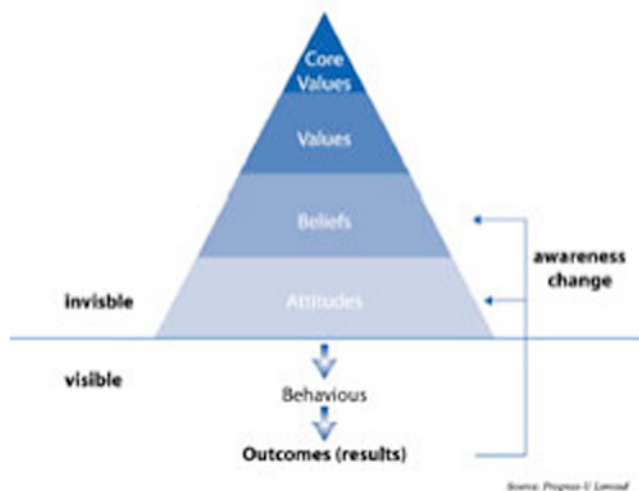


How to Develop Soft Skills

Being able to change attitude and beliefs is the key to altering behaviour

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How to Develop Soft Skills

In my role as an executive coach and trainer I regularly talk to senior managers and HR specialists. They often complain about the amount of time and money invested in training programmes for soft skills, to improve things like leadership and communication, and point out that there is little or no apparent change in the behaviour of those who participate. However, I rarely hear such complaints about training in hard skills, such as product knowledge or PC usage. There must be a good reason.

I believe it lies in the fact that all of us assume we have a certain level of soft skills. We are similarly clear in our own minds about the hard skills we do or don't possess. For example, most people's view is that they can communicate with reasonable proficiency, can lead a team if necessary, and have sufficient commercial instincts to be able to get by in sales. Hard skills are different. If you can't drive a car, prepare the monthly accounts or write a computer program, it's hard to pretend otherwise.

The approach to training therefore needs to be modified. You can teach hard skills from scratch; soft skills are already there in a rough form and must be transformed, developed, extended and added to.

In a typical classroom setting, the trainer is the specialist who knows the "right" approach to the given subject. The process of teaching will usually involve explanation, then perhaps a demonstration, and finally participation by the students or trainees. In the case of soft skills, this is usually done with the help of role-plays, which give the trainer the chance to correct mistakes, highlight different types of behaviour, and give further tips and examples.

It probably seems like a reasonable approach, but experience shows that it doesn't effect lasting changes in behaviour. That is because the traditional training methods try to create new modes of behaviour in areas where there are already long-established patterns and where a degree of resistance is almost inevitable. This obviously can't work very well.

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When developing soft skills, I have found it much more effective to work on attitudes and beliefs, instead of behaviour. For example, if an over-aggressive salesperson believes that clients need to be pushed into making a decision, then it won't help to talk about a change in behaviour and recommend a more tactful approach, as long as the original belief remains unaltered.

A change in behaviour leads to a change in attitude or beliefs only if the immediate outcome is dramatically better than what was achieved previously. In this example, the salesperson would only tone down his usual aggressive behaviour if he could see quick results and considerably better sales. A change in his basic beliefs and in the attitude shown towards customers might then follow.

The problem is that it takes time to master new modes of behaviour and we cannot expect to see the results as quickly as we would like. Therefore, the place to start effecting change is at the level of beliefs.

New beliefs and attitudes

People are generally willing to re-examine and change their beliefs once they understand how these work and how they may also be limiting the possibilities of future progress. An important factor in effecting change at this level is that the trainee must "own" this realisation.

For example, if you think that you have led your team well during a crisis, you might want to ask yourself the following questions:

1. What were the key success factors in dealing with the crisis?
2. What worked well and what could have been better?
3. How could I be even more effective next time?
4. How could I achieve better engagement among team members to avoid future crises?

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Besides asking yourself such questions, I suggest that you elicit feedback from people you respect. Get them to consider these questions as well because it may give a clearer picture of how others view you and provide new insights and ideas. As a result, you will become aware of other areas for potential development.

Professional coaching is one of the best ways to bring about lasting change in both beliefs and attitudes, since it is based on the key principle of encouraging the trainee to own ideas. Coaching also helps people to discover any existing types of individual behaviour which are limiting. It then helps to address these and to make the necessary changes in belief systems. Once this step has been taken, trainees start to see the results and are more willing to invest time and energy in developing modes of behaviour which will guarantee success.

For lasting transformations, there must be an effective follow-up process after any initial class or workshop. This can be done in one-on-one or group sessions. A combination of the two often works best.

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Charlie Lang works with senior executives who are already successful and want to make sure that they stay at the leading edge. They are often challenged by issues like:

- How to improve staff retention, especially how to keep top performers.
- How to achieve a corporate success culture that guarantees longterm success.
- How to create new levels of excellence through high employee engagement.

Charlie, an executive coach & trainer who is known for his innovative approaches towards leadership, change processes and sales, assists his clients in mastering these challenges. They achieve outstanding results through Charlie's unique application of latest findings in research combined with his own experience in international management and leadership.

Charlie's mission is to help Progress-U's clients deal with their interpersonal challenges in the most effective way for the benefit of all stakeholders. To achieve this, Charlie offers Executive Training and Coaching to middle and upper management. He also delivers public speeches, and is a passionate thinker and writer of articles on these topics. End of 2004 he started authoring "The Groupness Factor", a book on First-Class Leadership which was published in August 2005.

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