

## Soft Skills for Successful Leaders

by Anne Polglase

Articles about career enhancement often ignore the fundamental reasons for an individual's success. They fail to talk about the soft skills necessary for personal and professional success which is the new agenda for business growth. Good leadership is the key and so forget about 'financial planning for managers' and 'successful sales and marketing'. In reality, whilst you do need those hard skills, being successful in business is also about 'soft skills' and career advancement demands an understanding of what these skills are and how to acquire them in order to become a good leader.

Economically times have changed although sentiments in business are still the same – business needs to succeed. In order to be instrumental in that process there is now a need for every manager and supervisor, whatever their position, to be able to lead their people rather than merely manage them. If you think that office politics and having a noticeable powerful and controlling image are your strengths then think again – it is time to change. The modern business culture wastes no time with bull shit! Having a desire for power and control will not make you good at your job and nor will it enhance your career. It is important to be creative and sensitive with an entrepreneurial spirit, it is important to lead others by gaining respect and support from fellow workers.

It is becoming clear that businesses today are inadequately populated by good leaders. This is a requirement for the future. Not only must you have good and appropriate technical competencies but you must have good leadership skills as well. You can become a good leader whatever your position in a company, leaders are needed at every level in an organisation.

So, forget all that stuff about trying to create the illusion that you are indispensable, being a 'yes'

man, having the loudest voice, or orchestrating the office politics. If those attributes were ever in vogue, they are now out of date. You need to be creative, responsive, consistent, supportive, challenging, entrepreneurial, ..... and most importantly you need to build a good team around you who will share their ideas and thought processes. From this position of trust and respect all good things will come and help you to move forward in business.

There has been too much cloud around the issue of leadership for too long. There have been too many senior managers sitting at big desks with the powerful controlling image hoping that the business will keep coming. In reality they neglect their real task which is to promote a healthy business whatever the economic situation. They have been protecting their own backs by retaining all of the power which has meant that further down the line managers and supervisors have been unable to move or make decisions either through fear or ignorance. The new generation of successful businesses will open up their management structure and encourage more people to be good leaders. Leaders should be everywhere empowering their people, embracing the workplace and being passionate about the work culture they share.

By encouraging openness and greater understanding, through creating a sensitive and caring environment for working and by encouraging each individual to share ideas, everyone becomes involved from the top down. In the past the men behind the big desks were the only ones making the decisions and the only people who knew where the company was heading. From now on, if you are a supervisor, create a team spirit, get your people working with you as well as for you. If you are manager visit the shop floor, speak to the people who do the work and find out how they

think. Let them know where the company is going and listen to their views. By encouraging openness, each and every employee will be contributing to the success of the company through a free-flow of information which in turn enhances the business, increases profits and lifts morale.

This fresh approach to managing people, that of learning how to be a good leader, is fundamental to future growth and success. How can a company grow and continue to move forward, particularly in difficult times, if people are playing office politics and spending time creating the right 'political' impression? There is no longer room for such an egocentric attitude, everyone must pull together and learn from each other. Poor performers are dispensable, there is no room for the individuals who protect themselves and who contribute nothing to an organisation. Everyone must have a useful role and be prepared to share and trust others to help the common good which is exactly what leadership is all about.

So there must be many leaders in an organisation. Each level of the hierarchy must have leaders to coach and encourage the best out of their people. The commonly held view that 'leaders are born, not made' is untrue. In fact, most people already have the soft skills necessary to be a good leader but may need help putting them to use in their professional life. Others may not be comfortable displaying sensitivity or creativeness in the office, but that is only because they have not done it before. It could become a way of life and with practise will get easier. It is important to realise that times have changed, there is no longer a place for office politics. Be open and honest with yourself , learn the soft skills required for business success and the rest will fall in to place.

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*Article contributed by Anne Polglase, director of People Plus a company specializing in leadership development.*