

Directions

Newsletter of E. C. Davis & Associates

The following article appeared in our April 2010 email newsletter. *We welcome your comments on any of our articles. Send an email to info@ecdavis.com.*

What I have learned about “Soft Skills” development

by Ellen Davis

Some people will tell you that “soft skills” are so personality- based, or so impacted by childhood and environmental experiences, that they cannot be effectively taught to adults. I understand that view, and to some extent, I agree. But on the whole, I believe “soft skills” can be learned and that substantive development in behavior is possible.

As a trainer for more years now than I like to admit, I’ve seen a lot of bad efforts and failed outcomes. But, through it all, I have witnessed some very successful efforts too. Here are simple, common elements from among the success stories which you might consider as criteria when evaluating workshops and programs in the future.

1. *A powerful punch.* Don’t give me a book to read about conflict resolution techniques if I am typically a bull in a china shop! Don’t send me to a half-day class with 20 -30 other folks and expect much change when I return! Instead, get me into something that will force me to see what I am doing and the impact it is having on others. Make sure I get a personal wake-up call about my own behavior.
2. *A rifle approach, not a shotgun.* A generic workshop on communications can cover the waterfront, be intellectually interesting, and even fun. But it will likely only spend a very short while on MY particular need in communications. Far better to pinpoint my need and target a learning experience focusing on that. Workshops that are going to “Make you a Leader” in 3-4 days can provide generic understanding of a leader’s role and skill requirements; they are not likely to create substantive behavioral change and development.
3. *Credible experts who will coach and reinforce.* Once I have a clear wake-up call regarding my specific, pinpointed behavior, my need to know what to do about it is typically heightened. So don’t leave me hanging! Ensure the trainer will spend time with me personally, talk through my behavior patterns and the situation back at work. Get me a credible trainer who is skillful with straight-talk, who encourages me, and who can balance corrections with reinforcement when s/he catches me doing something right.
4. *Practice that helps make perfect.* Okay, I know everyone seems to resist role-play ... me included. Why? Because it forces us out of our comfort zone to actually do something we aren’t very good at; and then we get feedback on what we did. Ideally we even see ourselves on video. Also, effective role-play is realistic and simulates the actual workplace. In any case, behavioral development without behavioral practice and feedback is a waste of time.
5. *Bridging between the workshop and the workplace.* The classroom can offer a lovely learning environment and the trainer can be an attentive coach; unfortunately, neither of these things is likely to mirror “the real world.” So, realistically, how can I possibly take these newly honed skills back and sustain them? Is there a way for my manager or my peers to help me? Is there any documentation that can be a reminder? Is there any check-back system with the trainers? Without a sound process to keep me propped up for at least awhile, you can bet that those new skills will soon disappear!

At EC Davis we are committed to providing training that meets the criteria above. For that reason we offer only one public workshop. It is called the Team Manager Development Center, and we have been running it for almost 20 years.

There are six participants to a program with two instructor/coaches. Individual attention is a cornerstone. A realistic workplace simulation engages participants without the typical artificiality of role-play. Video reviews and developmental coaching focus on pinpointed improvement opportunities as the workshop progresses. Documented feedback, personal tips, and coaches suggestions go home with each person. Later a conference call is held with the coach, participant and back-home manager to review the feedback and discuss development. We are proud to say it carries an effective and a powerful punch.

Otherwise, our workshops are customized for each client. Certainly, we pull from basic materials that we have developed and proven over the years. But then we customize closely to the client's precise needs and situation. It can be done and it can be cost-effective. We encourage you to consider that approach for your needs as well.

Whatever you choose to do, don't compromise on the criteria! My lesson learned would be that you are likely throwing money away if you do.