

“Soft” Skills for Hard Times

By Phil Olley

One of the most incredible misnomers in business is the use of the term “soft skills” to describe such issues as goal setting, thinking, sales, communication, and time effectiveness.

It is these skills that are the *hardest* to perform consistently at a high standard, and which are often neglected in times when their effect is most needed... those times when business is getting tough.

At the moment, most people seem to be cowed by “the downturn”... with businesses running scared of doing what they know they need to do to be successful. Fear is affecting their approach, their decisions, and their performance, and in the long term (nay, even in the short-term) that is what will cripple many businesses. Because it’s a self-perpetuating downward spiral... a self-fulfilling prophesy.

There are now huge opportunities for businesses. For the small businesses, it’s time for the most effective operations to really start to make breakthroughs. As for the BIG BOYS... time to start Thinking again. Thinking like a hungry small business in need of growth. Sad thing is, most have forgotten how. You see, whilst the going has been good, Thinking got relegated. Computers did it!

People even stopped selling. The marketing department ran an ad, and the salespeople took the orders! Customer loyalty and long-term business relationships got relegated to a plastic card. Oh dear! All’s changed. And for those large companies who think they can turn things round by just deciding to call their people “intra-preneurs” (yuk!), you’re missing the point!!

Strategic Level “Soft” Skills

I hear a lot of talk about Visions... though interestingly many people are just talking survival. It's a pandemic, a paralysis.

Time to exercise your character muscle. Time to Prove your confidence, by creating:

- BIGGER Visions, not smaller
- more conviction about them, not less
- higher expectations, not lower
- more confidence, not less
- more determination, not less
- more self-investment, not less
- more enthusiasm, not less
- more energy, not less
- resulting in more business opportunities, not fewer

At the moment what is being fostered is a small-thinking, low-belief, low-esteem, low confidence, no opportunity-mindset. Don't be suffocated by this. Break out of it. And the best way to break out is using the "soft skill" of goal setting to create a compelling Vision for you and your team.

I'm astonished at the number of people who tell they are just concentrating on "getting through the next two months". And there are even more who say they are confident, but when action is required, they shirk away from progressing out of fear.

Let's bring this to a personal level: how about you prove your confidence, simply by raising your eye line to look long term. This requires courage... an exercise in character muscles.

"Creating the long-term Vision"

1. sends a powerful message. You set yourself apart.
2. sends a compelling message to YOU yourself... you can think long term, even now, as the rest of the world is sinking in the swamp. It stops you thinking small and proves you are confident.
3. sends a huge message to your people... your team, your suppliers, your customers, your allies. They are inspired, motivated, and want to do business with you. It's essential for recruiting and retaining the best people.

Tactical Level "Soft" Skills

This is all about your "approach" to doing business in tough times. Effective businesses, that really think, and harness their limited resources, will thrive, whatever their size. This goes for SME business owners, and for all levels of larger organisations.

We DO need to be "tough" at our core... certain about our visions, our values. And at the same time, flexible/ adaptable in our approach to external changes. Sad thing is, most people and businesses are defaulting to the opposite. They are compromising their values and vision for a quick sale, a quick fix, short-term. And not being flexible or open to the opportunities that the new world order is providing.

Thinking

Time to start **Thinking** again. There are now huge opportunities for businesses.

The current climate, the New World Order, requires us to have an abundance mentality rather than a scarcity mentality. Think abundance (believe there are loads of customers/ clients out there); Act abundant (continue to invest in the best for your business); And guess what...

BUT

Think scarcity (it's a struggle, no one wants what we provide, it's too expensive); Act

scarcely (hold onto the little we have, and don't invest in our businesses' future);
And guess what...

Thinking creatively, looking for fresh angles to identify fresh opportunities is essential. How much genuine thinking time are you investing in generating action?

Resources

Similarly, optimising resources is a tactical skill that many didn't have to worry too much about in the "good times". Yet now... well, it's essential to maximise your investment of time, energy, money to reduce wastage, and ensure optimum investment to achieve your goals. That doesn't mean you cut down on them... you make sure they are being invested for a genuine return.

Most businesses tell me their major resource is their people. Great. Now time to get the best from that resource. And that means great people management. Good old supervisory "soft" skills, professional internal and external coaching skills, to maximise performance. And this is not about providing some occupational counselling service. It's about dynamic peak performance management.

Soft Sales Skills- The Price is Right?

The reaction of many to the current climate has been knee jerk: drop the price. And in many cases, in fact most cases, this may not be the best option.

If the first thing a small business does in the current climate is slash its prices, it sends a signal that they have been overpricing for years. That's an affront to previous/ existing customers. And when you want to maintain customer loyalty, the last thing you want to be doing is affronting them. The assumption that any resistance to buying from you is down to price is plain wrong. Think of the last time you bought something you really wanted and needed... consider what you were thinking when you went through that process. How much did price play a part in your decision to buy?

In the case of most small businesses (and indeed many large businesses), it's not about price. It's about value. And this is particularly the case with intangible products and services. Those businesses that focus on value over price will both buy better and sell better in the current climate. The trouble is that people have forgotten to sell value. They didn't need to, haven't needed to for many years. After all, the going was good. Now it's different and it's time to start honing those "selling with integrity" skills.

Businesses that really have something to sell, and know how to sell it, that offer unbelievable levels of service and quality, will thrive.

Operational Level "Soft" Skills

Here's another area where we have, let's be frank, got a little slack. After all, the going was so good that being super-effective was not something that came under scrutiny. And now, many of our management teams haven't been in business during hard times before, so aren't equipped with these "soft" professional effectiveness tools at a habitual level.

When it comes to things like time effectiveness, professional self-organisation, focus and communication, there are huge benefits to getting it right at all times. Even more so in these difficult times, when we want to reduce levels of frustration and wastage -how many times have you sat waiting for a meeting to start, waiting for the one person who always turns up late? Or if you are that person who is disorganised, and often late for meetings, the last thing you need to be doing right now is hacking off your colleagues/ boss/ team/ clients.

"Soft skills" set businesses, and business people, apart from their competition. They attract the market, attract clients and customers of the right type that you want to deal with, and give you a competitive advantage.

Whether you are a "solo-preneur" or head of a large corporation, it's time these "soft skills" were revitalised and rejuvenated. Next time such skills are described as "soft", ask why it is that they are the hardest to do well!!

And here's the really Great News...

The successful people and businesses can now stand above the mediocre who for too long have got away with poor service, poor products, lack of vision, lazy marketing, wastage of endless resources, poor people management, a complete absence of leadership, no quality, and very little character.

Yippee! Rejoice.

The opportunities are endless for those who do have:
Great service, compelling Vision, exciting marketing, creative investment of resources, engaging leadership, high qualities, integrity, values and stacks of character. Because these soft skills are what set you apart.

Those who are worried are those who know they haven't been true to these things. There's still time. Just...