and stay completely engaged in the conversation. When you need to "close the door" to deal with a private matter or focus on a project, be sure employees know your lack of availability is only temporary and note when you'll be reachable again.

Negotiation

Most executives already view themselves as strong negotiators. After all, they may have negotiated the purchase or sale of a company, the details of a large contract, or their own compensation package. But people often forget that the majority of negotiation occurs during everyday situations - agreeing on a project deadline or determining resource requirements, for example - where reaching a mutually agreeable decision is more important than winning the battle.

The most successful negotiators maintain a flexible, positive attitude. They recognize that someone else may have an idea they had not previously considered. Strong negotiations also keep their emotions distanced from the discussion at hand so they can remain as objective as possible. By looking for common ground, successful negotiations can achieve an outcome that advances the goals of both sides and, most importantly, is in line with the long-term objectives of the department or firm.

Developing a full complement of soft skills will not only make you more effective in the workplace but also enhance your personal and professional credibility. Take the time to assess what areas you might need to strengthen and then discipline yourself to make small improvements in each. Over time, the results could pay big dividends.

This article is provided courtesy of Robert Half Management Resources. For more information, visit www.roberthalfmr.com.

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