

Soft Skills: Essentials for workplace success

These days we in CTE (Career and Technical Education) are working hard to explain our role in teaching students to use and develop academic abilities.

As we do this, however, it's easy to lose track of our commitment to teaching the essential soft skills as part of workplace readiness. Are our efforts at nurturing these more personal skills just fluff? Do these skills have a legitimate place in the classroom? If so, why? Do they enhance or interfere with the basics of our curriculum? Do they waste classroom time?

The article at the right describes the soft skills as a crossover between academics and personal skills. The companion article on page 7 shows how one teacher develops these personal skills in the classroom and, along the way, achieves competitive event success.

Businesses want soft skills for success

A recent article in *Techniques* magazine (May, 2007) demonstrated that businesses want to hire employees who can contribute more than technical knowledge to the workplace. These businesses cite the lack of soft skills as the chief cause of project failure. ("Soft Skills: the New Curriculum for Hard-Core Technical Professionals, by Randy Bancino and Claire Zevalkink) They are not just talking about frills, they're talking about the polished habits and social and teamwork skills that make the companies successful. Yes, they are the soft skills.

What do we mean by soft skills?

Bancino and Zevalkink quote Wikipedia in defining the soft skills as "the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness and optimism that mark people to varying degrees. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job."

Communication and teamwork

Two main areas link the technical competencies with these soft skills—communication and teamwork. These two core sets of skills for marketing and management extend your curriculum into the world of work, and they both combine a range of skills that include academic competencies and personal abilities.

Communication has its base in language competency, a core academic skill. Reading and writing are its foundations. Yet when we put language to work in interpersonal situations, another skill set evolves: the ability to speak concisely and clearly, to listen actively, to send and receive nonverbal clues, to "think on your feet," to hit the right tone (appropriate enthusiasm), even just to be confident enough to engage others in conversation or debate. Is there any question that these are vital career skills in marketing and management? Look at the basic marketing skill of selling or the ability to manage employees. Teaching students to extend their communication abilities into the real work of the marketplace involves all of this and more.

Teamwork to accomplish a task or reach a goal is an essential business skill as well as a life skill.

Rarely does a person get to work alone. While the underlying concept of a project or a piece of research is organization, to the extent that people need to work together, team members need many soft skills. They need to set goals together and assume roles that will work best for the team—reaching consensus and working through disagreements. They need to respect one another's talents and time. They need to behave responsibly. All of the skills we mentioned under communication apply to any kind of joint effort as well.

Which aspects of DECA develop these soft skills? Almost all. Your chapter officers need soft skills to lead the chapter and to work together. Teamwork and commitment are required by any team project. Social intelligence isn't just for making friends—it develops social abilities and increases emotional intelligence. People need to understand others and take that perspective into account in their personal interactions and their work. Are these the "extra" aspects of a "club"? No, they are building blocks for a productive and fulfilling career and life, and are an asset in any business.

Soft skills for competitive events

As DECA's competitive events put classroom knowledge to work, they require these extended personal abilities. Management Team Decision Making events and many written events are undertaken by teams. This isn't an accident. The team approach is designed to teach cooperative techniques in pursuit of a goal.

Presentations and role-plays require skill at speaking and listening. The role-plays particularly demand clarity, confidence, active listening skills and quick-wittedness.

As you teach your curriculum through the real-world interactions of the competitive events structure, don't neglect the soft skills. Tricks and gimmicks may sometimes seem to be a shortcut to role-play success, but teaching and practicing the real personality enhancement of confidence and communication skills are essential not only to role-play success, but to career and life satisfaction. (See more on page 7)