



As Hiring Gets Harder, Think Soft

Try this sixty second experiment before reading on: Using a blank sheet of paper and a pen, make a list of the adjectives that you would include if you were to post a job description for an entry level position in your company or organization. (There is no trick to this task, and you don't have to be in HR to know what it takes to be successful in your organization. Don't over-think this.) You have a one-minute limit, so keep an eye on the clock. Ready, set, go... Good.

Upon completion, you should be staring at a list of at least eight adjectives.

Next, take your pen and put an 'S' next to each adjective on your list that you consider a soft skill (i.e. a personal characteristic or value) and an 'H' next to each that is a hard skill that is either a required skill for a position in your organization or an integral part of your employee training program.

I would wager a pretty penny that your list is comprised primarily, if not exclusively, of 'S's with words like responsible, honest, punctual, dedicated, enthusiastic, loyal, positive, professional, willing, cheerful, team player, etc. Why am I willing to bet?

Several years ago, I began incorporating this activity into my live presentations to business owners, managers, and executives. Regardless of the company or industry involved, the similarity of responses is uncanny; in fact, most lists appear as if they've been written by the same person.

Every leader insists on having their team comprised of people who possess these soft skills, but you won't hear them using that term. Soft skills has become a catch-all nebulous, squishy term that implies traits that are 'nice, but not essential' when it clearly represents the exact opposite.

According to Wikipedia, soft skills is a sociological term relating to a person's cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism. Regardless if the search is for a part time cashier, forklift operator, or a nuclear physicist, no organization will knowingly hire an unfriendly, pessimistic slob who does not communicate well, is chronically late, and cannot be trusted, even if that applicant possesses all of the other required 'hard' skills for the job.

While it is the objective of every organization to hire people with the soft skills you've just listed, most fall short. Operating under the false assumption that every kid is still being taught these essential values at home or at school BEFORE they enter the job market (circa 1960) paves the way for 'any port in a storm' recruiting agendas and inefficient 'one size fits all' training programs that are focused almost entirely on hard

skills. No wonder poor performance, lousy customer service, high absenteeism, and rapid turnover are rampant. While the ‘hire for character, train for skill’ management philosophy has been bantered about for decades, it is the new unspoken edict in pro sports. Teams used to draft players out of the college ranks solely based upon their on-field performance. But as the off-field behaviors of so many marquee athletes continue to result in enormous financial losses for their respective team owners, a growing number of teams now base every personnel decision upon a thorough background check of a prospective player that includes in-depth interviews of his former coaches, teammates, friends, and family. (Google recent news stories for quarterbacks Ben

Roethlisberger and Tim Tebow and you’ll see both the cost and the value of character in the NFL.)

Your Choice – When it comes to your business, character, work ethic, and soft skills are synonymous; they are necessities, not luxuries. Review your list of adjectives and eliminate any that are negotiable. Then realize that you have only two choices when making each and every personnel decision:

1. Hire the ‘S’s – Even though the culture they’ve grown up in fights against it, there still remain young talented people who possess the character you’ve described on your list. Undoubtedly, you have a few already working for you. They are in short supply and high demand, so work hard to acknowledge, appreciate, and retain them. Then actively recruit their friends. Additionally, do some detective work on the applications and the interview notes of your high character ‘S’ employees as it will reveal the clues as to where others like them can be found. By consistently doing the extra work that your competitors are too lazy to do, you will draft a team they can’t possibly match.

2. Train the ‘S’ into them – Astoundingly, most organizations do nothing to develop the soft skills of their employees. Naively assuming that parents and teachers have instilled the required character and work ethic into their new hires, managers begin onboarding new hires with some paperwork, an orientation, and a mind dump of skills-only training.

If your training program does nothing more to train soft skills than mention them in with your rules and regulations in your employee handbook (e.g. be on time, always smile at guests and go out of your way to make them feel special, don’t give your employee discount to friends and family, etc.) you can’t expect them to be internalized and demonstrated.

Invest the time and resources to develop character, work ethic, and soft skills into your front line associates. This won’t happen overnight, so don’t think of this as something that you can do once and cross off your list. Instead, commit to integrating some degree of soft skills training into your regular training regimen, and the results will astound you.

Conclusion

The Army realizes that their new recruits do not possess a ‘military bearing’, i.e. the soft skills the Army demands. Soldiers develop this bearing in Basic Training through rigorous and repetitive training as they learn how to address officers, groom themselves, plan ahead, follow orders, etc. These become permanent values that soldiers internalize and never forget.

You expect ex-military employees to arrive on time, look you in the eye, appear neat and tidy, call you sir or ma’am; it’s been drilled into them. But those who don’t come from the military (or haven’t grown up on a small farm in the Midwest) have likely not internalized these values, so you may end up inheriting the role of the drill sergeant. Embrace it.

Start by encouraging one or two simple core values each day, letting them know the ‘why’ behind each one, and rewarding them each time they demonstrate that value in their daily performance. Before long, you’ll develop a culture where all the essential values and soft skills you require are being modeled by your front liners and passed on to new recruits.

Eric Chester, Internationally Acclaimed Expert on Employee Engagement, Workplace Culture, and the Emerging Workforce, is an award-winning speaker and best-selling author, and a 2004 inductee into the National Speakers Association Hall of Fame.