



LEADERS' DIGEST

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From the
Editorial Desk

Romancing the Stone

From any skill take away the technical aspects and you are left with the core. In other words, take away that what is measurable and quantifiable (the hard data) and you are left with the soft stuff.

Accounting, medicine, playing badminton, engineering, carpentry, etc. are hard skills. One starts learning the technicalities, the necessary 'testable' aspects, of each skill always having an objective point of reference to know if one is reaching the skill standards one aimed for.

At the end there are qualified accountants, doctors, engineers, badminton players, carpenters, etc. Each has proven that they passed the exam and can work with numbers, work with medical tools and medications, design structures, play with a racquet and a shuttle, use a saw and a hammer, etc.

So far, it seems that a hard skill is about applying logic, applying thinking vis-à-vis a situational requirement. So where does the soft skill come in, even have a comparative value or inter-relationship with the hard skill?

What drives us to want to learn, develop and bring a hard skill to a continuous higher level? Is it another hard skill? No! (for now)

A soft skill was anything that wasn't measurable and was based and driven by emotions, more specifically, behaviour. Organizations invested more in hard skill development than soft skills (most still do). Why? Because a soft skill couldn't be really measured and was considered more a subjective than objective ability. But if you look back into what drove you further in developing your hard skills, your hobbies, your past times, you can agree that it was the soft skill, that internal energy that sparked a beginning, fueled an enhancement and is not letting you stop where you are. With an ultimate stage called passion. The hard skill depends on the power and continuity of our soft skills. It is that core mentioned in the first paragraph.

The soft skill, the behaviour, is the initiator, the propulsion of this skill 'rocket' to reach levels beyond the norm.

And here comes the dilemma: is behaviour a hard or soft element within this equation? Are skills like negotiation, coaching, leading, counseling, soft or hard? By concept soft, yet scientifically, hard.

If a hard skill is what can be measured and be part of KPIs, then, if we are able to prove that a soft skill can also be measured, it should fall into the hard skill category. Today, soft skills can be admitted to the 'hard skill club' because in the last 10 years scientists have been able to measure behaviour.

Functional MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), PET (positron emission tomography) and other sophisticated brain scanning equipment can now measure if and how brain areas can develop, sustain and enhance the behaviours by assessing and testing the brain areas that underlie such complex mental mechanisms.

If the behavioural aspect for creative-logical thinking for strategizing is to be assessed, by scanning and analysing the pre-frontal cortex (PFC: the area responsible for planning, judgment and socializing), the visual cortex (mental imageries management) and the hippocampus (long-term memory and learning potential), we can determine if the elements for a conducive behavioural foundation are positive or negative. Should the PFC be weak and not strongly connected with other brain areas, then the amygdala (the automatic emotional reaction mechanism for fight or run away) will lead to a more emotional, subjective platform for strategizing. Rather than working for the objective, the person acts vis-à-vis what feels comfortable for them. The person is reactive rather than pre- or pro-active. And all this can be measured and re-measured.

Soft has become hard. Now, it is no longer about a soft vs. a hard skill but two hard skills, whereby the 'new' hard skill has taken centre stage.

Maybe we should focus on romancing the new hard skill in town!