

BookReview

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'Soft Skills' guide highlights less heralded keys to success

BY PAUL SANDERS
BUSINESS BOOK REVIEWS

Ask a recruiter or employer what skills are needed for business success today, and technical competence would be the top of the list.

Kentucky author Greg Coker in his new book, "Soft Skills Field Manual: The Unwritten Rules for Succeeding in the Workplace," agrees that it should be the most important. But more than ever, he argues, products and services are slower to market absent much needed "soft skills."

Soft skills include communication, teamwork building, problem-solving, conflict resolution and leadership. The term refers "to personal attributes that enable one to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people," Coker writes.

Both individual and organizational success are dependent on soft skills, Coker says. The lack of such skills is costing American business billions of dollars per year.

The author brilliantly makes the case for soft skills. Among other reasons, he suggests that lack of such skills is the main reason for conflict in teams and organizations. Our education systems are failing to teach such skills to our technically savvy younger workforce, he says.

Coker cites a 2015 Kentucky Chamber of Commerce survey of 500 large and small employers suggesting that a significant

percentage state they have trouble finding people with soft skills. Further, a survey conducted by CareerBuilders found 77 percent of employers said they were seeking candidates with soft skills.

Recruitment is only one area where soft skills are being sought. Development of soft skills also provides an opportunity for engagement among employees. According to Gallup polling, only 29 percent of employees are fully engaged at work while 54 percent are partially engaged. Up to 17 percent of the workforce is totally disengaged, simply going through the motions.

To illustrate the importance of soft skills, Coker builds on the foundation of his first book, "Building Cathedrals: The Power of Purpose," published in 2012. He describes three bricklayers working on St. Paul's Cathedral in London being approached by architect Christopher Wren. Wren asked each of them what they were doing. The first responds, "I'm working. I'm a bricklayer," the second says, "I'm building a wall," the third says with enthusiasm, "I'm building a Cathedral!"

The metaphor works as well in this book as it did in the first. Simply put, while all three workers had technical skills for the job, only the third had soft skills, including leadership, power of purpose and engagement.

Coker's book lives up to its title as a field manual. Each of the 30 short chapters can be read individually to explore a particular soft

skill. In addition at the end of each chapter (even the introduction) he includes a section of questions to consider, group activities or suggestions for action.

For example, Chapter 5, "The Redemptive Qualities of a Fire," is a mere two pages long but may be one of the book's most insightful in sparking conversation about the crisis process many companies and individuals face. A third added page includes questions, such as "What Soft Skills are needed during a crisis?" and "How do you typically react to the 'Fires' in your life?"

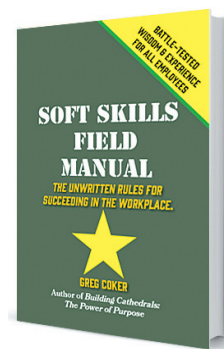
Chapter 26, "Customer Service: Back to the Basics," contains a carefully analyzed conversation between the author and his local bank teller. It illustrates the two basic needs of customers: human-level (need to feel respected, cared about) and business-level (need to receive the product/service). Using these tools, Coker suggests building a "Cycle of Service," for every department within a business.

Coker concludes his manual the way he suggests concluding any significant meeting, training program or crisis situation — with a meaningful debriefing. He offers his own six-step debriefing model:

1. Review
2. Lessons learned
3. Next steps
4. Action plan
5. Recognition
6. Appreciation

The author proceeds to apply this process to the material covered in the book with insight and candor. This final chapter reinforces the principles that Coker has given readers to take the next steps toward.

"Soft Skills Field Manual" provides exactly what is needed to create and put to effective use those soft skills that are too often overlooked but absolutely crucial for personal and organizational success. This deeply motivating guide leads you to an invaluable understanding of the skills that are needed and how to create them. Coker proves that the success of your business comes out of the success of your soft skills. **BL**



Soft Skills Field Manual: The Unwritten Rules of Succeeding in the Workplace

By Greg Coker

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