



Soft Skills are the Hardest

Why mastering these skills is so difficult and essential

by Elizabeth J. Agnew, MS

I understand why “soft skills” are called “soft”. They’re intangible, immeasurable, and for the most unconscious among us, ignorable.

Just because I understand why some people describe these skills as “soft” doesn’t mean I like it. These skills aren’t soft at all. They don’t comfort us like a pillow, they don’t pad us like a down coat. They can cut like a knife and create a shudder of pain through our body. They can drop a pit into the bottom of our stomach on a moment’s notice.

Choosing to be open, to listen instead of showing all you know, being vulnerable, sharing the truth when you don’t know how it’s going to land, making reparations when you know you’ve wronged someone – this is *hard* stuff.

Why should I care about said skills?

The way we experience our life on a day-to-day basis, when you boil it down, is really all there is. In other words, these skills are everything for our experience. More pointedly though, two reasons: business results and your health.

Business Results

MIT Management Professor Douglas McGregor helped bring the ideas of Abraham Maslow (the ‘hierarchy of needs’ guy) to the business world, especially the idea that our humanity is what motivates us.

Daniel Pink points this out in *Drive*: “People have higher drives...and these drives could benefit businesses if managers and business leaders respected them. “ Soft skills are the gateway through which our humanity sustains our work.

Personal Health

Daniel Goleman says it best in *Social Intelligence*: “Perhaps the most astonishing, science now tracks connections between the most stressful relationships and the operation of specific genes that regulate the immune system.” Stressful relationships aren’t managed through the technical skills that we learned for our job; but rather the “soft” skills that allow us to connect.

How do I get better at “soft skills”?

Human beings are wired to connect. It’s when our workplaces become distinctly anti-human that we shun the intangible and our connectedness and associated skill level drops. You get better at “soft skills” (a.k.a. leadership) by first opening up and making the commitment to start noticing. You then start to notice. You pay attention to personal patterns. You commit to being 100% responsible and then when something happens you actually respond to it; you ask questions.

These skills are the hardest for two reasons.

1. They require attention and commitment to improve, and there's no stopping rule – no arrival destination that says “you've made it! You have all the soft skills you need.” If you look at the paragraph above, even the instructions on how to get better are vague, intangible, and “soft”.
2. More importantly, they require an extremely high degree of vulnerability as all aspects of your life integrate to either bolster or undermine our ability to be “soft”.

Your ability to learn from, manage, and improve your emotional intelligence *directly* affects the quality of your relationships, work product, leadership abilities, and the experience of every moment you live through.



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