

BRIDGING THE SOFT SKILLS GAP



SECOND EDITION

HOW TO
TEACH THE
MISSING BASICS

TO THE NEW HYBRID WORKFORCE

BRUCE TULGAN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
IT'S OKAY TO BE THE BOSS

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This book is dedicated, yet again, to the great

—Susan Rabiner

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PART ONE

THE SOFT SKILLS GAP

Prologue

Meet the Workforce of the Future

An executive in a major financial services institution recently told me about a recruiting interview with a very strong job candidate: “In the middle of my pitch about the long-term rewards of making a career in a company like ours, this young man starts laughing out loud. I mean actually laughing, just for a second. Then he quickly regained his composure. He was very apologetic. But what he said really struck me. He said, ‘Sir, you must realize that it’s very hard for someone in my position to have any kind of faith in those long-term promises. It’s not that I don’t trust YOU. It’s just that I don’t trust the future.’” The executive said, “What really struck me was that, of course, he’s exactly right. There is so much complexity and uncertainty in the external risk factors. Why in the world would anyone trust the long-term promises of an institution like ours?”

The CEO of a biotech company in Silicon Valley was hosting a half-dozen employees at his weekly “lunch with the CEO.” Making conversation with the 22-year-old brand new employee to his left, he asked, “Did you just graduate this past May or were you working somewhere else prior to joining us?” She said she had just graduated. The CEO said, “That’s great. Congratulations. We are glad to have you.” And then he asked, “Where did you go to school? What did you study?” The new young employee answered. The CEO continued, “Excellent. Did you do any part-time work while you were in school?” To this, the young woman replied, “Look, that’s enough about me, all right? What about you? What’s your story?” The CEO chuckled as he told me this story. He told me, “I wanted to say, ‘My story? I’m your boss’s boss’s boss’s boss. That’s my story. But instead I just told her

my story.” He concluded, “It just took me aback, being so young and so junior in her role, her lack of inhibition in talking to the CEO of her new employer.”

At the corporate headquarters of a very old and very large consumer products conglomerate, summer interns are sometimes permitted to attend certain high-level meetings, mostly as a learning experience, but also to run errands and assist with clerical tasks during the meetings. One such intern was visibly annoyed when she was asked by her manager to dress in “business casual attire, at least” on days when she would be attending such meetings. After “ignoring that suggestion entirely,” the intern came to one such meeting “very casually dressed” and then spent most of the meeting texting on her handheld device. When her manager whispered quietly to ask her to please stop texting during the meeting, the intern responded in an exasperated tone, “Actually, no.” The manager whispered back with incredulity: “No?” At this point, the intern explained, “I’m texting with my dad . . . about this meeting. So, it’s fine. My dad works here!” As it turned out, she was giving a blow-by-blow account of the meeting in progress to her father, who was himself a longtime executive in the company, and had arranged the internship with the company for his daughter.

Some partners at a forensic accounting firm told me of their latest young associate “case study”: This first-year associate, a recent top graduate of a top school, was cutting edge in his knowledge of a new set of tools and techniques for mining and analyzing data buried within evidentiary documents obtained during pre-litigation discovery. One of the partners said, “This kid had done some projects in school using this new approach and his technical knowledge in this area far surpassed anyone else in the firm. But he kept running into roadblocks because his communication made him seem so immature. At first, he couldn’t get anybody to listen to him. Once we got him going on introducing the new process, I know it sounds petty, but he kept saying ‘like, like, like’ every other word and he could barely look people in the eye or string three words together without saying ‘like.’” In short, “His inability speak in a way that seemed even remotely professional was just rubbing people the wrong way, especially in meetings, though it wasn’t very much better when he was working with people individually.” One of the other partners

explained, “We had to send him to a class.” One of the other partners added, “It took a lot more than one class.”

A very savvy and experienced restaurant general manager shared this with me: “Schedule adherence is always an issue, but it’s getting much worse. More and more we are having a terrible time with waiters, kitchen support, and cleaners disappearing for ‘breaks’ in the middle of their shifts, not to mention calling out ‘sick’ too often, coming in late, and leaving before shifts are over.” To make matters worse, it seems that whenever confronted about their timeliness by a manager, often employees respond by pushing back. The general manager said, “They would always have an excuse and they’d be almost indignant about it. Every one of them is a ‘special case.’” She reports: When his manager told him he was taking too many breaks, one waiter told his manager, “You have to understand, I have ADD so I am going to need some help staying focused.” Reprimanded about coming in late and leaving early, a prep chef pushed back, “I’m not really used to following a set schedule.” When confronted about regular last-minute absences, a cleaner explained, “Sometimes I just don’t feel up to working.”

In an aerospace company that hires hundreds of new engineers every year, engineering group managers have been reporting that lower-level engineers quickly become frustrated and bored with repetitive tasks and narrow recurring responsibilities – so bored in fact that they are playing games on their handheld devices while working. The problem, of course, is that the work of lower-level engineers – like so much work – involves a lot of repetitive tasks and narrow recurring responsibilities. One of the engineering group managers said, “If we don’t actively keep them engaged in the work, they get distracted and then they slow down and they also start making more mistakes.” Another group manager responded, “What are we supposed to do? I found it frustrating and boring when I had to do it too. The work is the work. Should we have the higher-level engineers do more of the grunt work so the lower-level engineers get a chance to do more interesting work so they will stay engaged? They are simply not as qualified yet to do the more interesting work.”

An experienced nurse-manager on a busy hospital floor told me about her campaign to stop the nurses from using their handheld devices at the same time they are administering care to patients.

The manager and her nursing supervisors had been surprised and impressed to discover how often the nurses on their devices were instant messaging with each other about the patient care. They were asking each other for – and giving to each other – regular advice and support throughout the day. Sometimes they were searching the internet for clinical information – often reaching out on social media to other nurses who were not even coworkers. One supervisor was startled to discover a young nurse having a real-time video conference on her handheld device with her friend, a nurse in India. “She was standing outside this patient’s room, discussing the case with her friend in India. When I asked her about it later, she said this friend had been a mentor to her in school and she felt like she didn’t have anyone here yet she could confide in.” By the way, the nurse manager hastened to add that the young nurse in question was NOT herself of Indian descent. She went on, “They spent a lot of time on FaceTime together. She was more comfortable getting answers from her friend in India than turning to any of us for help.”

One large retail chain I know has a long-standing tradition of involving retail sales personnel in all aspects of the business – ranging from creative work, such as providing input on marketing, to janitorial work, such as cleaning the bathrooms in the store, and everything in between, including buying, inventory management, accounting, legal, HR, safety, loss prevention, and you name it. An executive in the company explained to me, “Of course, we have all those roles in the company: We have a professional marketing team, buyers, inventory managers, accountants, lawyers, and so on. We do use a janitorial service – they are not on their own cleaning the store. But we have a deep commitment to involving the store personnel in everything we do. We talk a lot about cross-training and teamwork. We do it because they are the face of the company to our customers and we want them to own everything in the organization.” The executive added, “That’s also one of the ways we recruit internally for corporate positions – not only store managers or district or regional, but also for other jobs throughout the organization.” What’s the problem? According to this executive, “They want to sit on the marketing panels, but they don’t want to clean the store or change over inventory because those things happen after hours and seem less glamorous. They beg for the high-profile, fun, or interesting projects but

they complain bitterly when they are asked to help clean the store or change over inventory. Quite a few of them outright refuse to do it. Quite a few have been fired or have quit over it.” As a result, the executive concluded, “We are currently rethinking our whole approach to these cross-training/teamwork projects.”

Senior leaders in US intelligence agencies have been grappling with the impact of steadily rising zero- to five-year employee turn-over rates among new young intelligence professionals. This is a particularly pressing issue because intelligence agencies make an unusually large investment in new hires due to the elaborate selection criteria, the need to gain security clearance, the extensive requisite training, and the sensitive nature of the work and information to which employees are often privy. So, it is a big problem when that investment keeps walking out the door before the new young professionals have a chance to contribute to the mission. One intelligence official told me, “No matter how hard we try to develop a profile to help us select for retention – to predict who will be longer-term employees – it just doesn’t work. We used to be able to do it. But it doesn’t work anymore. Maybe there is no ‘type’ anymore who stays or a ‘type’ who goes. I’m afraid that the young people joining now who serve long-term will end up that way, not by deciding that today, but instead by deciding every few months or years to not leave just yet. We are making a lot of adjustments. But how are we supposed to identify the right high-potentials to start developing for new leadership roles? It makes succession planning very difficult. Too often those identified for promotion end up deciding to leave, taking with them the huge investment we’ve made in them.”

Soft skills are more important than ever, in the new hybrid workplace, where we all must communicate, cooperate, and collaborate with an ever-widening range of people – whether remotely or in person. At the same time, there is a growing soft-skills gap throughout the workforce, and not just among the new young workforce, but also among people of all ages.

Managers tell us every day what one manager recently told me: “It’s mainly about people skills. There have always been people who struggle with that stuff. But standards are dropping. I mean, even manners, but also work ethic, taking responsibility, and just working like you really care.”

The incidence and insistence of managers reporting that soft skills are lacking in employees has risen steadily year after year since we began tracking it in the mid-1990s. There is a growing gap between the expectations of employers and the reality of how people manage themselves and their interactions with others.

Even when people show up with the latest and greatest tools and tricks, what they are missing – way too often and more and more – are the old-fashioned basics. What many refer to as “the soft skills.”

Many business leaders and managers say something like, “This should NOT be our problem to solve! Shouldn’t they have already learned all these old-fashioned basics from their parents? Or in kindergarten? Or at least in high school or college? Or graduate school for that matter? Or in work experiences? Or somewhere? Can’t we expect employees to have the soft skills we need in order to get hired? The problem is that there is a perpetual shortage of good people with the technical skills so it’s very hard to rule people out because you suspect they are lacking in soft skills.”

Here’s what I tell my clients: The soft-skills gap is your problem. That’s the bad news.

Here’s some good news: You can bridge the soft skills gap and doing so will give you a huge strategic advantage when it comes to hiring the best talent, getting them on board and up to speed faster, with better performance management, improved relationships, and greater control over retention.

We’ve collected hundreds of case studies of organizations and individual managers who have systematically helped their employees radically improve their soft skills. There are many, many ways you can help them build up one soft skill at a time, and make them better employees, coworkers, and future leaders.

Chapter 1

The Soft Skills Gap

No matter how careful you try to be in your recruiting, selection, and hiring process, it is getting harder and harder to figure out which job candidates to hire. Should you hire the promising new graduate with impressive, freshly minted credentials indicating valuable technical skills, even though they seem like they might be yet another new potential hire lacking in some of those elusive yet critical "soft skills"?

It seems like a higher percentage of new hires are not working out, one way or another. What goes wrong? Too often they don't seem to appreciate that they are entering a pre-existing scene; joining an organization with its own mission, history, structure, rules, and culture; integrating with a group that has its own established dynamic; and engaging with individuals, each of whom has their own story and many of whom have been part of this scene in this organization for years on end or longer.

Too often they say the wrong things or speak at the wrong time – and they fail to ask the questions they should be asking. Heck, sometimes they can't even get to work on time. Anyway, they spend too much of the workday on their devices instead of focusing on the work. That really comes through in customer service scores, along with other complaints about front-line service personnel. Sometimes their lack of interpersonal skills leads to misunderstandings and even conflicts on the team.

You have to worry they have one foot out the door from the day they arrive, all the while asking for more of something – or more of everything. Even the superstars nowadays don't seem to want to come in early, stay late, work through meals and weekends and holidays, bend over backward, and jump through hoops like the superstars of yesteryear.

What is a soft skill? I use the term “soft skills” because most people understand the term is used, in contrast to “hard skills,” which are technical, to encompass a wide range of nontechnical skills ranging from “self-awareness” to “people skills” to “problem solving” to “teamwork.”

These skills may be less tangible and harder to define and measure than many of the “hard skills,” but they are absolutely critical to the success or failure of any individual in the workplace. The problem is that these old-fashioned basics – professionalism, critical thinking, and followership – are out of fashion and so they are too rarely spoken of nowadays. Today’s young talent is not being indoctrinated in these old-fashioned basics either at home or in school. Usually, by the time they get to the workplace, employers figure it is too late to focus on them. Certainly, most managers figure it is not their place, nor do they have the time or resources or know-how to deal with their employees’ soft skills gaps.

So, the soft skills gap continues to grow, hiding in plain sight, despite the fact that it costs organizations a fortune every day.

I’ve asked tens of thousands of managers: “How much do these so-called ‘soft skills’ matter?” The answer is nearly universal: Soft skills matter a lot. The cliché is that people get hired because of their hard skills but get fired because of their soft skills.

When employees have significant gaps in their soft skills there are significant negative consequences: Potentially good hires are overlooked. Good hires go bad. Bad hires go worse. Misunderstandings abound. People get distracted. Productivity goes down. Mistakes are made. Customer service suffers. Workplace conflicts occur more frequently. Good people leave when they might have otherwise stayed longer.

It robs so many employees of greater success and causes so many managers so much aggravation and unnecessary costs. The soft skills gap is not a household term like the technical skills gap, but it should be because its impact is monumental.

Like the technical skills gap, the soft skills gap in the workforce has been developing slowly for decades. But the soft skills gap runs across the entire workforce – among workers with technical skills that are in great demand, every bit as much as workers without technical skills. What is more, the soft skills gap has gotten much worse in recent years.

How much of this can we blame on the newest youngest workers?

The Soft Skills Gap: Growing Steadily from Gen X to Millennials to Gen Z to Whoever Comes Next

Since 1993, I've been tracking the attitudes and behavior of managers and employees in the workplace and their impact on organizations, especially the impact on working relationships.

I started out as a frustrated young lawyer seeking to understand why the older, more experienced lawyers were so annoyed by those of my generation, Generation X (born 1965–1977). I quickly realized that it wasn't just the older, more experienced people at my firm who were annoyed with Gen Xers. It was nearly everybody older and more experienced in workplaces of all shapes and sizes.

That's when I started conducting in-depth interviews with young people and their managers, the original research that led to my first book, *Managing Generation X*. I formed a company to continue that research and we've been conducting that interview research for decades now, tracking workers of all ages, always including the ever-emerging and ever "newer" new young workforce. By the late 1990s, we were tracking the first wave of the great Millennial cohort (born 1978–1989). Then the second wave of Millennials (born 1990–1996), followed by Generation Z (born 1997 and later), and we'll interview new young workers as long as we endure.

Since the mid-1990s, I've had a front-row seat on the front lines and behind the scenes in organizations of all shapes and sizes. We've interviewed more than a half a million workers in just about every industry – health care, professional services, restaurants, retail, research, finance, aerospace, software, manufacturing, the public sector, even nonprofits, you name it. Based on two decades of research, I can report that the overwhelming data indicates a steady diminution in the soft skills of the workforce. Going forward, workers are increasingly likely to have significant notable weaknesses in one or several key soft skills.

Why is that?

Something Much Larger Is Going on Here: The Post-Boomer Generational Shift

Of course, the older, more experienced people are always more or less annoyed by the attitudes and behavior of each successive new

young generation. New young employees are, by definition, always younger and less experienced and, therefore, lacking in the corresponding maturity and patience. As they step into the adult world with youthful energy and enthusiasm, young workers often clash with their older colleagues. That's always part of the story. But there is something much bigger going on here.

On a macro level, Generation Z represents a tipping point in the post-Boomer generational shift transforming the workforce. With Boomers retiring in droves, they are taking with them the last vestiges of the old-fashioned work ethic. The workforce of the near and intermediate future is a post-Boomer workforce – dominated in numbers, norms, and values by the Millennials and Generation Z as well as the aging Generation X. Plus, the workforce is even younger in Africa, South Asia, and South America.

The new workforce is fundamentally shaped by this era of profound change and uncertainty driven by a confluence of epic historical forces:

GLOBALIZATION

We are all global now, whether we like it or not – connecting and traveling to work across borders in every direction and combination. We can all look forward to a future of interdependency and competition with a rising global workforce from every corner of this ever-flattening world.

TECHNOLOGY

The pace of technological advance today is unprecedented. Information. Computing. Communication. Transportation. Commerce. Entertainment. Food. Medicine. War. In every aspect of life, anything can become obsolete any time – possibilities appear and disappear swiftly, radically and often without warning.

INSTITUTIONAL INSECURITY

In the post-9/11 era, we all live in a world threatened by terrorism and environmental cataclysm, a world where the economy fluctuates wildly from boom to bust, governments sometimes shut down or run out of money, and great companies conquer or fail or merge or continually downsize, restructure, and reengineer. Our greatest institutions are in a perpetual state of flux in this constantly changing world.

It's harder and harder for people to anchor themselves reliably to even our greatest institutions.

THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Gen Zers are the first true digital natives, but we've all been learning how to think, learn, and communicate in a never-ending ocean of information facilitated by handheld supercomputers. We all live in an information environment defined by internet ubiquity, wholesale technology integration, infinite content, and immediacy. From a dangerously young age, we have infinite access to information and ideas and perspectives – unlimited words, images, and sounds – a context completely without precedent.

HUMAN DIVERSITY

In every dimension, the world is becoming more diverse and more integrated. Generation Z will be the most diverse workforce in history, by far. That's true in terms of geographical point of origin, ethnic heritage, ability/disability, age, language, lifestyle preference, sexual orientation, color, size, and every other way of categorizing people. Equally important, Millennials and Gen Zers tend to look at every single individual, with their own combination of background, traits, and characteristics, as their own unique diversity story. They value difference, uniqueness, and customization, most of all their own. Meanwhile, the entire workforce will include a global mix like never before.

At the same time, the emerging workforce is increasingly shaped by two very important microtrends:

HELICOPTER PARENTING ON STEROIDS

By the late 1990s, the Boomer-esque self-esteem-based “everyone gets a trophy” style of parenting was morphing anew. “Helicopter” (hovering) parenting has been appended with the even more aggressive “snowplow” (clearing away obstacles) strategy. As one Gen Xer parent told me, “I don't want to make my kid just feel like a winner no matter what happens. I want to do everything I can to set him up with every possible advantage to make sure he has a big head start in the real world so he can win for real.” Parents (and contingent authority figures) are thoroughly engaged in supervising and supporting the child's every move, validating their differences, excusing

(or medicating) their weaknesses, and setting them up with every material advantage possible.

Young people today spend so much of their time ensconced in their own highly customized safety zones – the private comfort of protection and resources provided by responsible adults who are always supposed to be looking out for them. They expect authority figures to be always in their corner, to set them up for success, and to be of service. They are often startled when authority figures see it otherwise.

VIRTUAL REALITY

It's not just that they are always looking down at their handheld devices. Today we are all always plugged into an endless stream of content and in continuous dialogue – through social media-based chatting and sharing and gaming – with peers (and practical strangers), however far away (or near) they might be. We are forever mixing and matching and manipulating from an infinite array of sources to create and then project back out into the world our own ever-changing personal montage of information, knowledge, meaning, and selfhood.

We can try on personas, virtually. Social media makes it easy to experiment with extreme versions of one persona, or another; more or less (or much more) a crass means of expression.

The youngest among us are perfectly accustomed to feeling worldly and ambitious and successful by engaging virtually in an incredibly malleable reality – where the stakes can seem all-important one moment, until the game is lost and reset with the push of a button.

Soft Skills Are – Sort of – About Conforming in an Age of Nonconformism

If you think about it, soft-skills are mostly about “fitting in” –making an effort to conform one's attitude and behavior to established standards of conduct – in order to engage and work together effectively with others in a shared enterprise.

Here's the thing: The workforce of the future will be the ultimate nonconformists in an age of nonconformism.

For some time now, the pendulum of the zeitgeist has been swinging – more or less – away from conformism. Nonconformism is the belief that it is better for individuals to be unique and emphasize